

The Alpha's Bride

#Chapter 841: A NOT secret pregnancy (1)

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Talia was in the living room, sitting on the sofa between Damon and Ashton.

Keith, Luna Michelle, and Alpha Cristian were also there.

Ashton was holding Talia's hand and ignoring angry glare of the Alpha, who was on Talia's left.

Luna Michelle tried to get Ashton into another room, but the boy was sticking to Talia, and Talia melted at his big puppy eyes directed at her, and "Do you want me to leave?"

He was adorable.

"Ashton is not bothering me," Talia assured the boy's parents.

And that's how Ashton ended up sitting next to Talia.

'He is just a child,' Talia would say to Damon through their mind-link every time Damon would growl at the boy.

'If he is a child, he would call you Aunty and not treat you as his future wife!' Damon grumbled.

Damon knew that Ashton was just a pup, but the idea of anyone being close to Talia was driving Damon mad.

'Where do you draw the line?' Damon asked.

Talia didn't get it. 'Excuse me?'

'How old do they need to be before you see them as a threat? Ten years? Fifteen? Twenty? I guess your limit is higher because Keith was all over you, and you didn't think of chasing him away.'

'That's not fair, Damon.'

'What's not fair is you making me watch as another human clings to you.'

Talia exhaled helplessly and turned to Ashton. "Would you do something for me?"

Ashton's eyes lit up. "Anything." The boy didn't flinch at Damon's growl.

"I heard from your mom that you are quite an artist. Will you draw something for me?"

"I can draw a house and people. Will you come and watch me work?"

Talia smiled. "How about you make it a surprise? Show me when it's done."

Ashton nodded vigorously, and then he turned to Damon.

"Uncle Damon, I need you to take care of my Luna until I'm back."

Damon's lips twitched in annoyance, and Talia wondered if he will snap at the child.

"I think you should get going, Ash," Luna Michelle said. "Don't make Talia wait. After that, we need to get you ready for the party."

Ashton flashed a smile at Talia, and then he left the room.

'Better?' Talia asked Damon.

Damon put his arm around Talia's waist and pulled her closer to him. 'Better.'

Talia was not sure if she should laugh or cry. She looked at Damon, intending to scold him for being irrational, but then she saw his enamored gaze directed at her, and her fighting spirit sizzled away.

Cristian cleared his throat before saying, "Thank you for coming early. Preparations were made, per your suggestion."

Since Cassie gave them a warning that rogues will attack, Damon had several online meetings with Cristian to discuss countermeasures.

Tony and Maddox agreed to send their people, as well as selected warriors from the Dark Howlers pack. Pierce and Liam were there with their mates, and Amelia was their secret weapon as no one could expect a witch among troops. They distributed scent-suppressing mixture and were ready to confront rogues, in case they attacked.

Due to Tanya's pregnancy, Maddox didn't want to risk her coming there, but Tony and Kalina were on their way.

"I would like Keith to familiarize himself with people who will be in charge of patrols around the venue," Damon said.

"Of course," Cristian agreed immediately, and his eyes lost focus for a moment. "My people will show Keith what we have in place. Other than your guys that arrived yesterday, teams from the Lightclaw and Blue River pack are here. I want to thank you for your assistance with this matter."

"It is I who should thank you for agreeing to proceed with Ashton's party," Damon said.

No one would blame Alpha Cristian if he decided to cancel the event. He would ensure the safety of his pack, and that would cause rogues to postpone their attack, but that's what it would be... just delaying the inevitable. Rogues would regroup and wait for the next opportunity. Like this, they knew to expect them, assuming that Cassie's information was legitimate.

Two tall males arrived. They were lieutenants in the army of the Spring Leaf pack who held a similar status as Keith.

After exchanging a few words, Keith left with them.

"How far along are you?"

Talia's eyes widened when she saw that Michelle directed that question at her.

"What?" Talia asked.

Michelle smiled knowingly. "Your pregnancy. How far along are you?"

Cristian's eyes darted from Talia to Michelle, and then he looked at Damon. "Is it true? You have a pup on the way?"

Talia was flabbergasted. "How do you know?" She asked Michelle.

"I can see how Damon is holding you," Michelle responded. "And also..." She pointed toward Talia's stomach. "If you don't want people to know, you shouldn't put your hands on your abdomen every minute. Only pregnant women do that."

Talia stared down to see that Michelle was right. Talia's hand was there, her palm resting low on her stomach.

Talia chided herself. Why was she thinking of concealing her pregnancy if people could see through her easily? At this rate, they might put it on billboards for everyone to know that Alpha Damon is expecting a child with his mate.

Talia released a long breath. "It's not really a secret, but considering the situation with rogues and everything, we were thinking of not announcing it. The fewer people know, the better it will be."

"I agree," Michelle said. "Well, your secret is safe with us."

"Woah!" Cristian exclaimed and stood up to shake hands with Damon. "Congratulations! If you thought that leading a pack is challenging, wait until your little one starts crawling."

Damon was confident that Cristian was messing with him. How could one child be more work than a pack?

A figure appeared at the door.

"Am I late?"

It was a tall brunette with an exotic air around her.

"You are on time, Arya," Cristian said. "These are Alpha Damon and Luna Talia..." His voice trailed as he looked at Talia. "Is that how I should introduce you, or..."

Talia knew he was asking if he should introduce her as Alpha Natalia.

"Any is fine. We are not keeping secrets." Talia said.

"Right," Cristian said. "You are just not announcing it." He turned to the brunette. "This is Arya, the rising star in the army of the Spring Leaf pack. She might look harmless, but I can assure you that's deceiving. Arya is a general in my army."

Damon looked at Arya with interest. "Considering your age, your skills must be impressive."

Talia felt a pang of jealousy in her chest. Why was Damon praising another female? And it was obvious that Arya was not mated!

Damon whipped his head toward Talia. "I was just wondering about the standards for Generals in this pack. She looks too young and feeble for such a position. There is nothing more to it."

Talia responded with a stiff smile and a mental message, 'There better not be more to it.'

"Don't look down on my Generals," Cristian said, feeling that Damon's comment about standards in the army of the Spring Leaf pack was a personal attack. "How about we organize a joint training session where we can exchange notes?"

Damon was still looking at Talia. 'Kitten?'

