

Damon and Talia came to the dining room with Damon's arm wrapped around Talia's waist tightly, and during their meal, he didn't let go of her hand.

Talia's words that things are not working and that she wanted to leave were still fresh in Damon's mind, and he feared that she will leave him. He needed her touch that comes with sparks of their bond to assure him that she was there, next to him.

Yes, Talia agreed to stick around and step in front of Elders as his mate and future Luna, but she agreed to many things before and based on her behavior, Damon concluded that unless she can feel their bond, no matter what he says or does won't make a difference.

When Talia feels threatened or at disadvantage, she might leave. He assumed that by creating connections to the Dark Howlers pack, she will be reluctant to leave even if something bad happens, but it seemed that was not the case. That thought was eating him alive.

Damon is not a guy who will beat around the bush. He never was. Damon told Talia about his intentions and feelings openly, but her insecurities prevented her from believing in his words.

He really wished for a magic potion that will awaken her wolf. Only with her wolf, Talia could feel the bond and nervous knots in Damon's stomach would resolve.

For dinner, at the table were just Damon, Talia, and Maya.

Stephanie brought food to Lisa, and they were in Lisa's room.

Talia and Lisa didn't meet yet, and Talia wondered when will Lisa come out of her seclusion. Talia was anxious about meeting Lisa, fearing that Lisa will dislike Talia because Talia and Kalina are friends (it said so in the WW Magazine).

For the duration of dinner, Maya was in a visibly better mood. At some point, she announced, "Caden will arrive here by 2 o'clock in the morning."

"Maya", Talia called. "Can we have a word after dinner?"

"Sure.", Maya responded right away before remembering, "I have sync up with the Alpha after dinner. Can we talk after that?"

"Of course", Talia agreed. "Work comes first. Let me know when you are done and..."

"You will join us for the sync up.", Damon interrupted Talia. Did she think he will let her out of his sight after the scare she gave him before?

"Actually, it's just the three of us here, so you can go ahead.", Damon told Maya.

Maya's updates were brief, mostly about two families of refugees that arrived recently.

Talia realized that the Dark Howlers pack has detailed plans related to settling the new pack members.

Every refugee family had several neighbors who would help them navigate in the new environment, to find necessities, and that they are socially accepted. Other than that, locals would also watch for any suspicious behavior.

It's not that Damon was accepting refugees without any benefits for him. For a werewolf community, the more people they have, the better, as each individual has its own skills and strengths.

Unfortunately, there was always a risk that they were spies or with bad intentions, and that's why for the first few months, everyone would stay vigilant while being careful not to alert the newcomers of the fact that they were being watched.

It's a delicate balance, and families who were interacting with refugees had special training before taking over those duties.

The more Talia listened, the more she admired the complexity of everything and the man who is behind it all. She knew that Damon is a great Alpha, but this added another dazzle to his brilliance.

Damon had an option to refuse them, yet he went to the lengths of giving them a chance while assuring they are not a threat to his pack.

After dinner, Talia and Maya went to Maya's room.

Damon was not happy about losing Talia from his visual range, but Talia said that she wanted to talk to Maya in private, so he gave in.

'Watch what you say', Damon warned Maya through the mind-link.

'I will.'

'Don't let her escape through the window.'

Maya was not sure how to respond to this. Why would Talia escape through the window?

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"I am impressed with the attention you give to refugees. I'm sure that they are grateful to be here.", Talia said when it was just her and Maya.

"Many people are involved.", Maya said. "It would be much easier if we could accept them without keeping our guards up, but you never know what someone is hiding behind a smile."

"Are refugees with bad intentions frequent?"

Maya shook her head. "Not really. But once scalded, you will be afraid of warm water. Luckily, most of them are just looking for a better place to live."

"Like me.", Talia said.

Maya gave Talia a thoughtful look. "I admire your decision to leave the Red Moon pack. When people are ostracized for a long time, they get used to it, and it's not easy to leave, no matter how bad it is. Especially abused women who were raised to believe how that's normal. But whoever comes here, soon realizes how suppressed they were by others' negativity. It's rewarding to see scared kids transform into a lively bunch at the playground. Grownups also find interests they didn't think about before. It's like they become different people. I love to see them smile."

Talia's mind focused on one word Maya said. Suppressed. That's what shaman Gideon said when discussing Talia's wolf.

"I assume there is a reason why you wanted to talk to me in private.", Maya reminded Talia.

As much as Maya would love to chat with Talia, Maya was aware that an antsy Alpha was in the hallway. Was he eavesdropping? Probably.

Talia pressed her lips into a line while thinking about her predicament.

"Elders will come, and I don't know what to do.", Talia said eventually.

"What's the problem?"

"I am reserved, and a future Luna should be outspoken."

Maya cocked an eyebrow at Talia. "How many Lunas did you get to observe?"

Talia didn't need to think about the answer. "Luna Layla from the Red Moon pack."

Maya shook her head helplessly at the silly girl. "There is no handbook for a perfect Luna, Talia. But here is the thing... as a Luna, you are in a position to create your own rules. Do what feels natural. Will you dress up fancily, or sportish, will you be sophisticated or rowdy, no matter what you do, people will judge you. It will be up to your attitude if they will dare to judge you openly. I've met many Lunas and no two were the same, so you need to be yourself."

Talia thought how that's easier said than done.

Maya saw that Talia's expression was not good, so she added. "Besides, don't use Luna Layla as an example of a good Luna."

Talia thought that she just heard something important. "Why?"

Maya lowered her voice. "The word is that Luna Layla and Alpha Edward are not fated mates."

Talia was not sure what to do with this information. "And that is important because...?" Talia hoped that Maya will fill in the gaps.

"Union between Luna Layla and Alpha Edward allowed for the Red Moon pack to grow. Her family doesn't have an Alpha bloodline, but they were influential. She didn't become Luna because of her love for Alpha Edward or because she is a natural leader, but because of benefits. Their lavish lifestyle proves it."

"Would it be different if Luna Layla and Alpha Edward are fated mates?"

Maya shrugged. "Who knows? But the point is that if Alpha Edward didn't eye her dowry, she wouldn't be his Luna. Fated mates can influence each other, and Alpha and Luna should take care of their pack. You grew up there, so you know first-hand how they treat their pack members."

Talia remembered how in the Red Moon pack they prefer warriors while Omegas are invisible. In the Red Moon pack, people get benefits if they can contribute to the strength and luxury of the pack, and others are not important. A good Luna wouldn't allow for such a treatment of her pack members just because they don't have the strength or some other skill that's useful on the battlefield or for impressing guests.

Talia had another concern. "Damon said that he will introduce me to Elders as his mate. How do I act the part?"

"Just do what you normally do when Damon and you are alone.", Maya said and burst into giggles when she saw that Talia blushed profusely. "I can see how he is holding you, Talia. You like it, don't you?"

Talia didn't deny it. "But it's not appropriate in front of Elders."

"Pft!" Maya waved her hand, indicating that Elders are not important. "Appropriate is something you see in movies. Werewolves don't practice restraint. For us, love is sizzling, wild, and unrestrained. The only thing on your mind is your partner, his scent, his flavor, how good it feels when he is inside you, and you don't care who is watching."

Talia was flustered. Was Maya telling her to be frisky with Damon in front of Elders?

"Does it feel good?", Maya asked, and Talia blinked in confusion.

"When he holds you.", Maya clarified.

Talia nodded.

"There you go, dear. If you feel good, go for it. Don't hold back on being with him, no matter who is watching. Whenever I suppress my urge to touch Caden, my wolf is protesting, and I can feel her agony..."

Talia paused. There was that word 'suppress' again.

Chapter 192 - Like Two Ordinary People [Bonus]

Damon was standing in the hallway and eavesdropping on the conversation between Talia and Maya with his ear pressed against the door of Maya's room.

Why was it taking so long?

Everything Maya said was right, but based on previous experiences, Damon concluded that Talia's reactions are unpredictable, and he didn't pick up any distinct good or bad emotions from Talia through the mate bond, so he was restless.

When he heard Talia thanking Maya and exchanging good night wishes, Damon quickly took a few steps back and leaned his shoulder on the wall.

Damon stuffed his hands in the pockets of his jeans while hoping that his pose was cool enough.

He didn't want to appear desperate.

Alphas don't do desperate.

Talia stepped into the hallway and paused when she saw Damon.

She didn't think that he would wait for her.

Her eyes moved over his form, and she was very familiar with the perfect landscape his muscles are forming under those clothes. How can a man be so sexy by just standing there?

Their gazes met, and Talia's heart skipped a beat.

His icy-blue eyes were full of yearning and silenced desires and somehow, she knew that he was waiting for her to make a move.

What did she want to do?

Talia remembered Maya's words about how when werewolves love, it's without restraint, sizzling, wild, and those were emotions Damon invoked in her.

Was there a need to suppress any of those?

Damon already knew she was in love with him. Hiding it was impossible and denying it would be in vain.

And Maya also mentioned scent and flavor and the importance of touch. Yes, when Damon touches her, Talia would crave more of Damon and lose her inhibitions.

Was that only product of her mad love for him, or were they actually mates?

Talia knew that without her wolf she couldn't get her answers on her own, and she didn't dare ask Damon out of fear what his answer will be.

If he confirms they are not mates, everything would collapse immediately, and if he says they are... how is she qualified to stand by his side, as his Luna?

