

The Alpha's Bride

#Chapter 951: Searching for clues (1) –

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Two days later...

Talia was in the packhouse of the Red Moon pack, looking at the documents that covered almost every surface of what used to be Alpha Edward's study.

James told Talia that he didn't find anything special in Alpha Edward's safe, but there was plenty in other places. He and Cornelia decided to bring everything to the study in order to see what was useful and what could be discarded.

"This is a portion of what we found," James told Talia. "Once we clear this up, I will bring the rest."

"It will take forever to go through this," Talia said bitterly.

James shrugged. There was nothing he could do about this. "We have no idea what's useful. Knowing my father, he would keep top-secret information within the daily expenses of the pack. He had a habit of hiding things in plain sight."

"Show me the rest," Talia demanded.

James took her into the room two doors away, and Talia gaped at another mountain of documents.

"There is also the library," James said.

Talia released a long breath while telling herself not to panic. It's not like she expected to find one folder with the title "Top secret information on witches," and that would be it. This was more than expected, but at least they found something. On the other hand, maybe Alpha Edward hoped that no one would search through this mountain of documents.

"Alright. Tell me what you found so far," Talia asked.

Ever since the ceremony when Omegas from the Red Moon pack joined the Dark Howlers pack, James, Cornelia, Dawn, Zina, George, and Owen have been staying in this packhouse.

George and Owen were working with warriors, Zina and Dawn were preparing food and taking care of the packhouse, and James and Cornelia were busy looking at things that Alpha Edward had left behind.

Talia stayed in the Dark Howlers pack until everyone settled into their new routine, and she was comfortable leaving Mindy and Petra to take care of the rest.

The good news was that about a dozen Omegas who came from the Red Moon pack found their mates in the Dark Howlers pack. That helped with the assimilation of newcomers.

Damon was not happy with leaving Talia out of his sight, but he had meetings with his Generals, Cristian, Maddox, and Tony, to figure out the details about border patrols for their territories and several other things that Caden and Maya couldn't handle.

Talia assured Damon that she wouldn't wander away. Liam, Amelia, Keith, and Arya were with her, and Damon had access to the security cameras in the packhouse of the Red Moon pack, so he could see what was going on there.

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Talia helplessly looked at the pile of documents that James had put in front of her.

"What am I looking for?" She asked.

"Things that don't seem right. Something that will be out of place. My father had his own codes in writing things that no one else would understand."

Talia pursed her lips. She didn't want to point out that James was still dressing Alpha Edward as his father. "Why would he write down things if it was just for him?"

"Valid point," James said. "We might as well say there is nothing useful here, and we can stop. However, what if there is one document, one clue, that will lead us to something bigger?"

"Did you find something from Alpha Howard?"

James paused. "I know you are referring to his diaries that mentioned witches. No, I didn't find those."

"Does that mean there are other hiding places, or..."

"Or they were destroyed. Taken away. Anything is possible," James said.

Talia puffed her cheeks in frustration. She was already several days behind because she was comforting Omegas, and those Omegas still needed her. This will take days or weeks, and there is a chance they won't find anything. Wouldn't that be a waste of time?

With the latest developments, Talia forgot that Alpha Edward was just one of their problems. Now that things settled, she remembered rogues and Guardians, and now that Alpha Edward was gone, there was a chance that another Alpha would lead the unofficial anti-Damon coalition. Beta Raymond was still missing, Talia was pregnant, she had two packs and a mate that needed her, and she didn't have time to spend weeks combing through documents in search of things that might not be there.

Can she fake an emergency and leave James and Cornelia to handle this? It didn't seem right. Cornelia and James had other things to do also, and if Talia bailed on them, she wouldn't be able to look them in the eyes.

Talia wished for the ability to absorb whatever was in those documents and to sort that information, and... Talia's face lit up when she remembered one person that had a super-cheat that allowed him to read the archive of the Silver Flame Coven in one night. If he could do that, surely he could tackle this within a few hours.

Talia got her phone and made a call. "Hi, Axel!"

"To what do we owe the honor of Alpha calling?" Axel answered dryly.

Talia was confused. "Pardon?"

"Sandy and Tyler told me about your adventures. Why do I need to read about it in a magazine like I'm an outsider? Aren't we family? And when will you visit your niece and nephew? Varya is driving me nuts with her demands to visit her sisters, and Yasmin is missing you."

The more Axel spoke, the more Talia shrunk in her seat. She was guilty. Of everything.

Yasmin had her babies, and they escorted them to the portal, and Talia promised to visit as soon as she could, but so many things happened, and she didn't.

"I assume things are alright there?" Talia asked sheepishly.

"Didn't you hear what I said?" Axel asked sourly. "People are missing their Alpha. It might be a few days for you, but for us is months and..."

"I heard you," Talia said. "As Sandy and Tyler told you, and as you read in the magazine, a lot of things happened, and I'm sorting this out, but it's taking longer than I thought it would. I know I am neglecting the pack. I am sorry. In my defense, I wouldn't leave the pack for such a long time if I didn't know you were doing a fantastic job taking care of it in my absence."

Axel snorted. "Good that you know. Now, what do you want?"

"How do you know I want something? What if I just called to hear how things are going?"

"Spare me," Axel said dramatically, and Talia could imagine him rolling his eyes as he continued, "You just said that things are busy. You wouldn't interrupt your busy to catch up casually. You need something."

"I do. I need you."

"Oho! You need a capable Alpha?" Axel asked cheerfully. "How can I serve you?"

Talia was not sure if that was sarcasm, but it was better than grumbling.

"We spoke before that Alpha Edward might be involved in experiments that involved our people," Talia said and waited for Axel to confirm before continuing, "Alpha Edward called them witches, but it all points that those were people from the Midnight Guardians pack. Well, now that he is gone, we collected documents to find evidence."

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Chapter 952: Searching for clues (2)

Axel listened carefully to Talia before asking, "What are you hoping to find?"

"I don't know," Talia responded honestly. "Assuming that Alpha Edward was involved in these experiments, we should find out where it happened. What if it's still happening? Who is involved? What if some of our people are still there?"

"How do I fit into that picture?"

"We found a mountain of documents, and it will take forever to go through them the old-fashioned way. I hoped you could come here and help us sift through it to find relevant stuff. You know... your super-fast reading."

Axel wanted to say how it's not super-fast reading, but he actually sees the future where he reads the book, and then he just doesn't take that path. What seems to Talia as seconds, for him, feels like forever; at least mentally. But he didn't want to waste time

explaining. If Talia was right, and they could find clues about what happened to their missing pack members and maybe even rescue some, this would be huge.

"Alright," Axel said. "I will talk to Yasmin and make arrangements here." Every hour he spent outside would be a day in the Midnight Guardians pack, so he needed to ensure things ran smoothly in his absence.

"Great!" Talia exclaimed. "Just give me a call when you are ready, and I will send Cornelia or Amelia to pick you up at the portal. Or I will send you the coordinates, and you can come on your own." Not on his own, but there were witches in the Midnight Guardians pack. "How are things there? Tell me about Meg's pregnancy. I assume that Yasmin is busy with babies."

"Everything is fine. It's just... it would be better if you were here also, at least sometimes. Meg is doing fine, and so is Yasmin. Twins are keeping us busy." Axel responded, and he paused before continuing, "Yasmin is resting now. My parents are babysitting."

"Your parents?" Talia blurted, unable to hide her surprise.

"I know what you are thinking, Talia, but they don't have their abilities and are excited about grandbabies, and..."

"No need to explain," Talia said. "If you managed to mend your relationship with them, that's a good thing." As long as he didn't expect her to do the same, Talia was fine with it.