Talia exhaled sharply. "Excuse me. I need some air." She glared fiercely at Damon, "You should answer Alpha Cristian's question." And Talia moved toward the door.

Damon was about to go after Talia, but then he heard her voice in his head, 'Stay there. I need space.'

You can find pic of Arya in the comments.

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Chapter 842: A NOT secret pregnancy (2)

Damon felt wronged.

He really didn't look at the brunette for any other reason than thinking if she could match up to his Generals. But Talia was getting increasingly irritable due to pregnancy, and he wondered if he should run after her immediately or if he should give her a minute to calm down.

"I will check on her," Luna Michelle said.

Talia stepped onto the terrace that overlooked a small garden. It was nothing like spacious packhouses Talia had seen before, but this place was cozy and warm, full of personal touches. One could immediately see that it was a home of a loving family.

"Talia?" Luna Michelle called from the door. "Do you mind if I join you?"

Talia realized that she had made a scene. That was NOT like her. Was Damon blaming her for losing her temper?

"I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable," Talia said guiltily.

"We are not uncomfortable, but we are worried."

Talia pressed her lips into a line. "I will make sure it doesn't happen again."

Michelle smiled. "I think you misunderstood me. I am not worried about you walking away. I am worried about you keeping it in."

Talia was confused. "What?"

"Your emotions. Don't keep them in. It will harm your baby. If you are angry, throw a fit. Your status as an Alpha and as a pregnant woman gives you the right to blow up stuff and no one will dare to say a word."

Talia's eyes widened, and then she burst into laughter. She had no idea what was funny, but there she was... laughing.

"I am emotionally unstable," Talia said.

"And that's normal during pregnancy. I don't know what happened inside, but I guess it's related to General Arya. I assure you that she is focused on training. I know, because I was watching her."

"You did?"

Michelle hummed in confirmation. "Arya is beautiful. Compared to me, she is younger and more capable." Michelle shook her head. "She came to this pack when she was four or five years old. Our warriors found her after a rogue attack, and no one knew who her parents were, so we took her in as an orphan. Everyone would fall in love with her instantly, first as a child and then as a teen. She was an excellent student, and a great cadet, but the most impressive was her outgoing personality which made everyone like her. Cristian would talk about her rising through the ranks and accomplishing missions, and it made me insecure."

Talia couldn't believe it. "Insecure? But Cristian adores you."

"And Damon adores you, yet you ended up doubting him."

Talia paused. Was she doubting Damon?

Talia was confident that Damon had eyes only for her, but a small part of her didn't forget about his past. Now that Damon was looking at an attractive female, the darkness in Talia swelled and threatened to spoil everything good they had built so far.

'I'm sorry, Damon,' Talia spoke to him through their mind-link. 'Pregnancy hormones caught me by surprise.'

'Can I join you?'

Talia's heart tightened at the insecurity in his voice.

'Of course.'

Two seconds later, Damon was at the door, and Michelle excused herself, saying that she will go to check on Ashton.

Damon pulled Talia onto his chest, and he held her there firmly.

Talia's ear was pressed on Damon's chest, but even if it wasn't, she would be able to hear his raging heartbeats. He was anxious. Guilty. Confused. Concerned. Fearful. And Talia knew it was her fault. She made him feel that way.

"Don't ever ask if you can join me, Damon. You are my other half. No matter what happens, I will always want you close."

"But you told me to stay back," Damon reminded her.

"Don't listen to that nonsense," Talia said. "Just come after me. I might be angry and yell, but I won't hate you for wanting to be close to me. Actually, only your proximity can calm me down, and considering that pregnancy is making my temper flare, I will need extra doses of Damon to keep me sane."

Damon smiled at these words. "All doses of Damon are yours and yours only, kitten."

She took a few deep breaths to fill her system with Damon's scent of the forest and dark chocolate, and her emotions stabilized.

"We should go back," Talia said. There must be a reason why that female showed up.

"We can stay here," Damon responded. He didn't want to risk Talia getting upset again.

As much as Damon was concerned, they could return to the Dark Howlers pack and leave all this behind.

But Talia insisted on them coming because (according to Cassie), Talia was the target, and rogues were coming for her. Talia didn't want to stay home and hope for the best while their friends risked their lives.

This was the opportunity for them to ambush their attackers, get more information, and confirm if Cassie was telling the truth.

And also, even with her being pregnant, Talia was not a defenseless she-wolf. She could still use her abilities, and she had Liseli, and rogues didn't know about those.

Damon and Talia returned to the living room to see that Alpha Cristian was talking with General Arya, both with serious expressions while looking at the map that was spread on the coffee table.

"Are you feeling alright now?" Cristian asked Talia. "If you need to rest, you can go..."

"I am fine," Talia interrupted him. Damon needed to be here, and Talia didn't want to separate from him. "Thank you for your concern. I guess this whole situation is making me edgy."

Cristian nodded in understanding. "We are prepared for tonight. My pack members are moving into shelters so we won't have innocent casualties. As for our warriors, that's why Arya is here."

Arya had a serious expression, and her gaze didn't move from the map. "We found pack-link jamming devices here, here..." She was pointing at the black dots on the map. "They are the same ones used during the recent attack on the Blue River pack. Teams are watching those areas." She glanced at Talia. "It seems rogues are using something to conceal their scent. To offset those, we set up infrared sensors that show heat signatures. They are not a hundred percent accurate because they get triggered by bigger animals, but at least we can confirm areas where we don't have rogues."

Talia listened to Arya talking, and she had to acknowledge that the female spoke eloquently with the confidence of a seasoned warrior.

When Arya finished with her status, Cristian asked Damon and Talia, "Do you have any questions?"

Damon glanced at Talia.

"No. It seems you covered everything," Talia said.

Cristian grinned. "Of course. With Arya overseeing the security detail, we are in safe hands." He looked at Damon. "Now that the work is done, how about a drink? It can help take the edge off. I've got a new bottle of a hundred year-old scotch."

Damon was about to agree, but he changed his mind. "My mate is not drinking, so I'm giving her company."

Cristian rolled his eyes. "You can have juice and give me company while I drink the good stuff."

"How about you?" Damon asked Talia.

Talia waved at him to go ahead. She had a feeling that Cristian called Damon so they could talk about guy stuff.

"I will be here, sipping my ginger tea. Stay close."