How Talia saw it, it was better not knowing and just enjoying the present because if she knew the answer, one way or another, she would overthink it and it would ruin everything.

Like this, when it was just the two of them, Talia was able to imagine that Damon was not an Alpha and she was not some no-name she-wolf he found in the attic. Like this, their pasts and backgrounds were not important because they were two ordinary people. Damon and Talia. Equals.

Talia looked at the man in front of her who now fidgeted from one leg to another while facing her unreadable expression, and she acknowledged that she loved every part of him. His scent, his touch, his flavors, his heated gaze, the way his muscles rippled under her palm... she loved it all. She even loved his mood swings that somehow always ended with him embracing her, and she wanted to feel it again.

Pushing all her insecurities aside, Talia dashed toward Damon.

Damon caught her as she jumped on him while wrapping her legs around his waist, and he eagerly responded to her kisses.

Damon turned on his heel, pinning Talia against the wall and she moaned into his mouth when he pressed his erection against the cradle of her thighs.

Talia really loved the way Damon held her like she weighs nothing, and even with all that strength, he handled her with care, and he made sure that it was good for her.

Talia gasped when she felt his hand under her top.

"Not here... Our room...", Talia said breathily.

Damon smiled and spoke into her lips, "Our room? Does that mean you gave up on the silly idea to move out?"

Talia tilted her head to see him better and her eyes sparkled with mischief. "It depends. Will you remind me that I'm yours?"

Damon needed a moment to process Talia's words, and then he tightened his hold on her and dashed up the stairs with urgency, leaving behind Talia's giggles that echoed down the hallway.

Damon was elated that Talia made the first move, she came onto him, and she said that she wanted him to remind her she is his. He was up to the challenge.

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"Mmm...", Talia groaned in protest when kisses and small bites on her neck and shoulder pulled her out of her much-needed sleep.

"Sorry, kitten, but we need to wake up so that we can have breakfast and check if there is anything urgent we should handle before Elders come."

Talia's eyes snapped open, and she was wide awake. Elders are coming!

They will try to persuade Damon to stick with Marcy as his Luna and they will scold him because he attended an important party and got photographed with some other woman (aka Talia) when Marcy was right there.

Talia didn't meet any of the Elders, but she already didn't like them.

The thought of losing Damon was unbearable and Talia hugged him tightly.

Damon chuckled. "Should I take this as... you don't want to get out of bed?"

Talia knew very well what he meant by staying in bed. His erection pressing on her thigh spoke volumes and reminded her of a wild night full of carnal pleasures they shared, but she didn't want to admit it.

"It's early."

"Get used to this, kitten, because I won't let you sleep in anymore.", Damon said matter-of-factly. "Yesterday I was awakened by an issue with rogues at the border, and I found you with some guy putting crazy thoughts into your head about leaving me."

Talia pouted. She wanted to stay in bed longer to avoid Elders, and Damon's company was a bonus, as for the rest... "That SOME guy is a shaman, and he was not persuading me to leave you. We were talking about my wolf."

Damon cocked an eyebrow. "What did he say?"

"Gideon said that I am suppressing myself, and that's harming my wolf."

"Suppressing?", Damon repeated while nodding. "I agree."

Considering the hostility Damon harbored toward Gideon, Talia thought that he might say how that's rubbish, but he ended up agreeing. "You do?"

"You grew up learning to diminish your presence. They treated you lower than Omega.", Damon said while gritting his teeth. "... but you are born to stand out."

"How do you know that?"

Damon would be blind not to notice how amazing Talia is. The moment her confidence peeks through the fence of her insecurities, Talia is like a Goddess everyone wants to worship. But that was not something he could back up with evidence, so he chose to tell her something Talia was well aware of.

"The fact that your wolf could talk means that your background is exceptional."

Since they were on this topic, Damon decided to share one more bit of information he acquired.

"My people checked official records of the Red Moon pack regarding orphans in the last two decades, and there is no evidence you were there. I don't think that the old Alpha brought you to the Red Moon pack accidentally and they forgot about you. I believe they were hiding you, and that's why they didn't make you join their pack and establish the mind-link when you got there."

The best-kept secret is the one no one knows about, so it's no surprise that there were no records of Talia staying in the Red Moon pack.

Damon wondered if Alpha Edward was aware of Talia's existence and why they would allow Talia to grow up as an undocumented orphan the old Alpha picked up who-knows-where.

Talia let out a long breath. "That all sounds fantastic, but it's of no use if I can't awaken my wolf."

Damon knew that Talia wanted to rely on her own abilities, and he admired that side of her. Actually, that was also proof that she was not an Omega. A werewolf who craves independence is a sign of strength, and he suspected that she has an Alpha bloodline.

"That's why you should take care of your body and don't suppress your desires. Keep in mind that I will support you so if you want something, just go for it."

Talia felt a wave of heat splashing on her cheeks. "Maya said the same thing." About going for it, with IT being Damon.

"Did she?" Damon feigned ignorance. He was eavesdropping and he knew very well that Maya said that about him. "Maya is wise, you should take her advice."

Talia's cheeks heated further and she wondered if Damon can read minds. "Didn't you say that Elders are coming, and we should get ready for the day?"

"No need to rush.", Damon said. "Remember that starting today, you are my Luna."

When Talia nodded in understanding, Damon continued, "In order to prepare for Elders' visit, you should take your role seriously and get into the character."

Talia had a feeling that this was a trap, but she still asked, "How?"

"The first thing a good Luna should do is to please her Alpha.", Damon said with lust clouding his icy-blue eyes. "Don't suppress your desires, kitten. I know you want me."

Talia wanted to say something snarky in return, but he moved to kiss her neck and his hot palms glided over her body, setting her soul on fire.

Within seconds, Talia gripped Damon's back while plunging headfirst in the wave of lust that crashed on her.

He was right. She wanted him. Desperately.

Chapter 193 - Rogues, Gossip, And A Hickey

When Talia and Damon got into the dining room for breakfast, the food was already on the table, and Maya and Caden were waiting, both with dark circles under their eyes and big grins on their faces.

It was obvious that Betas didn't get any sleep, and they were catching up on intimacy they missed during the days Caden was away.

Luckily, one or two nights of missed sleep is nothing much for werewolves.

After exchanging greetings, Caden told Damon what he achieved while away, and then they switched to discussions about rogue attacks on the territory of the Dark Howlers pack.

Talia listened to all that with interest.

She didn't know about her background and since no one bothered to search for her, she assumed that her parents were rogues. By the time she was old enough to ask questions, there was no one who could give her answers, and she didn't dare to ask Alpha Edward or Luna Layla about it.

From random stories, Talia concluded that rogues are faceless bad guys who live wildly in caves and would come to packs to steal and wreak havoc. That misconception also contributed to Talia concealing her presence, fearing that she will be hated more.

However, now Talia understood that rogues are not simple barbarians and she couldn't wait for the official part of their talk to be over, so that she can ask questions.

Maya and Caden left the table to settle some things before Elders come, and Talia asked Damon, "Can you tell me more about rogues and how they are impacting packs?"

"Don't think about them as anything other than werewolves.", Damon said when he sensed Talia's anxiousness. "The only difference between them and us is that they don't have an Alpha to lead them, but they are organized. Many of them live in towns, blending in with humans, but there are groups who established their own settlements in unclaimed territories..."

Seeing Talia's curiosity, Damon continued telling her how rogues can be hired for jobs from gathering information to scouting, and sometimes for crime as well. Some of them are specialized to work as bodyguards or mercenaries for human employers.

"So, the group that was caught yesterday morning was not here accidentally?", Talia asked.

"No. They were hired for a scouting mission, but they didn't know who their employer was...", Damon said before explaining how getting information on other packs sneakily is standard practice.

It's easy to determine from which pack the perpetrator is coming (everything can be solved with a bit of torture), and that's why many would hire rogues for dirty jobs. If a rogue gets caught, he can't spill the

beans if the only thing he knows about his employer is an alias and the place from where he collected cash.

"Are rogues dangerous?", Talia asked while concern swelled inside her.

Yesterday Damon went to deal with rogues while Talia overslept and then she allowed herself to be upset because of trivial things like Rosa and Ashley and Heather, and Damon was out there risking his life. What if he got hurt or worse? Talia chided herself for being bothered by gossips and jealous women.

"Most of them are.", Damon responded. "That's why I tell you not to wander. It's for your protection, kitten. We run tight security, but sometimes they will slip between patrols and get deeper into our territory. Regardless of why rogues come here, if you bump into them, they will be forced to choose between fleeing and attacking you, and guess which one they will pick when they see that you are alone?"

Damon let out a long breath. He could feel that Talia was sorry.

"Alright. Let's not talk about it anymore." He gave Talia's hand a squeeze. "Just don't wander on your own. Even if you want to stroll close to the packhouse, you should let one of us know about it because you can't contact us if you are in a pinch."

Talia knew he was talking about the mind-link. She thought about one thing. "If I bump into a patrol, how will they know I'm not a rogue?"

"They will probably recognize you as the MVP from the tournament.", Damon said right away and then a thought hit him. "Or... are you willing to join the pack officially?"

That would make it more convenient because Talia would join the collective mind-link and Damon could sense her presence easily, but before she could answer, he thought how it might not be so simple.