Sophia and Isaac tried to harm Damon. For Talia, nothing justified that action, not even saving a pack or the whole world from a potential calamity.

Talia knew that Sophia and Isaac were good parents to Axel. Will they be good grandparents? That was a possibility, and Talia didn't want to ruin it for Axel. He soldiered without complaints when Talia took away their abilities and Alpha positions, but she knew Axel suffered. He wanted them to be a happy family, and the rift between his parents and Talia was eating him alive.

After discussing logistics, Talia ended the call.

"James, Cornelia," Talia called. "Stop what you are doing and take a break."

James looked at Talia in confusion. "I heard you calling Axel to help while mentioning his super-fast reading. How fast can that be?"

Talia smiled mysteriously. "You will see. Trust me. Take a break. Axel will be here shortly, and there is a chance we will wrap this up by the end of the day."

James made a face, but he didn't want to question Talia. He wanted a break with Cornelia, but there was too much work to do.

"Since we got this time off, how about we check those secret rooms under the basement?" James suggested.

Talia puffed her cheeks. She forgot about those.

"Do you know how to open them?" Talia asked.

James shrugged. "No. But I know that they won't open on their own. We need to go there and try."

Talia's mood deflated completely. "Alright. Let me just call Damon so he doesn't freak out if he can't reach me." They had no cameras down there, and her cell phone will probably lose its signal.

Talia told Damon that Axel would come to help out, which Damon approved. But then she mentioned locked rooms in the secret passageway below the basement, and Damon didn't like it.

"What if something happens?" Damon asked.

"What can happen?"

Damon hated that question. It was like an invitation for calamity.

Should he insist on Talia's return to the Dark Howlers pack right away? Or should he tell her to stay put until he gets there?

Damon released a long breath, reminding himself that Talia was strong and she had people guarding her. It was just his overprotectiveness because she was pregnant. Sapa would always tell him they should trust their mate, but Damon struggled with it. Talia was delicate and prone to getting into trouble.

"Didn't we agree to proceed with caution because those things might be boobytrapped?" Damon asked.

"We did, and I will be careful. I am not alone, and we won't just jump on the door to force it open. Someone needs to check. We procrastinated long enough. I promise that we will move slowly and open the door only if we are reasonably confident that it's safe."

Damon released a long breath. "Take Keith and Arya with you, and be careful."

Talia knew that this was tough for Damon. "Thank you, Damon."

"I want to know what's going on! Keep the video call going."

"That might be a problem."

"How can that be a problem?"

"You remember that rooms are below the basement level, right? There is no signal there, Damon."

Damon groaned in frustration. Talia was set on doing something reckless again, and he was about to allow it to happen!

"Don't move a muscle until I come there."

"You can't, Damon. We talked about this. Take care of the pack, and I will investigate here. I will be careful, I promise..."

After some back and forth, they agreed that Liam and Amelia will stay upstairs and hold onto Talia's phone. Liam will keep the mind link with Talia open, and he will contact Damon if anything suspicious happens.

After that was settled, Talia asked, "How is your day going?"

"I think I did a lot of work, but the pile of documents in front of me disagrees."

Talia giggled. "I know how that feels. Should I send you Axel once he is done here? He can go through everything and just point out if there are any issues and tell you where to sign."

"That's a great idea. Send him here, and I will authorize him to be my proxy. Then, the two of us can go on a vacation."

"Sounds fantastic," Talia responded dreamily, even though she knew that won't happen. Axel was already busy with the Midnight Guardians pack, and he had Yasmin and the twins. She was feeling guilty for dragging him out to do this work instead of going to visit him, but it was for the best. Or so she thought.

"Damon?"

"Hmm?"

"When we settle these things, let's go on a vacation. A real vacation where we will relax and do some touristy stuff."

Damon approved. "How about after your Luna ceremony? It will be a massive event for everyone to know you are my Luna, and then we will take a month off. Where do you

want to go? Hawaii? Thailand? We could rent an island and go snorkeling or a mountain so we can ski and play in the snow all day."

Talia's heart fluttered. A month with Damon, and no worries? "I would like that very much. Let's pick a location together." Everything sounded good, as long as it was with Damon. Now that they had Betas, Gammas, and one Alpha in each of their packs, they could pull it off.

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Chapter 953: Searching for clues (3)

After ending the call with Damon, Talia looked at her phone with a thoughtful expression.

"Problems?" James asked.

"I don't know," Talia responded. "Axel was supposed to call by now."

James didn't think it was a big deal. "Considering the difference in time passing, Axel needs to make preparations for at least one week. He needs time to discuss things with Kai, Meg, Tyler, and Sandy. Yasmin will be left behind with the kids without the protection of an Alpha, and he is probably taking extra caution. Also, if Axel is coming on his own, he might call after passing through the portal to ask about coordinates, and the portal could cause distortion of a few hours."

Talia thought about how it made sense.

Talia gave her phone to Liam, who was set to stay in the living room with Amelia. "If Axel calls, give him our coordinates. If he needs Amelia to pick him up, let me know before you head out."

"I have a request," James asked and turned to Cornelia. "I want you to stay upstairs and rest."

Cornelia was not willing. She wanted to be with James. "You could use a witch. I can sense if something is off with the energies."

"I can sense it also," Amelia said from the side. "I will go. You are with a child. When Axel calls, you can handle it, or call me, and I will do it. In the meantime, this chance to rest and eat something. Sit with your legs up, so they don't get swollen."

Cornelia looked down to examine her legs. They looked fine. Why did Amelia mention swelling?

Amelia gave a smacking kiss to Liam before instructing, "Mind link Dawn and Zina and ask them to prepare a nutritious snack for Cornelia..." Amelia was excited about Cornelia's baby, and she hoped that she would have a child of her own soon.

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Talia, James, Keith, Arya, and Amelia went into the basement and then to the secret passage that was winding downwards.

They stood in front of the first door and took turns inspecting it carefully.

It was a heavy door made of a single piece of wood. It had a simple doorknob, and the rough curved scratches on the stone floor were a giveaway that the door could swing open.

James inspected it visually, and then Amelia stood in front of the door. She released energies in small pulses while chanting under her breath. She was sensing how energies flowed through the wood and reflected from it to discover a hidden mechanism within the door itself.

Amelia pointed at the grooves and knots in the heavy wooden door. "These need to be pressed in a specific order, so the door opens."

"What will happen if we press it in the wrong order?" Keith asked.

Amelia shrugged. She was not sure.

"Wait," James said. "This was my father we are talking about. If it were anything complex that blows up if you make a mistake, he would blow himself up a long time ago."

James put his hand on the doorknob and tried opening it, but the thing wouldn't budge.

'Lis?' Talia called. 'There must be some way to figure out how to open this without endangering people.'

'You can.'

'I can?'

'Close your eyes and sense the internal structure.'

Talia followed Liseli's instructions, and she could see the outline of levers, springs, and gears that were hiding inside the door.

'Now what?' Talia asked. It looked complex and confusing.

'In the end, the doorknob should click open. Start from there and work your way backward.'

Talia could see a rod that ended with a hook on the doorknob, and then there was a spring, and Talia followed what looked like a maze.

A few minutes later, she had a good understanding of what was going on there.

"Six points. This is the first one..." Talia extended her hand to push the groove when Keith grabbed her wrist.

"Alpha said to keep you safe," Keith said sternly. "If anyone needs to push things, I will do it."

James rolled his eyes, but he still agreed with Keith. "Talia, step back and tell me where to press."

"Why you?" Keith asked.

James straightened his back. "You are Talia's guard, but I am the Gamma. I outrank you." Before Talia could protest, James looked at her. "And you should stand back because if you are wrong, and this thing explodes, even if we survive, Damon will kill us."

