

Alphas Bride 481

Chapter 481 An Alpha and a witch (2)

Yasmin was never intimate with a man, but priestesses taught her about body parts and how things work, and she wondered if Axel's thing will fit in her because just his finger was making her feel the fullness in her.

Any thoughts of caution disappeared when Axel added a second finger and started thrusting inside her while his palm pressed on her clit.

His touch was electric, making her whole body hum and she rocked her hips to meet his hand.

Yasmin gripped Axel's back and buried her face in the crook of his neck, her labored breaths splashed on his skin, telling him to keep going. And he did.

"Ah... Ah... AH!", she cried as her body trembled, getting closer to the climax with each stroke, and Axel groaned while imagining his cock in there instead of his fingers.

Without any warning, Yasmin's hand fell on top of Axel's and she applied pressure to push his hand away.

Axel paused, wondering if he did something wrong. He thought he was doing great, and she responded wonderfully, and thanks to the mate bond he could feel that she was aroused and happy, but then... maybe he didn't interpret the signals correctly.

"Did I hurt you?", he asked.

Yasmin shook her head.

"Was it not good?"

She shook her head again.

Axel was at a loss. Did she change her mind? "Then, what?"

"Not with hand.", she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

He was confused. "Don't you like it?"

"For the first time, not with hand." She took two deep breaths and forced herself to look into his honeyed eyes. "Witches follow what nature and our instincts tell us and right now... my instincts are telling me to merge with my mate and not just his hand."

It took him a second to understand what she was saying, and he swiftly moved on top of her, to settle between her legs.

His hard cock pressed between her folds and both of them inhaled sharply at the sparks that tingled their most sensitive parts.

Axel's hips rocked and he started grinding himself on her, every move had more confidence than the previous one as he coated his shaft with her juices.

He kissed her deeply, and he loved the sensation of her little tongue dancing with his. Right then and there, he ascertained that kissing Yasmin will be his favorite thing to do for the years to come.

Axel couldn't believe that this was happening.

He longed for his mate forever. He imagined that the woman will be tall or short, slim or chubby, blonde, brunette, redhead, and anything in between, but he never imagined anyone so perfect. Yasmin was perfect. For him.

Yasmin's hips moved to meet Axel's, and just how it happened with his finger, they both froze when their angles changed and his tip pressed against her entrance.

Her gaze didn't waver, silently telling him to keep going.

Axel swallowed hard and he didn't break eye contact as his hand moved between them to guide himself to the right position.

Slowly, very slowly he pushed against her, and a vein popped on his forehead at the sensation of her hot flesh gripping his cock firmly. It was heavenly, and every cell in his body screamed for more, but he forced himself to move slowly as he didn't want to hurt her more than he already did.

Yasmin's mouth was open in a silent cry at the scorching sensation of her insides stretching to accommodate his length. This was definitely much more than his two fingers and she was back to wondering if he will fit.

The priestesses told her that during the first entry there will be a sharp pain, but this whole thing hurt like hell, and she wondered if the sharp pain happened already, or was it yet to come. But she didn't hate it because it all came wrapped in a layer of addictive sparks, and she wondered if she was losing her mind when she could feel so much pleasure with pain.

Yasmin blinked her tears away to see better because she was not sure if she was imagining that Axel's eyes shimmered in silvery light.

Axel gripped her hip and in one quick stroke buried himself for that last inch.

Yasmin saw stars, and she held onto his back like holding onto her dear life.

A fierce growl ripped from Axel's chest as searing energy spread through his veins, threatening to burn him alive. His whole body buzzed, and he could clearly feel the woman below him. They were one.

Axel's hips rocked a bit and Yasmin gasped. He moved again, and again, struggling to control his thrusts and not give in to the maddening desire to plunder her insides.

Axel never felt anything like it. His cock was enveloped in her wet heat that clutched him in an airtight grip to deliver addictive sparks straight into his brain, and he hoped that this will never end. Unfortunately, after only a few thrusts he became aware of an incoming orgasm that threatened to come too soon, and he knew that he can't stop it so his mission became to make Yasmin come first.

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Axel started kissing and sucking her neck, nipping occasionally, and then licking her there while searching for the perfect spot.

Yasmin was lost in the sensation of Axel all around her, and inside as well. The pressure in her core was building up at an alarming rate, and she feared that she might pass out if this lasts much longer, but she didn't want it to end.

"Axel... Axel...", she chanted wantonly, spurring him to move faster.

Her body moved on its own to respond to his, all the pain long forgotten, leaving only pleasure and need for more.

Axel's instincts took over and he shifted a bit to change the angle of his thrust, hoping that he won't come too soon because she was almost there. He smiled when Yasmin's moan told him he was on the right track, and he was back to nipping her neck, waiting for the right time to put his mark on her flesh.

Yasmin's body tensed below him, and she exploded in a cry a moment before piercing pain assaulted her neck.

Yasmin felt the heat spreading and her whole body was threatening to combust from the overload of sensations as Axel rammed himself inside her mercilessly.

Axel groaned when her tight pussy clenched around him, pushing him over the edge and he exploded to shoot his seed inside her, thrusting in shaky movements to prolong their flight.

Yasmin was dazed and her body twitched as he licked the spot where he bit her. It was super-sensitive.

"Axel...", she called breathily.

"Mine", he growled.

After making sure he licked her neck well to heal quickly, Axel lifted his head to look at Yasmin.

Her flushed face was adorable and he gave himself a thumbs up for enduring and not coming first.

Axel cleared his throat. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Axel Moonrider, Alpha of the Midnight Guardians pack."

Yasmine blinked. "Don't you think we should do the introduction before sex?"

Axel's eyes widened, and he reminded her, "I wanted to talk first, but you said that we should do other things, so..." His voice trailed.

Yasmine giggled, making her insides squeeze around him because he was still sheathed in her.

"Do you regret it, Axel Moonrider, Alpha of the Midnight Guardians pack?"

"No.", Axel said right away. "And I will make sure you don't regret it either."

His head dipped for him to kiss the spot where he marked her a minute ago, and Yasmin released a shaky breath.

Axel grinned. That's his mark, and that's his mate, and nothing else mattered.

Axel couldn't wait to see Kai and tell him how he is not the only one who did it! And he was looking forward to taking Yasmin with him and introducing her as the pack Luna. But what he wanted to do the most was...

"Can we do it again?"

Yasmin smiled and pulled him down for a kiss. He took that as a, yes.

Chapter 482 The Silver Flame fountain (1)

Talia walked through the garden and observed the colors changing as dawn cracked.

Just as Talia feared, sleep didn't come to her. Whenever she closed her eyes, mental images of Damon and Marcy plagued her mind, so she gave up on sleeping and decided to take a walk.

She sat at the edge of a circular basin of a fountain and looked at the still water. In the middle was a sculpture of a woman and a wolf. The wolf was on his hind legs, two creatures leaning on each other while reaching up for something in the sky, and Talia guessed that from there water would flow if the fountain was working.

Talia dipped her fingers in the chilly water and tried to think how much time passed for Damon.

Since Damon passed through the portal, one day for Talia should be about one hour for Damon.