"We might want to talk with an expert before that step."

"Is it because I don't have my wolf?", Talia guessed.

"Yes. I don't want to risk doing something that might bring harm to your wolf." Not now when it seemed that her wolf was showing signs of waking up.

If Talia's wolf was present, Talia would be aware of the bond and so many things would fall into place.

Talia pressed her lips into a line. She knew that without her wolf, she was like a human, and humans can't establish the mind-link. Humans can live with werewolves, but they are never truly pack members no matter how much werewolves accept them.

Talia remembered what Damon told her that morning. "If your theory is correct and I have some impressive background... doesn't that mean I belong to a pack already? How can I join your pack then?"

Damon frowned. "OUR pack, kitten." He knew that Talia has many scars from the past, but he still wished that she embraces him and the Dark Howlers pack. However, he knew that he can't force it, or he might scare her away.

"If you belong to a pack, I will be able to sense it once your wolf awakens, assuming that your mind-link is still functional."

Talia's eyes widened. "Will you know from which pack I came?"

"Probably."

"Is that an Alpha ability?"

"It is my ability.", Damon said mysteriously.

Talia glanced around to make sure no one is in visual range, and then she leaned closer to Damon and spoke in a whisper, "Is it because your wolf can talk?"

Damon tapped her nose with his index finger. "You are smart, kitten. Our pack will do great with you as Luna."

Most of the werewolves can identify if someone belongs to a pack or is a rogue, but Alpha wolves can sense differences between mind-links.

Damon's advantage is that his wolf can speak so if they already met someone from a specific pack, Damon's wolf can tell him if the new face belongs to a pack they previously identified.

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Damon's eyes lost focus for a moment and he told Talia, "Elders will be here in a few minutes."

Talia swallowed a mouthful of air. Chatting with Damon helped her forget about what's coming, but now her anxiety swelled with interest.

She quickly patted down non-existing wrinkles on her dress. It was a peach-colored short-sleeved summer dress that ended just above her knee level. That dress together with white sneakers and her hair lifted into a sleek ponytail gave Talia an aura of youthfulness and sophistication.

Talia had a lip gloss on, but Damon kissed it away before they came down for breakfast, so Talia gave up on makeup.

"Do I look alright? What if I mess this up?"

"You can't mess up anything.", Damon said confidently. "We talked about this. I will meet with them first and when the time is right, Maya will bring you in. If they ask you something and you are unsure how to respond, I will do it in your stead."

"Will they believe I'm your mate?", Talia asked nervously and craned her neck. "How about you leave your mark?"

Damon's eyes widened and he blinked a few times before asking, "You want me to mark you? Now?" He could already feel his fangs coming out.

Talia nodded earnestly. "I saw it on movies that females usually have hickeys that expose they were intimate, and as mates, we should...", Talia's voice trailed when she saw that Damon's face fell. "You don't agree? I thought it was a good idea."

Damon cursed internally. For a moment, he thought that Talia was jumping into this whole marking thing, but then... she was talking about hickeys. Of course, this was Talia.

Damon put his hand at the back of Talia's head and pulled her closer to him.

"Ah!", Talia exclaimed when Damon started sucking on her neck harshly, releasing his pent-up frustration. He really thought that she wanted him to mark her, damn it!

It took less than a second for Talia to realize how this was not a good idea.

How was she supposed to meet Elders when they could smell her arousal?

But there was nothing Talia could do as her reasoning was drowning in the addictive scent of the forest and the dark chocolate, and she gripped Damon's shoulders at the same time a shaky moan escaped her lips.

Damon unlatched himself from Talia's neck and he hummed in satisfaction at the dark red circle that was turning darker by the second. There. He left her a hickey. A big one.

Damon's nostrils flared when he picked up the scent of Talia's arousal and the sight of her flushed face and unfocused eyes made her irresistible.

He thought that it was just him getting this aroused, but now he realized that it's the both of them. How could he ignore this call?

Chapter 194 - Visit From The Elders (1) [Bonus]

Somewhere in the back of Damon's mind was the thought that Elders were about to reach the packhouse at any moment, but Damon was entranced by the scent of Talia's arousal, and he couldn't resist the pull of the bond which told him that his mate has a need, and it was his duty to fulfill it.

Damon's tongue darted to moisten his lips before he dove in for a kiss. One, two, three... and his hand moved under the skirt of Talia's dress, over the smooth skin of her thigh, and he smiled into the kiss when she spread her legs to give him easier access.

With the tips of his fingers, Damon felt the moisture when he brushed her panties at the cradle of her thighs, and Damon lost it completely when a small sexy moan escaped Talia's lips.

Damon picked up Talia and dashed into a nearby room that's used for storage when they have parties, but now it was dark with curtains pulled to block the windows. Other than the tables and chairs arranged in the far end, the room was empty.

The impatience with which Damon tore Talia's panties only turned her on more and she tugged his shirt out of his jeans while he worked on the buttons.

The moment his erection sprang free, Talia was holding onto his shoulders, ready for him to lift her so that she can wrap her legs around his waist, and Damon smiled at the thought that his kitten was eager to feel him.

There was no need to delay what both of them wanted.

Damon pinned her against the heavy wooden door and Talia released a muffled groan as he entered her in one swift move.

Talia's dress was bunched around her waist and Damon's pants were around his ankles... her arms were on his shoulders, and she was fisting his hair... her legs connected behind him, and he held onto her buttocks while kissing her sloppily and pounding himself inside her, filling her up with every inch he had to offer, over and over again... Scandalous.

The door behind Talia clattered with his every thrust, threatening to fall out of its hinges, but neither Talia nor Damon cared about it because they were lost in the heaven-defying friction as their bodies merged into one.

"Damon... Damon... Damon...", Talia chanted deliriously, spurring him to continue his frenzied assault on her insides.

Colors danced in front of Talia's closed eyes as she was entranced by the lustful dance of their bodies that caused ecstatic pressure in her core to increase exponentially.

Damon was delighted that even in their current position with Talia being held up and pinned against the door, her hips moved to match the wild rhythm he set, changing the angle slightly and amplifying his pleasure by several folds. Seductress!

Talia wanted this to last forever, but she couldn't restrain the swelling at her core that was about to explode her into a million pieces.

And there it was...

Her toes curled involuntarily, and her legs shook as she fell apart while muttering unintelligible sounds.

Damon groaned when Talia's insides coiled around his shaft, and her orgasm hit him full force, pulling him into rapture with her.

The movements of Damon's hips became jerky as he came undone, filling her up with his hot seed, and she whimpered weakly as her body twitched with his every move.

"This... I can't get enough of you, kitten..." Damon spoke lowly close to her ear while catching his breath.

Talia rubbed her cheek against his and her hum of satisfaction sounded like a purr.

He thought how the nickname 'kitten' suits her.

That's his kitten. His mate. Only his.

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In the study...

Elder Charlie and Elder Samson were sitting on chairs, and they looked at Caden with stern expressions.

"Is Alpha Damon coming?", Elder Charlie asked Caden.

"Of course.", Caden responded with a stiff smile.

Caden mind-linked Damon, but Damon shut him down.

These two Elders were getting more irritable by the minute, and Caden hoped that whatever Damon was doing, was important.

Elder Samson glanced at his wristwatch impatiently. "He is the one who picked this time, and now he is late. How disrespectful..."

Elder Samson's complaint was cut short when the door of the study opened abruptly, and Damon walked in.

"I apologize for making you wait.", Damon said, but the smirk at the corner of his lips was a giveaway that he was not sorry.

He was not sorry, not even a little bit.

Damon sat in his executive chair and faced two Elders over his desk. "How can I help you, gentlemen?"

"Do you really not know why we are here?", Elder Samson asked.

Damon made a thoughtful expression. "Did you come here to discuss the issue related to rogue attacks?"

Elder Charlie waved his hand like that was not important. "Why would we come to discuss something that's a daily occurrence?"

"So that it stops being a daily occurrence?", Damon responded with a question, and both Elders stiffened. They were not sure how to respond and Damon continued, "You used to be advisors to my father, so I thought you came to advise me even though I told you a decade ago that I don't need advisors, but maybe you forgot about it. Since you are not here to talk about the rogues... Did you come to offer your help with resettling four families whose homes were damaged by the earth slide? Or do you have suggestions related to improvements to the drainage system to prevent another earth slide from happening? Or...?"

"Enough!", Elder Samson snapped, interrupting Damon. "That's not why we are here."

They are Elders, respected by everyone, yet this youngster (aka Damon) is treating them like they are jokes.

Damon's expression frosted. "You might be an Elder, but I am the Alpha. One more outburst like that, and this will be your last visit here."

"You should listen to us.", Elder Charlie said to Damon.

"My father listened to you, and that didn't do him much good.", Damon said curtly. "I am a busy man so will you tell me why you are here or are you expecting me to continue guessing?"

Elder Samson cleared his throat. "We are aware that Marcy from the Red Moon pack will come here soon, and you are considering to make her your Luna."

"I didn't know that my personal matters are something that interests you."

"The matter of your Luna impacts the whole pack, not only you.", Elder Samson said.

"I see. So, you are here to represent the interests of the pack.", Damon said thoughtfully to what two Elders nodded. "And?"