"What if it doesn't explode, but it teleports you to a different continent?" Amelia asked. It was a possibility.

"Then, use my cell phone signal to locate me and get me back," James responded.

"What if you end up in the middle of a jungle without a signal?" Arya asked from the side.

"I will do my best to find a human settlement with a signal before wild beasts eat me. Any more questions?" James spoke impatiently.

"We are just worried," Talia said. "If anything happens to you, what will I tell Cornelia?"

James froze at this. He just got his freedom to live a life without the shackles Alpha Edward put on him, and now... now what?

James shook his head. "If anything happens to me, tell Cora that every minute with her was worth more than a year without and that she should wait for me until I return. I survived sixteen years as James Redmayne; trust me, I am not easy to kill."

Talia nodded in approval. She liked James' confidence.

"Alright!" Talia exclaimed while waving at others. "Give James some space. We are doing this, and if things blow up and the ceiling collapses, someone will need to dig us out."

Keith and Arya exchanged nervous glances. If anything happened to Talia, Damon would skin them alive.

Keith grabbed Talia's right shoulder, and Arya grabbed Talia's left one, and they started dragging her backward.

"Wait! Wait!" Talia protested.

"You have superb eyesight," Keith grumbled. "You can tell him where to press from a distance."

Talia guided James, and he followed her instructions cautiously. He was talking bravely, but he didn't want to explode or be teleported. What if he gets teleported inside a volcano? It wouldn't be fair for him to perish now that he had found happiness. Who would take care of Cornelia?

The hidden mechanism clicked and twirled, and James jolted when the door creaked open. They did it.

James, Talia, Keith, and Arya entered the room one by one. Amelia stayed outside, just in case, but she was peering in from the door.

Talia scrunched her nose at the stale air that was heavy with dust and moisture, and there was something metallic in it that made her stomach churn.

"What a mess..." Keith said in a low voice while looking around. There were papers everywhere like a tornado passed through.

With the light coming from the hallway, they could see well.

File cabinets lined two walls, no windows, no other doors. Under the papers, there was a long desk and four chairs around it.

'CLICK!'

Everyone squinted when James flipped the switch, and the light blinded them.

"There is someone!" Arya exclaimed and squatted to push the papers away from the body lying on the floor, completely covered in papers.

Keith joined her, and his brows came together when he realized that some of the papers were brown, and he recognized it as dried blood. The metallic scent was blood, but because it dried, he didn't identify it right away.

James and Talia also got down to help move the papers from the unmoving body, and Talia's eyes widened when she recognized the man. "Beta Raymond..."

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Chapter 954: Searching for clues (4)

Beta Raymond's body was cold and unmoving, and his clothes were torn in a few places to reveal wounds that resembled ghastly flowers from horror movies. The flesh opened outwardly like it exploded from the inside.

Arya reached to put her finger on Beta Raymond's neck. "I can feel a pulse!"

Talia moved quickly in an attempt to heal him.

'Stop,' Liseli said before Talia's palms lit up. 'He has silver and wolfsbane in his system. You can close the wounds, but silver is preventing healing, and wolfsbane is killing him. His wolf is gone already. To be honest, I have no idea how he is still alive.'

Talia was not willing to accept this outcome. What if they remove silver and wolfsbane? There are blood transfusions and surgeries and... "Doctor! We need to call a doctor."

"We don't have a doctor here," James said. "There is nothing we can do."

"We need to do something!" Talia shouted. "Amelia! Transport him to the Dark Howlers pack. Doctor Travis will help him!"

As if he could hear her, Beta Raymond's eyes opened slightly.

"Who...?" He breathed.

They were all surprised to hear him talk.

James moved closer to Beta Raymond's face. "It's me, James. Who did this to you?"

"Edward? I told you... not to..." Beta Raymond froze like someone pushed a pause button.

James frowned when he realized that Beta Raymond had breathed his last. He reached to close the man's eyes while trying to decipher Beta Raymond's last words.

Talia's eyes swelled with tears. Why did she feel sorry for this man?

"He thought that Alpha Edward was here, which means that he didn't know Alpha was dead," James said.

"Or he was rambling because he was delusional," Arya said.

James looked at Talia, whose chin was trembling, and he saw Amelia at the door with her hand over her mouth to muffle her sobs.

Keith, Arya, and James saw a lot of gruesome stuff, but Talia and Amelia didn't, and they took it badly. It was one thing to see a body and a different one to see a person dying.

James waved at Keith. "Take Talia and Amelia away from here. We should clean this up so we can see what these documents are."

Keith took Talia by the shoulders and pulled her up to stand. "Can you walk, or should I carry you?"

"Let me carry her," Arya volunteered.

Keith refused. "I will do it."

"I can walk," Talia said weakly. "I don't want to leave. I'm fine. I will be fine. I just need a minute. Arya, you can go with Amelia upstairs. We won't be opening another door now." Or maybe they should, to see if there were more half-dead people inside.

Arya was not willing to leave Talia's side, but she couldn't refuse. "I will be back as soon as I escort Amelia to Liam."

Liseli could feel Talia's emotions, and she knew that Talia had many questions and no answers. Unfortunately, there was not much they could do.

"Did any of you see Beta Raymond at the event?" James asked.

"He was on the video footage, going into the forest," Keith reminded James. "How did he get here?"

James shook his head. "We saw a guy who looks like Beta Raymond walk into the forest."

"Are you saying that was not him?" Keith asked.

"Clothes don't match," James said. "The guy on the video was wearing a black suit, and this..." James gestured at the body. The gray polo shirt and jeans were in bad shape and colored with dried blood. "This is what Beta Raymond was wearing earlier that afternoon when we met with Ana in Alpha Edward's office."

Talia's brows furrowed as she thought of something. "No one saw Beta Raymond at the party, yet we saw someone looking like Beta Raymond walk into the forest after the birthday cake was cut. We don't know what disguise he had on, but it was good enough to move through the packhouse and walk away without being stopped. It was not just the appearance, but his scent as well."

Keith was alerted. "Do you think it was a Guardian?"

Talia confirmed. "That would explain why Beta Raymond didn't show up at the party. He was here. The impostor didn't enter the event hall because he was not confident he would fool people close to Beta Raymond, or maybe because Sandy was there."

"I thought you said that only one Guardian has the ability to disguise himself, the one we found in the Midnight Guardians pack," Keith reminded Talia. "And only he knew what Sandy could do."

"True," Talia confirmed. "His mind was compromised, but maybe he remembered." Or maybe someone forcibly picked his memories, just as Talia and Liseli did to Vincent.

Keith pursed his lips. "That still doesn't explain how he was disguised to the point of no one seeing or smelling the difference."

Talia thought for a moment before responding, "If I can take away abilities, what's to say that some Guardians can't grant them?" It was a long shot, but it was a possibility.

Talia and Keith turned to look at James, silently asking him for his opinion.

"It sounds crazy, but that could explain why no attack happened at the event," James said after some time. "Assuming their target was Alpha Natalia, they knew that caution was the priority. They want her alive. Sandy was an unexpected variable, so they backed off. For now."

"How does Beta Raymond fit into that picture?" Keith asked.

James shrugged. "Maybe he worked with the Guardians to let them in. Or maybe Alpha Edward was working with the Guardians, and Raymond was snooping until he found out more than he should." It was such a mess.

...

Declyn entered a room to find Gregory staring at the map of North America. It had outlined new borders of packs that were set after they divided the territory of the Red Moon pack. It was glaringly obvious that the Dark Howlers pack gained more influence.

"Is everything ready?" Gregory asked Declyn.

Instead of answering, Declyn asked his own question. "Are you sure we should go with it? Why don't we wait to see how these changes are impacting the balance between the packs."

