

Alphas Bride 221

Chapter 221 - Cassandra's Prophecy

~ The Midnight Guardians pack ~

"Come in...", Axel called when he heard a knock on the door of his room, and he stood up to welcome the regal middle-aged woman who appeared when the door opened.

"Mother. What brings you here?"

Sophia Lightrider is Axel's mother and one of the two Alphas who are ruling the Midnight Guardians pack. The other Alpha is her mate, Axel's father, Isaac Lightrider.

Sophia is focused on the internal affairs of the pack, while Isaac is dealing with external relationships, but other than this division of their focus, Sophia and Isaac are equals.

Having two Alphas is not the only thing that is differentiating the Midnight Guardians pack from others.

Their location and size are kept a secret from other packs and except for a few members who are authorized to venture into the outside world, other members of the Midnight Guardians pack stay within their borders.

How can they maintain this uncertainty about their whereabouts? Only a handful of people know how to reach the Midnight Guardians pack, as everyone else is put to a sleep-like trance while they are being led through a maze of caverns and passages their ancestors left behind. The territory of the Midnight Guardians pack is like a separate dimension and there is ancient magic that casts illusions and unless one knows where and how to reach the entrance, they will pass by it without noticing anything.

This contributed to various stories related to this pack, some more fantastic than the others, but no one can deny that this pack is concealing secrets.

There are people who believe that they are self-isolating because they are outdated, and some believe they are hiding immense treasures, while others spread tales how members of the Midnight Guardians pack mixed their bloodline with witches and faes, and that they have fantastic powers.

Well, there is no smoke without fire, so some of those rumors have specs of truth.

Most of the members of the Midnight Guardians pack will find their mates within their pack, but the ones who don't are allowed to venture into the outside world. Once the mate is found, they will return to the pack and stay there. No one lives outside; this is one of the practices that contributed to the mystery surrounding this pack and whoever snooped around in search for the Midnight Guardians pack, disappeared without a trace.

"Your father told me that you are leaving again.", Alpha Sophia said with a small frown of concern on her face while looking at her son.

"Yes. Tomorrow. Kai and Tyler are coming with me."

"Is your destination the Dark Howlers pack?"

Axel exhaled helplessly. "Why are you asking if you know?"

"I guess I am trying to see if you thought about the consequences of getting too close to outsiders."

Axel puffed his cheeks. "Yes, mother. I know. But we can't stay isolated completely. Besides, Alpha Damon is different. Ask father. As long as we are not a threat to his pack, he won't bother with us."

Sophia narrowed her eyes at Axel. "You are not going for Alpha Damon. It's that girl."

"THAT girl is called Talia. I told you about her. Aren't you curious?", Axel asked and paused to give his mother time to respond, but seeing that she only pursed her lips, he knew that she doesn't approve. "She might be one of us, mother. She might be..."

"Enough!", Sophia snapped. "If she is who you think she is, it's better to leave her there. Stay away from her and pretend you didn't notice her. She will find a man if she didn't already, and as long as he is not her mate, her powers will not awaken."

Axel shook his head in disapproval. "I can't believe you."

"You don't need to believe me, but I hope you will believe in Cassandra's prophecy."

Axel pressed his lips into a line. The whole Midnight Guardians pack knows about the prophecy that Cassandra, the pack seer, made several decades ago.

It was about a child of their pack that will be born on the night of a full moon with a destiny so great that even Selena, the Moon Goddess will be present and bless the child.

What only a few people know is the second part of the prophecy that Axel discovered accidentally.

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A little background first...

As the future Alpha of the Midnight Guardians, Axel was training and learning from his early teens.

Before being allowed to venture into the world outside their pack, Axel got access to various confidential documents.

There, among many records, Axel read a document describing a night when an epic storm came suddenly, bringing heavy clouds that covered the full moon, but when the cries of an infant girl filled the space, clouds parted and moon rays fell on the child, making it look like she was glowing in silvery light. The child's cries morphed into giggles and the clouds vanished faster than they came, revealing the moonless starry sky.

Axel was not sure why this information was with the top-secret files of the pack. There were no names or dates mentioned and it looked like it came from one of the stories that elders are telling to children around bonfires. But then Axel found another handwriting on the back of the same paper which contained information about Cassandra's prophecy, revealing that the child gained not only Selena's blessings, but part of the Goddess's power as well, and whoever knows about her true nature will be consumed with greed and bring calamity.

Naturally, Axel remembered the decades-old prophecy, and his interest was piqued. He went to his parents to see if his hunch was correct. Was that the same child? Is there more information? The expressions of his parents told him that he was not supposed to find out about it at all.

"I am the future Alpha of this pack", Axel tried to reason with them. "I need to know what happened. Who is this child? Is she still in this pack?"

"We don't know, and it's better to keep it like that...", his parents responded. "For everyone's safety."

Axel was not sure if he should believe them. Both Isaac and Sophia are powerful Alphas, each with their own mystical powers. How can they not know where this child is?

If this child got powers from the Moon Goddess, she might be vulnerable and potentially dangerous.

Can she see the future, like their seer Cassandra, or move objects at will, control the elements, fly, turn invisible, read minds, or explode things? Anything is possible.

Actually, every member of the Midnight Guardians pack has a supernatural ability that awakens only after one finds his (or her) fated mate.

In order to preserve their magical lineage, they are all sworn to celibacy until they find their fated mates because mates of choice won't awaken the mysterious abilities, and their offspring won't have it either.

Old records also say that when one gives their first time to a non-mate, they will lose their chance to awaken their ability. No one is willing to give in to temptation and test this theory, as every member of the Midnight Guardians pack is proud of their lineage, and they want to preserve it, so they chose celibacy.

This information is one of the most guarded secrets because if others find out about it, they will start catching stray members of the Midnight Guardians pack to use them for their benefit or to experiment on them.

That's why only unmated members of the Midnight Guardians pack are allowed to go outside of the pack. If they are captured, they will be just like any other regular werewolves, and this includes Axel as well.

Without his mate, Axel's powers are dormant, and he is not qualified to take over as the next Alpha.

Alpha Sophia and Alpha Isaac both told Axel to give up on finding this person, but Axel was unable to let go of the hope that he will find her.

Axel went to Cassandra to get more information, and she performed her ritual during which she told him two things among a bunch of gibberish.

The first thing that Axel understood was that the person in question is not within the territory of the Midnight Guardians pack, and second, the Moon Goddess takes care of her children and gives them what they need.

Cassandra's power is to see glimpses of the future, but her visions are often blurry and open to interpretation.

Axel left Cassandra's house with more questions than answers.

The information that the person is outside their territory only meant that his scope of search exploded exponentially, and it also confirmed that someone within the pack took the child away because outsiders can't come and go as they please.

The second part of Cassandra's words related to the Moon Goddess were cryptic and not useful at all. But it also gave Axel hope that the mystery person is alive, and out there... somewhere.

Axel had no idea how or where to search because he didn't know what's her name or how she looks like.

When he saw Talia, Axel felt something. A small whisper in the back of his mind increased when he found out that Talia's background is uncertain, and he remembered the prophecy. Is she the one?

Chapter 222 - Too Many Thoughts

~ the Midnight Guardians pack ~

Axel looked at his mother. "Are you going to stop me from going there?"

Sophia wanted to stop him, but she knew that if she stops him now, he will find a way to go there later. Axel's stubbornness is one of his main traits.

"No.", she said. "I came only to confirm that you know what you are doing."

"I am doing what I believe is right. I can't ignore my instincts without regretting it." Axel paused and looked at his mother deeply. "If Talia is the one from Cassandra's prophecy, she has no idea who she is. It was one thing when Talia was an unknown she-wolf, but now she is in a magazine, next to Alpha Damon and many eyes are on her. For some reason, Alpha Damon is protecting her, and I want to confirm his motives. Based on the documents, she came of age recently. If her powers awaken, she

won't have anyone to guide her. Didn't you teach me that every pack member is precious, and no one gets left behind?"

Sophia exhaled helplessly. "That ideal sounds wonderful, but sometimes an Alpha needs to make tough decisions because the reality is that we can't keep everyone safe. If people connect her with our pack everything we tried to protect for centuries will be for naught."

"I won't implicate the pack and if things go wrong, I will bear the responsibility."

"Be careful, Axel.", Sophia said sternly. "You say that you won't implicate our pack, but if something happens to you, our pack will suffer. Do you think that your father and I will stay idle if you are in danger?"

Axel grinned. "No pressure, eh?"

Axel knew that his parents are forced to look at the bigger picture, and he should do the same, but in this case, their interpretation of that big picture was different.

As the future Alpha of the Midnight Guardians pack, it's his duty to take care of his pack members, especially the ones who are outside the pack. He didn't know if Talia is that missing child from the prophecy, but he was determined to investigate.