Elder Charlie spoke. "Since Marcy will come here soon, we hope you can stop womanizing and focus on her. Her father is the Alpha of the Red Moon pack, the second largest pack in North America, after ours. Alpha Edward has many connections. It won't be good to offend them."

Damon knew why they came here, and he was not surprised that they were acting like concerned uncles, but he still didn't approve of their choice of words. For a decade Damon is not letting them meddle in his affairs and he knew that they were this bold only because Elder Parker and Alpha Edward were backing them up. The only thing Damon didn't know was what benefits these two Elders hoped to get by working with Alpha Edward.

"You want me to stop womanizing?"

Elder Samson nodded. "Rumors are that some of your women are staying in the packhouse. You should get rid of them before Marcy comes here. Also, you were with one woman at the Summer Solstice festival, and you showed up with another one in a magazine. Why didn't you go to that event with Marcy?"

Damon made a face. "Marcy is not my fated mate and I don't feel the need to be faithful."

"She will be your mate after you mark her.", Elder Charlie said.

"But the bond for mates of choice is not forcing exclusivity."

Elder Samson shifted in his chair. "What are you trying to say?"

"I am stating the facts. Right now, I see Marcy as a nice piece of ass, and nothing more. Will that change if I mark her? I don't know. The two of you don't have Alpha bloodline, so you don't know how strong Alpha's urge is to dominate everyone, especially women. The only one who can put a stop on that is my fated mate."

Two Elders swallowed curses that were threatening to burst out of them. Damon reminding them that they don't have Alpha bloodline was rubbing them the wrong way, but there was nothing they could do about it. It was the truth.

Chapter 195 - Visit From The Elders (2)

Elder Samson spoke seriously, "In the absence of a fated mate, Marcy from the Red Moon pack is the next best choice. Even if you have urges to sleep around, be discrete about it. You should do what's best for the pack."

Damon released a slow breath. Here they go again with the story of how they want what's best for the pack.

What about what's best for Damon? Of course, they wouldn't care.

A decade passed, yet these two Elders still looked at Damon like he is a child that can be used for their own agenda.

If this was before, Damon would tell them to scram and not to return unless they want to challenge him to a duel, but this time it was different. Now he had Talia, and Damon needed to turn the tables and make Elders serve him.

As much as Damon didn't put Elders in his eyes, their influence was undeniable, and he didn't want them to create waves against Talia once her role as the Luna becomes public knowledge.

"What makes you think that Marcy is the next best choice?", Damon asked. "Marcy being the daughter of Alpha Edward doesn't mean she will be a good Luna. If I want to do what's best for my pack, I should reject Marcy and wait for my fated mate. After all, only when Alpha and Luna are fated mates, the prosperity of the pack is guaranteed. Instead of advising me to give up on womanizing, you should come up with a good plan to reject Marcy as my Luna without offending the Red Moon pack. Or do you think that I should accept any woman just because she wants to be my Luna?"

Elder Samson and Elder Charlie were at a loss. Everything Damon said sounded right, but that's not why they came here.

"Marcy is not just any woman.", Elder Charlie said. "If you miss this opportunity, you will regret it."

"Are you threatening me?"

"No, no.", Elder Charlie was quick to deny it. "I'm just saying that since you didn't find your fated mate so far, the Moon Goddess has other plans for you. The Dark Howlers pack needs a Luna, and you can't wait forever. You are not a young boy anymore."

Elder Samson added, "It's undeniable that the Dark Howlers pack is prospering under your leadership. However, you are just one man with a handful of people who are holding the reins. You need to expand

the circle of people who are on top of things, and Luna like Marcy will give you access to many valuable resources. Alpha Edward said that his people will be at your disposal if you need them."

Caden listened to this from the side, and he shook his head at their hypocrisy. They were making this sound like Damon would benefit from his union with Marcy, but actually, they want to use Marcy as an opening to inject their people close to Damon.

Caden was not sure if they got stupid with age or are just blinded by greed. Did they really think that Alpha Edward will share power after he sinks his claws into the Dark Howlers pack? At most, they will get some crumbs that Alpha Edward doesn't find useful... if Alpha Edward allows it.

Damon straightened his back and his expression turned serious while facing two Elders. "I recognize your sincerity and I acknowledge that you are thinking about what's best for the Dark Howlers pack."

Elder Samson and Elder Charlie exchanged confused gazes while silently confirming if they heard the same thing.

"You agree?", Elder Samson asked.

Damon nodded solemnly. "The Moon Goddess has plans for everyone, and she is always right. If I find my fated mate, I will turn into a man who has eyes for only one woman, and she will be perfect for me and for my pack."

Elder Samson opened his mouth to say something, but Damon was quick to raise his hand, gesturing that he was not done.

"Since you are thinking about what's best for the pack, I want to share sensitive information with you. I hope you can keep this between us, for now", Damon said, and when two Elders nodded in agreement, Damon reached out to Maya with the mind-link, 'Come in.'

Elder Samson and Elder Charlie both turned toward the door that opened, and they glanced at two figures who came in. The two Elders didn't show much interest in Maya, they were aware that she is Beta, but they couldn't stop their brows furrowing as they looked at Talia. She was familiar, yet not familiar, and the fact that she walked in front of Maya meant that Talia's status isn't low.

After closing the door behind her, Maya scurried to stand next to Caden. She didn't want to miss the show.

Talia's eyes locked with Damon's, and she walked straight to him, without paying any heed to anyone else in the room.

Damon's lips lifted into a smirk as Talia approached him and she sat on his lap.

"Who is this girl?", Elder Samson asked irritably. Didn't they just discuss Damon's womanizing, and how Damon will keep it low-key?

Damon wrapped his arms around Talia and rested his chin on her shoulder before responding. "This girl was with me at the Summer Solstice festival, you might recognize her as the MVP of the tournament. She accompanied me to the Luna announcement ceremony at the Lightclaw pack, and she is the only one who is staying with me in the packhouse. Gentlemen, this is Talia. My fated mate."

Damon felt his insides jolt when he officially introduced Talia as his fated mate, and he was not sure if that was him, his wolf, or Talia. Probably all three of them.

Elder Samson and Elder Charlie gaped at Talia like she was growing a second head.

Damon continued talking to Talia, "Talia, dear, these are Elder Samson and Elder Charlie. They came to express their concerns about me leading the pack without my Luna, so I decided to introduce you to them. I hope that's OK with you."

Two Elders couldn't believe the gentle tone Damon used to speak to Talia. Were they imagining things?

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Caden snorted. "Is this how you greet your future Luna?"

Two Elders snapped out of their daze.

"Luna?", Elder Samson asked in disbelief. "What proof you have for that?"

Damon cocked an eyebrow. "Do I need to prove I found my mate?"

"No, no...", Elder Charlie said with haste. "If what you said is true, you met your mate weeks ago. How come no one knows about it?"

"Relevant people are aware of Talia's importance."

Damon's response made the faces of two Elders turn ugly. Did he say they are not relevant?

"What is her background?", Elder Charlie asked his next question.

Damon was ready for it. "It is being kept as a secret for now. For Talia's safety." This was the truth. "Does it matter from where she is? Talia is my fated mate. The Moon Goddess knows what she is doing."

At the mentioning of the Moon Goddess, both Elders gave up on pursuing information related to Talia's background.

"Why is she not marked?", Elder Samson asked.

Damon feared this marking question because if he exposes the truth of how Talia's wolf is not present, it might be used against Talia. Normally, that wouldn't be a problem because there are instances where an

Alpha would have a human for a mate, but in this case, these Elders felt that they are entitled to meddle in Damon's affairs, and how can they just give up when they were so close to their goal?

Talia pressed her lips into a line. Why are these two old geezers so overbearing?

Damon told her not to anger the Elders because he will be in the role of offending them, while she just needs to be his mate, but how can she let him do all the work? And why were they talking about her like she was not in the room?

Talia steeled her resolve and spoke, "I heard that Elders of the Dark Howlers pack were removed from their roles as advisors, and I thought how that was disrespectful, but now I know it was justified. The two of you are not offering advice, you are meddling in the private affairs of your Alpha. That's unheard of." She narrowed her eyes at Elder Samson. "Do you have a mate? Did anyone tell you when to mark her or how to treat her? What Damon and I do in our relationship is none of your business."

Elder Charlie's eyes flashed in anger. "But it is our business, missy. If you want people to accept you as the Luna of the Dark Howlers pack, you need to think about the pack, and not just about your private business."

Damon snorted. "Don't make rash statements that can get you penalized. Talia will be a wonderful Luna."

"You don't know that.", Elder Samson snapped.

"But I do, you see...", Damon made a dramatic pause before continuing, "To address your concern of Talia being accepted by the pack members, Coach Keith said that their win at the tournament is thanks to Talia's role as the team spirit. Everyone cheered when she was crowned as the MVP of the tournament. Outside of the public eye, Talia is knowledgeable with gifts of nature, and she shared with us a special mixture of herbs that are increasing the success rate of our scouts. In terms of external relations, during our outing at the Lightclaw pack, Talia is the one who secured us a tribute from the Steelbite pack. And she did all that before getting official recognition as my Luna. Isn't she wonderful? Or are you doubting the will of the Moon Goddess?"

Chapter 196 - Visit From The Elders (3)

Two Elders realized that there is much more to Talia than they thought.