Gregory shook his head. "Just like any other power shift between the packs, this one will be temporary and not worth mentioning. Alpha Talia is an Alpha with the Guardian bloodline. You tried talking to her, I tried talking to her, and we invited her here politely, but it didn't work. If you have other suggestions that don't include waiting, I'm all ears."

Declyn's eyes moved to the map. "She is strong and surrounded by allies. This can backfire in so many ways."

Gregory waved his hand, indicating that it was not important. "Treat them as flies. If they stay away, we will let them be. The only one that can impact our plans is Alpha Damon, and we will deal with him. As for Talia, no matter how powerful she is, she is just one female and can't be in too many places at once." Gregory narrowed his eyes at Declyn. "Are you going to turn your back on me now? Are you going to turn back on our people? On what's left of our people?"

"I would be an asshole if I said yes."

"And you are not an asshole, Declyn. Get our people moving. It's time."

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Chapter 955: An emergency?

~ the Dark Howlers pack ~

'KNOCK-KNOCK!'

"Come in!" Damon responded without raising his gaze from the document in front of him. He knew who was at the door.

"You are working hard, so I thought of bringing you something nutritious," Stephanie said.

With Dawn and Zina not being around, Trisha was left to deal with food for all guests. Sure, they were Omegas who knew their way in the kitchen, but Stephanie didn't want to let just anybody prepare food for high-ranking members of the pack. One can never be too careful. Damon didn't object. He missed Stephanie's cooking.

Damon smirked at the sight of a tray that had a bowl of tomato soup garnished with bacon bits that smelled divine. There were also a grilled cheese sandwich, grapes, apples cut into bite-sized pieces, and a mug of steaming coffee.

He looked up to see Stephanie standing and staring him down, just as his mother used to do.

"You can have that after your meal," Stephanie said while pointing at the coffee.

"You treat me like a child," Damon grumbled.

"That's because you are acting like one."

This brought back Damon's memories that stretched over the last decade. It was heartwarming.

Damon leaned into his chair. "It's good to have you here, Steph."

"It's good to be here. Now eat. Don't make me come back and find that the food is untouched and you had only coffee. Fruits are also important."

Damon threw a piece of apple into his mouth. "Yes, ma'am!"

Stephanie shook her head and was about to leave, but she paused when Damon asked, "Is Richard OK with you working here?"

Stephanie officially retired from her work, but since the group from the Red Moon pack arrived, Stephanie was spending most of her days in the packhouse.

Talia was reluctant to let Stephanie come to the packhouse because they still didn't clarify Lisa's situation, but she let Damon handle this.

Stephanie either didn't want to share details about Lisa's whereabouts, or she was unaware of what was going on. Just in case, they kept tabs on Stephanie, so they knew that she didn't contact anyone outside of their pack territory via mind link or via phone. And she didn't interact with outsiders.

With every passing day, Damon was more convinced that if Stephanie was the one who leaked information to Lisa, she did it unintentionally. Stephanie would be devastated to find out that Lisa was behind the attack on the Blue River pack.

Damon was nearly certain that Lisa was behind it, but he wanted to make sure before telling Stephanie. For that, they needed to find Lisa, but it appeared as Lisa and Tristan had disappeared completely. Damon was not surprised. Rogues were experts in blending in with humans, and no one could find them unless they wanted to be found. That was one of the perks of not having the mind link.

"Don't think I'm suffering by coming here," Stephanie said to Damon. "If I'm home, I would be bored because Richard is helping with construction, and all my friends are busy with activities related to the newcomers."

Damon was glad to hear this. "I want to thank you for your efforts."

"Everyone is doing what they can for the pack, Alpha."

Damon cocked an eyebrow. "Why are you so official?"

Stephanie crossed her arms over her chest. "You started it."

"I did?"

"You sure did. When you thanked me like I'm an outsider."

"Fair enough," Damon said.

Stephanie waved at the food. "Eat up. I know you have a lot of work, but you should eat. Alpha needs energy if he will help his people. I'm going to start with dinner. I will make extra, so I take home for Richard and myself. Consider that as my fee for working after my retirement."

Damon looked at the door that closed after Stephanie, and then he popped a grape into his mouth. It was sweet and juicy, and Damon realized he was starving.

He checked the time, and sure enough... he had missed lunch. No wonder Stephanie brought him food.

Trisha could do the same, but she wouldn't dare interrupt Damon while working.

Should he call Talia now or later? Damon checked the live feed on his screen to see that Liam and Cornelia were lazing in the living room. There was no sound, but it was obvious they were relaxing, which meant that nothing significant had happened.

Damon wanted to call, but Talia said she would call him when she was done checking the rooms below the basement.

Damon decided to call later.

He pushed documents to the side to make space for the tray, and he started eating with gusto.

...

'Luna!' Liam called Talia through the pack link. 'Axel is on the call. It sounds urgent.'

Talia was alerted. 'Is he coming?'

'He won't talk to me,' Liam responded.

'I'm on my way,' Talia responded and then said to Keith and James, "I'm heading up first. Axel called."

James and Keith were preparing to take Beta Raymond's body out of there.

Their plan was to remove the body and then check the papers that were scattered all over the room.

As soon as Talia got out of the basement, she saw Liam standing with her phone in his hand.

"Yes?" Talia said as soon as she got the phone.

"Talia... it's Yasmin and the kids..." Axel said while wheezing. "They... they..."

"Calm down, Axel. What happened?"

"They are gone."

"Gone? Where?"

"I got everything ready and was about to go and see her, but she was not in the kids' room. I checked the main house, and she was not here. I thought she went to my parents, but they are not responding. They never shut down their pack link. The guards didn't see anyone coming or leaving. I'm on the way to their home now, but... something is wrong. Yasmin wouldn't leave without telling me."

Talia could sense dread creeping up her spine. "I'm on my way, Axel. Investigate, but don't do anything rashly. Increase the security at the portals and put our people on alert. Tell them it's a drill. Let's hope Yasmin went for a walk with the kids and forgot to tell you." But that wouldn't explain why Sophia and Isaac were not available via the pack link.

Talia ended the call and moved to the living room with urgency.

Liam was right behind her. "Is Luna Yasmin in trouble?" With his werewolf hearing, he could hear what Axel said.

"It seems like it, but let's hope everything is fine and Axel is panicking because she forgot to tell him where she went. I will need Amelia or Cornelia to take me to the portal. Mind-link Keith, Arya, James, and George and tell them I'm heading to the Midnight Guardians pack."

"What about Alpha Damon?"

"I'm calling him right now." She was set on going without delay. Her people needed her. Her family needed her. Every minute counted because the time difference was working against her now.

Talia rushed to tell Amelia to prepare the teleportation diagram to the portal of the Midnight Guardians pack.

They knew that the portal would be needed, so Amelia and Cornelia had one ready, and they needed a few minutes to set up energy crystals.

Talia bit her lip while listening to Damon's phone ringing. The third time, fourth... why didn't he pick up?

"Hello?"

Talia frowned. "Steph? Why are you answering Damon's phone?"

"Normally, I wouldn't. However, I saw that it's you calling, and I thought that if I left it unanswered, you would worry," Stephanie said.

"I am worrying. Where is Damon?"

"I'm in Damon's study. I came to pick up used plates because he ate here while working. He is not here, but he left his phone on the desk. I'm not sure where he went, but I could guess it's related to newcomers and the construction that's happening. I heard Caden complain during lunch how some materials were subpar and that Damon should check."

Talia released a long breath. "I see. Sorry. I just..."

"It's OK," Stephanie said. "When I see that boy, I will give him a good scolding for leaving his phone behind. Until then, can I take a message? Or do you want me to reach out to Caden and Maya and see if they are with Damon?"