After giving him the last few warnings, Sophia left Axel and went to join her mate in the study.

Without a word, she stood in front of a closed window and gazed into the distance where the dense forest met the dark sky full of stars.

"He is still going?", Alpha Isaac asked.

It was obvious that Sophia was not in a good mood.

Sophia nodded faintly before responding, "He is stubborn."

"Like his mother."

Sophia shot him a side-glance, but her lips curved into a faint smile. She liked when people noticed traces of her in Axel.

A second later, Sophia let out a long sigh. "Do you think we made a mistake by giving the girl away?"

"At that time, we did what we thought it's best for everyone.", Isaac said.

"And now? Do you still think it's best?"

Isaac stood up from his seat and in the next instant, he was behind Sophia, wrapping her in his embrace and pulling her to lean on his chest as his silvery after-image disappeared from behind his desk.

Sophia always loved when Isaac used his teleportation to get close to her, but this time she didn't react, which told him she was really upset.

"I think that there is no point in dwelling on what's already done.", Isaac said. "You heard Axel. Alpha Damon is protecting the girl and if Axel confirms that she is the one and has no powers, our plan worked. There is no way that she caught Alpha's attention and he didn't touch her."

Sophia hummed in agreement and leaned into her mate's embrace.

Over the years, while collaborating with other packs, Alpha Isaac kept his eyes and ears open, and no one mentioned any she-wolf with abnormalities.

As the time passed, they believed that the child either perished or that maybe she found a man which made her lose the potential of awakening her powers, and also nullifying the part of the prophecy that included greed and calamity.

Alpha Sophia and Alpha Isaac didn't want to give the child away, but if she grew up in the Midnight Guardians pack, even without knowing that she is the child from the prophecy, she would maintain her purity until she found her mate, just like every other pack member, and once her powers awaken, it will be impossible to keep her identity a secret.

When they heard some Elders whispering about using the child to establish the Midnight Guardians pack as the ruler among all other packs, Alpha Sophia and Alpha Isaac decided.

By letting her grow up in the outside world, Sophia and Isaac hoped that the child will become like any other she-wolf and that she will succumb to the licentious nature of their kind. In that way, no one will covet her powers and she will be able to live a normal life.

And that man promised to take good care of her.

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~ The Dark Howlers pack ~

The packhouse of the Dark Howlers pack was never noisy, but that morning was particularly peaceful with only sounds being chirps of the birds from outside and two heartbeats that followed the same rhythm.

Everything smelled of the forest and the dark chocolate, and the fresh breeze that was coming in through the open double door of the balcony brought in the faint scent of flowers from the garden. On top of all that, there was a lingering scent of arousal and bodily liquids that made Talia blush as scandalous mental images flashed in front of her closed eyes.

Talia knew that warm body next to her was Damon, and she didn't mind the strong arms that shackled her to stick close to him.

Last night started in the closet and at some point, the two of them moved to the bed where they spent the night that Talia could describe with one word, magical.

Talia counted Damon's slow and even breaths before looking up to see that Damon's eyes were closed. Was he still sleeping? That was rare because Damon would always wake up before her.

Talia took this opportunity to silently admire his chiseled features. Strong jaw, straight nose, kissable full lips... actually, every part of him was kissable. And lickable.

Damon's expression was relaxed and there was a hint of a content smile like he was dreaming something pleasant.

Talia's sight drifted lower and paused at Damon's Adam's apple before it continued over his pecs and the majestic landscape of his abs.

How can a man be so handsome? And this was not just any man. This was Damon Blake, Alpha of the Dark Howlers pack, Alpha who can be scary and powerful and domineering and gentle and caring... and he was her mate. Unbelievable. She was never this happy.

Talia's only fear was that this was a dream or a figment of her imagination and that she will wake up to a reality where she was still stuck in the attic of the Red Moon pack.

She let out a long breath. If this was a dream, she didn't want to wake up. Ever.

Talia hugged Damon and stuck to him as close as she could, hoping that they will merge into one and never separate.

Yes, they merged last night many times, and Damon was right, it was several folds better with the sparks, to the point that Talia thought she might pass out while she repeatedly fell apart and came

together with pieces of Damon embedded into her soul as her new normal, but she needed more of Damon. Will it ever be enough?

Talia's neck still didn't have Damon's mark and Talia was anxious about it. She knew that he wanted to mark her, but she could also feel his restraint every time his fangs grazed her neck.

Will it hurt? What if people target her?

Damon's mark will be an invitation for various people to come at her, from Damon's wannabe brides to Damon's enemies.

What if she bumps into another group of rogues? And what if this second group is actually looking for her?

For the first time, Talia wished strength, so that she can defend herself. She didn't want to allow Damon to end up in danger again because she is weak.

"That's too many thoughts for this early in the morning, kitten...", Damon murmured in a deep drowsy voice. He chuckled when she looked up at him with her honeyed eyes full of unspoken questions.

"I can feel your emotions. They are all over the place."

Talia's expression flashed with the realization that Damon can see through her, even when he is not looking at her.

"Were you able to feel my emotions from the beginning?", she asked.

Damon thought for a moment before responding, "I'm not sure when it started. It was very faint at first and I would often wonder what's going on, but as our bond strengthened I realized that those are your emotions."

Before Talia could say anything else, Damon turned sideways and hugged her tightly, pressing her against his body. "If you have this much energy to think, maybe I didn't tire you out enough last night. Hm?"

Chapter 223 - Difficulties In Getting Out Of Bed [Bonus]

Talia was not sure how to respond to Damon's scandalous remarks which insinuated that they should indulge in carnal pleasures, and his erection pressing on her stomach made her flustered, so she buried her face in his chest and decided to stay silent.

"Hmm...", a low hum of approval sounded from the back of his throat. "That's better. Arousal. I like it."

"Can you stop talking?", Talia squeaked.

Yes, she was aroused because they were both naked in bed and the sparks flared wherever they touched, but him calling her out like that was embarrassing.

"OK. I will stop talking to you.", Damon said and slid lower until his face was in line with her breasts. He kissed each of them slowly, licking and sucking while enjoying Talia's moans and her fisting his hair, and he stopped when both of her nipples stood taut in attention.

"Good morning, my darlings. How are you today?"

It took Talia a moment to realize that he was talking to her breasts, and she burst into giggles. "What are you doing?"

"I'm saying 'hi' to my two out of three new best friends.", Damon responded matter-of-factly. "Since you don't want to talk to me, I have options."

Talia was not sure if she should laugh or cry. The playful Damon was here, and she didn't know how to handle him. But one thing stood out. "Two out of three?"

His smug expression told her that she fell into a trap. He was waiting for this.

"The third one is also eager for her good morning greetings", Damon said and swiftly moved lower, placing himself between Talia's legs with his face only a few inches above her intimate bush. "Hello, my dear. Did you miss me?"

Talia's mouth was open in a silent scream when he latched his mouth around her clit and started sucking without any warning and ecstatic quivers shook her body as colors exploded in front of her closed eyes. It was a good morning.

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Sometime later...

Damon shuddered in his release as he shot his seed deep inside Talia who clawed his back while cursing profanities mixed in with his name... beautiful music to Damon's ears.

Their ragged breathing was oddly in sync.

Damon was supporting his weight on his elbows, his body lightly pressing on Talia's, allowing for those addictive sparks to course through both of them.

That was their third time making love that morning, and as much as they were sated every time, it took them only a minute to crave for more of each other.

Talia blinked her eyes in focus to see Damon's handsome face hovering above hers.

His skin was glistening from sweat and several unruly strands stuck to his forehead, but what got her attention were Damon's icy-blue eyes that smiled at her.

Even without prying into his emotions, Talia knew that he was happy, and she was happy as well.

"I could do this all day, kitten...", Damon murmured into her lips before giving her a long slow kiss that made her toes curl. "Actually, I want to spend the rest of my life inside you. Just. Like. This."

"It's almost time for breakfast.", Talia said. "And there is a lot of work."

"We can eat here, and Caden and Maya can handle work.", Damon was quick to find a solution.

"Tony and Kalina will arrive today", Talia reminded him. Others will trickle in later in the evening and tomorrow morning, but Tony and Kalina are set to arrive first with their group in the afternoon.

Damon frowned a bit. "Caden and Maya can handle them."

Talia stifled a laugh and put her palm on his cheek. "When we are done with guests, let's go on that vacation. Just the two of us."

Damon approved. "Alright."

He already had a spot in his mind. A secluded cabin in the forest, with a lake nearby, and it's not far, just how Talia specified. As a big bonus, he owns it so there won't be any scheduling issues, and they can stay as long as they want. If Damon can pick, they would stay there forever, just the two of them.

Damon glanced at the bedside clock and Talia could guess that he was thinking if they have time for another round of lovemaking.