Damon leaned to give her a soft kiss. "I won't be more than three seconds away."

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Chapter 843: Misunderstandings

"Alpha Damon cares about you," Arya said to Talia while folding the map.

"That's what fated mates do," Talia responded. "They care for each other unconditionally."

"So I heard," Arya said in a monotone.

"You don't believe in fated mates?"

Arya paused and looked at Talia for a long moment before responding.

"The idea of unconditional love is something I can't comprehend. Since I remember, people have been nice to me. They are smiling, eager to indulge me, but it's all skin deep. Only one truly cared about me as a person and showed interest in what I could do, and that's Alpha Cristian. He gave me a chance to rank up as a warrior while others said that a pretty girl like me shouldn't get her hands dirty because I might break a nail."

"You admire Alpha Cristian," Talia said.

Arya didn't deny it. "I do. He acknowledged my desire to prove myself, and he didn't look down on me because I was pretty. I will prove he didn't make a mistake by believing in me."

"How is that related to mates?"

"People say that only mates can speak to each other's soul, yet Alpha Cristian did that to me. He is not my mate, and he is not available. Isn't that ironic? Among many who showed interest in me, I couldn't determine which one was honest and which one was attracted to my appearance. Some say my face is my blessing, but I see it as a curse."

Talia observed Arya's features, and she had to admit that even without makeup, Arya was one of the prettiest females Talia had ever seen. Well, everyone had their problems. Too much of everything was a bad thing, even beauty.

Arya didn't trust people, and that was the result of Arya's experiences. Talia didn't know what Arya went through, but it was obvious that Alpha Cristian held a special place in Arya's heart.

There was a dose of arrogance in Arya's tone, and Talia would usually let it pass because she was not the one to provoke others, but this time Talia needed to speak up.

"Alpha Cristian is a good Alpha who takes care of his pack members. He helped you just how he would help anyone else. Don't mistake his kindness for something else. You should be able to see the difference in how he treats his pack members and how he treats his mate."

Arya smiled wistfully. "Yeah. He is not fooling around like some other Alphas."

Well, Talia couldn't deny that some Alphas are fooling around even after finding their mates, but... "The bond is telling us who is our perfect match, but we have a choice to reject it." Damon told her that on the night when they marked each other (the first time). "Every relationship requires work, even the one between fated mates. But it's worth it. Once you meet your mate, you will realize how wonderful is to feel complete, and your mate will adore you no matter how you look."

Arya cocked an eyebrow at Talia. "I will believe it when I see it."

"You will feel it. That's the benefit of the mate bond. You will share emotions, and you will sense his sincerity."

"I hope it comes with proof."

"What kind of proof?"

Arya shrugged. "He should risk his life for me. Something that couldn't be faked."

Talia thought how that was extreme. But then... Arya was a warrior, and Talia had no idea about Arya's past, but it seemed she didn't have it easy.

"I wish you good luck."

"I don't believe in luck," Arya said. "Tonight will be successful because we have a solid plan, and we prepared..."

"I meant about your mate," Talia interrupted Arya.

Arya didn't expect this. "Well... thank you."

Talia stifled a laugh. Arya was visibly flustered. Somehow, Talia had a feeling that under that unapproachable façade, Arya was a good person.

"Arya," Talia called when Arya stood up to leave. "About me leaving earlier... It was nothing personal."

"I didn't take it personally."

"Good. I wanted to clear that up."

"Why?"

Talia shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe we can be friends?"

Arya paused. "Friends? With me? Why?"

"Do I need a reason to be friends with someone?"

"Yes," Arya responded without missing a beat. "I am a warrior, and I worked hard where I am while you... are not."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

Arya gestured toward Talia, who was wearing a flowy dress. "You are like royalty while I..." Arya gestured toward her cargo pants and a tank top. "Am not. What do I have to offer in order to make you wish to be my friend? Or are you attracted to me?"

Talia felt her face twitching. This last question caught her off-guard. "What?"

Arya smirked. "It wouldn't be the first time for a female to hit on me."

In front of Talia's flabbergasted expression, Arya got bolder, and she moved to sit on the sofa next to Talia.

"Did I get it right? You fell for me?" Arya smiled condescendingly. "Do you think that just because an Alpha marked you, you are something special? If you are not Alpha Damon's Luna, you wouldn't be here."

'That does it!' Liseli shouted in Talia's head. 'Let me bite her head off!'

Talia snapped to her senses. 'No biting, Lis.'

'Put her in her place, on the floor! Push her through it! I want her to eat dirt! ... '

Talia tuned out Liseli, but Liseli's hostility was still affecting her. The emerging violence got a boost from Talia's pregnancy hormones, which made Talia's Alpha aura leak.

"What did you say?" Talia asked icily.

Talia narrowed her eyes at Arya, whose arrogance was dwindling by the second.

Arya would blurt out things when she was angry, things she didn't mean to say. And now it seemed that she said too much, and she crossed the line. Talia was angry, and Arya wondered if she could get a re-do of the last thirty seconds.

"You think I fell for you? Tell me, Arya, which part of you is attractive? The one where you are pinning for a mated guy who has a happy family? Or did I fall for you because you are looking down on others?"

"I'm not looking down on..."

"LIES!" Talia exclaimed, now leaning closer to Arya.

"You are making yourself a victim like everyone got things served on a platter while you had to work for it." Talia touched the left side of her neck. "You think I am here because Damon marked me? It seems you forgot to look at his neck." Talia sneered, showing her elongated fangs. "My mark is right there, on his neck. I marked him first."

Talia snarled, and Arya feared that Talia will bite her.

Arya wanted to escape, but Talia was above her now, and Talia's aura paralyzed her. Arya was in many dangerous situations, but she had never felt that helpless before.

Talia pinched Arya's chin, and Arya could feel Talia's breath splashing on her face.

"If I want anything from you, I will take it. There is no need to ask because I am the dominant one. Just how you misunderstood Cristian, you misunderstood me as well. I am not kind because I am weak. I am kind because I choose to be. If I tell you to kneel and serve me, you will do so because I am an Alpha."

'CRACK!'

A sound of glass shattering was heard, and Talia looked in that direction to see bewildered Damon standing at the door with juice dripping from his hand where a glass used to be.