Talia thought for a moment before responding, "No. It's fine. Just tell him that I called."

"Alright. Take care."

A moment later, the phone in Stephanie's hand lit up with a notification. It was a message from Talia: "Call me when you get this."

Stephanie released a long breath and ran her hand through the raven black hair of an unconscious male who was sprawled over his desk.

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Chapter 956: Missing (1)

Talia found Axel in the infirmary. He was in the room with Sophia and Isaac, who were lying on hospital beds.

Talia opened the door to hear Isaac talking.

"Stop treating your parents like villains. Why are you acting like we did something? Do you believe we will harm our grandkids?"

"You had no problems getting rid of your niece!" Axel hissed.

"This is different," Sophia said. "We are different. Instead of shouting at us, you should..."

Sophia's voice trailed, and Axel turned to the door to see what got his attention.

"Talia!" Axel cried. "Yasmin is gone. My kids..."

"Calm down," Talia said while giving Axel a hug. She released a bit of her aura to envelop him with the goal of soothing his mind.

"Take a deep breath. We won't figure this out if we give in to panic. Yasmin is a smart and capable witch with an awesome ability, and she won't be easily bullied." Talia waited for Axel to take several deep breaths, and then she asked, "Tell me what happened."

Axel was visibly relaxed, but now the sadness and exhaustion showed on his face.

"I was talking to Meg, Kai, Sandy, and Tyler about their duties for the next two weeks. With the number of new mates that arrived recently, our current living quarters were cramped, and we needed to build more. Digging underground and making it habitable for our pack members takes time. It's simpler to build above ground, but Elders argued how that will create a hierarchy where less privileged get to stay down..."

Talia wondered if Axel spoke in such a roundabout way because her aura relaxed him too much. Did he remember that he needed to talk about Yasmin, Edgar, and Valeria? But she didn't want to interrupt him.

Axel said how some mated couples were expecting pups and needed more space and how several newcomers were having difficulty adjusting to life underground. This brought them back to the solution of building above ground, but the Elders objected.

There was a conflict between old and new, and Axel was unsure how to strike a balance between providing necessary living space with time constraints without changing their

way of living. He was only a proxy, and these matters that impact the dynamic of the pack should be handled by the Alpha.

Talia realized she was supposed to be here to sort these things out. She didn't know Axel was dealing with these turbulent internal affairs.

Since Talia became the Alpha of the Midnight Guardians pack, about a hundred pack members found their mates, and that meant a hundred new people that needed a place to stay. Any other pack wouldn't have difficulty accommodating one hundred additional people, but the Midnight Guardians pack stayed the same for a very, very long time. Those few who escaped through the portal never came back. Their unused living quarters were invaded by moisture, mold, insects, and small animals and became inhabitable. It was the same amount of work to build new rooms compared to cleaning existing ones and removing infestations. It was all more challenging because their pack didn't have free access to the human realm where modern technology could be acquired.

The excitement of people finding their mates slowly deflated, and they realized that one bedroom for a couple was not enough, as they needed more.

Axel eventually got to the point of Yasmin missing.

"I looked in the nursery, and they were not there. I asked Omegas if they saw them, and no one saw anything. I checked our bedroom, common areas, and the garden, but I didn't find anything. Yasmin doesn't have the mind link, but someone always knows where she is."

Axel released a long breath and glanced at his parents while talking to Talia. "The bond tugged me toward their home. At least, that's what I thought. I went there to look, and I found them unconscious on the floor. I could pick up Yasmin's scent that was not old, but it was not fresh either. I tried sensing the bond again, but I got nothing. She is not here."

Talia narrowed her eyes at Sophia and Isaac. "What did you do?"

"Nothing!" Sophia and Isaac exclaimed in unison.

Sophia raised her hands defensively. "We were in the living room, but then we woke up in the hospital to Axel shouting."

'Lis?' Talia asked. 'Is she telling the truth?'

'Her heart rate went through the roof from the moment she saw you. She could be lying, but she could be just scared of you. One does not exclude the other.'

Talia turned to Axel. "What about Omegas who are working in their house? Did they see anything? Is any of them missing?"

Axel rubbed his face with force. He didn't think about it. "I don't know. I found them, and I called guards to bring them here and..."

"It's OK," Talia said. "We will figure this out. Let's go to their place and investigate. You said you picked up Yasmin's scent there."

"Impossible!" Isaac exclaimed. "Yasmin and the kids didn't visit us in days."

Talia thought how that was odd. The old guy sounded convincing.

"Come, let's check together," Talia told Axel.

They had guards watching over Sophia and Isaac, and Talia instructed healers to check on the duo and figure out why they were unconscious. If they were telling the truth, someone knocked them out. But Talia didn't trust them, and she didn't want to act until she got the information.

Keith, Arya, Liam, and Amelia were waiting in the hallway. They followed Axel and Talia to the house that the old Alpha couple was using.

"Tell me about the overall situation," Talia demanded from Axel. She wanted to keep his mind busy with something because his anxiousness was showing, and it made his Alpha aura leak.

Meg and Kai were handling patrols who were searching for Yasmin and the kids, while Sandy and Tyler were in charge of security, checking for anything suspicious and ensuring no one passed through the portals. So far, there was nothing. It didn't look good.

The probability that Yasmin took the kids for a walk and forgot to tell Axel was close to zero.

"Did the two of you argue?" Talia asked Axel.

Axel was taken aback by this question, but he still responded, "No, not really. I mean... Yasmin wanted me home more, and she was exhausted because of the night feedings, so there was occasional friction, but nothing serious."

Another wave of guilt washed over Talia. If she were here, Axel wouldn't need to work that much. But this was about Yasmin and two babies, and Talia will deal with her matters later.

"Do you think she went to her mother?"

Axel dismissed the idea. "If she did, she would go through the portal. If she went out, someone would pick up her scent."

"What about security cameras?" Talia asked.

"There is nothing. However, the cameras are covering the main hallways and the entrance. She could have gone there without being recorded. There is security, but it's not very tight so..."

Talia nodded in understanding. The Midnight Guardians pack had only two portals that can be used as entry points for outsiders, and they focused their attention on them. Anything that the warriors did within the pack territory was more-less for practice purposes, and they were not on high alert.

What a mess.

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Chapter 957: Missing (2)

Talia checked the living room with the help of Keith and Arya while Axel spoke to guards and Omegas. He went to talk to them in person so he could gauge their expressions. Liam and Amelia went with Axel.

Talia sniffed the air to confirm that there was Yasmin's scent lingering. She followed her nose to a storage ottoman that had a sweater and two onesies.

"That's Yasmin's," Axel said from the door. He recognized the sweater. It was one of Yasmin's favorites, and she complained a few days ago that she couldn't find it. They assumed that Omega took it for washing, and it would appear eventually.

Talia pointed out baby clothes. "Edgar's and Valeria's, I assume. How often would they come here?"

Axel took the garments and squeezed them tightly. "Mom and dad didn't come to the main house ever since you took over as the Alpha. Yasmin would bring the kids here every few days. She drops them off and comes back to pick them up later. There is no need for Yasmin to have her clothes here. This was her favorite sweater; she wouldn't leave it behind."

Talia nodded in understanding. "Someone kept this here."

"Why would anyone do that?"

Talia had no idea.

"What did you find?" Talia asked.

"No one is missing, and no one saw anything strange," Axel said dejectedly. "But guards are lax, and Omegas come daily to prepare food. If someone from the pack came here, it could be easily missed."

Talia puffed her cheeks. "It might be possible that Yasmin didn't come here."

"You believe my parents?" Axel asked.

Talia didn't know what to believe. She wished that Damon or James were with her. They would know what to do.