"We need to get ready.", Talia said shyly. "Can you..." She glanced down where their bodies connected. He was still inside her.

Damon smirked and Talia's eyes widened when she felt his erection moving inside her even though his hips stayed in place. She didn't know that he can make his cock twitch just like that.

"Are you sure you want to get ready?", Damon asked in a husky voice and his heated gaze told her he wanted more of her. It was never enough.

Talia inhaled a shaky breath. Of course, she didn't want to get ready, but... "We can't spend the whole day in bed." Not today, at least.

Damon pouted even though he knew she was right. He was the Alpha of the largest pack in North America, and as much as he enjoyed his time with Talia, he couldn't neglect his duties.

Reluctantly, Damon moved to lay on the bed next to Talia.

When he pulled out, Talia felt empty and she really wanted him to get back in there, but she suppressed those urges.

Talia thought that Damon will get out of the bed, but he ended up spooning her from behind.

"Let me hold you like this for a minute, kitten", he spoke into her hair and Talia responded with a nod. Her Alpha wanted to cuddle and she would never deny him that.

Talia attempted to relax, but how can she relax when his erection was poking her behind?

Damon took a deep breath and focused on the heavenly sensation of Talia's body pressing against his, and on the delicious sparks that came with that contact.

Last night and that morning were proof he will never get enough of Talia. Every time was better than the previous one. She was the best thing that ever happened to him, and he decided to never let her out of his visual range. In that way, he will protect her from rogues and any women who have silly ideas and that reminded him...

"I spoke to Lisa last night."

Talia was alerted. "You did?"

Damon kissed the back of Talia's head. "If anyone is giving you hard time, I want to know about it. Why didn't you tell me?"

Talia turned to face him. "Lisa was not giving me a hard time."

Damon cocked an eyebrow at Talia. "And why did you go into the forest yesterday?"

"She is just hurt because Tony..."

"And that doesn't give her the right to hurt you or anyone else.", Damon interrupted Talia sternly. Seeing Talia's expression dropping, Damon rubbed her back gently and softened his voice. "I'm not blaming you. I only wish that you rely on me. Now you know that we are mates. Allow me to protect you. For the last decade, I am fighting for this pack, but that doesn't mean a damn thing if I can't protect you."

Talia looked at Damon as guilt swelled inside her.

"I know that Lisa's words were not directed at me. She was just projecting her anger.", Talia said in her defense. "Yes, I should have told you, and yes, I was supposed to say something back to her and not allow her to vent on me, but she was only talking, and I didn't want to make things awkward because this is her home."

"Wrong. This is your home, kitten. Lisa only lives here and if she can't follow the rules, we will make different arrangements for her."

Different arrangements included things like Lisa moving to a different house, an apartment, or a dungeon, and it didn't exclude the possibility of kicking Lisa out of the pack which Damon will do without flinching if Lisa doesn't get off Talia's case.

Damon already gave Lisa a verbal warning which is more than he did for any other offender.

Chapter 224 - Additional Guests

Talia loved that Damon spoke like she belongs here, but Talia didn't want Lisa to be kicked out from the packhouse where she grew up. Even if they disregard Lisa, what about Stephanie?

"Lisa is just hurt, and her energy is misdirected. If she finds something to keep her mind busy until she meets her mate, I'm sure that Lisa will forget about Tony and turn into the cheery girl everyone remembers."

Damon's heart swelled at Talia's benevolence. She is an amazing Luna without trying.

"I know you mean well, but you can't force people to accept your help against their will.", Damon said. "Stephanie is talking to Lisa since the news about Tony finding his mate started spreading. I spoke to Lisa, and as of last night... I don't think it's working."

Damon was not blind. He could see that his words went over Lisa's head and that her defiance only grew. He left with the hope that Lisa understood Talia is not someone Lisa can touch because messing with Talia means provoking Damon. There was also the possibility that Stephanie will handle her daughter because if Damon does it, no one will like the outcome.

Regardless of how Lisa ends up, Damon wanted to assure Talia that he's got her back. "I won't ask you to retaliate against Lisa, but I don't want you to stay passive either. You are Talia Blake, the future Luna of the Dark Howlers pack, my mate, and you are no one's punching bag."

Talia's lips lifted into a smile that reached her eyes. Damon's emotions reinforced his words and Talia never felt so accepted. He really was her home and by his side, she felt a sense of belonging.

Talia inched closer and pecked his lips once, twice... and then her arms snaked around his neck, and she started grinding herself against his erection.

"What about getting ready? Breakfast?", Damon asked between kisses while his hands already roamed over her naked form.

Talia looked at him with eyes that were clouding with lust. "Let's make it quick."

Damon grinned and pounced on Talia like they didn't make love three times already since waking up and it was not even eight o'clock in the morning.

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Later that morning...

Damon and Talia were in the study, both busy with their respective tasks when Talia's phone rang.

Talia's eyes lit up when she saw the caller's ID. "It's Kalina. I will take it outside."

Damon wanted to tell Talia to stay in his visual range, but she was already in the hallway, and he heard her say, "Hi Lina, give me a minute to reach a spot from where we can talk. I don't want to disturb Damon..."

With a few strokes on Damon's keyboard, the monitor on his desk showed the video feed from a security camera, and he could see Talia entering the living room.

He didn't want to spy on Talia, but he needed to confirm that she was safe. His previous experiences confirmed that whenever Talia was not in his sight, she ended up in some kind of trouble.

Damon gazed at the video feed that came without a sound, and he smiled helplessly while remembering how from the day they met, Talia was often in some kind of predicament. She bumped her head into the fridge when he startled her, and then she fell off the bed, fell asleep in the forest, ah... all of those were sweet memories, and Damon was looking forward to making many more. Hopefully, without any men sticking to her.

In the living room...

Talia made herself comfortable on the sofa before asking Kalina, "Do you have some last-minute instructions for me? Should the pillows be double-fluffed? Or do you want me to crank up the AC?"

Based on Talia's calculations, Tony and Kalina should be on their way if they were driving, unless they were coming with a plane.

"Sorry, Lia, but we might need to postpone our plans for a few days."

Talia's playful mood disappeared in an instant. "Eh? What happened?"

"My sister is coming for a visit. She got a break in her schedule and said that she wants to see me and meet Tony. It was sudden and she will arrive today and stay no longer than three days. Tony said that he will stay a bit to meet her and then he will resume with his schedule. The moment my sister leaves, I will head to the Dark Howlers pack."

Talia didn't think that is a problem. Kalina's sister means one extra bedroom, and it can be ready within an hour. "Bring her with you."

"Really? Is that OK?"

"Sure. I will give you time to bond, don't worry. The guys have their schedule, and we will do something fun. Instead of three of us, it will be four of us." Maya said that she will join if she can, and knowing that Maya is always busy, Talia didn't count much on her.

"About that...", Kalina said and paused. "Luna Alicia insists that I bring some Omegas with me, and I still didn't figure out how to shake them off."

Talia couldn't believe this. "Are you making things up so that you don't come here?"

"No, no.", Kalina was quick to say. "You know that I'm looking forward to this. Luna Alicia was hinting that I should bring someone to serve me, but I brushed it off, thinking that it's just a suggestion. I don't need anyone to serve me. I survived on my own so far just fine. But then today over breakfast she asked me if I picked Omegas who will accompany me or if she should pick for me." Kalina huffed in frustration. "This is not about serving me, but about having someone keep an eye on me so that they can report to Luna Alicia and Alpha Magnus..."

Talia listened to her friend's grievances, and she wondered how to help her. These were Kalina's family affairs and Talia already knew that Kalina is struggling to feel comfortable in the Lightclaw pack and that Tony's parents are overbearing.

It didn't sound like Kalina will postpone her visit because of Omegas, but she was not happy that she will be monitored. Who would be?

Talia got an idea. "If you don't know which Omegas to accompany you, I have a suggestion."

"You do?"

"When I was there, two Omegas helped me get ready. They were professional and if you take them, it shouldn't be a problem. No matter what Luna Alicia has on her mind, we can find something to keep them occupied. Ivy and Lily..."

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Talia returned to the study, satisfied with the outcome.

She sat in her chair, in front of the laptop that had on its screen paused the educational video, and thought about her conversation with Kalina.

"Did something good happen?", Damon asked when he saw Talia's smile.

Talia was not sure if that was good or not, but... "Tony's and Kalina's party increased by three. Kalina's sister will join them and two Omegas. That's not a problem, is it?" Talia ended with a question, even though she knew the answer.

"No. It's not a problem.", Damon confirmed.

Talia bobbed her head happily. "Omegas will stay in the common building. I will get Dawn and Zina to help them settle and they can be extra hands in the kitchen while Tony and Kalina are here."

