

## The Alpha's Bride

### #Chapter 921: Liar, liar (2)

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Beta Raymond cleared his throat to get everyone's attention. "Nora will be here in a few minutes. I suggest we wait to hear what she has to say."

"While we wait, why don't you contact George?" James asked Alpha Edward and Beta Raymond.

"He was not there," Ana said right away.

James narrowed his eyes at Ana. "George is a Commander in the Red Moon pack. That's the highest position among our warriors. He is also my mentor, and I know he is loyal to the pack. If Alpha Damon and Luna Talia were in his home, he would know about it. Or are you suggesting he was concealing them so they could bully you? Are you that important?"

Ana lowered her head, and James snorted with, "I agree with Beta Raymond. Let's wait for Nora and hear what happened there because Ana's story doesn't make sense. Ana was either brainwashed, went mad, or deceiving us on purpose. In any case, she is compromised and should not be allowed anywhere near the packhouse."

Ana's chin trembled as an ominous feeling gripped her heart. Did her fate depend on Nora? Ana never got along with Nora, and she knew that Nora would use this opportunity to get rid of her.

"What can Ana gain by accusing Commander George of treason?" Beta Raymond asked, and no one had an answer to this question.

Ana looked at Alpha Edward desperately. "I implore you to believe me. This pack is in danger. You are in danger."

"We are always in danger," Beta Raymond said.

"But this is real. It is happening right now and right here. Commander George is a traitor, and his whole villa is colluding against us!"

"I suggest you stop talking," James said curtly. "Do you know what you are saying? You just accused the best Commander of this pack of treason! You sound like a crazy person. Did you overwork yourself for this party?"

'KNOCK-KNOCK!'

Two crisp knocks were heard on the door, and Beta Raymond went to open it.

"Who is that?" Alpha Edward asked while pointing at the teen who came with Nora.

"That's Oscar," Nora responded. "He accompanied me and Ana to Commander George's villa. Since you have questions about what happened there, I thought you would want to hear from everyone."

Alpha Edward waved at the boy to start talking.

"Uhm..." He didn't know what to say.

"Go on," Nora encouraged him. "Just tell them what happened at Commander George's villa."

"He was not there," Ana protested.

"He was," Nora said. "We arrived together, and I left with him. How can you say he was not there? Who carried the garment bags?"

"Let him talk," Alpha Edward said while checking the time. The party was close to starting, and instead of welcoming guests, he was dealing with this drama. But if Ana's words were true, it would be a big mistake to dismiss them.

Oscar fidgeted, and he spoke without lifting his head. "We arrived, and Estelle took the garment bags."

"Estelle is an Omega from Commander George's villa," Nora said quickly.

"Adele showed me to the kitchen, and they gave me food. I said that I shouldn't be there lazing, but they said there was no work left and that I shouldn't be in the room where females were changing clothes, so I stayed in the kitchen. It didn't pass long when there was a commotion, and when I reached the hallway, I saw Ana running out of the villa. I wanted to go after her, but since Miss Nora was still there, I stayed."

"And then?" Beta Raymond asked.

"Then... they gave me more food, and I left with Miss Nora."

"Did you hear anything suspicious or see someone that shouldn't be there?" Beta Raymond asked.

Oscar shook his head. "Just Omegas working there. Estelle, Adele, and Cherry. They have been with Commander George since he got his position as a General and are taking care of his villa. They said there were four more Omegas, but they were not around. Estelle is the oldest one, and she manages it..."

"Enough," Alpha Edward interrupted Oscar. It was obvious that the boy didn't know anything. "You can leave."

Oscar left the study, and Alpha Edward turned to Nora. "What do you have to say?"

Nora said the story they prepared. How she came with Ana and Oscar, and Nora and Ana went to the living room to see Zina and Dawn.

"There was no one else?" Alpha Edward asked.

"Estelle brought the garments, and she would occasionally come to bring refreshments, but there was no one else."

"Liar!" Ana hissed.

Nora rolled her eyes. "How would you know when you left?"

"I assigned both of you to go there. Why did Ana leave?" Beta Raymond asked Nora.

Nora fidgeted before responding, "We were there less than 5 minutes when Ana excused herself to the bathroom. I assumed that she went to snoop around, just as you told us, so I focused on two Omegas to keep attention on me. The next thing I know, there was some shouting, and Ana ran away."

"Shouting?" Alpha Edward asked.

Nora pressed her lips into a line and lowered her head.

"What are you not telling us?" Beta Raymond demanded.

Nora whimpered. "Please, dad... Don't be angry at me. I had no idea Ana would do such a thing."

Beta Raymond hated Nora's dramatic personality change, but they had an audience, so he spoke calmly, "Don't worry. If you did nothing wrong, you won't be punished, but we need to know, what did Ana do?"

Nora released a long breath. "I'm not sure what exactly happened, but Ana ran out, and then Commander George came, furious that she went into his study. He was shouting about her looking at important documents and then coming onto him, and he said she was lucky that Alpha Edward was protecting her; otherwise, he would kill her on the spot."

Beta Raymond turned to Ana robotically. "You went into Commander George's study? And got caught? He told her to snoop around, not to be stupid!"

"I didn't!"

"How dare you make up stuff in front of your Alpha!?" Nora asked Ana in outrage. "Why would Commander George lie about you coming onto him? Do you think a man of his stature is lacking women?"

"I didn't come onto him!" Ana cried. What kind of a nonsense story was that? She didn't even see the man!

Nora rolled her eyes. "Tell that to someone who is blind. Commander George is young, handsome, and powerful. Only a blind woman would pass on a chance to get close to him but sneaking into Commander George's study is too much. Are you upset because he rejected your advances? Are you hoping that Alpha Edward will punish him for you? Did your recent promotion get into your head?"

James stood up and looked at Ana sternly. "For your good, I suggest you come clean, or you will be punished for lying to your Alpha and smearing the reputation of Commander George. Did you accuse him of treason because he refused to shag you? Or because he caught you in his office? Who do you think you are? Who gave you the right to snoop around? Are you going to tell us how you were unaware that a Commander has classified information in his possession? For whom are you working? Is it the Dark Howlers pack? Or is it the Steelbite pack? Rogues?"

Ana felt the ground under her feet shaking. What the hell was going on!? Why did accusations become graver the longer James spoke? Was he doing it on purpose, or did the dim-witted teen believe she was a spy from another pack?

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Chapter 922: Liar, liar (3)

Ana gritted her teeth in anger. Why was James twisting everything? Unless... Ana's eyes widened. "You are also with them!"

Before anyone could react, James crossed the distance between Ana and him and held Ana by her neck, lifting her off the ground.

Nora quickly took a step back from Ana. This was the second time today for Ana to be attacked, and Nora didn't want to be a side casualty of a brawl that had nothing to do with her. Well, almost nothing to do with her.

"What did you say?" James squeezed through his teeth while glaring at Ana.

Ana clawed at his hand, trying to pry it free, but it was in vain. How can a sixteen years-old be so strong? Why was no one helping her?

Alpha Edward and Beta Raymond stared at James in disbelief. He moved so quickly that they didn't see it happening. And what was this volatile energy radiating from James? That was not normal.

Ana looked at Alpha Edward tearfully, silently asking to be spared.

"Don't kill her," Alpha Edward said, and James loosened his grip, but he didn't let her go.

"I am the next Alpha of the Red Moon pack, and this lowly Omega accused me of being a traitor," James said icily without removing his glare from Ana. "Traitor of what will be mine? Why are you protecting her? How far can her boldness go? After what I've seen here, I am confident that this Omega is dangerous to our pack. You taught me that it's best to remove dangers as soon as possible."