Now that Damon mentioned it, they recognized Talia as the girl who was the team spirit at the tournament. The whole soccer team was kneeling in front of her and people cheered. It was quite a spectacle.

They also heard warriors praising a mysterious medicine that was super secretive.

Two elders were not familiar with the tribute from the Steelbite pack, but Damon wouldn't deceive them with something that can be easily proven.

On top of all that, Damon mentioned the Moon Goddess.

But even with all that, how could Elder Samson and Elder Charlie give up easily?

By helping Marcy become the Luna of the Dark Howlers pack, these two will definitely be close to Alpha and Luna, no matter how Damon feels about them. Marcy will be grateful that they are on her side and she will use her womanly charms to sway Damon, and the Elders could become Alpha's advisors again. With that, their influence in the pack will increase.

At their age, Elder Samson and Elder Charlie can't win a duel, so they need to rely on other ways to stay in power. It's normal for werewolves to crave power, it's like a drug to them. Only Omegas are submissive while everyone else is clawing to get to the top.

Elder Samson and Elder Charlie were aware that they already had agreements with Alpha Edward and Elder Parker. If they back down now, wouldn't they suffer consequences?

Unfortunately, when faced with the scenario of Damon finding his fated mate, all their plans for the future started cracking.

Now what?

They were stuck between a rock and a hard place, unable to move forward or to retreat.

"This girl secured us a tribute?" Elder Charlie wanted to know more about it, hoping to find a weakness that can be exploited.

Damon's expression darkened. "THIS GIRL has a name, and it's Talia. I suggest you remember it because soon she will be your Luna. Talia was in the position to ask for anything she wants, yet she asked Alpha Richard to give tribute to the Dark Howlers pack. We still didn't determine the date for her Luna ceremony, yet she is contributing to our pack. Based on the information I received about Marcy from the Red Moon pack, her days consist of sitting at home and relaxing."

Damon glanced nervously at Talia. "It's not that I would ever consider Marcy as my Luna. I was just making an objective comparison."

Elder Samson frowned. "If you didn't consider Marcy as your Luna, why did you go to the Red Moon pack to settle the engagement?"

Damon tightened his hold on Talia like he feared that she will leave him right then and there. He could feel that her emotions became unstable. Was it because he said that he was gathering information on Marcy? Or because Elder Samson brought up the point that he went to meet Marcy?

"There was no settling of anything. It is one thing what they planned, and another what actually happened.", Damon said stiffly. "The point here is that Talia is more than qualified to be my Luna, and us being fated mates means that our union is blessed by the Moon Goddess. Anyone who thinks otherwise is welcome to challenge me openly. As for the ones who try to scheme and cause discord in our pack, I won't hesitate in punishing everyone involved."

Damon continued in a dangerously low voice. "Besides a few people I trust, the two of you are the only ones who know that Talia is my fated mate. If this news spreads before we announce it officially, I will know whose lips were loose. You are aware of my reputation related to defending my pack. If anyone dares to jeopardize my mate, I will show no mercy."

Both Elders swallowed hard.

Damon was clear that the consequences of messing with Talia will be dire.

The two Elders didn't have a problem in keeping Talia's importance a secret. Surely, Damon will announce it soon. However, they had another problem.

Both Elder Charlie and Elder Samson made agreements with Elder Parker and Alpha Edward, and the purpose of their visit today was to seal the deal with Damon. If this with Marcy falls through, who knows what Elder Parker and Alpha Edward will do?

"But... what about Marcy?", Elder Charlie asked.

Talia looked at two Elders and the displeasure that bubbled inside her exploded.

"What about Marcy?", Talia snapped. "Why are you talking like Damon is breaking up a long-term loving relationship? There is nothing going on between them. Nothing. Or do you think I will allow my man to keep a woman on the side?"

Damon's heart soared. Talia just claimed him as her man!

He wished that he recorded this so that he can replay it later.

Elder Charlie was irked by Talia's attitude, but he felt the urge to bow his head. "Well, no, but..."

"But, what?", Talia interrupted him angrily. "You are old and should be wise. Is it better to tell Marcy before she comes here that the role she is coveting is taken, or should I do it instead of you at the doorstep of my home?"

Elder Samson lost color from his face as he realized, "You want US to tell Alpha Edward that Marcy won't be the Luna of the Dark Howlers pack?"

"It seems your brain is working fine, given enough stimulation.", Talia said, and Damon stifled a chuckle while hiding his face behind her back. Ah, his mate was on fire and Damon loved every minute of it.

"Preposterous!", Elder Charlie protested. "Why do you want us to deliver bad news?"

Talia's irritation swelled. "Seeing how the two of you are standing up for Marcy, there is no place for doubts about who from within our pack worked with Alpha Edward. As respectable Elders, you should own it and clean up the mess you made. Find a peaceful way for Marcy to give up on a position that belongs to me, and make sure not to reveal my existence."

Talia stood up from Damon's lap and narrowed her eyes at two Elders. "I didn't forget that you neglected the simple courtesy of greeting me as your Luna. Your disrespect offended me and your Alpha. It makes me wonder if you did that on purpose or are you just simply foolish?"

Damon had an urge to pull Talia into his embrace and to kiss her senselessly. How can she be so amazing?

Did she notice that not only two Elders, but Maya and Caden also lowered their heads for her?

Of course, she didn't notice. Talia doesn't notice these things, but Damon does, and he was damn proud of his little mate.

She was like a firecracker, putting everyone in their place, and Damon enjoyed the show profusely.

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Two Elders left Damon's office in a daze, and only when the air from the hallway hit them, they realized their clothes were drenched in sweat. Just what the hell was that?

Caden and Maya silently left the office as well, to make sure the Elders really leave the packhouse, and by the way Damon pulled Talia to sit on his lap, it seemed that lovebirds would like some privacy.

When Talia realized that it was only her and Damon in the study, she looked at him apprehensively.

"Did I cross the line?"

"Nothing is too much for you, kitten. You did amazing.", Damon said dotingly.

Talia smiled brightly. She enjoyed the compliment for a few seconds, before asking, "Do you think they will handle Marcy?"

Damon shrugged. "There is no way to tell, but if they fail, I will make sure she gets the message. I don't want to risk her coming here and making you uncomfortable. Now that these two Elders are aware I have a mate, they won't dare to cooperate with Alpha Edward."

Talia pressed her lips into a line. Why did he make it sound that he was arranging for Marcy to not come only for Talia's sake? Did that mean, if Talia was not here, Damon would be OK with Marcy? Talia pushed those thoughts to the side.

"Will you use the same mate story to deter Marcy? What if Alpha Edward opposes? If he made these two Elders work for him, there are probably others. What if..."

"Let me worry about that.", Damon interrupted Talia's next what-if scenario.

Talia nodded obediently and then her eyes lit up when she remembered one detail.

She craned her neck, for Damon to see. "Do you think they noticed the hickey?"

Damon stared at Talia's neck, gave it a sniff and a lick, and even though Talia giggled while wondering what he was up to, his brows were furrowed to form a serious expression. He was not playing.

"I thought you changed your mind and covered it with makeup, but now I know you didn't. There is no hickey, kitten."

Talia was confused. "What? It was there." She checked in the mirror of the bathroom where she was tidying herself after Damon left to meet the Elders.

"I know.", Damon said. He remembered the dark red mark on her neck he left behind.

Chapter 197 - Lunch For Two [Bonus]

Author's note:

Shoutout to Catherine_C, the #1 fan of "The Alpha's Bride"!

Damon's lips stretched into a big smile. There was only one explanation for a hickey that disappeared mysteriously. "Your wolf healed it."

"You think so?", Talia asked nervously.

"I know so. Without your wolf, it would take days for that hickey to completely disappear, and your neck is clean. I think she will wake up soon." Damon wrapped Talia in his arms and pulled her to lean on him.

He really wanted her wolf to awaken as soon as possible. Right now, would be perfect. With Talia's wolf present, Talia would be confident they are mates and belong together, and he will take care of everything else.

Talia snuggled into Damon's embrace and stuffed her face in the crook of his neck, taking a deep breath of her favorite scent that made her dizzy.

Talia didn't want to think about her wolf. Doctor Travis explained to Talia how nothing is certain and that even if there is some improvement, it could be temporary, and it doesn't mean it will go all the way.

If her wolf awakens, it would be another unknown that will definitely impact her relationship with Damon and Talia didn't want anything to change because this, right now, was perfect.

...

Talia was impressed that even with Elders visiting and all the pending work, Damon prioritized her training as something that can't be skipped.

The two of them spent more than an hour in their own private gym stretching, running, jumping, planking, Damon showed Talia a few techniques how to punch effectively with a fist and with the base of her palm, and then they ended up on the exercising mat in a steamy make-out session that left them craving for more.

Talia got to keep her clothes on while in the gym, but after training was over... it was a different story.

The moment they entered the shower enclosure, Damon pinned her against the wall, and she couldn't wait to feel that stretch and friction, and Damon didn't make her wait.

Talia melded into Damon while relishing the way he worshiped her body. Everything he did was right.

"I don't want to leave this place, but there is a ton of work waiting for me in the study.", Damon said while breathing heavily and Talia was not sure if 'this place' was the shower enclosure, or her body because Damon's hard cock was still lodged deep inside her.

Talia felt guilty because he had so much work, yet he still went with her to the gym. "Can I help you?"