Axel predicted that Damon would need at least one day to reach the Dark Howlers pack, but Talia knew that Damon would reach there in less. He was the fastest and the strongest guy she knew and in his wolf form, he was like a flash. Talia remembered her vision just before she passed out while opening the portal. Damon didn't wander. He was moving in one direction, with purpose. He knew where he was going, straight toward the territory of the Dark Howlers pack.

Talia's heart tightened at the memory when she saw him the last time, in the cave.

She knew that Damon was not himself when he pushed her away, but it still hurt.

Liseli told her not to worry about it because Damon didn't remember her and she shouldn't blame him. But Talia remembered clearly all the gentle words and caresses and promises, and then it was all gone as he pushed her away with disgust like she has some disease.

It made her wonder if he even liked her or if it was just the bond. Talia snorted. How is she supposed to believe in a relationship that was relying only on a bond that was put there by the Moon Goddess?

'Don't go there', Liseli said. 'Sure, the bond was the reason why it started, but then Damon got to know you and he saw that you are kind and generous and fierce and...'

'And he forgot about it, so why does it matter?', Talia interrupted Liseli.

'It matters. Didn't you think of him as a scary brute at first? If someone erased the memories of your time at the Dark Howlers pack, you would be glad that he left.'

Well, Talia agreed with that. But, was she supposed to forgive him for the harsh treatment because he didn't remember her? And what if he ends up cozying up with Marcy? Should Talia overlook that as well? Her insides churned at that thought.

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"Can't sleep?"

Talia turned to see Evanora approaching her.

It was obvious that she couldn't sleep, but Talia didn't want to share her thoughts.

"When will the potion and the spell be ready?", Talia asked.

"By lunchtime, it should be ready, but I recommend that you give us time to test the effectiveness before you leave."

Talia was surprised by this. "Test it? Like... on a person?"

"Mhm...", Evanora hummed and stood by Talia while looking at the unmoving statue of the woman and the wolf.

"You have a person willing to get under the effect of black runes in order to test dispelling it?"

Evanora cocked an eyebrow. "We have a person who made a deal to be helpful."

Talia's stomach tightened when she realized that Evanora was talking about Cassandra.

"How do your deals work?"

"Our magic bounds us to stick to the agreement."

"How?"

"Cassandra won't be able to leave this place until conditions are met."

Talia was alarmed. She didn't care about Cassandra, but what about Axel? The deal was a mate for a mate. Were they planning to keep Axel here until he finds his mate? And then what? And what if Yasmin was not his mate?

"How would that impact Axel?", Talia asked, and Evanora's expression tightened.

"If I knew this would happen, I would make a deal with you."

"Me? Why me?"

Evanora shook her head, refusing to answer. "Don't worry about your brother, Talia. He is the soulmate of my daughter. I would never harm her."

'Holy-moly!', Liseli exclaimed in Talia's head. 'I think they wanted to keep Axel here as a breeding stud.'

'As a what!?'

'Didn't you notice they are lacking males?', Liseli asked. 'But now that Yasmin's future is tied to Axel's, Evanora won't force Axel into fornicating with other witches.'

'Axel would never get intimate with a woman who is not his mate because that would be giving up on his powers.'

'Evanora doesn't know that.', Liseli said.

Talia's expression tightened. 'But what if she does know?' Another level of panic swelled in Talia. 'How would that work if I made the deal? Would they take my mate away?'

Liseli growled. 'He wouldn't touch another woman. Not with the bond, but...'

'But?'

'If the breeding is for creating offspring, they could drug him or cast a spell to think it was you. Or they could collect samples without the act of coupling.'

Talia's insides churned. Was she close to putting Damon in another hell because she was reckless?

'Don't worry about things that didn't happen.', Liseli said. 'Things worked out. Selena is watching over us, Talia.'

Talia cringed. If the Moon Goddess was watching, they wouldn't end up in this mess.

"Is something wrong?", Evanora noticed changes in Talia's expression.

Talia scrambled her brain for a way to answer this without exposing her conversation with Liseli. "I was just thinking about Cassandra. Will she be OK during the test?"

"You are worried about her?", Evanora asked with amusement in her voice. "That woman cursed your mate. He is in a bad condition, and you are probably wondering if that's because you interrupted the spell before it was over. If you didn't intervene, he would be in a much worse state. Maybe dead. Shouldn't you be angry at Cassandra? Eager for revenge?"

Talia shook her head. "That won't get my mate back."

"You are letting her go unpunished?"

Talia took a moment to think about it. Cassandra did wrong, but Talia was so busy with getting Damon back that she didn't think about punishing the Oracle. But then, if not for Cassandra, they wouldn't know about runes and witches, and they would definitely not be here.

The last few days felt like a painful eternity, but there was something good in it, like Axel finding his mate, and that wouldn't happen if Cassandra didn't cooperate.

"I believe that everyone should get a chance for redemption.", Talia said. "What Cassandra did was wrong, but she followed orders. And after that, she was helpful. I won't punish her for what happened. I believe that the Moon Goddess is watching, and Cassandra will get what she deserved. It's not on me to judge her."

Chapter 483 The Silver Flame fountain (2)

Evanora laughed at Talia's words.

"You are letting Cassandra go unpunished? If your mate ends up in Cassandra's hands again, do you think she will hesitate to use dark magic?" Evanora leaned toward Talia, their noses only inches apart. "By letting her go, someone will get hurt, and it will be your fault."

Talia realized that Evanora was right. Maybe.

"You can't blame me if Cassandra harms someone after this."

"And who is to blame? Your Moon Goddess?"

Talia didn't miss the bitterness in Elanor's tone. "You don't believe in the Moon Goddess?"

Evanora's brows furrowed. "If she is out there, aware of what's going on, then she is a cruel person. Why would I put my hopes in her?" She turned to look at the statues in the middle of the fountain with longing. "We are called the Silver Flame Coven because there was a time when this fountain had flames that were said to be indistinguishable. On the day when the portal closed, the flames died, leaving us here to exist without a purpose, empty on the inside. Just like this fountain."

'Oh, oh!', Liseli exclaimed in Talia's head. 'No wonder the fountain looked familiar. I know what she is talking about!'

'You do?'

'No time to explain. Put your hand in the water, Talia!'

Talia had no idea what this was about, but she listened to Liseli.

Talia saw her hand glowing in silvery light that traveled through the water toward the statues.

Evanora stared in disbelief as statues shimmered like someone doused them in silvery glitter, but the most fantastic was when with a 'POOF!' a white flame emerged from the top of the fountain.

It looked beautiful.

"How did you do that?", Evanora asked. She knew very well how many spells they tried in order to revive the fountain, yet Talia did it like it was not a big deal.

Talia smiled a little, feeling proud that Evanora's high and mighty expression cracked.

"Maybe the Moon Goddess didn't forget you. What if she only tested you to ensure you are worthy?"

Talia spoke with confidence to Evanora, but she was also giving herself a much-needed pep talk.

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The day in the coven started with the commotion when one witch shouted, "THE SILVER FLAME FOUNTAIN IS ALIVE!"

More than a hundred witches swarmed that area to see the fountain with white flames dancing at the top that were visible even in the broad daylight. Ripples of silvery light pulsated rhythmically in the calm water below it.