James turned to look at his father. "What will we do if her nonsense reaches Alpha Damon and his Luna? Don't tell me you believe the story of how Alpha Damon's Luna used to live in the attic of our packhouse and that she was cleaning restrooms during the night while concealing her presence to the point of none of us sensing her. How can someone with the qualities of a Luna go unnoticed? How could she be Alpha Damon's Luna without leaving our pack? If Ana's story is correct, Luna Talia was in this packhouse at the same time when Marcy was here. Did you feel the bond breaking in the last few months?"

Alpha Edward's jaw ticked. He didn't. Sure, a few Omegas found their mates in different packs, and they left, but every bond breaking was accounted for, and none of the Omegas who left resembled Alpha Damon's Luna.

James continued talking.

"And let's assume Ana's story is true and Alpha Damon's Luna was an Omega in our pack. How can that information benefit us now that she is his Luna? Our spies confirmed that her Luna ceremony was complete. She belongs to the Dark Howlers pack, and us bringing up her past will either enrage her because it's a bunch of lies or won't make a difference because we can't touch her." James was tightening his grip on Ana's neck. "I should snap her neck just for daring to lie in your face. She wanted to manipulate you in order to conceal her failure to seduce Commander George."

"Don't!" Alpha Edward exclaimed. "As an Alpha, I will deal with this. Leave us. I want to have a word with Ana."

Beta Raymond hesitated. If Alpha Edward just wanted to talk or kill, there was no need for privacy.

Beta Raymond knew that his Alpha was lecherous and that Ana was attractive and willing, and he feared that she would be able to convince Alpha Edward to change his mind.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Beta Raymond asked. "Maybe I should stay and..."

"Leave!" Alpha Edward said angrily. Why were Raymond, James, and Nora still in the study? "The guests are here. Welcome them and represent the pack until I join you. All three of you."

With Beta Raymond, Nora, and James leaving the office, it was just Ana and Alpha Edward.

"You believe me, don't you?" Ana asked fearfully while rubbing her aching neck.

"I want to," Alpha Edward said while standing up from his seat and making his way toward Ana. "But... how can I when so many things don't make sense?"

He put his hands at the collar of her shirt, and in one swift move, the fabric was torn. Before Ana could react, all her other clothes were gone, leaving her completely naked.

She inhaled a shaky breath. Alpha Edward would eagerly pounce on her, but he was never this enthusiastic to the point of tearing everything.

Alpha Edward could pick up the scent of her arousal, but he was not in the mood to fool around.

"Turn around," Alpha Edward said, and she obeyed.

Ana made a full circle to see him frown while visually examining her body.

"You said they tortured you," Alpha Edward said. "How come there is not a single bruise?" Other than the one in the shape of James' palm on her neck.

Ana was not sure how to respond to this. "They blindfolded me, and I felt a cooling sensation, and after that, I was fine."

"Did they give you some medicine?"

"I'm not sure. My healing was always better than an average Omega."

'SLAP!'

A harsh slap landed on Ana's face, filled with the strength of an Alpha. Ana lost her balance and fell to the floor.

Ana held her throbbing cheek. "Why did you hit me?"

"To see how good your healing is." Alpha Edward squatted next to Anna and pulled her hand away.

The pink was turning into an angry red, and he knew it would become purple soon. There was also that bruise on Ana's neck, but Alpha Edward didn't know how much force James used, so he couldn't gauge the seriousness of that injury.

"If they tortured you and you ran back here, it can't be more than fifteen minutes before I saw you."

That would put her healing rate to be faster than an Alpha could have. After all, she mentioned broken bones.

While waiting for time to run out, Alpha Edward mind-linked George, who confirmed Nora's story. George said he was doing a final check of security procedures for the event, and when he got into his study, Ana was there. She tried to wiggle out of charges of spying by coming onto him.

'Why didn't you tell me about it?' Alpha Edward asked George. 'You should know that Ana works in the packhouse. If she is a spy working here, it would be dangerous.'

'I would tell you after the party,' George said.

'Why the delay?'

'This is a big event, and it wouldn't be good if you are distracted by this matter. As an Alpha, it's best if you focus on our guests, otherwise, they might suspect we have problems with our pack,' George explained. 'I assigned warriors to keep an eye on Ana, so we make sure she doesn't cause further damage, and we might find out for whom she is working.'

'You think she is working for someone?'

'That's the only conclusion I have. As an Omega, she wouldn't have the courage to pry into secretive information. And what would she do with it? If you, Beta Raymond, or other Commanders wanted to know about security procedures I am working on, you have clearance, and all you need to do is ask. Why send an Omega to spy? But things



didn't work out as planned. I caught her, and she told me how she had admired me for a long time. She started undressing, and then I kicked her out...'

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Chapter 923: Liar, liar (4)

Alpha Edward had to acknowledge that George's story matched what Nora and that Omega boy (aka Oscar) have said.

It all pointed to Ana being a spy. Ana was born in the Red Moon pack. Since when was she working as a spy? For whom? Was that why she spread her legs for him? Alpha Edward had so many questions and he was unsure what to do. Was he compromised?

'Ana is in my office. What should I do with her?' Alpha Edward asked George.

'I suggest you don't bring up the spying, and we try to use Ana to see who hired her. But if you think she is onto us knowing, then it's better to cut our losses and imprison her before she tips off her employer. She knows that traitors have only one ending so we can't assume that she will tell us the truth. We might as well start with torture right away...'

'Dear? Am I interrupting?' Luna Layla's impatient voice sounded in Alpha Edward's head, covering George's words.

'Let's talk later,' Alpha Edward said to George, and then he responded to his Luna's summons. 'Yes?'

'Our guests are here. Do you expect me to welcome them with a smile while you are shagging an Omega?'

Alpha Edward cursed inwardly. How did she know that he was alone with Ana? But... 'I'm not shagging...'

'Save it!' Luna Layla cut him off. 'We have an agreement. You can do whatever you want as long as you are doing your duty as an Alpha and as my partner. It is our son's sixteenth birthday. Stop thinking with your dick! I'm tired of smiling while you get your fill of random bitches. Tuck it into your pants and come here before I make a scene in front of your guests!'

Alpha Edward puffed his cheeks. They were her guests also!

Normally, he wouldn't let his Luna talk to him like that, but this time she had a point of him being absent, even though the reason was off. Would she be more understanding if



she knew he was dealing with potential treason? Actually, it was not potential. It was real. The only question was who the traitor was.

Alpha Edward looked at Ana, whose cheek was now turning purple, and it was swollen to the point of her eye closing. James' palmprint on her neck was still there. What above-average healing nonsense?

If that were any other Omega, she wouldn't get access to talk to him, and he wouldn't listen, and he would end her life for accusing a Commander of treason without evidence. If there was any evidence, it pointed to Ana being a liar, yet she was still breathing. Was he thinking with his dick?

He was Alpha Edward of the Red Moon pack. Alpha of the second largest pack in North America. He was powerful with a lot of resources and influence, and his image crumbled to him wasting time listening to an Omega who was accusing his top people of treason.

Ana could see Alpha Edward's expression turning icy, and she panicked.

"I'm not lying! I would never lie to you."

Alpha Edward didn't respond, and Ana felt her mouth going dry. Will he kill her here?

"Just think about what I said. It all makes sense!"

Alpha Edward frowned. "Do you think I'm stupid?"

"No, no! Of course, not! I understand you have a lot of information to consider, which can sometimes get mixed. But think about this..." Ana licked her lips nervously. "Didn't you say how Luna Talia's background is mysterious? It's not mysterious. No one knows where she came from because she came from here. She was a nobody, an Omega hiding in the attic. I saw her there... I can call other Omegas who also know. They can confirm her identity."