Damon had an inkling about the type of work he had to do, and that was not something Talia could help with, but there was something else. "You can give me company. You should prepare for exams if you want to earn your high school diploma. As a bonus, if you have questions, I will be right there to help you."

Talia was touched. He really put her first.

Damon took the effort to go through the curriculum and compile the list of material she needed to learn in order to get her degree. He prepared books and other supplies, as well as paid for online subscriptions so that she can access the latest resources. Can he be any sweeter?

He was handsome and powerful and considerate, and Talia couldn't get enough of him.

Talia's fingers laced into Damon's damp hair, and she gave him a long deep kiss that spurred his hips to move again, and within seconds both of them forgot that there was work or anything else outside that bathroom.

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In the study...

Damon was at his desk, and Talia was behind hers, each busy with their own respective tasks while enjoying the fact they were sharing space.

Talia was motivated to catch up with her education, but her enthusiasm dampened when she realized how much there is for her to learn.

As an orphan in the Red Moon pack, Talia attended lessons in the pack school until third grade. After that, Talia ended up in the attic and she would sporadically go to school, but she would skip often because of bullies, and soon she stopped going completely.

Olivia taught Talia some bits and pieces, but the reality was that Talia was lacking in many areas academically, and she forgot many things. As a result, she had to re-start her education from elementary school.

Talia lifted her head from the lesson on ecosystems and she looked at Damon who was focused on the documents in front of him.

She soaked in his enchanting visual. How can a man be so handsome?

"Shouldn't you be studying?"

Talia was startled out of her daze. How did he know without looking?

"I'm taking a mental break.", Talia said.

Damon lifted his gaze and smiled. He could feel her fluttering heart and warm and fuzzy emotions that came with a hint of arousal, and he knew that she was either thinking about him, or those ecosystems became sexy. "Whatever you say, kitten."

"Do you want us to take a walk in the garden for a change of scenery?", Damon suggested.

Talia bit her lower lip guiltily. She interrupted his work. If he accompanies her for a walk, it would be too much.

She got an idea.

"Actually, I was thinking of doing something for you."

Damon cocked an eyebrow. "You did?"

Talia nodded earnestly. "I made a promise to cook for you. Since we usually have leftovers for lunch, how about I cook for you today?"

Damon's eager expression told her that he approved.

Talia fidgeted when she remembered... "I'm still not confident in doing everything on my own, so I hope that Steph will be in the kitchen."

Damon would eat whatever Talia serves him, but he knew that she has her own ideas. His eyes lost focus for a second before he said, "She will be there in five minutes."

Talia was excited. She didn't have plans for what she will make, but with Stephanie's guidance, it will be great. Or at least good. OK, edible. Hopefully.

...

In the kitchen...

"How come you decided to make lunch?", Stephanie asked. Talia would usually follow instructions, and this was the first time for Talia to take initiative, so Stephanie was curious.

"Alpha Damon did a lot for me, and I want to repay him. How much I can.", Talia responded honestly.

Stephanie smiled. "I'm glad you are getting along well."

She knew how lonely Damon was even with all women buzzing around him.

Stephanie liked Talia from the moment she came to the packhouse, and the fact that Cassie was expelled from the packhouse because of Talia was a big bonus in Stephanie's eyes.

As for what happened in the last few days, Stephanie was fully focused on Lisa and she barely appeared in the common areas (other than the kitchen), so Stephanie was not aware of the latest relationship developments between Talia and Damon.

"What will you make for him?", Stephanie asked.

"I don't know. I was hoping you can suggest something tasty and not too complicated. I want to make it myself, and you can be here to ensure I don't burn things or make something poisonous."

Stephanie laughed at Talia's adorable honesty.

Most of the she-wolves are haughty and trying to leave the impression of being perfect at everything, and Talia's down-to-earth attitude was refreshing.

"For an Alpha, meat is a must.", Stephanie said. "Tasty and simple, hm? Put some sausages in the oven, and make sure to put extra because even if Maya and Caden don't show up in time for lunch, they will be looking for leftovers once they catch onto the scent. Let's think about some side dishes and don't bother with salad because Damon doesn't like it..."

As one after another thing came together, Talia thought that she was floating. She was really making lunch for Damon! She hoped that he will like it.

Stephanie looked at the big smile on Talia's face and she laughed. "Do you need help with plating?"

Talia rejected. "You already helped so much. I can handle this, and I will pack the leftovers also. Thank you."

Stephanie waved like it's not a big deal.

Talia used her cell phone to send a text message to Damon to come to the dining room in ten minutes, and when he responded with a thumbs-up emoji, she got busy with plating.

Talia meticulously arranged food on two big plates, one for her and one for Damon.

There was roasted sausage, a side of baked potatoes with a generous dollop of sour cream sprinkled with tiny bits of scallion and bacon, and there was artisan bread that was toasted on the pan before it got coated with a spread of garlic butter and thin slices of sundried cherry tomatoes. Perfect.

After keeping leftovers in containers to the side and tidying up some of the mess, Talia carried two plates to the dining room victoriously.

Talia made several trips back and forth between the kitchen and the dining room while getting cups, utensils, and napkins. In her excitement, she always forgot one thing or another. She wanted it to be perfect.

The last thing were knives. Talia shook her head helplessly. She forgot knives.

How can they eat the sausage properly without cutting it? It will be messy.

Well, Damon more than once licked the mess from her lips. Maybe she could return the knives in the kitchen?

Talia's steps halted at the door of the dining room when she saw a girl about her age with long dark brown hair eyeing the plates with food. She acted freely, yet Talia never met her.

It took Talia a moment to connect the dots.

"You must be Lisa."

Chapter 198 - Lisa

Lisa turned toward the door when she heard Talia's voice.

"Are you the new girl?", Lisa asked.

Talia smiled a little. "I guess I am. My name is Talia. Stephanie told me about you."

"Mom told me about you also.", Lisa said and observed Talia who was putting knives and carefully pushing forks and napkins so that they are perfectly aligned with just the right amount of space between them.

"Are we having a guest for lunch?", Lisa asked.

Talia paused. "No. Why?"

Lisa shrugged. "I see you arranged a second plate next to Damon's so I assumed that person must be important."

Talia wanted to say how that's her spot, but she held her words back. She didn't want to make it sound how she was boasting. Damon should arrive in a minute, and Lisa will either leave or see them so... Talia decided not to comment.

"Did you have lunch?", Talia asked Lisa.

"I don't eat much lately."

Talia understood that this might be related to Tony finding his mate (aka Kalina). "I heard what happened. I'm sorry you had to go through that."

Lisa made a face. "It's not enough that I was dumped, but everyone knows about it."

Talia was not sure how to respond to this.

"Mom told me that you are staying in the packhouse and helping in the kitchen.", Lisa said to what Talia nodded, and Lisa continued, "Not everyone is open-minded like Damon."

Talia's insides tightened. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, not everyone will accept a wolf-less she-wolf into the pack, and Damon even arranged for you to stay in the packhouse and work. In most of the packs, people like you will be shunned as trash, forced to work some menial work or banished and they end up living with humans."

Talia frowned. Why does Lisa know that Talia doesn't have her wolf? Did Damon tell her?

Since Lisa arrived, Stephanie was spending a lot of time with her, and Stephanie spoke to Lisa about Talia, a wolf-less she-wolf who came from the Red Moon pack and is staying in the packhouse.

Damon told Stephanie about Talia's condition, as an excuse for Talia to stay in the packhouse and to be treated with special care. Talia herself is the one who disclosed to Stephanie that she came from the Red Moon pack. That happened before Maya warned Talia to keep her background a secret.

Stephanie didn't mean to gossip. She hoped that Talia's story will inspire Lisa to keep on fighting and not drown in depression because Tony found his mate.

Lisa saw that Talia's expression worsened, and Lisa quickly added, "I don't have a problem with you not having a wolf. I just wanted to point out how Damon is an amazing Alpha. If this was Alpha Magnus, he would label you as a damaged wolf and discard you, yet Damon treats you as any other Omega..."

Talia's ears were buzzing. Shunned? Trash? Damaged? Discarded?

Talia wanted to tell Lisa that she was wrong. Damon doesn't treat her as an Omega. And Talia was not damaged, and no one would discard her, but her insecurities that took roots over two decades were swelling again and suffocating everything good in Talia.

Talia wished that Damon gives her a comforting hug and to tell her that she is wonderful and amazing, just how he always does, and she would believe him because he has the power to dispel her negative thoughts, but he was not there, and Talia was looking for an exit.

"Excuse me, I need some air...", Talia said and walked out of the dining room and into the garden.

Lisa didn't get it. Why did Talia leave suddenly? She was just praising Damon.

Lisa's eyes fell on the plates with food. Those sausages smelled amazing, and Lisa didn't eat in a long time, and she licked her lips because she drooled a little.

Talia said that there will be no guests for lunch, so Lisa sat on Talia's spot.

How Lisa saw this, the second plate could be for her mother, Maya, or Caden, and neither of them will raise a fuss if Lisa helps herself.

She never suspected that the second plate was for Talia.

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In the study...

Damon felt uneasy and he glanced at the time. Was Talia upset because he was late? It was only by a few minutes!

He got up and rushed toward the dining room.

Damon paused at the door of the dining room at the sight of Lisa sitting at the table and eating. She was so focused on the food that she didn't notice him.