Liseli told Talia that Selena has a similar fountain in her garden, but Liseli had no idea how that replica ended up here.

Per Talia's request, Evanora didn't reveal that Talia was the one who made it work, but the witches whispered among themselves how the change happened due to one of the three newcomers based on the fact that it happened shortly after Talia, Axel, and Cassandra arrived.

They were all hopeful, believing that this was a sign of good days ahead.

The time dragged, and Talia felt every minute like an hour as she was itchy to leave this place and head after Damon, but this couldn't be rushed.

Evanora explained that the potions and spells were something they were creating with their knowledge and experience, but there was no guarantee they will work, and that was why testing was necessary.

Talia could imagine herself going to the Dark Howlers pack and facing Damon to perform a mystical ritual only for it to fail. Damon would probably throw her in the dungeon with other women who got on his nerves. But then... with him not remembering Talia, he won't know why Lisa, Nora, and the other women were there and he will probably release them. Talia's skin crawled uncomfortably at that thought.

With the goal to distract herself, Talia asked to help with preparations for the feast. Activities in the kitchen were just what she needed. The mood was lively, and it reminded Talia of her time with Dawn and Zina.

Witches would ask Talia about the life on the other side of the portal, and she told them about the Summer Solstice Festival, the amusement park, restaurants, and modern medicine, and she hoped that her voice stayed steady because each of those reminded her of Damon. Talia realized that every part of her life, since she left the Red Moon pack, was marked by Damon's presence, and she was not sure if that was a good thing.

What if she can't dispel the black magic? Will she stay broken forever, stuck in the memories of Damon?

Talia did her best to suppress negative thoughts and to focus on the egg wash she was applying to the dough that was going to be baked into perfect bread rolls. They were cooking with herbs, and it smelled divine. Talia hoped that she can make some of those dishes for Damon, after the dark magic is dispelled and things get back to normal.

Throughout the day, Talia managed to chat with Cornelia and a few more witches. She found out that they were living on their own here and it was only women. Other than wild animals and familiars that witches created contracts with, there were no other creatures.

Cornelia mentioned the time when witches coexisted with werewolves, but then one day they just disappeared. "We had three High Priestesses at that time, and they disagreed on what to do. One wanted to reopen the portal, the second one went to explore our realm with the hope to find passages to other realms, and Evanora stayed here. We never heard about the other two High Priestesses, and we assume that they either found a way out but couldn't return, or something horrible happened.

Unfortunately, Cornelia didn't know more about that topic.

Talia wondered if the disappearance of werewolves was related to the closing of the portal. Did she make a mistake by reopening it? Surely, someone didn't close the portal on a whim. She shook those thoughts away. What was done was done, and if she closes it now (assuming that she knows how), Axel and Yasmin would need to pick a side.

Evanora was obviously the most knowledgeable about the past, but the High Priestess was too touchy, and Talia didn't want to provoke her.

Talia was informed that if all goes well, the potions and spell will be ready by tomorrow morning.

Somehow, the day passed, and the sun started dipping toward the horizon.

Axel and Yasmin didn't come out of Yasmin's room, but the tray with food that was left in front of the door disappeared as a sign they were alive.

Talia was happy for Axel, she truly was, but her heart tightened at the thought of how that was supposed to be her with Damon. They went to the cabin to spend three days being lovey-dovey and after an emotional night, they fell asleep on the grass, and then the nightmare began.

Chapter 484 The celebration begins

Talia went to her room with the intention to get ready for the celebration. Just like Axel, she brought with her a backpack with some snacks and a few changes of clothes. They didn't know how long they will spend on the other side of the portal, so they went prepared.

Talia was surprised when two witches entered her room, saying that they came to help her get ready. She was about to go in her jeans and a fresh t-shirt, but the witches said how that was not appropriate for the occasion.

Talia gaped at the two awfully tiny pieces of fabric, and a string. They obviously wanted her to dress as other witches, with cloth hanging loosely from her waist over her private areas and nothing else. Even skimpy sexy lingerie she bought with Maya provided more coverage than this!

Talia scrambled her brain on how to reject this service. "Uhm... I appreciate your care, but I..."

"We feel with our whole bodies", one of the witches said, interrupting Talia's protest. "How will nature and energies touch you if you are covered in so many layers?"

Talia understood that logic, and as a she-wolf, she should be fine going around naked, but still... that's not how she grew up.

After some negotiations, the witches produced another long and narrow piece of fabric that will be tied around Talia's chest to cover her nipples and give her girls a squeeze, so they don't jiggle when she moves.

Talia wondered if Damon would be OK with her attending an event so scarcely dressed. She thought how it was silly that she craved his approval when he was not there, and he didn't even know who she was.

The celebration was held in an open courtyard that was connected to the garden where the Silver Flaming fountain was.

Long tables were arranged with benches on each side, and with more than a dozen of witches bringing out food, the area was set up within minutes.

Everyone cheered and clapped when Axel and Yasmin stepped out, with Axel holding Yasmin close to him, unwilling to put even an inch of distance between them.

The couple wore matching clothes which consisted of a string around the waist and two cloths, one in front and one in the back, just enough to cover private areas. Axel's shoulders were wide and his whole body ripped, and Yasmin walked proudly next to him with her chest sticking out.

Talia admired Yasmin's courage. If that was Talia, she would shrink and try to hide behind Damon.

Both Yasmin and Axel had white flowers in their hair and flower garlands around their necks. They looked festive.

Talia pushed emerging memories of the Summer Solstice festival aside. She didn't want to think about dancing around the bonfire under Damon's watchful gaze, or when he found her in the town square under the clocktower, or when she gave him the garland of flowers after Damon asked her if there was a guy she liked more than she liked him. He said that he will cherish it forever and he asked her to help him preserve it. And then he kissed her. Their first kiss.

This was not the time. Now she needed to focus on Axel and Yasmin, at least for the duration of this event.

As Axel and Yasmin approached the table where Talia was, Talia noticed their skin shining like someone rubbed them with oil. The couple had symbols on their arms, chest, and face written with golden powder, making them sparkle under torches that were lit to illuminate the area, but the brightest were their smiles that reached their eyes.

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Axel's eyes locked with Talia's and his hold on Yasmin tightened. Somehow, his vision tunneled on Talia who was there all alone, without Damon, and his chest tightened at the thought of how he would feel if someone took Yasmin from him. The mental image was unbearable, yet there was Talia, looking at him with a gentle smile, happy for him, like she was not dying on the inside.

He realized that Talia was the true Alpha, able to endure personal pain and do the right thing. Would he be able to hold himself with such grace if that was him standing there? Axel was not sure.

"Hi, Talia...", Axel greeted Talia awkwardly when they reached the elevated table that was for important people. He was feeling guilty for leaving Talia on her own for such a long time when he came with her to protect her and help her get Damon back. "I'm sorry for..."

"Don't.", Talia interrupted him. "I am happy for you. I truly am. There is no better thing in life than a mate, Axel. Cherish her."

Axel gave Talia a small nod and looked at Yasmin. "I will. Let me introduce you." He pulled Yasmin closer to him. "This is Talia, my sister..."