Talia thought how this will work. In this way, those two Omegas will be nearby, but they won't breathe down Kalina's neck. Actually, Talia had a good impression of Ivy and Lily and she was confident that they won't make things awkward for Kalina. If Dawn and Zina are OK with entertaining two visiting Omegas, that would be perfect.

But before figuring out fun activities for Lily and Ivy... "We need another guestroom prepared on the second floor for Kalina's sister. I will talk to Steph about it." Stephanie is in charge of Omegas who are working in the packhouse, so it was normal for Talia to think about Stephanie.

"Steph is busy.", Damon said. "Maya can help you with arrangements for Omegas and ask Rose to set up an additional guestroom."

Talia felt a pang of dejection when Damon said that Stephanie is busy, and she guessed that it came from Damon. "Is everything OK with Steph?"

"It's fine.", Damon assured her before adding, "Steph and Lisa are settling in their new place."

Talia needed a moment to understand the meaning behind Damon's words. "They moved out of the packhouse?"

Chapter 225 - Talk About Superpowers

Seeing Talia's strange expression, Damon was quick to explain, "It was Steph's decision to move out of the packhouse. I don't know the details other than they moved earlier this morning. Maya assigned them a two-bedroom apartment in the common building where Omegas are staying, and a few warriors came to help them move their stuff in one go. Steph will still be in charge of the kitchen and perform her duties in the packhouse, as usual, but she asked for some time off so that they can settle in their new place. She will be back in time to prepare dinner. It's for the best, considering that Kalina is coming."

Talia knew that it was a good idea for Lisa to stay away from Kalina. If Lisa could say all those nasty things to Talia, who knows what she would say to Kalina? And there was a chance that Lisa would stir trouble with Tony.

Of course, sleeping in a different building didn't mean that Lisa won't approach them when she gets a chance. After all, there are many public areas and the packhouse itself is open to all pack members. But it meant that Lisa won't bump into Tony and Kalina accidentally, and Talia hoped that Lisa will have enough presence of mind not to stir trouble on purpose.

Talia was sad that Stephanie moved away.

"Are you feeling sorry for Lisa or for Steph?", Damon's voice came close from behind Talia, startling her from her thoughts. She didn't notice when he approached her.

"Both.", Talia responded.

Damon turned Talia's chair to face him, and he squatted so that they are on the same eye level. He knew that Talia is kindhearted, and he loved that part of her, but he didn't want her to be upset because of others.

Damon's goal in life was to make Talia happy, and how can he do that when random people are popping from all sides and troubling her?

"Don't feel sorry for them.", Damon said, unable to control his irritation. "Lisa can't let go of her imaginary throne and face the reality, and that's her problem. As for Steph, if she disciplined Lisa in time, they wouldn't be facing this issue now."

"I'm sure that Steph only thought about doing what's best for Lisa."

"Don't we all do what we believe it's best? We need to bear the consequences of our actions, regardless of how things end up."

Talia could feel the weight behind Damon's words.

As an Alpha, without his parents to guide him, Damon definitely made numerous decisions for himself and for the pack. Her heart ached at the thought that he was on his own during all that, and Talia knew what loneliness is. Yes, Damon had Stephanie, and Caden, and Maya, but at the end of the day, Damon was the one who faced the burn of his choices.

Talia slipped off her chair, pushing Damon to sit on the floor before she sat on his thighs and wrapped her arms around him.

"It's OK, Damon", Talia said while looking into his eyes lovingly. "I am here now, and we will do everything together."

Damon exhaled helplessly. How did this end up with Talia comforting him? But he had no intention of refuting her. There was only one thing he wanted to confirm. "Promise that you won't leave me, kitten."

"My words are still valid. As long as you treat me well, I will be by your side." Talia was painfully aware that those words were not completely true because with every moment they spent together she was falling for him more, and the mate bond only made things more difficult. Would she be able to leave him if he mistreats her? She was not sure, but she knew one thing... "I don't have strength or speed, and I have no confidence that my wolf will ever awaken, but I will do my best to support you."

Talia mentioning her lack of strength and speed reminded him. "Kitten, how much do you remember from what happened in the forest with rogues?"

Talia was not willing to talk about her encounter with rogues in the forest.

That incident reminded her that she acted without thinking while disregarding Damon's warnings, and as an outcome, Damon got hurt. She remembered how powerless she was when facing four guys with bad intentions. But Damon insisted, so Talia told him how she went into the forest and thought how they were patrol team from the Dark Howlers pack, and by the time she realized that something was wrong, they noticed her.

Damon listened to her every word attentively, especially the part when she spoke about his wolf appearing like a majestic savior, and he felt her anguish when she talked about the knife in his abdomen and gunshots.

"And what happened after that?", Damon urged her to continue.

"I'm not sure. I was petrified. They were shooting at you, and there was so much blood... I feared that I will lose you. If anything happened to you because of my stupidity, I would never forgive myself. I caused that mess, and I couldn't do a thing to stop it. I'm so sorry."

"There is nothing for you to feel sorry about.", Damon said gently. "Are you sure you didn't do anything to stop them?"

Talia's brows came together. "What do you mean?"

"I was losing blood and the wolfsbane was clouding my mind, but I'm quite confident I saw you moving like a lightning and in the next moment, two rogues flew backward like some invisible force propelled them backward violently."

Talia observed Damon intently, waiting for him to say more, and when he didn't, she realized... "You are saying, I did that?"

Damon nodded. "And not only that. When I reached the pack hospital, I had two stab wounds and three bullet wounds, all laced with wolfsbane. It all healed within hours, and I don't have a single scar. Your injuries healed also. Travis confirmed that both of us were in a sorry state when we arrived in the pack hospital, and after spending some time alone in the room, both of us were in perfect shape. My wolf said that you healed us, and I believe he was talking about more than just our mate bond."

Talia looked at Damon blankly and it took her some time to respond. "You are saying that I moved faster than normal, flung two grown-up werewolves, and I healed both of us?"

Damon let out a long breath. "I know it sounds crazy, but... It was just two of us, and I'm quite confident it was not me. I fought many times and if I have any superpowers, I would know about it."

Damon looked at Talia's confused expression and wondered if he spoke too soon about this. His plan was to discuss this with his wolf first and possibly get more information from the old guy, but he still ended up blurting it out.

"Let's not overthink it.", Damon tried to sound casual. "As I said, I was in a bad shape, and maybe I was seeing things. But just in case, pay attention to your body and if something strange happens around you. We will start from there."

Talia was anxious. "If something is wrong with me, shouldn't we talk to Doctor Travis or with the shaman Gideon?"

"No.", Damon was quick to reject the idea. "The more people know about this, the more we will be in danger. But no matter what, I want you to know that there is nothing wrong with you, kitten. Actually, I know that you are special."

"But... what if someone else has answers we are looking for?", Talia persisted.

"Let's keep this between us until we figure out what's going on. My wolf should be fine in a day or two, and maybe he can give us some answers."

Damon tightened his hold on her. "You are an amazing woman, and we will know the extent of your abilities when your wolf awakens. I hope you know that you can always rely on me."

Talia leaned into Damon's embrace, and she allowed his confidence to wash over her and dispel the anxiety that threatened to overtake her senses.

The more Talia thought about superpowers, the more she liked it.

"I hope you are right.", Talia said with sparkles in her eyes. "If I can really move quickly and have all those powers, I can keep you safe. Maybe I can learn to use them at will, so next time I will protect myself and you."

Damon chuckled and shook his head. "Silly kitten. I should be the one to keep you safe."

"How about we keep each other safe?"

Damon hummed in approval and inched closer to kiss her lips once, twice... his kisses were slow and full of longing and even though Talia felt his erection poking her bottom, his hands were firmly planted around her back and Talia could sense his need to confirm that she was in his arms and that she was not going anywhere.

Talia hugged him with all her might and responded to his kisses while immersing herself in Damon's presence that came with his solid embrace and her favorite scent of the forest as his addictive flavor of the dark chocolate seeped into her system.

Chapter 226 - The Honeymoon Phase

When Caden and Maya arrived in the study, they found Damon and Talia sitting on the floor, with their arms around each other and their lips connected as they exchanged light kisses. The two of them were obviously in their lovey-dovey bubble and didn't notice two newcomers.

"Should we come later?"

Caden's question got Damon's and Talia's attention and Talia scrambled up on her feet.

Talia's face was on fire, and she quickly turned away from the door while pretending to smoothen out the non-existing creases on her shirt.

Damon wanted to tell them that they should come later, but he knew that no matter when Caden and Maya came, they would interrupt them.

"This is fine", Damon responded while standing up. "I want to double-check the training plans for Tony and his men, and Talia needs Maya."

"How about lunch in one of the fine restaurants Darkbourne has to offer?", Maya suggested. "With Steph being away, our options are to eat out or make something ourselves."