"Lisa?", Damon called.

Lisa's eyes lit up when she saw Damon, and she swiftly got up and walked to him.

"I'm sorry I didn't greet you so far. I was a mess.", Lisa said while giving Damon a hug.

Damon slowly pried Lisa's arms away from him. It was one thing to hug when they were kids, but Lisa is a grownup now, and he didn't want Talia to misunderstand.

"It's good that you are better now.", Damon said and looked around the dining room. "Did you see Talia?"

"That new Omega?", Lisa asked.

Damon's brows came together. "Who told you that she is Omega?"

Lisa shrugged and shook her head. "Mom told me she is helping in the kitchen, and I saw her setting up the table, so I assumed..." Lisa's voice trailed when she saw that Damon's expression was not good.

"Where is she?"

"She said that she needed some air and left."

Damon's face darkened. "What did you say to her?"

Lisa was flustered. "Me? Nothing. Actually, I was just saying how you are an amazing Alpha. That's it."

Damon had many questions for Lisa, but he felt the urgency to find Talia and anything else will need to wait.

Damon dashed out of the packhouse, and his heart fell into place when he saw Talia sitting on a bench in the garden.

Talia's hair moved a bit in the breeze as she stared absentmindedly in front of her.

She jolted out of her stupor when Damon took a seat next to her.

"Hey...", Damon called. "Why are you here?"

Talia exhaled a long breath while adjusting her emotions. Damon did nothing wrong, and she didn't want to burden him with her demons from the past.

Lisa didn't say anything bad, but she hit a nerve. If Talia was a normal she-wolf, she would probably agree with Lisa and praise Damon, and it would end at that. But Talia was not a normal she-wolf because she doesn't have her wolf and due to that she was bullied and stuck in the attic.

But now that Damon was next to her, Talia's mood improved because he made everything better.

"I finished setting the table and I thought of enjoying the garden until you finish with work."

Damon knew that she lied, something definitely happened, but he didn't want to poke into it and upset Talia further. He will talk to Lisa, later.

He wrapped his arms around Talia, and she leaned on him.

Damon scent of the forest and the dark chocolate did wonders, and his solid embrace made Talia feel safe and Talia decided to focus on the positives.

"We should go back to the dining room before the food gets cold.", Talia said. "I hope you will like what I made. It's nothing much, but keep in mind that it was my first time to cook..."

Damon was moved at the thought that Talia gave him another of her firsts. But his joy lasted only for a second because he remembered that Lisa ate from one of the plates, and it was obvious that Talia was not aware of that.

Talia made a meal for the two of them, and Damon could see that it was very important for Talia. Well, it was important for him also but if they go there now, instead of remembering it as the first meal Talia made for them, it will be remembered as something that Lisa ruined.

Damon scrambled his brain while searching for a solution, and it took him a moment to come up with something.

"I'm sorry that I took longer to come down for lunch, but I was late for a reason.", Damon said and when Talia looked at him questionably, he added, "There is an issue with a restaurant in Darkbourne, and I need to check it personally. It seems to be urgent. What do you say that we ask Stephanie to wrap the delicious lunch you prepared, and we can eat that later? It should be good reheated, right?"

Unsuspecting Talia didn't object, and she knew that Damon was mind-linking Stephanie when his eyes lost focus.

In the car that was heading to Darkbourne...

'Stephanie!', Stephanie jolted when he heard Damon's stern voice in her head. 'Talia prepared food for us, but Lisa ended up eating it. I want you to re-make those two plates and make sure Talia doesn't suspect anything when she reheats it. You have one hour.'

'Yes, Alpha', Stephanie said quickly and turned the car around.

Stephanie pressed her lips into a line. She remembered how happy Talia was while making a meal for Damon. Why would Lisa eat from those plates instead of from the kitchen?

Lisa is willful and says whatever is on her mind, and it seemed that she caused some trouble.

Stephanie jolted when she heard Damon's voice again, 'I want you to talk to Lisa and remind her that she can't act like she owns the place.'

Stephanie's stomach dropped, 'Did Lisa do something?'

'You should ask her.'

Chapter 199 - Punishing The Pampered Princess [Bonus]

Maya and Caden made their way into the packhouse, and they followed their noses into the kitchen.

They found a scene of Lisa and Stephanie busying themselves with food.

It was unusual to make food at this time. Lunchtime passed and it was still a long way to go until dinner, and this was definitely too much work for a snack.

Not to mention that Maya had never seen Lisa holding a spatula and standing in front of the stove.

"Are we having guests?", Maya asked from the door.

The moment Stephanie and Lisa turned toward the door, Maya and Caden realized that something was off.

Lisa glanced at Maya and made a face. "It seems that I offended some Omega, and I need to pay for it."

"I told you not to call her Omega!", Stephanie hissed at Lisa and then looked at Maya and Caden apologetically. "Talia prepared a meal for Damon, and Lisa helped herself when no one was watching. Damon asked that we remake food so that Talia doesn't notice."

Lisa rolled her eyes. She hated working in the kitchen and she hated when people tell her what to do.

When Lisa was little, as the only girl living in the packhouse of the Dark Howlers pack, she was more than just Beta's daughter. She was the princess that was doted upon by her parents and the Alpha family while other people either played with her or served her.

Since she grew up here, Lisa treats this as her home, and nothing was ever off-limits.

Later, Lisa moved to live with her aunt in the Lightclaw pack. Lisa's aunt was not strict with her, and as Tony's girlfriend, no one dared to cross her.

When Lisa visited the Dark Howlers pack in the last decade, she would go on trips with Stephanie or hang out with her friends in Darkbourne, continuing with the princess lifestyle where everything was fun and games while the hard work was done by someone else.

Lisa was not used to this fix-your-mistake treatment, and she was not used to being reprimanded either.

"Why are you talking like I committed an unforgivable sin? It was just sausage and potato and bread. Nothing fancy. Or did I spoil her chances of charming Damon? If she was banking on that meal to get his favor, she won't..."

"Lisa!", Stephanie's shout interrupted Lisa's banter.

Stephanie hated when she needed to discipline Lisa because she felt guilty that Lisa grew up without a father and with Lisa living in another pack, Stephanie didn't spend much time with her either. However, Lisa's actions upset Damon, and Stephanie had to let Lisa know that she made a mistake before things escalate.

"I already told you that Talia made that meal to thank Damon for his kind treatment, which is much more than you ever did."

Lisa snorted. "Big deal. Sausage and potato..."

"I was talking about being thankful.", Stephanie said irritably.

Maya and Caden watched this from the door, both wearing matching frowns on their faces. They didn't want to get involved in this family dispute.

"Smells good. Any food for us?", Caden asked.

Stephanie gestured toward plastic containers that were stacked on the side. "There are extras from what Talia made."

Lisa snorted. "We could have used those instead of making new."

"Then, you wouldn't learn your lesson.", Stephanie said.

"What lesson? To not eat food that Omega made?"

"Lisa", Maya called stiffly. She couldn't stand Lisa's condescending attitude. Lisa was always a proud she-wolf, and the breakup with Tony hit her hard, but that didn't give her permission to vent her frustration on others. "I suggest that you tone down that attitude and treat Talia with respect, or you will regret it."

Lisa looked at Maya in disbelief. "You too? You are kidding."

"Do I look like I am kidding? I don't know if Steph told you, but Cassie disrespected Talia, and that got her kicked out from here."

"How can you compare me with that shameless slut?", Lisa snapped. "Cassie came here to spread her legs for Damon, and I live here."

"Talia lives here also.", Maya deadpanned.

"So what? Now I need to tiptoe around a wolf-less she-wolf Damon rescued?"

Maya wanted to respond, but Caden was faster.

"No one said that you need to tiptoe around Talia, but you need to treat her with respect. You are lucky Damon is not here to hear you say those words."

"What would he do? Throw me into the dungeon? Kick me out of my own house?"

Caden narrowed his eyes at Lisa. "This is Damon's house. It belongs to the Blake family. You only live here, just like the rest of us. You are not a child, and you should think about how you can contribute instead of causing trouble. Don't test your luck by messing with Talia because Damon won't sit that one out, and you won't like the outcome."

Lisa wanted to respond but she realized that she can't utter a word because Caden released his pressure and she ended up bowing her head.

Lisa hated this.

She was dumped by Tony when he found his mate, and Stephanie pestered her until she gave in to return home. Instead of being comforted, she is being punished and everyone is telling her to respect some random people.

Lisa grew up pampered and she didn't like this treatment. She didn't like it, not even a little bit.

"Ahh!", Lisa shrieked when the butter-garlic sauce for the artisan bread burned. She was so upset that she forgot to stir it.

"Throw that and start again!", Stephanie ordered.

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In a restaurant in Darkbourne...

Talia and Damon were sitting in the booth at the end of the restaurant and Talia was looking at the big platter filled with grilled chicken wings that were glistening in shades of red and brown from the smokey barbeque sauce.

"I thought you will deal with the matter here and we will go home to eat.", Talia said.

Damon scratched the back of his head awkwardly.

He told Stephanie that she has one hour, but even with him pretending to discuss something important with the owner, it was less than half an hour.

Damon thought of making up another excuse to delay their return, but Talia would suspect that something is off, so he went ahead with ordering chicken wings.