Talia noticed the redness on Yasmin's neck, a sign that Axel's mark was forming there, and Talia hoped that Evanora won't make a fuss about it. Surely, by now she accepted that her daughter found her mate.

Talia remembered that after Kai marked Meg, Meg was unconscious and her whole body was glowing. Meg later told her that she got the ability to break stuff and that it took her weeks to learn how to control it. Yasmin was not glowing or doing anything strange, and Talia wondered if the lack of odd things was because they didn't happen, or maybe because Yasmin could control it. After all, she was a witch. Axel should have his powers awakened also, and Talia wondered if it would be wise to ask about it or if that was a secret. She didn't want to appear too nosy.

After exchanging pleasantries with Talia, Yasmin and Axel turned to Evanora who greeted them with a stiff smile.

Evanora was seated in the center of the main table. Yasmin was on Evanora's left, and next were Axel and Talia. On Evanora's right was Cornelia, followed by two other priestesses that Talia assumed had a higher ranking compared to the others.

The main table stood out because it was elevated compared to the others, and the seven people seated there were facing the courtyard with no one on the opposite side of the table to block the view.

Talia smiled at the sight of Axel who immediately started piling up food on Yasmin's plate, and again, the scene reminded her of Damon, the cheeky Alpha who would feed her, hold her hand, and not miss any opportunity to get closer and sneak a kiss.

The dinner started without speeches or introductions.

Talia's eyes scanned the faces of witches who ate with gusto, occasionally glancing at Yasmin and Axel and giggling, and some looked at them with longing and maybe with a hint of jealousy.

Yasmin and Axel were lost in their bubble, feeding each other and talking in whispers.

Talia didn't see Cassandra, and she didn't want to ask where the Oracle was. After her talk with Evanora, Talia concluded that the less she knew about Cassandra, the better it will be because if she finds out that the woman was in danger, Talia won't be able to sit still and that would cause problems.

She needed to focus on what was important: spells, potions, Damon, but first... she needed to force this delicious food down her throat or risk collapsing from hunger.

Chapter 485 The blessed union

The last streaks of sunlight disappeared under the oncoming darkness, and the Silver Flame fountain glowed like a beacon.

At a certain point, Evanora stood up. "It is time for the ceremony. Let us gather next to the fire." Her voice was not loud, yet every witch in attendance left food and chatter, and moved toward the fountain.

Seeing that everyone was going there, Talia also followed.

Yasmin and Axel stood in front of the fountain and held hands, and Evanora and Cornelia were with them. All witches circled the area while leaving space for the four people.

"Come here...", Evanora gestured to Talia to stand next to Axel.

With Talia in place and Cornelia next to Yasmin, Evanora stood in the middle and turned to speak to the witches gathered.

"Yasmin has been blessed with a soulmate. I am happy that her man is determined to take good care of her and won't leave her behind..."

Talia glanced at Axel questionably, and his confident expression told her that he had this discussion with Evanora already. Talia regretted not having the mind-link because she would ask him about the details, but she had a feeling that it went well.

Evanora spoke about two people living in harmony with nature, and then she turned to face the fountain.

"Bless your children and guide them through life...", Evanora spoke solemnly, and witches burst into the murmurs as the fountain's flames danced more wildly.

Ripples of silvery light increased their pace noticeably as they pulsed from the middle of the fountain toward the edge, and the light reflected on the statue of the woman and the wolf, making it appear like they came alive.

"Step inside.", Evanora instructed Yasmin and Axel, and Axel scooped Yasmin into his arms and walked over the edge to step into the water.

Yasmin smiled dreamily as she slid down Axel's body to stand next to him, the delicious sparks that prickled her skin wherever they touched made her giddy.

Yasmin loved how strong Axel was. They made love for hours and he did most of the work, yet he still carried her like she weighed nothing. She was proud that such a man was hers.

Axel gazed into Yasmin's eyes, with his brain still high on the love-struck sensation, unsure if this was really happening, but he was confident that he didn't want to snap out of this daze because he was never so happy.

Evanora continued murmuring chants in an ancient language, and witches burst into excited murmurs when ripples in the water started breaking and moving toward Axel and Yasmin to converge and reassemble around the couple.

It was magical.

The silvery light reflected on Axel and Yasmin, climbing up their skin, and making them glow. Literally.

The two of them held each other and looked like ethereal statues.

"The heavens accept your union.", Evanora said with a hint of sadness in her voice. "I hope your lives are blessed and full of happiness."

Axel and Yasmin smiled at each other and then Axel leaned while Yasmin got on her toes, and their lips met into a long and sensual kiss that made witches giggle and sigh.

"The ceremony is over!", Evanora exclaimed at the witches. "You can return to your tables and resume feast until morning."

The witches started dispersing in a good mood, chattering excitedly about the event they just witnessed.

Axel and Yasmin stepped out of the fountain, their skin still shimmering in silvery light.

Cornelia and Talia were still there, and Evanora turned to Axel and Yasmin. "I have something to say. I hope you cherish what you have and always put each other first." Evanora turned to Axel. "As my gift to you, I announce that our deal is completed. A mate for a mate. Take care of my daughter, Axel."

Axel looked at Evanora's extended hand, and he reached for a handshake. The moment their palms touched, white light burst upon contact, and Axel felt like some shackles that were around him disappeared.

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"You made a deal with my mother?", Yasmin asked under her breath. She obviously didn't know about that. "A mate for a mate?"

Axel looked at Yasmin guiltily, but she was not looking at him anymore even though her hold on him tightened.

"What were you thinking?", Yasmin asked Evanora. "He is my soulmate. What would happen if I didn't come to your office last night, if we didn't meet in time, if we met too late...?"

"What's done is done.", Evanora snapped.

"No, mother.", Yasmin said, her voice breaking into sobs. "Even if Axel is not my mate, he would be someone else's. You can't make such deals."

Evanora narrowed her eyes at Yasmin. "That's what we do, Yasmin. We are witches. We make deals. The same rules apply to everyone. If you only take without paying the price, you will find yourself on a path filled with darkness. Besides, it's not like I forced him, he offered himself."

Yasmin turned to look at Axel. "You offered yourself?"

Axel really didn't know what was the big deal. "My sister is here because her mate is under the effect of black runes. I owe her a lot and I thought that paying in her place was the right thing to do." That was the short version.

Since they met, Axel and Yasmin were mostly engaged in carnal activities, and they didn't really talk. Now that he thought about this, Axel realized that he should tell her about his family situation, about the pack, and... so many other things.

"Don't blame him.", Talia said to Yasmin. "Axel is a good man, always ready to help, even if that might harm him. I hope you will be by his side from now on to stop him from doing reckless things."

Yasmin relaxed a bit at Talia's words, and she took Axel's hand, tugging him away with, "We need to talk." Talia wondered if Axel was in trouble, but then she saw him scooping Yasmin into his arms who giggled while wrapping her arms around his neck. He was walking away from the party, and toward the area where rooms were. Yup, they won't be talking much.

"Thank you for freeing Axel from the deal.", Talia said to Evanora who was still there with Cornelia by her side. "I don't know about Axel, but I plan to leave as soon as the potion and spells are done."