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Chapter 844: A big oaf

A loud growl ripped from Damon's chest, and in the next moment, Damon was hoisting Talia away from Arya.

"Stay away from my mate!" Damon shouted, and Arya was slammed flat on the sofa under the pressure of Damon's Alpha aura.

Damon turned to Talia and inspected her visually. "Did she harm you?"

"No, no..." Talia quickly said while trying to assess her emotions. What happened? "I think my temper flared, and I overreacted."

"I apologize, Alpha Damon, Luna Talia," Cristian said respectfully while struggling to stand straight. Damon's aura was not to be trifled with. "Arya is a prideful general, and she is not used to talking to people who outrank her. I will make sure to punish her."

Damon snorted irritably and retracted his aura.

Arya was not sure what had happened. They were talking, and she thought she had an advantage; she said some things, and then Talia suppressed her completely. Talia was obviously on the top. Why was everyone siding with Talia?

"Don't blame her," Talia said. "Arya is still young and needs to learn that people shouldn't be judged based on external appearance."

Alpha Cristian whipped his head to look at Arya.

Arya didn't dare to lift her gaze. She could feel Cristian's eyes on her, and she feared that if she saw anger or disappointment there, she would fall apart. At the same time, Talia's words stabbed Arya right into the stomach. This blow felt harsher than when Damon's aura held her down.

Arya hated when people treated her differently because of her appearance, yet she did the same to Talia. Based on werewolf standards, Talia had a small frame and was skinny, and seeing how Talia interacted with everyone softly, Arya assumed that Talia was submissive.

Arya was not sure if she implied that Talia was nobody because she really meant it or because she was angry, but the words were out, and she couldn't take it back, and no amount of apology will fix that. It was disrespect toward someone of high rank, an ally who was visiting, and the punishment won't be light.

Arya glanced at Talia to see that the latter was completely focused on the man holding her.

"I am OK, Damon. I really am. Can you keep me down?"

Luna Michelle got into the room, and she immediately noticed the awkward atmosphere.

Arya had her head bowed, Cristian stood on the side, and Damon was holding Talia in his arms.

Ashton peeked from behind his mother to see inside the living room.

He walked to Damon while proudly holding a sheet of paper and pointed his finger at Damon's feet. "Keep my Luna down. I am here now, so your protective services won't be needed. You can rest."

Damon gritted his teeth in annoyance. Will this little snot ever give up? Why was everyone set on getting their hands on Talia? She was his!

Unaware that Damon was tightening his hold on Talia, Ashton looked at Talia and grinned. "I made a drawing for you. Do you want to see it?"

"Of course," Talia said with a smile. 'Put me down, Damon.' Talia spoke to Damon through their mind-link. 'Don't make this more awkward than it already is.'

'What happened with that woman while I was gone?'

'Nothing.'

'I'm not buying it. I left you to sip tea, and five minutes later, I'm back to see you about to hump a random woman. Unless you switched to liking females, something happened. Or do you like girls now? Am I not needed after I gave you my seed?'

Talia was not sure if she should laugh or cry. How does his brain work?

'Don't overthink things, Damon. It's nothing like it. We have an audience. Put. Me. Down.'

Reluctantly, Damon's arms went lower, and Talia's feet touched the floor.

Ashton happily grabbed Talia's hand. "Let's go next to the window, so you can see it better."

Talia followed the little man, and Damon was one step behind them.

"I apologize, Alpha," Arya said in a small voice.

"I am not the one you should apologize to, Arya," Cristian said.

Arya turned to where Talia went, when he stopped her.

"Don't. We have a big night ahead of us. Can I count on you, or are you compromised?"

This time, Arya lifted her head and looked him into the eyes. Her throat constricted when she saw his stern expression. Even when she was lined up with other warriors, there was a hint of a smile at the corner of his lips when their eyes met, yet now there was none.

"You can count on me, Alpha."

"Good," Cristian said curtly. "Don't think about this incident. Focus on your mission. If we mess up, lives will be at stake. Do you understand that?"

Arya nodded.

"We will talk about this tomorrow. You are dismissed. Go to your position."

Arya bowed respectfully and left the room.

Alpha Cristian puffed his cheeks while looking at the door through which Arya walked out, and he knew that warm hand wrapping around his bicep was Michelle.

"Did I make a mistake by promoting her to a general so early?" He asked.

"You said that she deserved it," Michelle said.

"With her skills, yes. But this incident proved that mentally she is not there. A general needs to stay composed and have a firm head on shoulders and not to provoke allies." He didn't know what exactly happened, but nothing would justify Arya speaking or acting against Talia, not when their territory was full of warriors from the Dark Howlers pack, and definitely not in Damon's presence. Even without those, Talia was an Alpha, someone that could face a Guardian and come out of it alive. What was Arya thinking?

"Arya is a fast learner. She absorbed everything you taught her." Michelle said.

Cristian released a long breath. "I saw her as a child, and I didn't insist on respect and protocols, and now it backfired."

"It will be alright. Talia will forgive her."

"Talia is not the one I'm worried about."

They both turned to look in the direction of the window under which Ashton, Talia, and Damon were.

Ashton was pointing at the things on the paper while explaining to Talia what was there. Talia was squatting to be on the same level with Ashton, and Damon was hovering above them with a grim expression that would scare the Devil.

Talia did her best to ignore Damon's hostile attitude. She heard that Alphas get super-protective when their mates are expecting pups, but Damon was exaggerating. But then... Damon was always completely in or out without any middle ground.

Talia was looking at Ashton's drawing that had a forest and a house with a lawn. The sky was blue with some black spots that Ashton called birds, and three stick figures stood on the lawn.

"Is that your family?" Talia asked.

Ashton nodded earnestly. "This is me..." He pointed at the biggest stick figure.

Talia thought the boy pointed it wrongly because he should be the smallest one, representing the child, but then Ashton continued, "This is you, and this is our pup."

Talia's giggle covered Damon's growl.

"You made a drawing of two of us and our child?" Talia asked with amusement in her voice. She knew it was wrong, and she should correct him, but Ashton was adorable.

Ashton confirmed. "Yes. One pup is enough. I don't want more because raising children takes time, and I want to ensure I have time for my Luna."

"Your Luna will be a lucky girl."

He grinned. "I am glad you think so. I will treat you well."

Another growl came from Damon, and Talia felt the urgency to get some one-on-one time with Damon and pacify him.