"The owner was grateful for my quick action.", Damon said. "It would be impolite to refuse."

Talia let out a long breath. If she knew they will end up here, she wouldn't bother with making food.

She was looking forward to seeing Damon's reaction to the meal she made.

The potatoes were perfectly baked, bacon bits were crispy, and the sausage smelled divine. But that was when the food was freshly made. Now they will need to reheat it and Talia was not sure how much Damon was interested in it.

Did he take a peek at the plates before he found her in the garden, and he found that the food is not good enough?

Was it because many she-wolves cooked for him before and Talia's offering didn't compare?

Damon could feel Talia's dejection and he realized that he needed something bigger to distract her.

"Kitten...", he called. "Would you like to meet my wolf?"

Talia's eyes widened. "Now?"

"Anytime you want is fine."

She glanced nervously around. "Are you going to shift here?"

Damon chuckled. "I don't need to shift. Actually, if I do that, my wolf won't be able to talk to you and you will get sniffed and licked."

"Will he talk to me?"

Damon hummed in confirmation. "He wants to talk to you, but for that, I need to stay in this form and give him control. Like that, no one will know what's going on."

Talia was trembling from excitement. "Is it common for you to give him control?"

"No. He mostly just talks in my head, but with you is different." Damon glanced at the chicken wings. He was hungry. "However, right now is not convenient. Having a wolf out on an empty stomach might be problematic. I don't want him to embarrass me by jumping on the table to devour these..."

Talia was frozen for a moment and then she burst into a fit of giggles. The mental image of Damon climbing the table and stuffing his face in a mass of chicken wings was hilarious.

"What's funny?", Damon grumbled, but he was not angry. He loved to hear her laugh, and it seemed that mentioning his wolf distracted her from whatever bad thoughts she had.

"Nothing, nothing..." There was no way she would say what was on her mind. "Let's eat."

Damon used thongs to pile up chicken wings into Talia's plate.

"Eat, kitten...", Damon urged her. "These are the best chicken wings in Darkbourne."

Chapter 200 - Setting Things Straight

Author's note:

"How much work do you still have for today?", Talia asked Damon while munching on a chicken wing. The meat was tender and very tasty, sweet and tangy with some smokey smell, but with all that sauce, it was incredibly messy.

"If I could see the end of it, I would be planning a vacation.", Damon said honestly. No matter how much he works, more will come his way. "While on the topic of a vacation, did you think about it? We can go anywhere you want."

Talia remembered that Damon said how he will take her on a vacation. The fact that brought it up again meant he was not kidding. Right?

Talia could feel the heat in her cheeks increasing, and she hoped that the dark lighting in the restaurant will conceal her blush at least a little bit. "How about a forest? A lake would be nice. Something... private."

Damon paused and he stared at Talia while his lips rose into a smile in slow motion. Something else was rising in his crotch area and he shifted a bit to adjust himself. "Private. I like that. Tell me more..."

Talia was not sure what more there could be.

If she could spend time with Damon, away from it all, that would be the perfect vacation, regardless of if they are staying in high-end luxury, a modest cabin, a tent, or outdoors. But he expected her to say more, so she had to come up with something. "Let's not go far away. In case there is an emergency you need to handle, we can return quickly..."

Damon was amazed that even when she was planning a vacation, Talia thought about his needs and the pack. She was the perfect Luna, and she didn't even know it.

Damon and Talia chatted in a good mood while working on the chicken wings and Talia didn't realize at what point they finished.

"Should I order more?", Damon asked.

"Only if you are hungry."

Damon thought for a moment. "I think this is enough. I want to leave space for the food you prepared."

"You still want to eat it?"

"I will eat whatever you give me, kitten.", Damon said honestly.

Talia blushed and her heart swelled from warm and fuzzy emotions.

"Do you want something else?", Damon asked while pointing at the menu.

Talia wanted only one thing, to freeze time so that they can be like this, just the two of them, forever.

"No. I'm fine.", she responded and remembered one point that Damon brought up earlier. "About meeting your wolf... Can we do it in private? I would like to talk to him and also to see his true form. If he is willing to show me."

Damon released the breath he was holding. "Alright."

Damon knew that Talia will meet his wolf sooner or later, and his wolf promised to behave, but Damon was not sure how much he can trust the old guy because whenever Damon was not suppressing him, his fangs would come out when Talia was around, and Damon felt the need to mark her so that everyone knows she is his. It's not that Damon didn't want to mark Talia, but his wolf amplified that urge, and it was getting stronger by the day.

Damon froze when he saw Talia licking her fingers clean. That little action looked incredibly sexy and Damon imagined Talia licking his cock that was straining his pants.

The fact that she was oblivious to his arousal only made her more alluring.

"Kitten...", Damon called in a hoarse voice. "You should stop that, or I will jump on you right here."

Talia looked at him and her breath hitched. She didn't need to look down to know he was hard because she could recognize his heated gaze from a mile away.

"What did I do?", Talia squeaked.

A suppressed groan formed in Damon's throat, and he shook his head. She will be the end of him. Seductress.

Damon's hand landed at the back of Talia's head, and he pulled her closer for a toe-curling kiss. And only one kiss was not enough.

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Damon and Talia returned to the packhouse, and Talia was delighted to see that plates with food were in the oven that was set to keep the temperature on warm.

The two of them ate and Talia was overjoyed to see that Damon cleaned the plate.

She didn't know that was a different batch of food and not the one she prepared personally.

Damon didn't think it mattered who prepared the food because the only thing important was Talia's smile that lit up his life.

"Thank you, kitten. It was delicious.", Damon said while helping Talia keep used plates and utensils in the sink. "I hope you will cook for me again, when you have time."

Talia's eyes lit up. "Really? You mean it?"

"I told you, I don't lie.", Damon responded matter-of-factly, and he relished the feeling of Talia's joy that washed over him.

Damon was in awe to see how little Talia needed to be happy, just like now.

'Thanks, Steph, for re-doing the food', Damon mind-linked Stephanie.

'You are welcome.'

'I know that Lisa was not home for a while, but with Talia here, things are different. I will talk to Lisa.'

Damon was not very close to Lisa, but a long time ago, their relationship was something like siblings. Considering that Lisa will probably be staying in the packhouse for some time, Damon wanted to set things straight and avoid future misunderstandings.

Damon loved to see Talia's confidence growing over time, but he was aware it was still fragile.

'Maybe you should give Lisa a day or two.', Stephanie suggested. 'She is not in the best mood right now.'

'Alright.'

Damon didn't think much about it. He assumed that Lisa's bad mood was related to Tony. He knew that hysteric women can be easily triggered and throw tantrums.

Damon didn't know that Lisa's latest tantrum was related to Talia because Lisa thought that her punishment of re-making food and being reprimanded was all Talia's fault.

With their bellies full, Damon and Talia went to the study to work on their tasks.

Talia was at her desk, focused on the science lesson related to energy sources when Maya entered the study.

Talia saw that Maya came to talk to Damon, so she mentally disconnected and returned her attention to studying. She really wanted to cram all that in record time and graduate, so that Damon can be proud of her.

"They are here.", Maya told Damon.

"Are you sure you got the right people?"

"I traced the rumors and confirmed that these two were bragging how they put one of your admirers in place.", Maya responded.

"Alright. Bring them in."

Maya left the study and a minute later returned with two figures trailing after her. A second later, Caden came in also, and he stood with Maya on the side, while two women stood in front of Damon's desk.

The newcomers were Ashley and Heather, the two women who approached Talia in front of the library on the previous day.

"Alpha Damon", Ashley and Heather greeted in unison and bowed their heads in submission.

From the moment the door opened, their eyes gravitated toward the left where Damon was, and they didn't notice a second desk on the right with Talia behind it.

Ashley and Heather stood in attention behind two chairs while wondering why they were summoned by the Alpha.

Maya didn't tell them why Alpha wanted to see them, and neither of them dared to remind him of the steamy encounter they shared a few years ago, but secretly, they hoped that Alpha Damon remembers it. Maybe that's why he called them?

"Do you know why you are here?", Damon asked.

Two women exchanged glances and then shook their heads.

"No, Alpha."

Damon gestured for them to sit on chairs that were opposite him, and both Ashley's and Heather's faces lit up with a smile. Permission to sit in front of an Alpha is a big deal.

"I heard that yesterday you encountered a woman in front of the library. Do you mind telling me about it?"

Talia really didn't want to listen in, but she was already there, and her ears perked up. Did Damon mention yesterday and the library?

Talia glanced to the side, and she saw the backs of two females with blonde hair. Why did those two back-images filled with shiny hair resonate with the location of the library?

Emboldened by Damon's friendly demeanor, Ashley responded.

"We saw a woman lingering in front of the library and she looked familiar."

Talia's brows came together when she recognized the voice, and she listened as Ashley continued.

"When we realized she was the person from the magazine, we decided to approach her and introduce ourselves. She is the one who accompanied our Alpha to the event at the Lightclaw pack, and she was obviously a new face, so we wanted to extend our welcome. We didn't expect that she will be hostile."

Damon's eyebrows shoot up. "Hostile?" He imagined his kitten with her claws out, and the mental image was adorable.

Heather responded, "She refused to tell us anything about her background, and she pretended like she is a big deal."

Ashley added, "And she even insinuated that she has some secret technique to ensnare you..."