"That will be after breakfast.", Evanora said. "You will need to learn the spells."

"I will do it tonight." Talia had no intention to sleep.

"Yasmin expressed her desire to follow Axel through the portal.", Evanora said. "I believe they will join you." She turned to look at the fountain. "By bringing the flames back, you brought life to this coven. Everyone is hopeful. We didn't have this atmosphere in a long time. You also opened the portal, pulling us out of isolation. As a thank you, I will grant you a wish."

Talia blinked when she realized that Evanora was waiting for her to speak up about that wish.

Chapter 486 Back at the portal [Bonus chapter]

Talia wondered what to ask for.

Can she ask for Damon to be freed from the effect of black runes? No. If there was a shortcut, Evanora wouldn't go through the trouble of creating potions and spells. Or maybe she would, just to make it seem more difficult and to tangle Talia in that sketchy deal.

How about for Marcy to go back home? Or for Alpha Edward to give up on coveting what Damon has?

Talia realized that she couldn't ask for too much, but she also didn't want to ask for something small either. She should be careful with what words she uses because it needed to be something Evanora will fulfill without games, and it should be something that Talia needed. With that, she got an idea.

"A moving spell.", Talia said. "I need a way to quickly move within the same realm. Once is enough." As soon as she exits the portal into the human realm, she would teleport to the territory of the Dark Howlers pack.

Evanora frowned. "Isn't your wish too simple? You can ask for anything."

"This is what I want. Or is this too much in exchange for bringing life back to your Coven?"

Evanora's frown deepened at Talia's words and it took her a few long seconds to respond. "The teleportation spell can't be given. It is something we practice for years. Ask for something else."

Talia was confused. Was the movement spell too much or too less? It seemed that this was just another Evanora's scheme to get Talia tangled into a sketchy deal.

Talia was about to say how she doesn't want anything when Cornelia spoke, "I can go with her."

Evanora turned to glare at Cornelia who quickly explained, "I will help Talia move wherever she needs, and at the same time, I will ensure that Yasmin is doing well, and they don't close the portal."

Talia had a feeling that Cornelia was eager to go and explore, and maybe meet her soulmate. Talia saw Cornelia looking at Yasmin and Axel with longing, so the witch definitely had an ulterior motive. But Talia liked Cornelia who was friendly and chatty, so she decided to support the idea.

"Cornelia can be the pioneer in exploring other realms and she can tell you about the differences and what to expect when someone else from your coven decides to pass through the portal."

"Can you guarantee Cornelia's safety, Alpha Talia?", Evanora asked stiffly.

Talia paused at the way Evanora addressed her.

Evanora smiled smugly. "Did you think I won't figure out that you are the real Alpha and not your brother? With your power, he can be an Alpha only if you allow it to happen."

Talia didn't want to explain how she didn't see herself as an Alpha. It was not important.

"Yes. I will guarantee Cornelia's safety.", Talia agreed solemnly. "But let me warn you, in the realm where Axel and Yasmin are going, the time flows in about the same way as here. In the realm that's my destination, time flows thirty times slower than here. Every day there will be thirty here, so don't be surprised if it takes a few months for Cornelia to return with news."

Evanora nodded at this. "That's acceptable." They were alone for centuries. A few months was nothing. "What about your wish? Or are you forfeiting this chance?"

"Does it come with a time limit?", Talia asked back.

Evanora's eyebrows shot up in surprise when she understood, "You want to keep your wish for later?"

"Yes.", Talia confirmed.

"Alright. When you think of something, let me know."

Talia exhaled in relief. She had a hunch that Evanora's intention was to trap her, but Talia didn't want anything other than to get Damon back. Talia was glad to have this wish from Evanora, but she truly hoped she will never use it. Actually, she was hoping for witches to owe her, and that gave her another idea.

"Do you have other portals in your realm?", Talia asked, catching Evanora by surprise. From the stories she overheard in the kitchen, Talia understood that the biggest issue for witches was isolation. There were no other people besides them.

Talia explained to Evanora and Cornelia how in the territory of the Midnight Guardians pack there are several portals, but only one was open and now there were two. "If you have more portals, I can try opening them. Cassandra has knowledge of portals, so you might want to talk to her also."

"We will think about it.", Evanora responded cryptically, but Talia guessed that Evanora was interested.

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With Talia memorizing mysterious chants, the night passed quickly.

Axel and Yasmin joined for breakfast that was organized in the same courtyard where the last night's party was.

After they finished their meal, a lot of women gathered to escort the group of four back to the portal.

Talia didn't see Cassandra, but she knew that the Oracle was staying with the witches. She didn't want to be bothered with Cassandra's fate. They already had so many things to juggle, and Cassandra was the one who initiated the deal with the witches, and she will need to honor it, for better or for worse. But Cassandra made the deal with Cornelia who was leaving, so Talia was not sure how that will work. Can the deal be transferred? She decided to ask about it later.

The mood was lively as the people moved through the sparse forest. Witches surrounded Talia and were full of questions about what was on the other side of the portal.

Talia was nervous and really not in the mood for chatter, but she didn't want to offend the witches.

Talia wanted to ask why they were not using a teleportation spell to reach the portal, but then she saw Evanora's conflicting gaze glued to Yasmin's back, and she understood that this was Evanora's way of prolonging her time with her daughter.

Eventually, they reached a U-shaped rock formation where the portal was.

"We will visit you soon.", Axel said to Evanora. "Until then, please, don't come through the portal unless it's absolutely necessary. I will station guards on my side, to ensure no one trespasses and I suggest you do the same."

Evanora's brows came together in a frown. "Do you think your people will be hostile?"

Axel shook his head. "Hostile, no. Ignorant, yes. I want to tell my pack about you and this realm. When we come next time, I will bring a few more people who have my trust with the goal to discuss rules or regulations for using the portal going forward. There is a reason why we keep our location a secret from outsiders. You have a lot of unclaimed land here and a lot of beautiful women with mysterious powers. Each of those is tempting and can muddle someone's reasoning. I'm not saying that my people are vile, but I want to make sure things run smoothly and we don't offend each other just because of initial excitement. Over time, if things run smoothly, we can revisit this topic."

Evanora agreed. It made sense. She appreciated that Axel was thinking about those things. Evanora was consumed by the fact that Yasmin was leaving and her anxiousness about the possibility of the portal closing and separating them forever, that she didn't think about the safety of her coven.

Axel turned toward the portal and he imagined how Kai and Tyler will react when they see Yasmin sticking to him.

He will show her proudly and shout, 'THIS IS MY MATE! YOUR LUNA!'

Axel's dreamy smile faded after a second when he realized that Yasmin's outfit was technically non-existent.

They were surrounded by women, with him being the only male, so he didn't think much about it, but it will be different on the other side of that portal. He could clearly see in his mind numerous guys staring at Yasmin with lecherous gazes and drooling.

Well, that's not happening!

Anger rippled through Axel, making his Alpha aura swell and all witches looked at him warily while taking a step back on an instinct.

Chapter 487 The connection between the Alpha and the pack

Without explaining the unexpected change in his mood, Axel reached into his backpack and pulled out a t-shirt.