"Thank you for the drawing, Ashton. I will cherish it. Don't you need to get ready for the party?"

"You are right," Ashton said. "I should get going." He paused to look at Talia, and his cheeks reddened. "Will you dance with me tonight?"

Talia was about to say yes, but Damon growled again.

"We will see. I am a bit tired, so I can't make promises."

Ashton was disappointed, but he didn't insist.

Talia looked after the boy and shook her head helplessly. How can six years old boy be more understanding than the big oaf that was standing next to her?

Talia looked at Damon's grumpy expression, and her heart warmed. He was a big, domineering, overprotective, stubborn oaf. Her oaf.

Talia wrapped her arms around Damon's neck. "How about we find out where we will be staying tonight? There is still some time until the party starts."

She gave him a meaningful look, and Damon's lips lifted into a smile.

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Chapter 845: Ashton's birthday party (1)

The event hall of the Spring Leaf pack was a one-story building that resembled a hangar from the outside.

On the inside, it was a massive space that was perfect for any type of gatherings.

Two long bars with bartenders behind them stood opposite each other at the far ends of the event hall, there was an elevated stage with a band, a dance area where guests wiggled, and many tables with benches where people were enjoying finger foods and chatting in a good mood. Doors on the side led to restrooms, an extra storage area for additional furniture, and a kitchen where food was kept.

To accommodate larger gatherings, the event hall had massive doors that would open to a well-maintained lawn where tables and chairs were set up, but this area was mostly empty with only a few people there who stepped out for a smoke.

The forest around the event hall was filled with warriors who were organized in formations to wait for rogues while hoping that rogues won't come. Many of the guests came with their kids, and those were high-ranking members of their packs and prominent figures in society. A slip-up in security would be devastating.

When Damon told Cristian about a potential rogues' attack, Cristian considered canceling the event, but Damon convinced him otherwise with an argument that Tony and Maddox will send reinforcements, and this was the perfect opportunity to figure out what was going on with the rogues.

Someone was behind rogues, organizing them; someone powerful enough to make them obey, or maybe with pockets so deep that rogues would follow them willingly. In any case, it was a dangerous opponent, and staying passive while hoping for the best was not a good strategy.

Only a handful of people knew about Cassie's warning. Others believed that these were extra security measures after what happened in the Blue River pack. If the news leaked that Cristian had information about the upcoming attack and still proceeded with this party, people who were kept in the dark would be angry.

In the event hall, more than a hundred people were present, but due to the sheer size of the event hall, it looked under-utilized.

After an elaborate dinner, people were mingling, and kids were running around and doing kids' stuff. Normally, parents would remind their kids to be restrained, but this was a birthday for a six year-old, so children's energy was welcomed. It was lively.

Kids had their own area set up with a big bouncy house and games, and their laughter and cheers were overpowering music.

Damon was standing at the bar and sipping juice angrily while his eyes didn't leave Ashton and Talia who were on the dancefloor.

Ashton and Talia were holding hands and moving left-right, so it was not a big deal, but Ashton's grin rubbed Damon the wrong way. He really wanted to go there and slap some sense into the kid. Why couldn't he accept that Talia was taken? Ashton should go and play with other midgets or chase girls his size, and leave Talia alone!

Keith was among the guests, keeping an eye on Talia, but Ashton didn't count as a threat to Talia's safety so Damon couldn't count on Keith to take out that kid that was like a thorn in Damon's side.

"I hope you can overlook Arya's indiscretion," Cristian said to Damon.

Damon peeled his eyes away from Talia to look at Cristian who joined him at the bar without Damon noticing.

"Do you ask for forgiveness for all your generals or is this one special?"

Cristian didn't miss Damon's mocking tone and he wondered who else thought that Arya had special privileges.

"Arya joined this pack fifteen years ago as an orphan and I feel responsible for her shortcomings. But she is a good kid."

Damon snorted. "I'm sure you will say that your son is a good one also, yet look at him trying to take my mate away."

"He is just a child."

"Is that your answer to everything? Children should be forgiven no matter how big a mess they make? Last time I checked, ignorance and lack of experience didn't count as valid excuses for mistakes," Damon said stiffly. Cristian was about to say something else, but Damon raised his hand. "Your son is over the line, but I'm not a child-beater. However, don't blame me if Talia doesn't respond to his invitations going forward. And don't worry about your general. As long as she doesn't cause more trouble, I won't pursue this matter. Talia is an Alpha and she can take care of herself, but to me, Talia is my mate, my Luna, my family, and I will do anything to ensure she is happy. No one can act freely and disrespect her."

Cristian nodded in understanding.

"What's with the stiff atmosphere?"

Damon and Cristian turned toward the voice to see Tony approaching them.

"Am I interrupting something?" Tony asked.

"No," Damon responded. "We were just done." Damon glanced behind Tony to see that Kalina and Michelle were chatting, and Damon wished that Talia stops dancing with that shrimp and sit with the ladies.

With Tony joining, the atmosphere between Damon and Cristian was less tense, but neither of the three was able to relax completely as they were getting updates through their pack links from warriors that were spread through the area.

Maddox didn't join, because Tanya was pregnant and he didn't want to risk her safety, but his Beta Oliver was in attendance. Oliver was also mentally communicating with warriors from the Blue River pack.

"Do you mind if I join?" Alpha Adam of the Silverfur asked as he approached Cristian, Damon, and Tony.

Cristian gestured to Alpha Adam to go ahead. "Are you enjoying the party?"

"Yes, yes. It's been a while since I attended an event without a business agenda."

Damon didn't approve of Alpha Adam's presence, but this was not his party, so he didn't voice his complaints.

The Silverfur pack was usually staying neutral, acting only if their interests were in jeopardy and trying not to stir waves. That put them in a position of not having enemies, but not having any loyal allies either. Everything was a business transaction, which meant that Alpha Adam will side with whoever gives him more benefits, and Damon hated such people. Especially since Alpha Adam sent his Beta's daughter, Jade, to stir trouble for him and Talia.

Alpha Adam was in his early forties. Age-wise, he didn't belong to this younger group of Alphas, but he didn't quite get along with the older generation either because they thought of him as young and less experienced. He was caught in an awkward gap between two groups, and he was doing the best he could to provide for his pack.