"Let's go back to Sophia and Isaac and ask them about this," Talia said while gesturing at the clothes Axel was holding. "We need to know where Yasmin was seen last."

...

Sophia and Isaac swore they had no idea how those clothes ended up in the storage ottoman in their living room.

Axel released a low growl that came with a wave of his aura.

"Axel," Talia called. "Do you want to wait outside?"

"No!" He snapped and turned to his parents. "I want to know what you were up to. You claim you have no idea what was going on, but Yasmin and my pups are missing. Why are you acting like you don't care?"

"Who said we don't care?" Sophia responded. "But we don't have any abilities, and you are treating us like villains. You want to know what happened?"

"YES!" Axel shouted.

"Then you should find your mate instead of wasting time here!" Sophia shouted back. "We didn't see Yasmin and the kids today or yesterday. We have no idea how those clothes ended up there! That's the truth, and the longer you refuse to believe us, the more time kidnapers have to run away with your mate and pups!"

"Kidnapers?" Talia asked.

Sophia spread her hands helplessly. "How else would you explain missing people and planted evidence? We didn't knock each other out."

Talia paused. Sophia was right. The healers checked them out and didn't find any injuries. If they inhaled something that knocked them out, Axel would find traces in that

room. Unless someone removed the evidence, but that would point that someone else was involved, in which case kidnappers were accomplices. Which one was it? Talia was not sure.

"Why would anyone try to set you up with this?" Talia asked.

Sophia responded. "Can you think of anyone more suitable to delay you? Everyone knows that we are replaced. No one comes to visit. People don't respect us. If not for Axel and Yasmin, Omegas wouldn't come to clean and cook. We became invisible. Outcasts..."

Talia raised her hand, interrupting Sophia's pity party. "If someone set you up, why did they knock you out?"

Sophia shrugged. "I hope you will ask them that question when you catch them. And the more time you waste asking questions to which we have no answers, the more time they have to flee and hide."

Talia had to admit it made sense. All these inconsistencies would cause doubts, but no proof, so they were bound to investigate and waste time.

Talia turned to Axel, "Alert all warriors to start searching. Tell them that something precious that belonged to Yasmin is missing so they can track it by her scent."

"You think Yasmin is still here?"

Talia confirmed. "There are only two portals, and she didn't pass through them. Unless there is another portal we are not aware of, they are still here."

Axel's eyes lost focus as he was contacting warriors.

'Portal is not the only way to get out of here,' Liseli spoke in Talia's mind.

'What?'

'The stories speak of God-like creatures that could move among realms at will. They are the ones who created portals originally for the mortals to travel,' Liseli reminded Talia of the old legend. 'What if the God-like creatures were Guardians? What if some of them have the ability to travel without using portals?'

Talia's stomach dropped. Those were not legends. Talia's mother left information in the necklace, and it mentioned opening a passage at will. No diagrams, crystals, or magic items. Only energy summoned by a Guardian.

The etchings they found in the realm of witches when they searched for Yasmin's father were remnants of a passage being opened. It requires an immense amount of energy,

and the caster would need days to recover in order to use his ability again, but it was possible.

'And there is one more,' Liseli said.

'There is?'

'Magical items. Your mother left you a message. That was embedding an item with energies that would trigger given the right conditions. There could be a necklace that opens a temporary passage, enough for a few people to pass through it.'

Talia really, really didn't like this. The Midnight Guardians pack enjoyed a fake sense of security because they believed that trouble could come only through two portals.

A commotion from outside got Talia's attention.

"What's going on?" Axel asked, and he moved to open the door and check.

They could see Keith and Cassandra wrestling in the hallway.

Keith pinned Cassandra on the ground and was twisting her arm, and her mouth was open wide, ready to bite Keith's leg.

Arya, Liam, and Amelia stood on the side, all three baffled by the sudden brawl.

"What are you doing?" Talia asked, and the duo on the ground froze.

"She wanted to barge inside, and I told her no," Keith said while getting up.

Cassandra also stood up and dusted her long dress before turning to Talia. "Alpha, I need to speak to you."

"Speak," Talia said stiffly. They were facing an emergency, and she didn't have the time to waste on nonsense.

"It's a prophecy from the Moon Goddess," Cassandra said.

Talia's eyebrows shot up. "For me?"

Cassandra nodded. "I saw Alpha Damon. He was blind, and his other senses were not working either."

Talia needed a moment to process this. "Are you saying that Damon will be in trouble?"

"It will be soon." Cassandra's eyes moved to Talia's belly. "You were not showing yet. The forest was covered in snow."

"We have no snow!" Keith barked.

Cassandra crossed her arms over her chest. "If you don't have it in your backyard, does that mean your neighbors don't have it either? How much I know, some areas are always covered in snow."

Keith sneered. "Which means your prophecy is rubbish!"

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Chapter 958: Missing (3)

Talia waved, indicating for Keith and Cassandra to stop their bickering. She spoke to Cassandra. "Damon was in trouble, in the forest covered with snow, and... I was there. Correct?"

"I know what you are thinking, Alpha," Cassandra responded. "But Alpha Damon will be there with or without you. I believe that without you there..." She shook her head. "Your presence will be critical for his survival."

"How do you know that?" Axel asked.

"Alpha Damon was solid, while Alpha Natalia's image was fading. That means her presence is optional and will impact the outcome."

"And what if her presence makes it worse?" Keith snapped. Cassandra told him before that her prophecies were just images, full of symbolism and open for interpretation. However, assuming Cassandra was right... if Damon was in danger, should Talia go there? Talia was pregnant! Was Cassandra setting up Talia?

Cassandra released a long breath. "I can't force you to believe me. I received the prophecy, and I told you what I know. The rest is on you."

Talia nodded absentmindedly, unsure what to do. Can she trust Cassandra? What if she was the one behind Yasmin's disappearance?

'Where was Cassandra when Yasmin disappeared?' Talia asked Axel through the mind link.

'We have someone keeping an eye on her. She is spending time in her quarters and with healers. But if a Guardian came to her in disguise, only Sandy would notice.'

Talia puffed her cheeks. Everyone was a suspect.

'Do you want me to take her in for questioning,' Axel asked.

Talia rejected. 'We can't question everyone. We need to go by what we know. Where was Yasmin last seen?'

'In the nursery, with kids. Several hours passed, and no one saw her until I went to look for her. There is a sofa in the nursery, and she would put the kids in their cribs and take a nap after feeding them. Everyone knows that, so they wouldn't disturb her unless she calls for help or kids start fussing...'

Cassandra's eyes flashed when she saw the necklace around Keith's neck. "Didn't you say you lost it?"

Keith quickly put his hand over the necklace. "I said I threw it away, and I did. Later, I went to retrieve it."

"You said it was broken. It looks to me like it's fine. Give it back."

"It's not yours. It's mine. Alpha gave it to me."

Cassandra pointed an angry finger at Keith. "Liar!"

"I'm not lying!"

"You lied about throwing it away. Why would I believe you now?" Cassandra hissed and lunged at Keith. "Give it!"

"Ahh!" Keith cried when Cassandra bit his forearm, and she kicked his shin a moment later.

Keith grabbed Cassandra's wrists. The Oracle was going to snatch the necklace!

"Arya! Help me get this wild beast off!"

Cassandra had no abilities, and she was not a warrior, but she was still a she-wolf who didn't mind using dirty tricks.

Arya grabbed Cassandra's arm and started pulling the Oracle away.

Cassandra was livid. "Two on one? Is that how you are playing?"

"Ahh!" Arya shrieked when Cassandra bit her finger. "You should fight with honor and not bite people!" Arya could do all kinds of maneuvers, but she didn't expect to be bitten. That was so barbaric!

Cassandra sneered. "Honor? How can you talk about honor when two of you are attacking me?"