"What...?", Yasmin squeaked in confusion when soft cotton fabric went over her head.

"No one gets to see you like that.", Axel said with all the seriousness in the world. "You are mine."

Yasmin gaped at Axel, wondering if an evil spirit possessed him. Why did he suddenly turn hostile?

Talia was happy to see that Axel was so possessive. It meant that he truly cared about Yasmin.

Unfortunately for Axel, Yasmin's confused expression was a giveaway that the poor girl didn't see Axel's behavior as care. Talia understood Yasmin completely because before she knew that Damon was her mate, she thought of him as overbearing, unreasonable, and mentally unstable.

Talia touched Yasmin's shoulder to get her attention. "Axel is protective of you. On the other side of the portal we dress differently, and we cover certain parts of our body." Talia gestured to her t-shirt and jeans.

"Axel, you mean well, but keep in mind that Yasmin doesn't know what's on the other side of the portal. Let me talk to her, woman-to-woman."

Axel grunted in response, and he approved when Talia got light blue shorts from her backpack.

Talia handed the shorts to Yasmin. "Put these on." When Yasmin didn't move, Talia explained, "You mated with Axel so you should know that some parts of your body are more sensitive than the others."

Yasmin's cheeks turned pink, and she nodded at Talia's words.

"These...", Talia gestured to her chest and her crotch area. "Are only for your mate to see and touch. Think of this as Axel protecting you."

Yasmin didn't get it. "Protecting me?"

Talia thought about how to explain this.

"How would you feel if", Talia pointed at one random witch from the group that followed them there, "she sticks close to Axel, wants to touch him, and..." Talia stopped talking when Yasmin frowned. "I see you got the idea. Axel is an Alpha, and his instincts are to protect you from any man touching you or looking at you in the wrong way. Please, wear this, or any man stealing glances at your body will feel Axel's wrath."

With this, Yasmin accepted the shorts and shimmied into them.

After struggling with the buttons, Yasmin observed her outfit. Axel's t-shirt was oversized for her, and it hung on her like a loose mini dress that covered Talia's shorts completely. She had no idea what to think of this getup.

Yasmin glanced at Axel. "Is this fine?"

Axel's lips lifted into a half-smile. "Perfect. Just like you." Actually, he would give her longer pants to cover those gorgeous legs, but he knew that even this was too much for her, so he let it slide.

Yasmin looked at Axel dreamily. "Would you punish any man who looks at me in the wrong way?"

"Yes.", Axel said without missing a beat. "You are mine." His arm snaked around her waist, and he pulled her to stick to him completely.

Talia turned to look at Cornelia who was also covered only with two skimpy fabrics below her waist level. "Let me get you something to wear."

Cornelia cocked an eyebrow. "Why? I don't have a mate. Or will me going like this offend someone?"

Talia blinked. "No. No one will be offended." Actually, people will be glad to see such a fantastic body on display. Talia knew that witches are something like nudists, not seeing any need to cover up, but the outside was different. On the other hand, werewolves are used to nudity, and they will teleport to the Dark Howlers pack, so humans won't see her... "You can go like that if you want."

"As long as no one is offended, I will go like this." Cornelia didn't want to cover up if not necessary.

With this, they were ready to go.

Elanor gave Yasmin a hug and a last piece of advice, "Make sure to stay close to Axel. Don't get separated in the portal."

"Why?", Talia asked and then her eyes widened when she thought of something scary, "Does the portal have different exit points?"

"No.", Elanor responded. "The portal will take you to the same place, but the difference might be in when."

Talia was not sure if she heard this right. "Can you explain that?"

"The portal connects two places while twisting the time it takes to cross that distance. The entry and exit points are fixed, but the time fluctuates. You step into the portal two seconds apart and could come out of it two hours apart."

Talia gaped at Evanora and then turned to Axel robotically.

"Is this true?", she asked.

Axel's brows came together while thinking about his previous experiences. He either didn't pay attention, or was very close to his companions, but this last time they passed to come here... "Cassandra went first, and I carried you through the portal less than a minute later. Cassandra was already standing there", he gestured toward the area where U-shaped rock formation opens toward the meadow. "She looked impatient, but it didn't cross my mind that maybe she was there for a long time."

"Just go closely together and it will be fine.", Evanora said. "To make sure you don't get separated more than necessary, you can hold hands."

Talia's stomach dropped. This was not about them separating, but it was about the duration of the travel. How come she didn't think about it?

Axel told her that journey through the portal is just a few seconds long, but what if it's hours, or days, or... A sense of urgency gripped Talia's heart. She thought that for Damon only two-three hours passed since he went through the portal, but what if it was more?

She was grateful that Cornelia was tagging along because the teleportation magic will definitely come in handy.

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The moment all four of them exited the portal, Axel gave coordinates to Yasmin and Cornelia who started working on a teleportation spell that will take them straight into the main house of the Midnight Guardians pack.

Axel turned to look at Talia who stood dazed on the spot.

"Are you alright?", Axel asked.

Talia put her hand over her chest. "Do you feel that?" Her whole body was buzzing with energy like someone charged her up.

Axel smiled proudly. "What you feel are hopes and support of our pack members. You are an Alpha with a pack now, and your pack will amplify your strength and abilities. The effect is the most potent when we are in our territory. It's addictive. That is why most Alphas stay within the boundaries of their territory while craving to expand it."

"Is that why Damon is the strongest Alpha?"

"There is genetics and training, but yes, his pack members believe in him and follow him willingly and that adds to his strength."

Talia remembered how at the Alpha ceremony, a connection opened between her and the Midnight Guardians pack members, but she didn't feel the energies like now.

Chapter 488 Back at the Midnight Guardians pack

Seeing that Yasmin and Cornelia were busy drawing a diagram on a small clearing, Talia asked Axel in a whisper, "About your power... did you get it?"

"I felt it awakening, but I don't know what it is yet.", Axel responded with a sour expression. "Maybe I used it, but I'm not aware of it. Not everyone can do flashy things that glow or explode." He heard stories of how some pack members took months until they figured out what their ability was.

Talia remembered what Axel told her about some useless abilities. "Maybe you can attach and detach your limbs at will."

Axel grimaced. "You are having fun with this, aren't you?"

"A little bit.", Talia admitted.

Axel snorted, but he was not angry. He liked that Talia had this cheeky side and he hoped to see more of it. "I will mind link Kai, Meg, and Tyler to meet us in the study. And I also want to set up rotations of guards around this place..." His eyes lost focus and Talia knew that he was communicating through the mind-link.

After a few chants, Talia, Axel, Yasmin, and Cornelia found themselves in the study of the main building in the Midnight Guardians pack.

Cornelia and Yasmin were curious about everything, and Axel told them to feel free to look around until Tyler, Kai, and Meg arrive.

"Do you want to call home?", Axel asked Talia.

Talia paused. With all the mess happening, she forgot about the possibility of a phone call. Whom should she call? Maya and Caden? What would she say? Would it make any difference?

"No.", Talia said.

"Are you sure?"

Talia confirmed. "With Cornelia's help, I will be there before Damon." She didn't want to waste time explaining things over the phone.