"I don't mind preparing sandwiches for everyone.", Talia volunteered. With her limited experience in the kitchen, Talia was not confident in cooking something on her own, but sandwiches shouldn't be a problem. When she saw Maya's sour look, Talia explained, "We are all busy with last-minute preparations before guests arrive. I will make food and save time for everyone."

Maya was looking forward to lunch in the restaurant with Caden. Damon and Talia would be a bonus company if they want to join. Considering that most of the time they eat in the packhouse, and for lunch they grab something quick, eating in a restaurant leisurely would be novel.

But Maya knew that Talia had a valid point, so she gave up on the restaurant idea. "How can I allow my future Luna to work in the kitchen and prepare food for me? I will help you. It will be done faster."

Talia blinked. It took her a moment to remember that Maya and Caden know about her and Damon being mates. "I didn't know that being Luna impacts what I can do. My hands are still capable of cutting bread and toasting it."

Damon chuckled and moved to give Talia a light kiss on the lips that were swollen from all the previous kissing.

"And that's why you will be an amazing Luna.", Damon said and kissed her again before moving away with, "Let's deal with pressing matters first. As soon as we finish, we can relax." Damon beckoned Caden to come to his desk.

Maya approached Talia who went down to their business by explaining that there will be three extra guests, one for the packhouse, and two for the common building where Omegas are staying.

Maya quickly reached out to Rose with mind-link, instructing her to get another bedroom ready as soon as possible, and then they focused on settling down two Omegas.

"It would be good if Ivy and Lily can be close to where Dawn and Zina are. And as far away as possible from Lisa." Talia didn't want to take any risks.

If Lisa recognizes Ivy and Lily, who knows what might happen?

Maya thought for a moment before responding. "I think we can do that. But there are several buildings for Omegas and I'm not sure where Dawn and Zina are staying. I should get my laptop to pull out the list of tenants per each building."

"That should be recorded somewhere, right?", Talia asked. "We can access from my laptop."

Maya leaned over Talia and on Talia's laptop navigated to some file shares. "I don't think you have permission to see those. Alpha Damon needs to give you access."

"Remind me to do that later.", Damon said from his desk. "I'm going with Caden to check the additions to the training grounds, and we will be back in half an hour, tops. Until then, you can use my computer."

"Are you sure that's fine?", Talia asked Damon. She was nervous about using his computer. What if she messes up something?

"Of course, it's fine.", Damon assured her. "Nothing is off-limits for you, kitten."

Talia's eyes widened in shock. Did he just call her, kitten, in front of Maya and Caden? Ah! He did!

Luckily, Maya and Caden didn't react. Being lovey-dovey in private was one thing, but in front of others, it was overwhelming, and Talia hoped that Damon won't initiate public displays of affection when guests are present.

Damon gave Talia a few quick kisses before walking out of the study with Caden.

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"Relax and enjoy this honeymoon phase, Talia.", Maya said with a big smile on her face when it was just the two of them in the study.

Honeymoon phase? "Are you saying this will be over?"

"I don't know how long this will last, but eventually, the honeymoon phase will pass."

Talia had to ask, "And what happens when it's over?"

Maya's lips lifted into a wicked smile. "Then it's the marriage phase. Baby-making. Considering that Damon is an Alpha, his urge to extend his bloodline will be in overdrive and you probably won't come out of bed until you confirm pregnancy."

Maya burst into a fit of laughter when she saw Talia's expression. It was comical.

Talia was hoping that Maya was joking. Did she insinuate that Damon's libido will increase? Can she handle more than what he is giving her now?

Talia pressed her legs together. Why was her body heating up? This would be bad timing to get aroused!

"Stop teasing me!", Talia snapped. "Let's deal with accommodations for guests and then we can make sandwiches. Damon said they will be back in half an hour, and that will pass in no time."

Maya and Talia settled in front of Damon's computer, and Maya navigated to the share where files about the housing situation are.

"Maya?", Talia called. "Do you think it's fine for Steph to move away?"

Maya's movements halted and she wondered how much Damon told Talia. Maya didn't want to blurt out unnecessary information, so she kept her answer generic. "Steph did what she thought was the best solution for the given situation. Lisa is difficult. Steph didn't want to risk things escalating if Lisa flares in front of our guests." Or if she goes after Talia again.

Talia's brows furrowed in concern. "I fear that Steph will hate me. She lived here for a long time and now..."

"Don't worry about it.", Maya interrupted Talia. "Steph was an Omega before she found her mate. Caden told me that after Steph got marked, the Beta gene didn't transfer on her which made Steph stronger than an Omega, but not strong enough to get a rank. Yes, she lived in the packhouse, but only in order to accompany her mate. After Damon's parents perished, together with Steph's mate, she stayed here to help Damon in managing the packhouse. Steph told me more than once that she looks forward to the moment when Damon finds his Luna and Steph can hand over packhouse duties."

"But Steph doesn't know that Damon and I are... mates.", Talia said this last word with difficulty. It was strange to say it aloud.

"She doesn't need to know you are mates.", Maya said with amusement in her voice. "It's enough to see that you are reliable and that Alpha Damon trusts you. Now, stop overthinking because eventually, Lisa

will get over it, guests will leave, and if Steph wants, I'm sure she can return to the packhouse. This situation is not necessarily permanent. Let's look at the accommodations before we go and whip up some tasty sandwiches for our boys."

Talia knew that Maya was right, but she still felt guilty. How can she look Stephanie in the eyes? Damon and Maya made it sound like Stephanie and Lisa moved because Tony and Kalina are visiting, and it's not like that's false, but Talia also knew that another factor was the friction between her and Lisa.

Talia forced herself to focus on the files that Maya was opening. There were floorplans with information on the rooms, square footage, amenities, and who is occupying the space. It was very detailed and in no time they picked a two-bedroom apartment that was on one floor below Dawn's and Zina's apartments. Luckily, that was in a separate building from where Stephanie and Lisa are living.

Maya's eyes lost focus as she instructed someone to tidy up that apartment so that it's ready for the guests.

"You maintain this?", Talia asked to what Maya smiled smugly.

"For now.", Maya responded. "As a Luna, you will take over these. I will help you until you find your assistants."

Panic swelled within Talia. "Won't you assist me?" Somehow, Talia imagined that Maya will be by her side. Maya is smart, confident, and knowledgeable about everything, and if Talia needs to do any of Maya's duties, she will definitely mess up big time.

Maya was not sure how to answer this. "I will assist you, but I would like to shrink my duties so that I can focus more on Caden. We were thinking about starting a family, but there was never the right time for it because we are both very busy."

Chapter 227 - Folder With Evidence

Talia was silent, so Maya continued her explanation.

"Normally a council of Elders would handle most of the pack management. And in the pack as large as this one, Alpha would have his Beta and Gamma and other people who are in charge of specific matters, while Luna will have her helpers. As the future Luna, you should surround yourself with people you trust because they will know not only about the pack but about you as well. In case you are not available, someone will act in your place. It will be better if that is a person you picked than someone random who is power-hungry and potentially dangerous to you, Alpha, and the pack."

Talia thought how that made sense. Since she started working by Damon's side, Talia got to know some details about other packs, and she knew that many Alphas and Lunas have dozens of people who are close to them and help with managing their packs.

She personally saw how in the Red Moon pack, Alpha Edward had many people dealing with various aspects of the pack, even though only Beta was allowed to reside in the packhouse.

Talia didn't know the details, but she was aware that in the Red Moon pack there are three commanders who are above Generals, and as someone who values military strength, those commanders have their own villas as a sign of status and they report to Alpha Edward directly.

Talia knew that she will become Luna and she should have assistants, but who could that be?

Talia had only a few people who are close to her, and all of them she met in the last few weeks. Mindy and Kalina definitely can't take the roles as Talia's helpers, so she thought that Maya and Stephanie will be there, but it seemed that they won't be available either.

There was also Olivia, but Talia didn't see her in two years and Olivia went to live with her mate so... she is not a candidate.

Seeing Talia's dejected expression, Maya patted her hand. "Don't worry. I'm not going anywhere, and I will help you until you find someone else."

Talia puffed her cheeks. "It sounds overwhelming."

"It's a lot of work, but if you break it into pieces and tackle one thing at a time, it's manageable. Normally, Alpha will take care of security and warriors, while Luna will handle things related to the packhouse and pack members."

"Like housing.", Talia said.

"Like housing.", Maya repeated in confirmation. "Regardless of how other packs divide work, you will do whatever works for you. Every pack is different, and so is every Alpha and Luna pair. I'm sure that Alpha Damon will talk about all that as you get closer to your Luna ceremony."

Talia responded with a stiff smile while screaming internally. Luna ceremony. WAAAH!

Stress was eating her up from the inside already, but Talia took a deep breath and told herself to take this one thing at a time. Guests are coming, and she will deal with that first, and leave everything else for later because if she starts thinking about those things now, her brain will implode.