"You heard James," Alpha Edward said. "Even if that part is true, it doesn't change anything."

"It does!" Ana exclaimed. "It's proof that I'm not lying."

"One truth doesn't explain lies."

Ana's chin trembled. "What lies?"

Alpha Edward's eyes moved to Ana's cheek and then to her neck. "The bruises. How did you heal after they bullied you if you can't heal from this?" And there was the point of her coming onto George. Why would George lie about that?

Ana whimpered.

...

"Ready?" Luna Layla asked while peeking into James' room. The birthday boy was set to appear in the event hall with his parents accompanying him.

"Yes," James responded while straightening the lapels of his suit jacket. He wondered if his chocolate-colored Goddess would approve of the black suit with dark blue details. It made his blue eyes stand out, and Cornelia said more than once that he had sexy eyes. Did this suit make him sexier? Will she like it?

Luna Layla approached James and started fixing his necktie.

James observed his mother, who was a few inches shorter than him. Luna Layla's blonde hair was lifted into an elegant bun that was secured with diamond pins, and her impeccable makeup emphasized her almond-shaped blue eyes and thin lips colored in red. She was a woman in her late thirties, but she didn't look older than twenty-five. The mascara and eyeliner contributed to making her look like a doll.

"Where is the father?" James asked.

Luna Layla gave him a stiff smile. "He is busy. We will start without him."

James didn't respond. He was confident that Alpha Edward was busy with Ana, and he was pretty sure that his mother knew.

There was a time when he wanted to confront his father and console his mother, but then he realized how that was normal for them, and after a while, James thought it was normal for everyone.

No one talks about relationships without drama, and the only stories he heard were about Alphas sleeping around.

James wondered, how could his mother live like that? He wanted to ask her that question many times, but he held back. It was none of his business.

Alpha Edward's debauchery was a public secret. Everyone knew about it, but no one talked about it.

There were some rumors about Luna Layla, but everything was vague, and James had a hint that those rumors were spread by his mother herself, so it didn't look like she was only being cheated on. James knew that the only time when his mother was out of sight, it was with her girlfriends when they went shopping or to a spa. If she used those outings to see men, those so-called girlfriends would talk about it, and someone would hear, but again... it was none of this business.

James was in his early teens when he decided not to think about the relationship his parents had. Before his eighteenth birthday, he would leave all this behind and go no contact. That was the only way for him to survive.

However, since James met Cornelia, he wondered how his parents could pull it off.

The idea of Cornelia being with another man was driving him mad. How was it possible that his mother was indifferent when her mate was sleeping with other women? What was holding her to stay with Alpha Edward, who sought pleasure and comfort in others? Was it possible that she didn't know what people were saying behind her back? Whatever benefits Alpha Edward offered her twenty years ago were gone. Or was this beyond benefits?

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Chapter 924: Ready for the party

"James?" Luna Layla called when she saw him spacing out. "I know this event puts a lot of pressure on you, but... It's your sixteenth birthday. You will be an adult soon. Try to have a good time while you can."

"I will keep that on my mind, mother," James responded in his official tone. He was not used to his mother... mothering him.

As far as James could remember, Luna Layla would let Alpha Edward do whatever he wanted in the name of training the future Alpha, and she never stepped in; not even when Alpha Edward punished James harshly or forced him to do horrid things.

She didn't intervene when Alpha Edward took young James to observe people being tortured. By his tenth birthday, James knew exactly where to cut for maximum pain without killing his victim.

James was unsure what broke him first, the gruesome visuals, the screams, the beatings he got whenever he would look away or showed discomfort, or the fact that no one thought of making it stop. Not even his mother.

James found it ironic that he got the most care from strangers, yet his so-called parents get to boast how their son is a young Alpha with a promising future.

George was the only one in the Red Moon pack that treated James like a regular person without fear and agenda. Alpha Damon treated James like a young adult whose opinion matters. Petra, Zack, and Erik treated him as friends. And Cornelia showed him that there is such a thing as unconditional acceptance.

Luna Layla was the one who sent Marcy away, and for a whole decade, James didn't hear people talk about Marcy. And now that Marcy was really gone, it was like she never existed. Is that how a mother acts?

Seeing that Luna Layla was just staring at him, James said, "I'm sure that many ladies will be happy to keep me company tonight. Do you have a female on your mind I should allow to entertain me?" It was a normal question as everyone had preferences about who should get access to James first.

Luna Layla's perfectly groomed eyebrows came together to form a frown. "Is that what you want or what your father wants?"

"Is there a difference?", James responded with a question.

James' insides churned at the thought of any woman other than Cornelia, but this was an event where he will be the center of attention. James will avoid getting physical, but he can't avoid talking to people. He needed to be cool about it or his parents would notice that something was off and that would put Cornelia in danger.

Luna Layla released a long breath. "I... James..." Her mouth opened, but no words came out for a few long seconds. Eventually, she said, "Never mind. Happy birthday, James."

"Thank you. Shall we?" James offered her his hand, and she put her hand on his forearm as they walked out together.

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As they moved down the stairs, James could feel the tug of his wolf urging him to not go lower than the second floor.

James pressed his lips into a line. Silly wolf. They couldn't go to Cornelia at this time. But she will join them at the party. Soon. James wondered what dress will Cornelia wear.

Luna Layla gave his arm a squeeze, reminding him that they were about to enter the event hall.

Two warriors dressed in black slacks and red shirts were standing at the door, and one turned to shout into the event hall, "Luna Layla Redmayne and young Alpha James Redmayne!"

James groaned internally. His mother always loved theatrics, and this looked like an entrance to a medieval party. The only things missing to make the experience more realistic would be if the warriors at the door wore metallic full-body armor with spears in their hands.

'Is everyone getting this grandiose announcement?' James asked his mother through their mind-link.

'Only important people,' she responded while holding her chin high.

James and Luna Layla paused at the door to observe many heads turned their way.

At one glance, James counted eleven Alphas, seven Lunas, and more than one dozen Elders. He didn't bother counting other high-ranking members, but there were about two hundred people present. It was an impressive lineup.

The massive event hall was decorated with deep purple and golden fabric draped along the walls, and majestic crystal chandeliers illuminated the space. People were elegantly dressed and it had a royal feel.

If anyone knew how to throw a fancy party, that would be Luna Layla.

'You've outdone yourself, mother,' James said to his mother through the mind link.

She smiled. 'Thank you. I hope you like it.'

"There you are," Alpha Edward spoke enthusiastically while walking toward James and Luna Layla from the crowd. He put his hands on Luna Layla's shoulders and kissed her cheek. "If you took another two minutes, I would come to check on you."

James tried to pry his arm out of his mother's hold, but she tightened her grip, silently telling him to stay put.

"If we knew you were waiting, we would hurry up," Luna Layla responded to Alpha Edward.

James didn't feel like participating in this happy-family charade. No one was fooled, anyway.

Normally, James would endure, but since he marked Cornelia, his wolf was acting up and James had difficulty staying composed when things didn't go his way. He needed Cornelia for his wolf to calm down, but that was not an option now.

"Can we go and greet guests now?" James asked impatiently. "People didn't come here to watch three of us talking."

"Right," Alpha Edward said curtly. "Let's start from here..."

Alpha Edward led the way, followed by Luna Layla and James.

James was happy that his position as the future Alpha allowed him to be arrogant and not smile or engage in small talk.

Behind that unreadable façade, James was focusing on his bond with Cornelia. He wanted to feel how close she was. Why was she still on the second floor? Was something wrong?