"Do you have a map of the human realm?", Talia asked Axel. "I need you to point at the location of the Dark Howlers pack, and where you came to pick us up when I called."

Axel frowned at this second piece of information. "You are not going to the packhouse?"

"No. Damon will be there and if I appear, it will only cause a commotion."

"Didn't you say that you will reach there before him?", Axel asked.

"I hope I will get there before him, but if he is already there, I need to assess the situation and approach him carefully. I trust his Betas and several other people in the packhouse, however, if Damon catches me talking to them before he remembers me, he might isolate them, and that will backfire."

Talia had two things, a spell that will remove black runes, but that can be used on the night of the full moon, which Talia hoped was still a few days away, yet not too far away. Until then, she can suppress the effect of black runes with a potion, but Talia was confident that Damon wouldn't take the potion willingly. She needed a plan.

"What do you think Damon will do when he sees you?", Axel asked.

Talia pressed her lips into a line at the memory of Damon pushing her away with disgust obvious on his face. "I'm not sure. In the best case, he will kick me out. And in the worst-case... a dungeon?" Or maybe he just snaps her neck.

"Why don't you go as the Alpha of the Midnight Guardians pack?", Axel suggested. "He won't dare to be hostile."

Talia rejected that idea. "Damon won't shrink in front of authority. He suspected that I did something devious to him, if I show up there as an Alpha, he might see that as a declaration of war. In case things go wrong, I don't want to implicate this pack."

And she didn't want people to know that she was the official Alpha of the Midnight Guardians Pack. Now that Axel found Yasmin, Talia's intention was to make Axel the only Alpha, but with all the things going on, she decided to postpone that talk with Axel for later.

Axel didn't like that Talia was planning to go there as a mate Damon forgot about, but he understood Talia's intention. He would also do everything in his power to keep the pack out of that mess.

If Damon loses his temper, he might imprison Talia and start a war without giving her a chance to fix things. This mental image made Axel's insides churn, but he pushed the discomfort away with the thought that Talia was stronger than he was, and it was obvious that she had a plan.

Axel got a large map that was rolled and standing upright in a corner. "What are we looking for here?"

"Shaman's house." With Mindy and Gideon onboard, Talia can come into the packhouse and stay there without being noticed and take it from there. "He lives in the middle of a forest. However, on our way to the cabin, we passed the intersection that leads there, so if you show me Darkbourne and where you picked me up with your father, I will be able to estimate the location of his home."

"Give me a few hours to introduce Yasmin, and then..."

"No.", Talia interrupted Axel. "I can't wait for that long, and you should stay here."

Axel didn't approve. "You will need help. This is beyond just removing a spell from Damon. The Red Moon pack won't accept this without a fight."

Talia agreed with this, but... "The fight won't come for at least a few days, and that will give you and Yasmin a few months here. You won't leave Yasmin here, and if she bumps into humans right away, it might be too much. Let me handle Damon and I promise to call you if there is trouble with other packs."

Talia saw Axel frowning, and she continued before he could object again, "I'm sure you felt the unease of our people from the moment we stepped into this territory. They believe in us, however, they are also anxious because they lost their Alphas and we left on the same day. Be here and show them that you have your Luna and that they have strong leaders. Tell them about witches and introduce Yasmin to this realm. Besides that, there is also the task of watching over previous Alphas and making sure they don't stir trouble, and you should come up with rules about crossing the portal for witches. I know you wanted us to do this together, and I promise to join you as soon as Damon is free from the effects of black runes. Until then, I know that Meg and Yasmin will get along great."

With every next argument, Axel's motivation to go with Talia deflated. He knew she was right. Even his parents divided work into internal and external, and he thought how that was exactly what he and Talia were doing now.

The noisy trio entered the study together, and they were all delighted to see Talia and Axel in one piece. Meg wanted to ask where did they lose Cassandra and who the two new faces were (one woman almost naked!), but then Axel dropped a bomb how Yasmin is his fated mate, and everyone forgot about the poor Oracle.

Tyler was trying mightily not to stare at Cornelia's exposed breasts, but it was hard.

Talia introduced Cornelia, "In their realm, they have only witches, all females. They believe that clothing blocks their connection with nature, so they are scarcely dressed..."

Tyler swallowed hard. Other than scarcely dressed women, he didn't hear anything else. "When are we going to visit there?"

Talia shook her head at the Gamma. "Axel will tell you more. Cornelia, I need you to take us to the portal that leads to the human realm. Once we pass through it, I will give you another destination."

"You are leaving already?", Meg asked with disapproval obvious in her voice.

"With Damon out there, I can't stay. I will be back as soon as I can..." With Damon. Hopefully.

Meg and Kai wanted to join, but Talia refused them with a promise that she will call if she is in a pinch. She was grateful to see Axel, Yasmin, Kai, Meg, and Tyler eager to help. And Cornelia was there also.

The only one missing to make this scene heartwarming was Damon, and she was determined to get him back.

Chapter 489 Brawl in Gideon's garden

~ The Dark Howlers pack ~

Talia looked around while trying to figure out where Cornelia teleported them. She got her phone and after powering it on, Talia's face lit up when she saw the signal.

"Alright!", Talia exclaimed excitedly. "We are in the human realm."

"Did you think we will end up somewhere else?", Cornelia asked dryly.

Talia smiled awkwardly and opened the app for maps. "The Shaman's place is just a bit further this way."

Talia hoped that Gideon and Mindy were home and that they were not rolling in the sheets. Interrupting them can't be good.

She remembered that Axel told her how the energy buzz from the Midnight Guardians pack will diminish when she crosses the portal, and she paid attention to that energy that bubbled somewhere in the depth of her chest. It was a bit fainter, and while in the realm of witches, Talia assumed it was just her anxiousness acting out, but now that she knew what to look for, she could definitely feel it... the Midnight Guardians were with her. Somehow, it made her feel less alone.

'Let me know when you want to open the mind-link.', Liseli spoke in Talia's head.

'Will it work through the portal?', Talia asked.

'Probably not. But you will sense when someone from the pack is nearby.'

Talia thought how that's a double-edged sword. 'Won't they be able to sense me in return?'

'Pack members don't hide from each other. And don't forget that you are the Alpha. With a little practice, you can conceal your presence while sensing others.'

Talia liked this, but... 'Let's leave that practice for later. I have too much on my hands now.'

Axel told Talia that as the time passes and she gets in tune with the connection to their pack, she will be able to identify each member and their emotional state. She found that intriguing because Damon never mentioned anything like it. Talia knew that Damon was attached to the pack, but she thought how that connection was sentimental or maybe it was a sense of duty, and nothing else.

Talia felt like the members of the Midnight Guardians pack were her family, and she had the urge to protect them and make them happy, and now she understood that Damon feels the same about the Dark Howlers pack.

'While on the topic of sensing...', Liseli spoke in a teasing tone. 'Instead of using GPS and maps on your phone, you could have just sensed your surroundings how Axel taught you.'

Talia realized that Liseli was right, but she was too embarrassed to admit it. 'Maybe next time.'

"It's very fragrant.", Cornelia commented while taking deep breaths.

"Yes. Shaman has a garden.", Talia said. "His house is this way."