Liam and Amelia scooted further away. They didn't want anything to do with this commotion. They were in a hospital!

Talia tuned out the noise. She put her hands over her stomach while unease crept into her heart. She didn't trust Cassandra, but she couldn't ignore the prophecy either.

"Axel," Talia called. "Give me your phone. I need to call Damon..."

...

Talia's hands were shaking. Damon didn't pick up the call, so she called Caden next. Caden said that Damon was not with him, and Damon didn't respond to the mind link when Caden tried to contact him. Maya didn't see Damon since that morning, and Trisha confirmed that he was not in the study, but his phone was there. Stephanie was not in the packhouse, and with that, Talia didn't know whom to contact next.

"We need to go to the Dark Howlers pack," Talia said to no one in particular.

"What about Yasmin?" Axel asked.

Talia turned to Axel robotically. "If I'm right, this is much bigger than Yasmin and Damon. The Guardians are making their move."

Axel didn't care about the Guardians. He wanted Yasmin and his kids back. "Then, let's go to where the Guardians are and get our mates and kids back!"

"We can't just go there, Axel," Talia said. "They have devices that suppress Alpha aura and block the pack link and probably more things we don't know about. We would be walking into a trap." Assuming that Yasmin and Damon were there. Maybe all this was just a bunch of strange coincidences.

"Are you expecting me to sit here and wait!?" Axel shouted.

Talia frowned at him. "Calm down," she said while releasing some aura to tell him she meant business.

She knew that Axel was anxious, they all were, but shouting and panicking won't help.

Talia needed to think. What would Damon do? What would James suggest?

Investigate. They didn't have time for it. Yasmin and the kids were missing, and Damon might be in danger.

They needed strategy, and they needed numbers. There was no effective strategy without information, but she could do something about numbers.

"Axel, go to the Silver Flame Coven. Tell Evanora what happened here. I am not sure if the Guardians are behind this, but I can't see anyone else capable of doing it. If we are going to get Yasmin and the kids back safely, we need the help of witches."

Axel didn't want to go to the realm of witches. "Do we have time for this?"

Talia was not sure. "Time is passing differently here. We have more time here than outside. Now, I need you to focus. Leave Kai and Meg to handle things here and continue searching for traces of Yasmin, Edgar, and Valeria. Ask Sandy and Tyler to organize whoever can come out to help while leaving enough warriors to protect our people. Until we confirm what happened, let's not cause panic, but we should be prepared." There was an option to ask witches that were staying here to teleport everyone to the Dark Howlers pack, but if Guardians were hiding here, they would be getting a free pass into another territory. It would be just replacing one bad for another.

Talia put her hand on Axel's shoulder. "I am leaving now, and I will let you know if anything major happens. Your task is to convince Evanora to help us. Hopefully, she won't think twice about coming out when she finds out that her daughter and grandkids are missing, and she will have some spells to track her Yasmin. Regardless of the outcome, when you are done, find me."

Axel realized that Talia was right. Surely, Evanora should have some spells they could use to find Yasmin.

Axel moved while mind-linking Kai, Meg, Sandy, and Tyler with instructions.

"What about me?" Cassandra cried.

"What about you?" Talia asked dryly.

"I can help. The relics!" She reminded Talia. "I figured out what most of them can do."

Talia paused. If they were going to face the Guardians, those things might be helpful.

"Get them. You have one minute. You will come with me." Talia said.

Cassandra's eyes lit up, and she scurried down the hallway.

"Liam," Talia called. "I want you to keep an eye on the Oracle. If she does anything suspicious, snap her neck."

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Chapter 959: Missing (4)

Talia reached the Dark Howlers packhouse with Keith, Arya, Liam, Amelia, and Cassandra.

They informed James of the situation, and he said that he would join them as soon as he made arrangements there.

'Caden?' Talia called through the mind link.

'Talia! Where are you?'

'I just reached the packhouse, and I'm heading to the study.' That was the last place Damon was seen.

'I will meet you there,' Caden responded.

Talia opened the door of the study, and her stomach sank. There were documents on the table and Damon's cell phone, but he was not in sight. Damon's scent filled the air, but she could sense that he was not there for hours.

"You are here!" Caden said with relief in his voice.

"Where is Damon?"

Caden shook his head. "I tried contacting him, but I got no response. We have another problem."

Talia's heart tightened. "We do?"

"Cristian, Tony, and Maddox reported rogue activities along the borders."

"All of them?" It was Keith who asked.

Caden confirmed. "It seems to be an organized attack. So far, there have been some skirmishes along the borders. The reports are still coming."

"What about our pack?" Talia asked.

"We had suspicious activity but no confirmed attacks. Maya is investigating, and we raised the alert within the pack."

Talia could feel alarm bells ringing in her head, but she couldn't make sense of them. She mind-linked Mindy and Gideon. The duo was busy with Omegas from the Red

Moon pack in Darkbourne, and Talia decided to let them be there. People needed comforting, and Shaman was the man to make it happen.

"It's the Guardians," a male voice came from the door, and they all turned to see James and Cornelia standing there.

Caden frowned at James' words. "How do you know?"

"Do you need to ask, considering all these simultaneous attacks?"

"Who else came with you?" Talia asked.

"George and Dawn went to join Maya's unit."

"What about Owen and Zina?"

"They are in the packhouse of the Red Moon pack with warriors," James said.

"Will Owen and Zina be fine with the handful of warriors?" Arya asked. "Considering that we have attacks on so many fronts, wouldn't it be better to cut down our losses and tighten our ranks?"

James disagreed. "None of the attacks is a big threat. If we leave that packhouse unguarded, other Alphas will jump on the opportunity to control it with an excuse it was not claimed."

"Will anyone dare to come for it?" Arya asked.

"You bet they will," James responded. "Neutrality of that packhouse was the first thing Alpha Natalia asked for after announcing she was mated to Alpha Damon. Other Alphas will go for it to challenge her authority. It will reflect negatively on her image among people, and that will plant a seed of doubt in the hearts of ignorant ones. We will kick the intruders out, but we will be missing documents and valuables, which will be another swipe at Talia's reputation."

Arya didn't like this. Surely a smeared reputation was a bad thing, but how can it compare to people's lives? Owen, Zina, and their allies were there.

"How do you know that those attacks are not dangerous?" Arya asked James.

"Because they are after me," Talia responded. "All this is to cause distraction and rift between allies so they can get to me."

"What will you do?" Caden asked.

Talia wanted to rush to where the Guardians were, but she knew that would be foolish. "I want to talk to Cristian, Maddox, and Tony. Can you call them on a video call?"

Caden confirmed and got his phone.

Talia moved behind Damon's desk, and she sat on his chair. She reached for his phone to see notifications of missed calls, hers mostly.

While holding onto the phone, Talia remembered something. "Did you find Steph?"

Caden responded while sending a text message to three Alphas, "Steph is not in the packhouse, and she is unreachable via pack link." Caden's brows came together when he realized something. "Do you think she had something to do with this?"

"Before going to the Midnight Guardians pack, I called Damon to let him know about it. Steph answered his phone. She said that he was not in his study, and he left his phone behind, but Damon never leaves his phone behind." Especially not when he knew they were too far away to communicate through their mind link.

Caden had to agree with this. Damon wouldn't leave his phone unattended, and he always kept tabs on Talia.

"I will alert our warriors to keep an eye out for Steph," Caden said stiffly, and then his eyes lost focus.

Talia's laptop lit up as she had call requests.

Maddox, Tony, and Cristian shared their status. They each had a few skirmishes with injured parties but no fatalities.

Tony said he suspected one group of attackers was from the Night Sentinel pack, but they escaped, and Alpha William claimed he was being set up. Tony said that he would investigate this further.