"Are you OK?"

Maya asked and Talia realized that her facade cracked. She probably looked horrible.

Unsure how to answer, Talia's attention was drawn toward the computer screen that showed various folders.

In order to divert the topic, Talia pointed at one folder. "What is this?"

Maya's eyebrows came together. It was the folder named, 'Evidence'.

Before Maya responded, Talia double-clicked to open and see contents.

It was Talia's turn for her eyebrows to come together when she saw numerous folders, each labeled by a female name.

Abbie-SWP. Adalyn-APP. Alison-KP. Amanda-MP. Amanda-RTP. Amber-HLP...

The list of names seemed endless.

Maya wondered if she should stop Talia from scrolling further, but Damon clearly said that nothing is off-limits for Talia, so Maya let it be.

Talia paused briefly when she saw a folder named, Cassie-SBP, but then she continued until saw a folder named, Marcy-RMP.

That name gave Talia goosebumps, and if Cassie-SBP coincided with 'Cassie – the SteelBite pack', the Marcy-RMP was definitely reminding Talia of, 'Marcy – the Red Moon Pack'.

Talia clicked to open the folder and other than a few text files and emails, there was a video file with a timestamp only a few weeks old. Was that video taken when Damon visited the Red Moon pack?

Talia never paid attention to dates. Every day was like any other. However, she knew the date when she visited Doctor Travis the first time because it was on the after-visit summary he gave her, and based on that, Talia calculated that the video was taken on the second day of Damon's visit to the Red Moon pack.

Driven by her curiosity, Talia opened the video file and her eyes widened in disbelief when she saw a naked female standing straight while kicking her panties away. Marcy.

"What are you doing?", Marcy asked the person who was recording her.

"Memories of our first time, baby. Turn around. Let me see you..."

Talia's stomach dropped when she recognized the voice. Damon.

And what stung even more were words, 'turn around, let me see you'.

That was not the first time Talia heard them. Damon used the same words the previous night when he saw Talia wearing sexy lingerie in the closet.

Talia wanted to stop the video because her soul screamed in agony, but she just sat there frozen.

Talia's vision blurred from tears when she heard Damon's voice, "Spread your legs. More. Good. Perk up that ass..."

Anger and anguish clenched Talia's fragile heart, and she didn't realize at what point her insides started burning.

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Caden and Damon were on their way to the training ground.

They were walking because their destination was only a few minutes away from the packhouse through the forest, and they won't save any time if they use the car.

"It seems things between you and Talia are fine now.", Caden voiced his observation.

"Definitely!", Damon exclaimed with glee. "I feared her reaction when she finds out we are mates, but she took it better than I expected."

"Did you talk about the Luna ceremony?"

Damon shook his head. "Not yet. She asked for time, but I have a feeling that in a few days we will talk about it..."

Damon wondered if he should get Talia a ring. He read online how that's a symbol of commitment. Werewolves don't wear rings or bracelets because they come off or break when they shift, but Talia doesn't have a wolf so she can't shift. When Talia's wolf awakens, she can wear the ring around her neck, on a necklace that Damon is yet to purchase. It will be perfect.

At the same time, Caden's and Damon's steps halted, and they frowned.

Damon could feel the ache and he knew it came from Talia.

Pain. Grief. Embarrassment. Rage.

In an instant, Damon was livid. Was Lisa causing trouble again? But... didn't he leave Talia with Maya?

Damon looked at Caden only to see the latter clutching his chest and paling like he can't breathe.

'What's going on!?', Damon asked through the mind-link that was open for Maya and Caden, while rushing back to the packhouse.

'You should probably stay away for now.', Maya responded in a strained voice. She was on the verge of losing her consciousness because Talia's aura was suffocating her, and Maya didn't have the strength to increase the distance between her and Talia.

The hell Damon will stay away when he could clearly feel that Talia was on the verge of a mental breakdown.

'Where are you!?', Damon roared into the mind-link.

'Study.', Maya responded before adding with difficulty, 'Alpha, Talia found a video you took of Marcy.'

Damon didn't get it. What video? But there was no time to think about it. Talia was in trouble, and he was already running up the driveway and entering the packhouse.

Damon stormed into the study, and he found Talia and Maya sitting at his desk.

Nothing would look out of place if not for Maya's face that was pale as a sheet of paper, and she was drenched in sweat with her back curving down. She was not bowing in submission. It looked more like she wanted to kiss the floor, but her sitting position prevented her from doing so.

Talia's expression was unreadable, but Damon's survival instincts kicked into overdrive, telling him that he was facing grave danger with every wave of Talia's aura that washed on him.

"What's going on here?", Damon asked while trying to read the situation.

Talia's eyes moved to look at him, and Damon paused when he saw specs of silver flashing in her honeyed eyes that were full of unshed tears.

"Maya, leave us...", Damon said, and Maya stumbled off the chair, using her arms and legs to cross those endless several steps of distance and reach the exit.

Damon closed the door behind Maya and turned to Talia.

"Kitten, what's going on?"

His steps toward Talia halted when he faced her icy expression. That was not Talia he knew.

Talia's mouth opened and it took her a second to make a sound, "I don't know what bad karma this girl accumulated to have you as her mate." Her voice was strained as she struggled to speak.

Damon was taken aback.

He could feel his wolf trying to stir from his slumber and Damon's heart thundered wildly in his chest when he realized...

"You are Talia's wolf."

Chapter 228 - Talia's Wolf

Damon swallowed hard at the hostility that was tangible. Surely, this must be a misunderstanding. Why would Talia's wolf be aggressive toward him?

Damon reminded himself to leave a good first impression. "Hello. My name is Damon Blake. I am the Alpha of the Dark Howlers pack. As you probably know already, Talia is my mate. I was looking forward to you waking..."

"Save it for someone who cares!", Talia's wolf cut him off angrily. "You are a stinky boy, not worthy to be her mate."

Damon was flabbergasted. This definitely confirmed that the hostility was real.

He was not sure what's going on, but his instincts told him that if he retaliates, it won't end well.

"I know. No one is worthy of Talia."

"You are less worthy than the others. Promiscuous bastard."

Anxiety swelled inside Damon. He could clearly feel the loathing directed his way. "Unfortunately, I can't do anything about my past. However, since Talia came to this packhouse, I didn't touch any other woman." This was the truth.

Talia's wolf narrowed her eyes at him.

While Talia's emotions went haywire due to the video of Marcy that Damon took at the Red Moon pack, Talia's wolf stirred right on time to hear Talia's thoughts about how Damon was at the Red Moon pack only three days, and that he bumped into Talia on the first day.

Even if Talia's wolf ignores the fact that their first encounter included Marcy giving a blow job to Damon, the timestamp on the file confirms that the video was taken one day AFTER Damon and Talia met, and that is one full day AFTER Damon identified Talia as his mate.

And Talia's wolf found in Talia's jumbled thoughts how Damon said that since he met Talia, no other woman exists for him. If that was the truth, how could he touch Marcy like this? And who knows what else Damon and Marcy did after the video was cut off?

Talia's wolf doubted that a scoundrel like Damon would pass on the chance to sleep with a naked she-wolf who was moaning words like, "I want you to put your big cock in my pussy and fuck me hard, Alpha Damon." Disgusting.

No woman with self-respect will say such words aloud. And she knew that she was being recorded. Slut.

The only good thing was that Talia didn't feel the bond at that time, because the pain of her mate being with another woman would be unbearable. Talia only watched a video and her heart shattered.

Talia's wolf had no intention of letting Damon get close to Talia.

"You recognized her as your mate before she came to your packhouse. Are you saying that the video of a naked woman begging you to fuck her while you fondled her generously was taken before you met your mate?"

Damon's brows furrowed in confusion. What video? Maya also mentioned a video, but nothing made sense.

After two seconds of silence, Talia's wolf continued, "Are you pretending that you don't know? Selective amnesia? How convenient."

"I don't know what are you talking about.", Damon said. "Since I met Talia..."

Damon's voice trailed when Talia's wolf rotated the monitor in slow motion for Damon to see the screen.

It was a frozen video at the scene of Marcy's bare ass and Damon's hand reaching at the cradle of her thighs. Damon's face was not in the frame, but Damon recognized the situation, and he knew that he is the other party involved.

He forgot about this.

Damon cursed internally as pieces fell into place.

"This is not what it looks like. There is nothing going on between Marcy and me. I will make sure that Marcy never comes here, and Talia won't see her ever again."

"Marcy", Talia's wolf said thoughtfully, like she was trying to memorize the name. "Will you tell this Marcy person that you found your mate?"

"Absolutely!", Damon said without missing a beat. "Not just to her, but to everyone."

"Don't.", Talia's wolf said curtly. "I don't want you to label this girl as yours. She put her trust in you and this is what she got. Do you plan to humiliate her in front of everyone? How much will you hurt her until you are satisfied? You call yourself her mate but..."