On the second floor, Cornelia was in Talia's room with Talia, Damon, Keith, Arya, Gideon, Mindy, Sandy, and Tyler.

Damon demanded that they go through everything one more time. Their stories needed to match, or people will be suspicious.

"It will be alright, Damon," Talia assured him. She could feel his anxiousness rising. "Even if our stories don't match completely, no one will dare to question us. Besides, for anything that's not obvious, people will say that they are not familiar with details. Are you having second thoughts? We don't need to announce my..."

"No, no!" Damon quickly said. He wanted to announce her identity. No more secrets. He wanted everyone to know that his Luna is Alpha Natalia, but he was also nervous. It all sounded great while they were planning, but now that they were about to do it, Damon realized that so many things could go wrong. What if people figure out she is pregnant and use that against her?

Damon shook those negative thoughts away. Talia was fantastic, and even with her pregnancy, she could use her aura and abilities, and she had Liseli also, and Damon had no intention of taking a step away from Talia.

"I am ready," Damon assured Talia. "Let's do this. If anyone dares to say anything against you, I will kill him and that's it."

Talia smiled helplessly.

"Kitten," Damon called solemnly. "Don't do anything foolish. Don't leave my side." He looked at the people in the room. "I want you to keep your eyes on Talia all the time."

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## Chapter 925: The grand entrance of two Alphas

Talia held onto Damon as they walked down the hallways of the packhouse, and she was grateful that his arm was firmly around her.

This place was much more than a hallway for her. It was a place where she grew up hiding and she didn't know how to feel about it.

Two Omegas bowed deeply as they passed, and then they rushed about their business.

So far, other than Ana, no one recognized her.

There was a time when Talia was also moving along these hallways with her head held down. Attracting attention was never a good thing.

Talia shook off the unpleasant emotions that were creeping up on her.

Being in this space with Damon by her side felt surreal like it was happening to someone else.

Talia glanced at Damon to see him looking forward with confidence that spilled on her.

Right. She had no reason to be afraid.

She was Alpha Natalia Moonrider, and she had Damon and many friends, and she was not alone anymore. This was her time to shine as the Alpha of the Midnight Guardians pack, and as Damon's Luna.

Their group of nine reached the double door that was guarded by two warriors who bowed their heads. Even without knowing who other people were, everyone knew Alpha Damon.

Sandy stepped forward to pass a piece of paper.

The warrior read what was written there, and his eyes flashed before he turned to step into the event hall with urgency.

"Alpha Damon Blake and Alpha Natalia Moonrider!" A voice boomed from the door and everyone turned to see two people coming in with more behind them.

Damon's black outfit made him dark and mysterious, and Talia's white cocktail dress gave her an air of light and youth.

Damon's arm was behind Talia, and people quickly zeroed in on his hand that was on her waist. Damon had a reputation as a womanizer, so they wondered if he used his charms to come with Alpha Natalia as his date. What about his Luna?

Alpha Damon and Alpha Natalia were close at a few previous events, but their interaction was ambiguous at best. There was nothing ambiguous about how close they were now.



Talia looked up at Damon and smiled, sensing that his previous anxiousness disappeared.

Damon would never show weakness in front of others, and the truth was that he was waiting for this moment. He wanted to walk into any room with Talia as his mate, and it was finally happening. It was a big deal.

Damon and Talia walked into the crowd that parted to make space for them.

Cornelia, Mindy, Gideon, Sandy, Tyler, Keith, and Arya were behind the couple.

James was talking with a group of people when his eyes landed on Cornelia. She was beautiful with pearls in her hair and a baby-blue dress that provided a fantastic contrast to her dark skin. He balled his hands into fists firmly, as a reminder that he shouldn't go there. Not yet, at least.

'Did you know about this?' Alpha Edward's voice sounded in James' head.

'Know about what, father?'

'That Alpha Damon and Alpha Natalia are this close?'

'I never met Alpha Natalia, so I wouldn't know. But our reports said they are close without details on their relationship. Do you want me to ditch this group and investigate?'

'No. Keep what you were doing. I will take care of this,' Alpha Edward responded.

James couldn't believe that his father still didn't connect that Talia is Alpha Natalia from the Midnight Guardians pack. Sure, Talia would put some makeup on when she came out as Alpha Natalia, and she would lift her hair into a stylish bun, but it was still the same person.

There was also the possibility of Alpha Edward denying the possibility of Damon being mated to Alpha Natalia, to the point of not seeing what was right in front of his eyes.

...

"Alpha Damon," a gravely male voice reached them, and Damon's expression tightened.

"Elder Parker." Damon didn't bother with a fake smile. He didn't like the old guy.

Elder Parker bowed before calling, "Alpha Natalia." His eyes lingered at the point where Damon was holding her. "I don't think we've met. I am Elder Parker of the Red Moon

pack. I heard many things about you. It's such an honor for you to grace us with your presence."

Without waiting for Talia's response, Elder Parker turned to Damon. "I thought you will attend this event with your Luna."

"I am," Damon responded, completely aware that almost everyone was listening.

Elder Parker's smile fell in slow motion to be replaced with utter shock. "Are you saying that you... and Alpha Natalia..."

Damon cocked an eyebrow at him. "I am surprised you didn't know about it. It's not like we were hiding it, and we already attended so many events together."

Elder Parker had difficulty accepting it. "But your Luna's name is... Talia."

"My fated mate's name is Natalia Moonrider. Most people call her Talia, and her friends call her Lia. It is the same person. Did your eyes stop working considering your advanced age?"

"But... but..." Elder Parker stuttered while looking at Talia in disbelief. "You are..."

"I am Alpha of the Midnight Guardians pack, and I am Luna of the Dark Howlers pack," Talia said like it was a totally normal thing, and then she narrowed her eyes at Elder Parker. "Do you have a problem with it?"

If anyone pretended to talk, now they dropped it as only music was heard in the event hall. No one moved a muscle.

Elder Parker gaped at Talia. A sudden chill enveloped his body, preventing him from moving a muscle.

'What's his problem?' Talia asked Damon through their mind-link.

'Uhm... Elder Parker was one of the biggest advocates for Marcy to be my Luna.'

Talia's expression darkened. She thought that the old geezer came to talk, to get more information. Did he come to try to push Marcy or some other woman on Damon because he assumed that Damon left his Luna behind?

'We should get rid of these pompous bastards who think they can control others!' Liseli raged.

'If we do that, not many will be left,' Talia responded. 'Besides, we have bigger fish to fry tonight. This guy is just bitter that he didn't get his way.'

"Excuse us," Mindy said to Elder Parker impatiently. "You either have something to talk about, or get out of our way." She didn't like the old guy blocking their path, and her pregnancy hormones made her temper flare.

Seeing that Elder Parker didn't move, Tyler stepped forward and extended his arm to push the male to the side before gesturing to Damon and Talia that they can go ahead.

Damon had a destination on his mind. On the right was a bar, and he spotted Maddox and Tony there.

Kalina and Tatiana were at one table with Lidia who came with her mate, General Jordan, as part of the delegation from the Spring Leaf pack.

They all had their tasks. Cornelia went to greet the Wilkow sisters. Through casual chatter, masked as talking to Lunas of two packs, Cornelia will hear if they detected anything suspicious. Mindy and Gideon went to search for the Shaman of the Red Moon pack. Sandy and Tyler took a seat at the table that had a good view of the bar.

Keith and Arya were sticking close to Talia, just how Damon ordered them to.

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#### Chapter 926: James' birthday party (1)

"What a way to break the news," Tony said while greeting Damon and Talia. "I think Alpha Richard's jaw is on the floor."

"I am surprised that only one foolish soul blocked your way," Maddox chimed in. "Who do you think sent him?"