"I was wondering..." Alpha Adam started while his eyes darted from Damon to Cristian, "How are things going since you opened your borders to merge territories?"

"We didn't merge our territories," Damon said stiffly. "We came to an agreement that we won't be hostile toward each other, and due to that, we relaxed security on the borders we are sharing."

"You can call it that way, if you want," Alpha Adam said. "Do you see benefits of doing that? Any faults with it?"

"I'm sure you are aware of the benefits and dangers, Alpha Adam," Cristian said. "We are all friends here, so how about you get to the point?"

Alpha Adam scratched the back of his head. "Well... I was wondering if you will consider letting my pack in on that."

Author's note: You can see pics of the Pascal family in the comments

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Chapter 846: Ashton's birthday party (2)

Damon and Cristian exchanged quick glances like they were confirming if they heard the same thing.

The Silverfur pack was placed on to the East of the Dark Howlers pack, and it also shared a border with the Spring Leaf pack.

"No need for such a reaction," Alpha Adam said. "I am just trying to get more information. Are there some conditions I need to fulfill? Is there any transaction between you to keep this open-borders policy afloat?"

"You want to open your borders to our packs?" Damon was visibly surprised. Damon thought Alpha Adam would ask about Jade, and the conditions for releasing her from forced-labor punishment that was documented by the WW Magazine, and not discuss an alliance.

Alpha Adam pressed his lips into a line. "Is that so unexpected? Everyone would be attracted to the possibility of not needing to guard a certain stretch of the border. With fewer patrols needed, I can strengthen the ones along borders facing rogues and ease the load my warriors have. If we make this work, your two packs and the Blue River pack will be my allies. Even if you don't like me, you will come to my aid because if my territory is breached, it means that enemies can come to you easily." He glanced at Tony. "As a bonus, I am on good terms with Alpha Peter of the Evenfang pack. The South side of his territory borders the Lightclaw pack, and we could be the bridge to Alpha Anthony joining this alliance."

Damon couldn't believe this. It's not that just Alpha Adam wanted in, but he was negotiating for Alpha Peter too!? Alpha Peter was a bit older than Alpha Adam, but they were the same kind, both officially neutral and watching only for their own interests.

How Damon saw this, opening up borders to them would be an invitation to disasters on many levels.

"This is an interesting offer, Adam," Cristian said calmly. "We will consider it. However, as you know, we can't make that decision without involving Alpha Maddox; before we decide on anything, we will conduct a thorough investigation that must end with positive conclusions from all parties involved. If Alpha Peter is interested in opening up his borders, maybe the two of you should consider such a deal before you join our negotiating table. If you approach us to join as you are now, we will look at each of your packs individually."

The Spring Leaf pack was not the biggest, strongest, and definitely not the wealthiest, and they didn't have any hidden weapons either. The position of the Spring Leaf pack was secured by negotiating ability of Alpha Cristian. He was an Alpha, but he could read the room and navigate the conversation with such skill that he could slam a refusal into someone's face without offending the other party.

Considering that Alphas were known for their explosive temper and pushing their agenda at any cost, Alpha Cristian was an odd one.

Alpha Adam nodded while Cristian was talking, and then he left, pleased with the response.

"Are you serious about considering those two?" Damon asked when Alpha Adam was out of earshot.

Cristian shrugged. "Who knows? Let him play with Peter, and we will see how that turns out." Seeing Damon's obvious disapproval, Cristian asked, "Weren't you the one who spoke about a dream of unifying all our territories? I remember a speech about how that would eliminate rogues and allow us to move freely, which will also increase chances of our people finding their fated mates."

Damon said those things, but those were Talia's ideas. At that time, people didn't know that Talia was his mate, so Damon spoke in her place. It was her dream for everyone to live in peace, and Damon wished for the power to make it come true. Unifying territories of three packs was a step forward, but it was far from the end goal.

Tony released a long breath. "I wish my territory is closer to yours." They were allies, but Tony shared borders not only with the Evenfang pack but also with the Red Moon pack, and that was a big headache. If Alpha Edward attacked, Tony would be defeated before any reinforcements arrived.

"Me too," Damon said honestly.

It's not that Damon was buddy-buddy with Tony, but the Lightclaw pack was closest to the portal to the Midnight Guardians pack. If they could connect their borders, it would be easier for everyone to move around.

Unfortunately, Damon didn't trust Alpha Adam and Alpha Peter. If they opened borders with them, it meant that those two would know about witches and abilities, and Damon was not ready to share that information with the world; No one was ready for that, yet Damon could feel that a storm was coming.

Cristian's eyes lost focus for a moment. "My patrols caught some movements." He glanced to check the time. It was not time to end the party, but it was not early either. "I will get the kids out of here."

Cristian issued several commands through the mind-link, and the band stopped playing music.

Cristian went to the stage and took the microphone. "I want to thank everyone for coming here tonight to celebrate Ashton's sixth birthday. I'm glad to see you are having fun, but I must remind you that we have kid-friendly activities in the morning that start at seven o'clock. I will leave it to parents to decide when to put their children to sleep. We want you fresh and energized because we will build rafts and have a race on the river."

"YEAH!" A bunch of kids screamed, making grownups burst into laughter.

Cristian thanked everyone again, and the people started dispersing.

Guesthouses had tight security, so they were safe from the rogues. With most of the members of the Spring Leaf pack in shelters, the people left in the area were warriors and high-ranking members who were aware of the situation.

Ashton was reluctant to leave Talia's side, but he left with Luna Michelle's parents after Talia promised to watch him during the raft-building activity.

When Ashton was out of sight, Talia's smile faltered, and she looked at Damon with concern. 'What's going on, Damon?' She didn't have the pack mind-link, but she knew the plan, and the fact that kids and most of the grownups left, told her that something was happening.

'We have confirmed sightings of rogues,' Damon responded through their mind link. 'Do you want to go...'

'I'm staying with you,' Talia responded with finality.

Damon was now by her side. He cupped her cheeks with his palms and looked at her with all the concern in the world. "Kitten..."

"No, Damon. I am not backing out from this. I know what you are going to say. I am aware of the dangers, and I am aware of my condition. You might think I'm foolish, but I want to remind you of the fact that whenever something bad happened, we were apart. We need to stay together, Damon."