Talia's face scrunched into a grimace for a moment and the silvery glow faded. Damon knew that Talia was fighting her wolf for control.

Things shouldn't be like that.

Talia's wolf should be her ally, her best friend, and not someone she fights against. And Damon knew that the ongoing fight was because of him.

Damon was convinced that Talia's wolf coming out will solve their problems and not add more to them. And he felt like crap because his past actions were hurting both of them.

Talia had nothing to do with it, yet she was suffering over and over again because of him. Talia's wolf was right. Damon doesn't deserve her... but he was not willing to give up either. Nothing made sense without Talia.

Damon was exasperated. He didn't sleep with Marcy at all, and this video was only to expose Marcy! But he had a feeling that Talia's wolf won't listen.

Damon was confident that Talia's wolf can feel his emotions through the mate bond, but maybe regret doesn't count after the harm was done.

The thought of him shagging Nora flashed from the back of his mind, preventing him from saying how he kept it in his pants since he met Talia. Damn it!

Talia's wolf sneered. "Your conscience is not clean."

Anxiety swelled within Damon. Is she going to reject him?

"Don't worry, I won't reject you."

Damon paused. Can she read minds?

"I don't need to read minds. It's all over your face."

Damon was confused. Does this mean that she CAN read minds, or not?

"You are lucky that this girl loves you. You better prove your sincerity and be the man she needs. But if you harm her again, I won't hesitate in taking her away. She is better on her own than with a cheating bastard like you."

Damon ignored the cheating comment. "How do I prove my sincerity?"

"Invite Marcy here and clear the air in front of everyone. If you mess up, there won't be the next chance."

And with that, the silver from Talia's eyes disappeared and Talia slumped back into the chair, exhausted and covered in sweat like she just ran a marathon.

"Kitten...", Damon rushed to kneel next to Talia, cupping her cheeks with desperation to see her loving eyes directed at him.

'What did you do?', Talia asked her wolf mentally.

'I did what you should have done a long time ago. Mate or not, he doesn't get to mistreat you. That is not why I gave my vitality so that you can survive.', Talia's wolf said, and Talia could feel through all that grumpiness genuine concern that moved her.

'If you were not on the verge of collapsing, I wouldn't come out, but it was too soon. I need to rest more. Don't let him mark you until he deals with that slut, and if he just looks at another woman in the wrong way...', the voice drifted away.

'Hello? Are you still there?', Talia called, but there was no response.

Talia met Damon's icy-blue eyes full of questions and her chin shivered.

Her wolf woke up and took over, and even though Talia didn't have control over her body, she was able to see and hear everything that happened.

Talia knew that Damon has a past, and she thought that she made peace with it because they are mates and none of the women who passed through his arms previously matter, but that video was a bitter pill to swallow, and it made Talia die on the inside.

The feeling of his hand on her face, the same hand that fondled Marcy's private parts, got Talia's bile rising and she pushed his hands away.

"Don't touch me.", she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

She got up from the chair with difficulty and made her way around him.

"What are you doing?", Talia asked when Damon hugged her from behind.

"I took that video only to incriminate Marcy. I never slept with her."

Talia snorted. "Was something wrong with Marcy? You slept with pretty much everyone else."

"Not after I acknowledged we are mates.", Damon could say this with sincerity but he knew that was not enough. "I admit. When I saw you the first time my wolf told me we are mates but I didn't know what to do with that information. I didn't understand what it means to discover your other half and until I met you, I was convinced that I don't want a mate. Two days later, I found you in the attic and I realized that I can't move on without you. Your scent, the sparks, and the sudden need to care for you were overwhelming and I felt like a teenager who fell in love for the first time as every next day confirmed that you are my only one that matters. Since you came to this packhouse, you were with me most of the time. If I was not working, I was with you. I didn't touch any other woman, no matter how many of them were around me. You need to believe me."

Chapter 229 - Carried Through The Forest

Talia's heart ached as she was unable to erase from her mind graphic images and sounds of Damon and Marcy, and the floodgates of her insecurities collapsed.

"I am trying to understand you, Damon. I really am. But you need to understand me also. How would you feel if that was a video of me and some other guy touching me while I am saying how my body belongs to him and I want him to...?", Talia couldn't finish. "I need space. This is suffocating. Let me go, Damon."

"Ask me for anything, except for that."

In one swift move, Damon turned Talia to face him, and his hug was tighter than before.

"I'm never going to let go of you, kitten, but if you are set on leaving, I can't stop you. The only thing I will ask you is to take my heart with you because it's yours. Everything I have and everything I am belongs to you.", he spoke into her hair, just above her ear. "There is no point in overthinking this. Both of us know that there is only you and no one else. I know you are angry, scared, and disappointed. I can feel it. Curse me, hit me, do whatever you need to get it out of your system, but don't leave me. I will endure your wrath gladly, do your worst."

He really feared that she will give him a slip and he won't find her.

"Just an hour ago, in this room, you promised that we will do everything together. Let's deal with this together. I need you...", Damon's voice cracked as his desperation mixed with Talia's anguish and Talia fisted his shirt angrily.

Talia was angry because she couldn't tune out the negativity that surrounded her. She didn't want to be cautious. She wanted to trust him. She wanted to believe that there is such a thing as a happy ending and that she will reach there with Damon by her side.

Talia could feel Damon's sincerity and anxiousness and she knew he meant it. She knew that he loved her with every fiber of his being. She knew that he would give his life for her, and she would do the same for him. Why was that not enough?

She didn't want to think about the past that can't be changed or dread the uncertain future.

Talia spent most of her life alone and now she had a man who would do anything for her. Why can't she just be happy?

"Let's go.", Damon said.

"Where?", she asked.

"Into the forest. Isn't that a place where you go to calm down? Let's go. Together."

Yes, Talia wanted to leave the packhouse, and she was thinking about the forest, but... "I will go alone."

Damon cupped Talia's cheeks with his palms and planted a light kiss on her forehead. "We are mates, kitten. If you leave, I will look for you and not stop until I find you. You will never be alone because I will be with you, no matter where you go."

With that, Damon scooped Talia into his arms and carried her out of the study, down the hallway, outside of the packhouse, through the garden, and into the forest.

"Do you know where you want to go?", Damon asked.

"Not really. I would go wherever my legs carry me."

"OK. I will pick a spot.", Damon said and increased his pace.

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Talia was surprised at how quickly Damon can move with her in his arms, and it didn't look like he was getting tired at all. His hold was solid, and she could feel his warmth and addictive scent and her body moved on its own to lean on Damon.

Talia chided herself. Shouldn't she be upset at him? She was traumatized by watching the nasty video of Damon fondling Marcy!

She loved him to pieces and she hated that he was holding her with the same arms that he held many other women before her. Will she ever be able to accept Damon's past without her stomach forming painful knots? Talia thought she was over it, but that wretched video made her feel dirty.

"Can you let me down?", Talia asked.

"Allow me to do this for you, kitten. Your struggle against your wolf exhausted you."

"How do you know...?", Talia's voice trailed when she saw Damon's knowing look directed at her.

"I know that your wolf thinks badly of me, and that was not you."

Talia was not sure if he was right. Was that not her? Other than the words how Damon is not worthy of her, Talia actually agreed with the rest. She wished that his past was different, she wished that she never saw that nasty video, she wished that Damon never touched Marcy.

Talia wanted to chop off Damon's hand that fondled Marcy, or maybe to tear Marcy into a million pieces, but Talia knew that was irrational. It won't solve anything. Besides, if Talia starts going after every woman Damon touched, she will end up on the most-wanted list as a serial killer.

Talia thought that the best way to deal with the ghosts of Damon's past was to ignore them. Those are not hers to face. But if they are not hers, why are they haunting her? How can she pretend that numerous women like Cassie, Marcy, Ashley, and Heather are not important when they are popping out from everywhere and disturbing her peace?

Maybe instead of ignoring Damon's past, she should confront it?

"What my wolf said...", Talia paused while firming her resolve. "I agree."

Damon's steps slowed down. "With which part?"

"About Marcy coming here."

Damon's brows came together. "Are you serious?"

"Do I look like I'm joking?"

"No.", Damon was quick to respond. "But... I fear that you will get upset. When your mental state is weakened, that gives an opportunity for your wolf to take over. It happens to all of us."

"She was protecting me."

"I know." He regretted that the enemy, in this case, was him. "I am not against your wolf, but she just woke up and she should be familiar with the situation before she makes decisions in your stead."

Talia agreed with this. Her wolf saw only the video of Damon with Marcy and heard Talia's thoughts at that time (which were not good). If her wolf knew how kind and attentive Damon was, maybe she wouldn't be so harsh, but that didn't mean her wolf was wrong.