"It doesn't matter. It's not every day that two Alphas come out as a mated couple," Damon said proudly while looking at Talia with sparkles in his eyes. He was truly happy. "What will you drink, kitten?"

"I feel like something sour," Talia said, and Damon waved at the waiter to receive instructions for drinks.

Talia was aware of many eyes on them, but she didn't care. Coming out with Damon and saying openly they were a mated couple felt like a huge burden fell off her chest.

Talia's hair was up to expose Damon's mark on her neck, and her mark on his neck was also visible for everyone to see that Damon and Talia accepted each other as equals.

Their entrance went smoothly, and Talia knew that people were still in shock. Soon, they will snap out of it, and the real show will begin.

Luckily, they had a number of close friends in attendance; otherwise, Talia would be worried about other Alphas banding against them. The possibility of the Dark Howlers pack and Midnight Guardians pack merging as one would be perceived as dangerous to many others. Damon had numbers and strength, and Talia had mysterious powers. They could easily suppress any other pack.

'I want to greet Talia,' Dawn whined into the pack link for Zina to hear.

'Me too,' Zina responded.

Two friends were at the party with Owen who was standing next to them with his hands deep in his trouser pockets as a reminder that he shouldn't hug the chamomile-infused goddess by his side. Owen was under the impression that the hardest thing would be to keep lecherous people away from Zina, but now he understood that the biggest challenge for him was to control his urge to whisk Zina away. Since they arrived, they caught a few people looking at them curiously, but none approached them. Yet.

'At least you are with your mate,' Dawn said to Zina wistfully while looking in the direction where George was. He wore black trousers and a white shirt, and Dawn wanted to go there and cling to him so everyone would know he was taken.

'You think I'm having an easier time because Owen is here pretending to be YOUR mate?'

Dawn pressed her lips into a line. She wanted to make a point that there was no physical contact between Owen and her, but she knew that it wouldn't make it any better for Zina, who was enduring this situation while resisting the urges of her newly formed bond.

Dawn remembered that for the first few days after marking, the only thing on her mind was sticking to George so she could feel those addictive sparks... actually, even now, she wanted that, but she learned to control her impulses to a certain degree.

'We are in this together, Zi,' Dawn said. 'Just a bit more. We don't know if Alpha Edward will approach us, but we need to stay here until George says it's safe to leave without making it suspicious.'

'Let's go to the bar,' Zina suggested. 'Like that, we can be closer to Talia.'

'But we can't talk to her. If people suspect we are from the Dark Howlers pack...'

'I know,' Zina said. 'Just being nearby will make me feel better.'

They could mind-link Talia, but they guessed that Talia had too much on her plate already. Besides, Damon and Talia made it clear that Owen and Zina needed to show that they could stand on their own and not be a burden.

"Can we go to a bar?" Dawn asked Owen. Before coming here, they agreed that Dawn and Owen would do the talking because whenever Owen and Zina interacted, it was impossible to miss the lovey-dovey mood.

Owen had no objections to getting a drink or two.

Owen didn't like that Zina covered up his mark with makeup, but he knew it was necessary. He wondered at what point will all this blow into their faces. Only an idiot wouldn't notice that any type of communication between Dawn and him was forced, and that was NOT how mates behaved.

To make this charade convincing, Owen should put his arm around Dawn, but his wolf strongly objected to that idea. Also, putting a hand on Dawn meant saying goodbye to that part of his body because... George. And Owen wouldn't blame him because he would do anything to protect Zina.

They found two unoccupied barstools for Zina and Dawn, and Owen stood between them protectively.

"What will you have, ladies?" The bartender asked with a smile that froze when he saw Owen glowering at him. "Lieutenant Owen, what can I get for you?"

Owen had an urge to punch the bartender, and then he wanted to give the first order to Zina, but he couldn't do that because, in the Red Moon pack, warriors come first. "I will have a beer. As for the ladies..." Zina and Dawn ordered for themselves.

"You are doing great," Dawn gave Owen a few words of encouragement.

"You too," Owen responded, and Dawn flicked her head to look in the direction where George was, even though Owen didn't look that way.

Dawn's insides flipped when she saw that George was talking to a curvaceous blonde. The female in question had a black dress that was too tight and too short, and she had too much makeup on, and her smile directed at George stirred something murderous in Dawn. The only things keeping Dawn in her place were the fact that George didn't smile at the female, and there were a few other people in that group.

"Who is that?" Dawn asked in a low voice.

Owen didn't need more information to know about whom Dawn was inquiring. "I don't know."

"That's Penelope from the Night Sentinel pack," Zina said.

Dawn's brows came together when she recognized the name. "Alpha William's daughter?"

"Mhm," Zina confirmed. "If you look to the left, you will see that he is right there, eavesdropping on his daughter's conversation with Commander George."

Dawn didn't care about Alpha William. She couldn't stop staring at the woman who was shamelessly flirting with her mate! "Why is she sticking to my..."

'KHM-KHM!'

Owen loudly cleared his throat to cover up Dawn's next words.

Dawn jolted when Zina pinched her arm while tilting her head toward the bartender who was placing their drinks on the bar counter.

"This is young Alpha's birthday," Owen spoke to Dawn in his official tone. "High-ranking members from many packs are in attendance, and this is more than just a birthday event."

Zina thought that Owen was fantastic. She wanted to hug and kiss him all over, but she forced herself to focus on her friend, who was clearly in distress.

'Dawn?' Zina called through the pack link. 'Are you OK? You know that George wouldn't betray your bond, right? He is just talking because he is a Commander. If he shuts down, it would be bad, and if he came here, it would be worse. It's just a few hours, and then things will be back to normal.'

Dawn released a long breath.

'I'm sorry,' Zina said. 'If I didn't mess up at the market, we wouldn't be here, and you wouldn't need to endure.'

Dawn knew that Zina was right, but George would be here anyway, and if Zina didn't mess up, Dawn would be at home, wondering what George was doing. Would it be better just not to know?

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Chapter 927: James' birthday party (2)

The evening was passing slowly, but eventually, they reached dinner time. The Omegas guided everyone to the adjacent dining room to show them their pre-assigned seats.

Purple and golden decorated circular dining tables that had snow-white tablecloths, each set up for ten people. Since every delegation consisted of four-to-six people, every pack had a table, and the remaining seats were filled by notable members of the Red Moon pack.

Talia was amused to see that table for the Midnight Guardians pack was close to the main table where Alpha Edward was. Luckily, she already had her spot next to Damon as Luna Talia.

The main table had Alpha Edward, Luna Layla, James, and Elders of the Red Moon pack. George was at the adjacent table with Commanders and Generals.

Sandy, Tyler, Mindy, and Gideon decided to sit at the table reserved for the Midnight Guardians pack. It was a silent show that members of two packs were close.

Cornelia stuck close to Talia. Sitting at the table with Talia and Damon meant that no one would try to hit on her. She didn't want to make this more difficult for James.

Cornelia was watching James from a distance, and her heart ached every time their eyes met. Cornelia knew that this was hard on him, and she hoped that her presence would give him the strength to push through this evening.

When Keith and Arya took seats with Damon, Talia, and Cornelia at the table, Talia mind-linked her friends. She confirmed that Dawn and Zina were at the table with Owen and a few other high-ranking warriors. They were doing fine, for now.

Next, she mind-linked Mindy. 'How did the talk with the Shaman go?' Talia saw Mindy and Gideon talk with an elderly male, and Damon told her that was the Shaman of the Red Moon pack.