Damon frowned in disapproval, but he knew she was right. If it were up to him, he would ask her to go into a shelter, but that was not Talia. Even before she knew they were mates and that she had powers, Talia didn't go to a shelter. His kitten was always in the middle of a fray. Reckless kitten. His kitten.

Damon leaned to peck her lips. "Stay close to me."

Talia wrapped her arms around him. "There is no other place I would rather be."

Damon exhaled in defeat, and then he kissed her again.

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Chapter 847: An ambush (1)

Note: Pic of Arya is in the comments of chapter 841

Cristian was on top of the situation.

Patrols from the Spring Leaf pack identified several places where rogues were hiding, and they swiftly formed several groups, each with Alphas present. Their goal was to attack rogues. None of them were willing to wait and see what rogues were up to.

Their mission was to eliminate threats while trying to catch some alive, so they could interrogate them.

Beta Oliver was securing guest houses with warriors from the Blue River pack.

Luna Michelle was not a warrior. After confirming that Ashton was asleep and well guarded, she went to the shelter to assure their people things were under control.

Liam and Amelia were in the group led by Alpha Cristian. Amelia was excited to be part of this. She never saw anything like it.

Pierce and Daria went with Tony and Kalina. They volunteered to join that group because Daria wanted to be with her sister.

The idea to mix up teams came from Alpha Cristian. He thought it would be easier to share updates because each can communicate with members of their own pack.

Damon and Talia moved together with Keith and a group of ten warriors.

'It would be better if it were just the two of us,' Talia spoke to Damon through their private mind-link.

'You want a piece of this?' Damon asked teasingly and flexed his muscles.

He was wearing only shorts, and he knew that Talia enjoyed checking him out. Other warriors were also scarcely dressed, but Talia had eyes only for Damon. Damon approved.

'I don't want a piece. I want all of you,' Talia responded right away. 'I wish it's only the two of us because you are immune to my powers. It will be difficult for me to aim, so I don't harm our people.'

Damon shot a side-glance at Keith. Keith's injuries healed from how Talia blasted him in the cave, and since then, Keith had minimal interaction with Talia, keeping it strictly business-only. Damon guessed that Keith was feeling guilty about what happened when Talia was in heat, and Damon wouldn't mind if Talia blasted Keith again, just in case the measly coach gets any other funny ideas in the future.

Damon was truly torn about Keith. On one side, he was a capable warrior and the most loyal person, the perfect candidate to watch over Talia. And on another side, Keith couldn't conceal his admiration for Talia, admiration that went beyond what a warrior should feel for his Luna. If Damon dismissed Keith, Talia would lose a capable guard, but keeping him didn't sound good either.

'Damon?' Talia's voice sounded in Damon's head, reminding him that they were in the middle of a conversation when he spaced out.

'Yes, yes. Don't worry about harming our people. If you want to blast anyone, let me know, and I will mind-link them. Or... how about they duck when you whistle?'

Talia liked that. 'That sounds great, but I'm not much of a whistler. How about they duck if I shout "duck"?''

After a second, Damon responded, 'Done.'

Talia knew that he had already mind-linked others about this.

'Damon?'

'Yes, kitten?'

'I want us to hurry with my Luna ceremony. I need the pack mind-link, so that I can communicate properly with everyone.'

'Alright. We can do what Max and Tanya did. A private ceremony for the pack, and we can have a big party later.'

A few moments later, Talia called again, 'Damon?'

'Yes?'

'Don't get hurt. If you do, we can't have our ceremony.'

Damon smiled. Her concern was genuine, and he found it cute that Talia was chatty because she was nervous.

'Kitten?'

'Yes?'

'Relax. It will be alright.'

Talia released a long breath. Damon could pick up her anxiousness, and it was affecting him as well. She needed to be his support and not a burden. Talia had to admit that when they were planning for this, the forest was not this dark and not so scary, and she was definitely not this tense.

Talia admired Damon. Whenever it counted, he was composed and focused on what he needed to do, like now.

'You are amazing,' Talia said through their mind-link.

Damon paused and looked at her questionably. 'Where did that come from? I need details!'

Talia was alerted. People behind them also stopped and were looking around, searching for danger, or whatever reason caused Damon to stop.

'I was just saying what was on my mind. Can we move before people get suspicious?'

'I will expect an explanation on that. Later.' He turned to the front and narrowed his eyes. 'Stay behind me, kitten.'

'I don't think it's going to work that way,' Talia protested. If she was behind him, how was she supposed to fight?

'Fine!' Damon snapped. 'How IS it going to work? How are you expecting me to fight the rogues while I worry sick about my mate and my pup?'

'Damon,' Talia called. 'I get it. You are nervous. I am nervous as well. But just as I believe in you, I need you to believe in me.'

Instead of answering, Damon raised his arm, which was a signal to everyone to freeze.

Talia didn't sense anything, but she trusted Damon's instincts.

'Lis?' Talia called her wolf. 'Anything?'

'Something is messing with my perception,' Liseli responded. 'And that means we are close to trouble.'

'Did we walk into it without knowing?'

'I don't think so. The surroundings were clear just a second ago. This is almost like...'

'They were waiting for us,' Talia finished what Liseli was about to say.

Talia focused on her surroundings, and she confirmed that everything was fuzzy. The jamming effect was stronger than the one she sensed in the Blue River pack.

Talia tried a few things to confirm that her Alpha aura was obstructed, but the energy flow was normal, which meant she could use her abilities.

'CRACK!'

A sound of the branch breaking came from the left, and in the next moment, more than twenty rogues jumped from the foliage and went straight for them.

Chaos erupted. Growls and whimpers everywhere.

Talia couldn't see Damon anymore, but a black wolf was there, tearing into any rogue who dared to get close.

Talia's heart was beating wildly, and she could feel her palms brimming with energy just in time when one wolf turned to her.

Talia raised her hands, focusing on causing harm so the rogue couldn't get to her.

A silent beam of light burst from her palms, cutting through the wolf like a hot knife through butter. He didn't have time to make a sound when he fell down a few steps

away from Talia with his head split open. The nauseating scent of burned flesh and fur filled the space, and Talia swallowed the bile that rose in her throat.

She couldn't believe she had done that.

Before she could process what happened, a ferocious growl was heard from her left, and she saw a dark brown wolf coming her way. Another beam of light emitted from Talia's palms, and the rogue was cut in half before he realized what was happening.