"Where is Damon?" Maddox asked. He assumed that Damon wanted to meet with them and organize their units.

"He is missing," Talia said.

Tony's eyes widened. "Missing?"

Talia confirmed. "And he is not the only one. Yasmin and the twins are missing as well. No one saw them when or how they disappeared from the packhouse of the Midnight Guardians pack. The same is with Damon. He was last seen in the study a few hours ago. We suspect that the Guardians acted on this personally."

"What can we do?" Cristian asked.

"I hope you can protect your borders. I will figure out how to get Damon, Yasmin, and the kids." Talia didn't have a plan, but she knew that she was the one who needed to make it happen.

"That's a horrible idea," Maddox said. "If Damon is there, he would give you a good scolding for thinking that way."

Talia was confused. "What?"

Cristian nodded in agreement with Maddox. "You are talking about Guardians. If they have their hands on Damon, you are the last person who should go there."

James stood behind Talia so the other three Alphas could see him on their screens. "We are all assuming that Guardians are behind this, but we are not certain. And even if we know it's them, there are endless possibilities as to where they are keeping the hostages."

"Hostages?" Cristian asked.

"Would you be surprised to find out what's happening are distractions and baits for Guardians to get their hands on Talia?" James asked.

"That's another reason for Talia to sit this one out," Tony said.

"I can't sit and hope for the best while my people are fighting, and Damon, Yasmin, and the twins are missing!" Talia protested.

"No one says you should hide," Maddox said. "But I would rather face a war than allow Tanya to put herself in danger. However, I can't expect her to stay locked up. Right now, she is with our people, guiding them to shelters and assuring them that our warriors will protect them. Your people need you, and you need to put their needs first. If anything happens to you, they will be lost, and Damon will go mad."

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Chapter 960: Following clues

Talia was touched by the care Maddox, Tony, and Cristian showed, but she had to make something clear.

"I'm not Tanya, Maddox," Talia said. She was not comfortable discussing her heritage as a Guardian, so she stuck to other facts. "The Guardians want me. I can make this stop."

"You are right," Cristian said. "If you contact them and agree to negotiate, they will call off the attacks. However, they won't accept a trivial tribute. They don't need money or land. They want you. Assuming you accept their conditions, we will live in peace until the next powerful female catches their eye."

Tony added, "If you go, it will only tell them that this strategy works. Damon taught me that if the other party won't give anything in return, that's not negotiation; it's blackmail. This time, they get you. Next time, they will come for Kalina, Tanya, Michelle, and many others."

Maddox hummed in agreement. "I know you feel guilty by sitting there, knowing you can stop it. But you going to them won't be a solution. How guilty will you feel to know that your friends were targeted next because you gave in?"

"They are right," James said to Talia from the side. "We will figure out how to deal with attacks, and we will come up with a plan to save everyone without pushing you in the middle of it. I am confident that every pack member feels the same. You are Luna of the Dark Howlers pack and the Alpha of the Midnight Guardians pack. You are not replaceable."

Talia exhaled helplessly. She had no intention of going to surrender herself. She wanted to punish the Guardians for their behavior and save Damon, Yasmin, and the kids. But the truth was that she didn't know where they were held or where the Guardians were.

"I promise that I won't do anything reckless," Talia said to James and then turned to her laptop from where Maddox, Tony, and Cristian were looking at her. "Caden and Maya will be in charge of our warriors, and George will assist them. James will be our point of contact and main strategist. Please inform him of any changes. Axel is handling the Midnight Guardians pack and searching for clues on where Yasmin and the twins are, and I will do the same here regarding Damon."

After the video call ended, Talia turned to Cassandra, who was standing on the side silently. "Work with Cornelia in organizing the relics you've brought. Tell her what they do and how to activate them. Amelia, you will be in charge of preparing teleportation diagrams. In case of an emergency, we need to be able to move our units quickly. James, work with Maya and Caden to distribute relics to our people in the best way possible."

Caden nodded in approval. Instead of shrinking, Talia took charge of the situation. Damon will be proud to hear about this.

Amelia left the study to handle her tasks.

Keith and Arya went with Caden to sync up on the current situation. They went to Caden's study because Damon's was crowded with everyone in it, and Cassandra and Cornelia needed space.

Liam stayed to keep an eye on Talia.

"What will you do about Damon?" James asked.

Talia shook her head. "I don't know where to start."

"Do what feels right, and you won't have regrets," James said. "The worst thing you could do is rush."

"You expect me to sit and wait?"

"That's exactly what I'm expecting," James said. "If we are right, and the Guardians are doing this to get to you, they will get in touch with you to state their demands."

Talia started massaging her temples. The tension was building up, and she found herself emotionally detached. She knew that her people were in danger, but the only thing she could think about was Damon.

Talia grit her teeth in annoyance. Was this the extent of her abilities? What was the point of her power and strength if the only thing she could do was sit and wait for news? Damon was missing, and she could feel the bond but not the pull. Where was he? Shouldn't she be able to sense the direction of where he is?

'There are several reasons why you can't sense the pull,' Liseli spoke into Talia's mind. 'One is the distance, something might be obstructing your connection, and then there is your emotional turmoil. You are anxious and angry, and nothing is going through that.'

Talia put her hands over her stomach. 'Help me, Lis. Our mates are missing. I fear that...' She couldn't finish.

'The bond with Sapa is there, but it's weak,' Liseli said dejectedly. 'We can't follow the bond, but you can follow the clues.'

'Clues?'

'Stephanie. She is a member of this pack, and she can't be far away.'

Talia's eyes lit up. 'I can force-open the mind link and demand that she comes here.'

'Don't,' Liseli said right away. 'If she is guilty, it will only alert her you are onto her, and she will flee.'

Talia's excitement dwindled. 'If I can't use the pack link, how do I follow the clues?'

'You can still use the pack link. Even if they've done something to block your bond with Damon, they wouldn't be so cautious about her. Calm down and focus on the bond you have with this pack. Feel its members. Find the one you are looking for...'

Talia realized that Liseli was right. When she became the Alpha of the Midnight Guardians pack, she could see strings connecting her to every pack member. When she became the Luna of the Dark Howlers pack, she could feel the energies, and there was a lot of light, but she focused on Damon and emotions, and she didn't pay attention to the strings.

If she could focus. Only if she could sense that one particular string that connected her to Stephanie, she could... maybe... it was worth a shot.

Talia closed her eyes and took deep breaths to calm down. The talk between Cassandra and Cornelia turned into murmurs, and James' typing on the keyboard of a laptop blended with it. Everything faded as Talia focused on channeling energies like her mother taught her in the secret message.

If her mother was here, what would she do? Talia remembered the first message that gave her an insight into the relationship her parents had. They were in danger, hiding, protecting each other, and Talia could feel her mother's determination not to give up.

Cornelia and Cassandra both turned to stare at Talia when she started glowing. The light spread around Talia in pulses, and then it transformed into silvery threads that reached in all directions with Talia in the center of it.

The other four people in the room saw the light being compacted into a rich silvery layer around Talia, but they couldn't see the threads.

Little by little, threads faded into nothing, leaving only one.

Talia's silvery eyes snapped open, and she started moving while following the thread.

"Luna?" Liam asked while scurrying after Talia. Where was she going? And why was she picking up the pace?

'Keith! Arya!' Liam called through the pack link frantically. 'Luna is leaving the packhouse!'

'Where to?' Keith asked.

'How am I supposed to know? Get out! Now!' He was nervous that he would lose Talia, and it would be all his fault.

'Stay with her and tell us the direction!' Keith demanded. 'We are right behind you!'

Keith and Arya rushed out of Caden's study, leaving Caden totally confused. They were in the middle of something important!

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