'It was not a total bust, as the guy didn't tell us to scram, but we couldn't talk to him openly either,' Mindy responded. 'He is not at the main table, which means there is some friction between him and Alpha Edward, but we need more information. We will talk to him more after dinner. Leave it to us. I'm sure you have other things to worry about.'

Talia also saw Cristian, Michelle, Tony, Kalina, Maddox, and Tatiana. They were seated at the tables set up for their respective packs.

'Is it safe to eat this food?' Talia asked Damon through their mind-link. So far, appetizers were served on trays carried by Omegas that moved randomly, but this food was arranged and served specifically for their table.

'They won't dare poison us in public,' Damon responded seriously. 'But if you have concerns, I can ask to swap plates.'



Talia thought how it was silly. If anything were off with the food, Liseli would tell her. 'No need. I am paranoid because nothing has happened so far.'

Damon also found it odd. Sure, it was less than one hour since they joined the event, but their hosts didn't come to greet them in person, which was unusual considering their high status. Was it possible that Alpha Edward freaked out after finding out about Talia's double identity as a leader of two packs?

With everyone seated, Alpha Edward stood up to give a little speech before the meal started.

"I want to thank everyone for coming to celebrate James' milestone birthday. James is working hard on preparing for his upcoming role as the future Alpha of the Red Moon pack, and your support means a lot to him..."

James tuned out his father. It was all stupid and superficial, designed to make Alpha Edward look good. Reporters were snapping photos and recording to collect material for the special edition of WW Magazine that will cover James' birthday. If one looked just a bit under that shiny surface, they would see how dirty everything was.

James observed smiles directed at his table, but the unpleasant tension was nearly tangible. There were too many secrets, plots, and agendas for anyone to be at ease.

"...We hope you enjoy the food and the event after." Alpha Edward ended his speech, and people clapped.

James' sight fell on the table where Damon and Talia were, and a sad smile sneaked on his face when his eyes locked with Cornelia's. Only if she could be by his side, in touching distance, would things be more bearable.

James forced his eyes to move away from Cornelia, and he saw George.

'Do you want me to kill the female that was stuck to you?' James asked George through their pack link. James saw that Penelope was trying to seduce George and somehow... James felt a bit better. Maybe because he knew that others were enduring this event, just as he was.

'No need,' George responded curtly. 'I'm sure a young Alpha like you has other things to worry about.'

'Why are we doing this, George?' James asked, the teasing tone from his voice gone.

'To survive.'

James puffed his cheeks and stared at the creamy beef soup in front of him. George was right. They were playing these games to survive, knowing that a single wrong move could be deadly, but James was tired of games.

...

Penelope was fixing her lipstick in the female bathroom when she noticed a female standing behind her.

"You can take another sink. I will take a while," Penelope said while waving in the direction where the other three sinks were.

The bathroom for females had four sinks and four privacy stalls with a toilet each.

"I can wait," Dawn responded.

Penelope's finely groomed eyebrows came together, and she turned to face Dawn.

"Do I know you?"

Dawn shrugged. "I don't think so."

Penelope's eyes scanned the bathroom to confirm that it was just the two of them there. Good. She didn't need to pretend to be nice.

"Is there a reason why you are looking at me like I murdered your family?" Penelope asked.

Dawn knew that she should stay away and let George handle things. But she was sick of watching Penelope trying to cling to George and putting him in a spot where he needed to endure Penelope's hand on his arm or be rude by pushing her away. Dawn's wolf was going crazy in need to bite Penelope's head off, and Dawn knew that she shouldn't cause a scene, but she had to do something.

"I want you to stay away from Commander George."

Penelope's eyes flashed in understanding. "Are you his side-chick?"

Dawn's expression darkened. "Side-chick?"

Penelope shook her head. "You poor thing. You should know that a no-name she-wolf like you can't be more than a sidepiece to an outstanding Commander like George." Penelope narrowed her eyes at the left side of Dawn's neck. "Isn't that a mark? What would your mate say if he saw you pinning for a guy who is out of your league?"

Dawn sneered. "You think you are worthy of being with George?"

"Of course! I am Alpha's daughter."

"Do you have any other redeeming qualities other than your father?"

Penelope was outraged. "Listen, you... whoever you are. You can't insult me."

"What will you do about it?"

Penelope's nostrils flared in anger, and she released her Alpha aura. A second later, she realized that something was wrong. Really wrong. Why was it not working? And it was not that it was not working, but she was being suppressed back by... who exactly?

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Chapter 928: James' birthday party (3) [Bonus chapter]

Talia was chatting with Cornelia while opening her mouth whenever Damon brought food in front of her mouth. It looked casual, but both Damon and Talia were vigilant. They were aware of all eyes on them, observing, measuring, and waiting to approach them.

'Talia, we might have a problem,' Zina's voice sounded in Talia's head through the pack link.

'What is it?'

'It's Dawn. She saw Penelope from the Night Sentinel pack go toward the restrooms, and she went after her. That Penelope was sticking to George and...'

'I know,' Talia interrupted Zina's explanation. 'I saw her.' Everyone saw Penelope sticking to George. 'Thanks for letting me know. I will take care of it.'

"Where are you going?" Damon asked when he saw Talia wiping the corners of her lips with a napkin.

"Restroom."

"Take Arya with you."

Arya was already getting up, but Talia raised her hand, indicating to Arya to wait.

Talia spoke to Damon through their mind-link, 'It's not that kind of a break. Dawn is there, and I need to check she doesn't do anything foolish.'

Damon didn't like this. 'Why would she do anything foolish?'

'Do you remember the female that was sticking to George?' Talia asked, and her face stiffened when she felt a pang of guilt from Damon. 'I see you remember her. She is Alpha's daughter, and you sampled all of them. I don't know why I thought you would miss one.'

'Kitten, I...'

'Save it!' Talia snapped. 'My friend might make a mistake, and I need to check on her. I don't have time for your nonsense.'

Liseli wanted to tell Talia to calm down because whatever sampling of women Damon did was before he met Talia, but the truth was that Liseli was also bitter that they were getting random reminders of women who were too close to Damon at some point.

Damon watched helplessly at Talia's retreating form. She looked small and fragile and beautiful in that white dress. He waved at Keith and Arya with, 'Go after Talia and keep your distance.'

...

In the bathroom...

Dawn lost control of her wolf, who wanted nothing less than to squish the she-wolf in front of her. George's mark gave Dawn's wolf a boost that came with temper, and Dawn didn't have a chance to practice controlling it.

The mirrors on the wall were shaking, and the air felt heavy.

Penelope was holding onto a sink, and her legs were trembling while Dawn stood straight like nothing was out of place.

Penelope nearly plopped on the floor when the bathroom door flew open.

Dawn whipped her head that way to see Talia standing there.

"What are you doing?" Talia asked Dawn while closing the door behind her.

Dawn was surprised to feel her wolf reeling back in submission in front of Talia. Dawn's wolf was an Alpha, but Talia was her Luna.

Dawn quickly bowed her head. "I apologize, I... I have no excuses."

Penelope's eyes darted from Talia to Dawn. She didn't miss how Dawn submitted.

"You are from the Midnight Guardians pack?" Penelope asked Dawn. Somehow, that explained why Dawn could suppress her. Penelope heard rumors that members of the Midnight Guardians pack have mysterious powers.

Talia had no intention of correcting the misunderstanding.

Talia thought of scolding Dawn for acting recklessly and causing a commotion at this high-risk party, but she couldn't say any harsh words. If that female was sticking to Damon and Talia had to watch, Talia would do the same thing. Probably worse. At least Dawn waited for privacy instead of causing a scene in front of witnesses.

Talia touched Dawn's chin, making her lift her head.

"There is no need to apologize. I know how it feels when you are protective of someone," Talia said.