Damon noticed that his mind-link was not working, and he shifted into human form to shout, "LEAVE NO ONE ALIVE!" And then he turned into a black wolf again. He didn't want to risk any of these rogues fleeing and reporting what Talia could do.

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Chapter 848: An ambush (2)

The fight was ferocious, with growls and snarls everywhere.

Talia stood in the middle of it with her expression devoid of emotions, and the only thing preventing her from dissolving into panic was that she needed to keep going for Damon and others who were fighting by her side.

Talia fried and cut three more rogues, and then things turned silent.

Seeing that they ran out of opponents, Damon quickly got by Talia's side and put his hand on her shoulder. That point of contact was her anchor, keeping her from falling apart. She would lean into him for support, but he was naked, and they had an audience.

"Casualties!?" Damon shouted.

"No one died from our side," Keith said. "And I believe we got them all."

"My leg is bleeding," one shaky voice came from the back, and Talia moved that way.

"We can take him to the pack hospital," Damon said while tightening his hold on Talia and preventing her from going there.

Talia put her hand over Damon's. "I want to stop the bleeding."

Damon didn't want her to reveal her abilities more than necessary, but he saw her determination, so he let her have it.

Talia squatted next to the warrior who leaned away from her.

Talia realized he was afraid. Well, the wolf-frying white laser beams from her palms freaked her out as well.

"I won't harm you. I am here to help," she said. "Let me see your wound."

The guy swallowed hard, but he didn't dare to refuse or move when he saw Damon's fierce gaze locked on him.

Talia checked to see from where the blood was flowing, and then she put her hands above that area.

Damon squatted next to Talia, observing in silence as her palms glowed. The wound was closing at speed visible to the naked eye.

"Done," Talia announced. It was a good reminder that her hands were capable of healing.

"Thank you, Luna," the warrior said.

"I only did first aid. You should go to the pack hospital to get it treated further."

"Pablo, go with him!" Keith instructed.

Pablo was a guy who had a cut on his arm, but it was not too bad. However, the two of them could leave together as they were not in a position to fight properly.

Talia turned to see Damon observing her intently.

"How are you doing?" He asked.

"I am... I will be fine." She looked around. "How come we didn't sense them? Even if those devices jammed our perception, didn't Cristian say they have infrared sensors?"

The warrior from the Spring Leaf pack shook his head helplessly. "No alarms sounded in this area."

Keith was inspecting one dead rogue, putting his hand on the body. "Infrared sensors detect heat. These guys are cold."

Talia went there to touch the rogue's shoulder. It was icy.

At a closer look, she saw runes drawn on his body, and she assumed that those were causing their body temperature to drop.

"How did they know they should stay cold?" Talia asked.

Damon rubbed his face with force. "They were ready for this. Cristian said that they set up infrared sensors in the last few days. Someone leaked the information."

The thought of traitors was unsettling.

"Is it possible that they assumed this would happen after the outcome at the Blue River pack?" Talia asked.

Damon was not sure. "If that's the case, they have someone who can see the future."

"Or a good strategist," Talia said, and Damon frowned.

If the rogues had someone like James on their side, that could be disastrous.

Damon tried not to think about it and to focus on the pressing matter. "No matter how they found out, we need to inform others. They could be walking into traps."

If not for Talia and Damon taking out several rogues each with ease, the rest of the group would be in serious trouble.

"Let's find those devices and turn them off, so our pack links work," Damon instructed, and people spread around to inspect the foliage.

It didn't take long to find two devices, and the pack link was established with people from the Blue River pack. Beta Oliver confirmed that everything was quiet there.

The pack link with the warriors from the Dark Howlers pack was spotty, and the ones who were in groups with Cristian and Tony were unreachable. However, they couldn't contact anyone from the Lightclaw pack or from the Spring Leaf pack.

From the information they exchanged, no one else was fighting.

"Let's hope we were the only ones who met rogues," Talia said. "Cristian and Tony probably walked into areas that are being jammed." Talia turned to Damon. "Does any of them know how to find these devices?"

Damon was not sure.

It was one thing to identify that the pack link was not working, but finding these gadgets was a different issue. If Talia didn't figure out a way to find those at the Blue River pack, the casualties would be multiplied.

Sure, they can comb through the foliage to find them, but what if they are up in the trees or buried underground? Will rogues stay still and wait for their devices to be found and disabled?

The biggest problem was that Cristian was confident the infrared sensors would alert him of any dangers, and Tony and Kalina were not experienced in these types of fighting.

"We need to send someone there," Talia said.

Damon's stiff expression told her that he disagreed.

"There are eleven of us," Keith said. "We can send a few people..." His voice trailed when Damon growled.

Talia put her hand on Damon's shoulder. "It's not wise to separate. But we can't ignore the fact that others might be in danger. How about we all move together?"

Damon shook his head. "We need to secure this area." If they left, there would be an opening that rogues could take advantage of.

'Damon,' Talia spoke to him through their mind-link. 'Let's send everyone else, and the two of us will stay here to complete our task. You saw my ability. I will attack from the distance, and you take care of anyone who gets too close.'

Damon puffed his cheeks. He didn't like it, but she was right.

"Keith, take four people and go to meet Alpha Cristian's group. Provide assistance if needed and inform them about what we found. The rest of you, go and meet with Alpha Anthony."

Everyone obeyed Damon's order without objections.

Damon looked in the direction nine warriors moved, hoping he didn't make a mistake. But he had to admit that Talia was like the Goddess of vengeance, slicing through rogues easily. She was fantastic, and if they were not surrounded by rogues, he would make love to her thoroughly right there, in the soft grass under their bare feet.

Talia took Damon's hand into hers. "Come. Let's clear this area, so we can help our friends."

Damon was glad to see Talia taking charge. He guessed that she was running on adrenalin, and she will probably be a mess tomorrow when she remembers what happened, but until then... he will enjoy seeing her kick ass.

Damon and Talia moved stealthily while keeping an eye on their surroundings and talking through their mind-link.

They found a few smaller groups of three-to-four rogues, and they took care of them with ease.

Talia wondered how much more they had left when a sound of fighting got her attention.

'Do you hear that?' Talia asked Damon.

He nodded, and they rushed in that direction.

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