"My wolf said that you should get Marcy here and deal with her. I agree with that.", Talia said sternly. "I know there is a risk of jeopardizing strained relationship between your pack and the Red Moon pack, but they are the ones who came after you first and we will never have peace if others can pressure you by using politics or their position."

The whole conversation would be much more serious if Damon was not moving between thick bushes while holding her in his arms like a princess, but Talia worked with what she had.

"Our pack", Damon corrected Talia. Whenever she spoke like the Dark Howlers pack was only his, she was distancing herself from him and he didn't like it.

"Fine!", Talia snapped. "OUR pack. Happy? Now can you focus on the important part?"

"Alright.", Damon said.

Talia didn't get it. "Alright, what?"

Damon inhaled deeply before responding, "When I became the Alpha of the Dark Howlers pack, others didn't take me seriously. They treated me like a youngster who didn't know what he was doing, and they were right; most of the time, I didn't know what I was doing, but I knew how to fight. When they realized that a direct approach was not working, they started using underhanded methods to manipulate me, including pushing women into my bed. And I... was taking advantage of the situation. Caden helped me in gathering dirt on the women who coveted to be my Luna, and I would expose them."

Talia understood that the folder 'Evidence' where she found the horrid video is the one with the dirt that Damon collected with Caden's help.

"I know it was despicable of me to do such things, but I didn't force any of them. I only collected evidence on what they did of their own will.", Damon paused and looked at Talia with sincerity she could feel. "When I did those things, I had no idea what it means to have a mate. Feeling your sadness is killing me on the inside. The only thing I can do is make sure I treat these issues seriously going forward. No more games. I will send a message to Alpha Edward and everyone else that if they try something like that again, they are risking a war."

Part of Talia was moved that Damon told her all this. It was rare of Damon to talk about his past and even rarer to admit he made a mistake. But if he had any decency in that licentious mind of his, he wouldn't end up in this situation! They were sending women to his bed only because they saw that he is not refusing them! Bastard!

Chapter 230 - Meeting The Parents

Talia bit the inside of her cheek while wondering if that's worth it. Surely, her peace of mind is insignificant when compared with a war between packs. People will get hurt! And there is no guarantee she will be happy.

But her wolf said that Damon needs to deal with Marcy and that Talia shouldn't let him mark her until that happens. If Talia forgives Damon before he redeems himself, her wolf will go ballistic. Talia could feel the beasts' rage and she knew that her wolf was not joking.

Talia was reconsidering her idea for Damon to confront Marcy when she noticed that his eyes were unfocused. He was mind-linking someone.

"Did something happen?", she asked.

"No.", Damon responded. "We are entering a restricted area, so I was informing patrol to stay away."

"Restricted area?"

"You will see in a minute.", Damon responded mysteriously and increased his pace.

Talia observed dense foliage that changed as Damon moved and she noticed that there was an incline; and even though there was no path in sight, Damon definitely knew where he was going.

Where was he taking her? Was he planning to imprison her somewhere? Is that why the area is restricted and has guards?

...

The sound of the water running was clearer as trees around them became scarcer with every step Damon took.

Talia blinked at the bright sun when they emerged on a clearing that was speckled with wildflowers and there was a river going through the middle of it. The clearing ended with a sharp fall and Talia understood that the noise was coming from the waterfall. Based on the rumble, it was a long way down.

But Damon didn't carry Talia toward the river, or to the edge to enjoy the view. He took a right and stopped when they reached a deep shade of a lonely oak tree that shielded them from the scorching summer midday sun.

Damon carefully kept Talia to stand on her feet and he supported her by the shoulders until she got her footing. He was carrying her for a while.

"I'm OK. Thanks.", Talia assured him, and she was confused when he took her hand in his and started leading the way closer to the trunk of the tree.

Talia followed him obediently and her eyes widened when she saw a black marble rectangle-shaped stone with a curved top edge. It had engraved, 'In memory of loving parents, Jacob Blake and Violet Blake'.

Damon stood a few steps in front of the gravestone and bowed his head. "Mom, Dad, this is Talia, my mate. She is wonderful, everything a Luna should be, and much more, but I messed up. If you are alive, I would ask you how to fix the mess I created." He exhaled audibly. "Actually, if you are alive, I would probably not make that mess in the first place."

Damon turned to Talia and smiled a little. "Elders wanted to bury my parents in the pack cemetery, but I refused. They were free spirits who loved this land and treated every member of the Dark Howlers pack as family, but those same people betrayed them, so I decided they should rest here. This is the most restricted area in our territory, protected by a handful of guards I personally selected, and only I can enter. I come here when I'm not sure how to deal with the situation I'm facing. It's quiet and no one disturbs me."

Damon released Talia's hand and squatted to remove stray weeds that were growing too close to the gravestone. He moved swiftly and Talia concluded that he did this many times before.

Talia watched Damon awkwardly, unsure what to do while he approached the gravestone to dust off the dirt.

Damon paused his movements and glanced at Talia. "You can say hi to them, or not. They can't hear you, even though I wish that they can."

When he finished with cleanup, Damon stood up and looked at Talia. "You can treat this as a place where you can confess your thoughts, and no one will judge you. I instructed guards that you can come here so when you need space and the packhouse won't do, please use this area. It's safe and other than the two of us, no one else has access."

Talia was not sure if she should be here, and she definitely didn't know where this HERE was because Damon was carrying her and she was not paying attention to her surroundings. She didn't want to admit that if Damon left now, she would be totally lost. During her previous outings into the forest, she didn't spot any river or a waterfall.

Damon saw that Talia's expression was reluctant, so he gestured toward the gravestone. "Think of them as good listeners who are good at keeping secrets."

He glanced behind Talia. "If you want to just sit in silence, I will prefer that you join me there."

Talia watched as Damon walked away with his shoulders dropping gradually with every step he took, and his big and powerful back suddenly looked lonely.

Talia could feel he didn't want to leave her. He wanted to hold her close, but she needed some distance from Damon because his proximity only made her crave for his touch.

She turned to the gravestone and after a few moments of hesitation, she spoke, "Hi Alpha Jacob and Luna Violet. My name is Talia. I am Damon's mate. I heard many good things about you from Stephanie. Damon doesn't talk much about you, but he is not much of a talker."

Talia pressed her lips into a line. What was she doing? Talking to a stone?

But Damon said to treat it as she was talking to good listeners, and she really needed to voice her grievances.

Talia saw that Damon sat on a big rock at the bank of the river, with his legs toward the edge of the cliff, so the noise from the waterfall would prevent him from overhearing whatever she says.

Well, no matter how silly it looks, she had nothing to lose.

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Talia squatted close to the gravestone and spoke in a low voice.

"To be honest, I am not worthy of being Damon's mate. He is exceptional in every way possible, and I am not. Damon's past is bothering me, but I don't know if I have the right to judge him for what he did. I mean... I was often thinking about running away from problems even after we met. Damon was telling me that I am the only one who can be called Mrs. Blake, yet I was contemplating exit strategies. I am not a Luna material. Damon is doing his best to face challenges and instead of thinking about rising to meet his level, my desire is to pull him down. What kind of a Luna does that? I wish that Damon is not an Alpha."

Talia shook her head at her pessimism.

"I don't have skills or confidence for the job and the only person who believes I can do it is Damon. Maybe that's why I love him..." Talia's eyes widened as her cheeks caught on fire. Did she just say that she loves him? Aloud? But it's the truth.

"I love everything about him. He is handsome and caring, and he loves to cuddle. What is there not to love?" Her lips curved downward. "But if everything is so great, why am I reacting like this when his past

resurfaces? He has more than twenty years of life without me and if I am going to be the mate he needs, I should accept him... even the dirty parts, just how he accepts me unconditionally like I don't have any flaws."

"You would be proud of him. Damon takes care of his people and everyone talks about Damon and the Dark Howlers pack with awe. That's probably one of the reasons why so many women wish to be his Luna. On top of being an amazing Alpha, Damon found me in a dingy attic where I was hiding from people who forgot I exist. He brought me here while risking a war between packs. Without knowing my background, he gave me a place to live, and I am not wondering from where my next meal will come. He is taking good care of me even when no one is watching." Talia's cheeks heated. "Especially when no one is watching. And I am back to where I started. I am not worthy of being his mate."

Talia smiled sadly at the gravestone while wondering what would his parents say if they were alive. Well, that's one thing she will never find out.

"Thank you for listening."

She stood up and bowed toward the gravestone. "It was nice meeting you, Mr. and Mrs. Blake. If there is a chance, I will visit again."

Talia turned to look at Damon. His back was hunched with his hands balled into fists and his gaze was directed at the imaginary spot on the horizon. It was a strange posture because Damon would normally stand ramrod straight and his every pore oozed confidence, yet this was... different. But even with that, he was the most handsome man Talia ever saw.