Dawn looked at Talia gratefully. "I don't think I can stay here. I should leave."

"Stay a bit longer," Talia said and continued through the mind-link, 'You can leave with Owen and Zina. We will let you know when it's safe, OK?'

'What about this one?' Dawn asked.

'I will handle her. Go before George comes after you and blows his cover.'

Dawn nodded in agreement. "Thank you." And she left the bathroom without looking back.

"Alpha Natalia," Penelope called in her official tone. "Your pack member attacked me without reason. How can you leave her like that?"

Talia cocked an eyebrow at Penelope, and she chanted internally that she shouldn't imagine Damon and Penelope entangled.

Liseli whimpered in Talia's mind as they shared emotions. She would tell Talia to kill Penelope and be done with it, but the old spirit knew that Talia wouldn't approve.

"Your complaint is received. It is up to me to punish my pack members as I see fit. Did she harm anything other than your pride?"

Penelope's eyes flashed in outrage. The female in front of her was Alpha Natalia, the Alpha of the Midnight Guardians pack, but Penelope also had an Alpha bloodline. How could she just stand still and be bullied?

Penelope lifted her chin. "It seems that your pack member is interested in Commander George. I suggest you advise her to stay away from him. She has no chance."

"And you do?"

"I am Penelope Faith, the princess of the Night Sentinel pack, Alpha William's daughter."

"Tell me something, Penelope Faith, the princess of the Night Sentinel pack. Is Commander George your mate, or did you fall in love with him? What will you do if he finds his mate, or you find yours?"

Penelope frowned. "How is that relevant to this?"

"Oh, it is because mate bond comes first. But let's pretend that you end up with Commander George. You will need to sever the bond with your pack and take the identity of Commander George's partner. You won't be a princess of anything. People will know you as Penelope of the Red Moon pack. Are you ready to accept that?"

Penelope frowned, and Talia's anger flared. She was tired of Marcys, Cassies, Noras, and Penelopes, who came with an attitude just because their fathers had a title.

Talia released a bit of her aura that made Penelope freeze in place. Dawn's aura was overwhelming, but Talia was on a totally different level.

"Do you think your Alpha bloodline will give you a high-ranking status? You will need more than that to stand out, and I assume you don't have it, considering that a random she-wolf just now managed to suppress you. Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

Penelope couldn't believe this. "You... you..."

"I have a name, Miss Penelope," Talia squeezed through her teeth, increasing the pressure, and Penelope groaned.

"I am Alpha Natalia Moonrider. My name comes with a title I earned. I didn't get it because of my father or because of a man I shared a bed with. If you can't stand on your own, I suggest you back off because there are plenty of capable she-wolves who don't depend on a man to achieve something in their life."

With that, Talia left the bathroom.

Talia wondered if she had gone too far. Would she bully Penelope so much if not for her past with Damon?

'You stood up for your friend,' Liseli said. 'Dawn would do the same for you.'

'It doesn't make it right.'

Liseli snickered. 'What is right is determined by power, and right now, you are the most powerful Alpha. The world is your playground, and others need to follow your rules. Enjoy it, girl.'

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#### Chapter 929: James' birthday party (4)

George felt Dawn's emotional turmoil, and he was about to go after her, but he saw Keith and Arya standing there, and he knew that Talia had got it covered.

George mind-linked Owen to see what was going on, but Owen dodged to answer, saying how he was not sure, and there was nothing George could do unless he wanted to cause a scene.

Only when Dawn appeared unharmed did George relax, and he took a mental note to thank Talia. It was his duty to protect his mate, yet he needed to rely on others. George felt like a failure.

Talia returned next to her table with Keith and Arya trailing after her. Damon was quick to resume feeding Talia, and it appeared that the situation there was tense for a bit, but then things resumed as usual.

The space was filled with murmurs about Alpha Damon and Alpha Natalia, and George felt good about the fact that he knew about them before others.

When George saw Penelope coming from that direction, his questions related to Dawn's unstable emotions were answered.

George cursed internally. He wanted to find privacy and tell Penelope to scram, but so far, they were always in the company with Alpha William nearby. George was not responding positively to whatever Penelope was doing. He avoided looking at her, and he would take a step back and twist his arm out of her grasp, but it seemed that she didn't get his subtle hints, and he needed a blunt approach.

George observed that Penelope made a beeline to the door that led to the garden, and George went after her. He needed to tell her to back off before Dawn lost her composure, and George hoped that he was not too late already.

George found Penelope on the terrace, and he made sure no one was nearby as he approached her.

Penelope got a cigarette out of her purse and put it in her mouth. A second later, she took it out of her mouth, broke it into two, and flung it into the nearby bushes while cursing under her breath.



"Smoking is bad for your wolf."

Penelope jumped in fright. She didn't hear George approaching her.

George touched his nose. "It messes with your scent as everything smells of tobacco."

George stuffed his hands into his pant pockets and observed the pack of cigarettes in her hand. "I am surprised that Alpha William is allowing you to smoke." Werewolves, in general, don't smoke as others of their kind will find them stinky, and a posh she-wolf like Penelope shouldn't allow herself to be stinky.

Penelope stuffed the cigarettes back into her purse. She never smoked when her father was around. That's why she threw the previous cigarette away.

Penelope was not in the mood for chit-chat. She was still processing what had happened in the restroom. She was suppressed and humiliated. Twice.

"I guess you are here with a reason," Penelope said.

George nodded. "I didn't want to be disrespectful in front of an audience, but I want to clarify things to avoid potentially embarrassing you tonight."

Penelope frowned. One more humiliation? Just what was wrong with this party?

"Let me guess. You have a woman. This tall..." Penelope gestured with her hand. "Short blonde hair."

George didn't want to implicate Dawn in this further. "That's not my point. If you looked up my history, you would see I'm not a ladies-man."

Penelope tilted her head. "Do you prefer guys?" She stifled a giggle at George's obvious discomfort. "It doesn't matter. That's why I picked you."

George was confused. "What?"

Penelope rolled her eyes. "Do you think I want to be here and do this? Alpha's daughter should be mated to nothing less of an Alpha, but young Alpha James is too young, and Alpha Damon found his Luna, so..."

George nodded faintly. He was backup to a backup, and he was not bothered by it. Was she hitting on him because she knew he wouldn't accept her? Did her father make her do that? It was none of his business.

"I'm glad we cleared that up. I wish you pleasant rest of the evening, Miss Penelope."

George turned to leave, and he froze when he felt Penelope clinging to his arm.

"I didn't say I will give up," she said. "You see, my father gave me a task, and he expects results. I can't end this evening without delivering."

George pried his arm out of Penelope's grasp. "I suggest you find a way to satisfy your father's expectations without implicating me because I'm not a man who plays games. I didn't come here to negotiate. I came to tell you to back off, or I will make you."

In Penelope's eyes, George was a handsome warrior, but that was it. He didn't have a title or bloodline, and those were people at the top. Technically, George was below her in the hierarchy. She was beautiful and desirable. Why was he not crawling at her feet? Was that warrior's pride? She was eager to break that.

Penelope smiled smugly. "Really? And how will you make me back off?"

George leaned over Penelope, and his Alpha aura pressed on her. "Don't underestimate me, Miss Penelope. As a Commander, I learned to classify people into allies and foes. Pick one."

Penelope struggled to breathe. What the hell was going on here?

...

Cornelia got out of the bathroom and hurried to the dining room. It was almost time for the cake.

Cornelia didn't know about birthday customs followed by werewolves, but she watched a movie with humans. They had a special cake with candles and the birthday person got to make a wish and blow them in one go. She wondered if James would do the same.

Cornelia was halfway down the hallway when...

"Ahh!"

Her surprised cry was muffled by a hand over her mouth while someone dragged her into a room and closed the door behind them. The distinct click sound told her that the door was locked.

Cornelia's fingers prickled with magic to incapacitate her attacker when she recognized the voice.

"Did I tell you how beautiful you are?"

Cornelia relaxed against a firm body that pressed on her back. "The color reminded me of your eyes."

"Hmm..." James hummed. "The dress on you is like my eyes on you. I like it."

"Should you be here, Jay?"

"Where else should I be if not with my mate?"

Cornelia turned to face him. His open talk confirmed they had privacy.

The room was dark, and only moonlight sneaking through the windows cast shadows, but she could see his eyes looking at her eagerly.

"How are you holding on, Jay?"

James pulled Cornelia on him, buried his face in her neck, and took a deep breath. "Better now."

Cornelia hugged him tightly because she knew that he needed it, and she needed it as well.

"You are doing great," she said.

"Am I?"

"Yes, you are. I am watching you. Your image of the future Alpha who is powerful and distant is impeccable."

"You are watching me?"

"Always."

James' heart expanded. It meant the world to him to know that Cornelia was there with him, for him.

Cornelia giggled when she felt James' hands roaming her body. It was innocent, at first... along her back and sides, but then he started bunching her skirt up.

"Do we have time for this?" She asked.

"I always have time for you, Cora," James responded and pressed himself against her, making her feel his erection.

"What about the cake? People will notice."

"Who cares about the cake and people? I only care about you."

Cornelia moaned into the kiss when he pushed inside her with urgency.

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Chapter 930: James' birthday party (5)

Cornelia returned to the table, unable to suppress the smile on her face.

James was passionate and caring and intense, and she cried his name breathlessly as she came apart in that dark room. She never did anything like that, sneaking around, but it seemed to give her a kink because she had never had such a strong orgasm. She needed a few minutes to catch her breath because she was on the verge of passing out. Literally.

"Did I miss the cake?" Cornelia asked.

Talia leaned closer and responded in a gleeful whisper, "I'm sure you didn't miss the birthday boy."

Cornelia's eyes flashed in surprise. She didn't expect that Talia would tease her like that. But more importantly... "Can you smell me, or...?"

Talia waved, indicating that was not the case. "Don't worry about the scents. With so many people packed in this small space, everyone smells like everyone. But that smile tells me why you took so long in the restroom." And there was also the fact that James was missing from the dining hall.

'She is not a she-wolf, and her healing is average at best,' Liseli spoke in Talia's mind. 'Should she allow that vigorous boy to pound her when she is expecting?'

Talia paused. 'What?'

'Are you surprised that Cornelia doesn't have good healing? She is just a witch, and...'

'No, no!' Talia exclaimed. 'The other part. Did you say she is pregnant?'

'Yes.'

Cornelia noticed that Talia was staring at her, and she shifted uncomfortably.

"What?"

"Did you know that you are..." Talia leaned closer and whispered the last word into Cornelia's ear.

Cornelia's eyes were open wide to the point of hurting, and her hand moved instinctively to her belly.

"Are you sure?" Cornelia asked breathily.

Talia smiled. "I guess you didn't know. Congratulations."

Talia spoke softly, but this last part was heard by Damon, Keith, and Arya.

'Let's not make a big deal of it here,' Talia spoke to the curious trio at the table. 'We don't want to attract attention.'

...

James returned to his table a minute after Cornelia.

"Where have you been?" Luna Layla asked with disapproval in her voice. "We are waiting for you to cut the cake." She waved at the Omegas, who were on the side to start wheeling in the massive cake.

James didn't bother to answer his mother. He had his moment of bliss with Cornelia, and he wanted to savor it, hopefully until the end of this party when he could reunite with Cornelia again.

Alpha Edward took a sniff, and he didn't miss the scent of a female wafting off James.

"Leave the boy alone," Alpha Edward said. "He had some business to take care of."

James didn't want to comment. His eyes fell on Cornelia just in time to see Talia leaning in to say something, and then Cornelia's expression changed, and her hand landed on her stomach.

James could clearly pick up Cornelia's emotions. Excitement, anxiousness, happiness, and he knew. He just knew.

Holy shit! He is going to be a father!

His wolf howled, and James struggled not to shift right there. His urge was to snatch the chocolate-colored Goddess and to run until no one could find them.

Luna Layla nudged James, and he realized where he was. Dining room. Birthday. Guests. His father. He couldn't expose this, or he would endanger his mate and his child.

But she didn't have her heat! Oh, boy! Cornelia is a witch, and they don't have heat and... HOLY SHIT!

James had plans to last for the next two years. He had several exit strategies before that deadline, but this... He never thought of this.

A pup of his own! Will it be a boy or a girl? What if there were two or three? He could see himself holding Cornelia in the middle of a meadow with a bunch of kids running around them. Their pups. And he will love them all. No one will be forced into training or hardships, but he will encourage them to explore possibilities and follow their interests. Maybe they will follow their mother and be witches who talk to nature and cast spells?

James was vaguely aware that there was a cake and that he blew the candles. It took him three tries to get all sixteen of them. His mother held his hand as he cut into the cake, and he was unsure how he managed to stay in his seat until Omegas took the cake to cut the rest and distribute it among guests.

James bolted to his feet. "I need some air."

He told himself to stay away from Cornelia, but his legs took him there.

James stood next to Cornelia and extended his hand, palm up, and she put her hand into his without a word.

James led the way outside, and Cornelia followed.

"Jay, is this OK?" Cornelia asked when they emerged on the terrace.

James wrapped his arms around Cornelia and kissed her until she got dizzy. "I am happy, and right now, I don't care about anything else. Hop on." He wanted to talk to her about so many things, but not where they could be overheard.

Cornelia sucked in a sharp breath when James transformed into a majestic light brown wolf, and his expensive-looking clothes exploded into taters. He nudged her side with his head, and she mounted him. Cornelia gripped his fur as he dashed into the forest.

In the event hall, Alpha Edward was busy talking with Alpha Richard and Alpha William, like James didn't just leave the party with Cornelia.

'Is this OK?' Talia asked Damon through their mind-link.

'It seems James reached the point where he decided on his priorities.' Damon grinned. 'Our pack got a fantastic Gamma.'

'You think he will come over?'

'Alpha Edward seems cool about this, but he will demand an explanation. What will James tell him? That he is mated to a witch?'

Talia realized that Damon's words made sense. When Alpha Edward finds out how close James is to Damon, the hostility will reach the boiling point. Was the war going to start in minutes?

'Kitten...' Damon called, and Talia turned to see him look at her seriously. 'About Penelope...'

'Don't,' Talia cut him off. 'I know it all. Whatever happened, you can't take it back, and it's not fair, but here we are. If you want me not to think about it, I suggest you don't bring it up.' With Cornelia's pregnancy, Talia forgot about the wretched hookup Damon had in the past, but now that he mentioned Penelope, it was back in Talia's mind, and she was angry again.

'I don't want to talk about her.'

'Why did you bring it up then?' Talia snapped.

'Ignoring the problem won't make it go away. No matter which woman stands in front of you, and regardless of if I had something with her or not, I want you to keep in your mind that you are my only one now and in the future.'

Talia hugged him and fisted his shirt. 'I know, Damon. I know. But I am insecure and pregnant, and I need you to assure me that you won't betray our bond.'

Damon shook his head at the silly woman. They were in the middle of a party, but his kitten needed comforting, and he didn't give a damn about who was watching.

Damon pulled her onto him. 'I will never betray our bond, kitten.'

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