Seeing that Talia was moving away from the source of the scent, Cornelia asked, "Do you mind if I check the garden first?"

Talia wanted to say that they should stick together, but then she remembered that Gideon's garden is completely open, and just in case those two were rolling in the sheets, Talia could discretely inform them that they have guests.

Besides, Cornelia was a grown witch. If anyone causes her trouble, she can turn him into a toad or something like that.

"Feel free to.", Talia said. "I will check if they are at home."

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Talia knocked on the half-open door. "Anybody home?"

"Yes, yes!", Mindy called from the kitchen and turned to see who was standing at the door.

"Lia! What brings you here?"

Mindy wore a loose shirt with half of the buttons undone. It was obviously Gideon's shirt and Mindy didn't bother with buttoning it up.

"It's a long story. Where is Gideon? I need your help."

Mindy was now in front of Talia, and she gave her a hug before starting a rain of questions.

"Why are you so serious? Where is Damon? Did something happen?"

"Gideon, Mindy.", Talia reminded her friend.

"He is outside..."

...

Gideon was squatting and tending to his garden, busy with preventing mint bush from invading thyme.

He loves mint and uses it in many concoctions he makes, but it spreads at an alarming rate. At least once a week Gideon would go and remove branches that went down to take roots and expand.

Gideon heard soft steps only when they were close, and he didn't bother to see who it was.

"Did you come to check on me, princess? Or is the lunch done?"

Mindy said that it was her turn to cook and that she will call him when it was ready, so he used this breather to tend to the garden.

After two seconds of silence, Gideon realized that something was off, and he turned to see who was behind him.

A chocolate-colored beauty stood there and observed him with curiosity, but he had difficulty maintaining eye contact because she was nearly naked.

He cursed under his breath. With his head stuck in the mint bush, he didn't pick up her scent, and he didn't hear her until she was too close. What if she was hostile?

He calmed down a bit when he didn't sense a wolf in her, and he concluded that she was human. Obviously unarmed, and that made her harmless.

Cornelia glanced around. "This is a nice garden. Camassia could use more water, and you should consider replanting Bleeding Heart, so it gets partial shade. She doesn't like full sun."

Gideon realized that the woman was knowledgeable about plants. He was considering replanting the Bleeding Heart, but he had a feeling that she was not here to discuss gardening.

Gideon cleared his throat and stood up to stand in slow motion. "Can I help you?"

"Are you Gideon, the Shaman?", she asked.

"Yes. And you are?"

"Cornelia, the Priestess."

Gideon's eyes darted over her almost-naked form. He never heard of priestesses going around exposed like that. "What religion, if I may ask?"

Cornelia stifled a laugh, making her two peaks jiggle in a way that can't be ignored. "Religion?" She was about to say her next word, but a ferocious growl came from the side.

"No! Mindy!"

Talia's shout was too late because Mindy already tackled Cornelia and the two tumbled until they stopped in a patch of poppies with Mindy on top of Cornelia.

"Stay away from my mate!", Mindy growled and raised her hand to claw at Cornelia, but her movement was blocked when Gideon grabbed her wrist.

"Why are you defending this vixen?", Mindy struggled against Gideon's hold who was now pulling her away from Cornelia. "Is she your lover?"

"She is human and seems lost.", Gideon said in a low voice, hoping that Cornelia won't hear him.

"Who cares!?", Mindy was livid. "If you see a half-naked guy approaching me like that, would you be fine with it just because he is human!?"

Gideon looked at Mindy helplessly. She had a point, but it's not like he was about to do anything to Cornelia. He was also caught by surprise, alright? And the fact that Mindy was still struggling to fight Cornelia turned him on. His pumpkin-infused princess was fierce!

Talia went to Cornelia. "I'm sorry for this. If I knew..."

"It's OK.", Cornelia said while pushing herself into a seated position. "She just caught me by surprise. That's all. You warned me that people might act strangely when they see me, but I never assumed they will attack me outright. You should have told me that your females are savage."

"Who is savage!?! You bitch!"

Cornelia shot a glare at Mindy who was heaving from anger and ready to throw her next insult.

With a wave of Cornelia's finger, silvery light shot into Mindy's mouth.

Mindy panicked. Her mouth was opening and closing, but no sounds were heard.

Gideon cupped Mindy's cheeks and forced her to look at him. "Calm down. Tell me what's going on."

"She can't.", Cornelia spat. She stood up and looked at Mindy smugly. "I am a witch, not a bitch."

Talia pinched the roof of her nose. This didn't start well.

Chapter 490 One day less than expected

"At least she didn't turn you into a toad.", Talia said to Mindy who was pouting on the side.

After some convincing, Cornelia removed the mum spell, allowing Mindy to talk, and Cornelia accepted to wear Talia's t-shirt after hearing why Mindy attacked her with, "I thought you said that males are possessive."

"It goes both ways, Priestess Cornelia.", Gideon said.

After Gideon found out that Cornelia is a Priestess among witches, Gideon had to act with respect. Actually, he was super curious to find out everything about Cornelia and the Coven from where she was coming, but he knew that would only piss off Mindy, so he kept those questions for later.

Gideon made tea for everyone and gestured that they sit at the dining table. Mindy was unwilling to sit with Cornelia, but she also didn't want to let the witch close to Gideon. In a show of ownership, Mindy sat on Gideon's lap and leaned on Gideon while glaring in silent warnings at Cornelia.

Cornelia didn't like Mindy's attitude which reminded her of a child who was pouting.

Talia couldn't think in such a stiff atmosphere. She needed her allies working together and not going at each other's throats.

"Cornelia, Mindy attacked you because she saw you as being too friendly with her mate. Their mate bond is fresh, and they are still sensitive about others approaching them.", Talia said, and she turned to Mindy. "Mindy, Cornelia is a witch. Where she comes from, they don't cover their bodies because they want to feel the energies of nature without the obstruction of clothing. Her intention was not to seduce Gideon."

Talia's eyes were moving from Mindy to Cornelia as she continued, "Can the two of you accept that what happened was a misunderstanding and we can move on without me fearing you will start a fight?"

"There will be no fighting.", Cornelia said. "If I feel any malicious intent, I will seal much more than her voice."

Mindy glared at Cornelia. "Sure, no fighting. As long as she stays away from my mate and doesn't cast any spells on me again or on my mate. He is mine."

Gideon's chest swelled when he saw how possessive Mindy was. He approved, and the way Mindy's cheeks flushed when he squeezed her hip told him that she got the message. He will reward her for this, later.

"I assume you are here with Priestess Cornelia for a reason.", Gideon said to Talia.

"Yes. Damon and I went through marking and..."

"Where is your mark?", Mindy interrupted Talia whose neck was obviously clean.

Talia decided to omit non-important parts. "I marked him."

Mindy gaped at Talia, and she turned to look at Gideon who didn't seem to be surprised. "You knew about this?"

"I had a feeling that Talia's wolf is more powerful than Damon's.", Gideon said and cocked an eyebrow at Talia. "But you are stronger than the last time we met. Much stronger."

Talia really didn't want to go into details. "Can we focus on why we are here?"

"Please, do.", Mindy said and motioned with her fingers like she was zipping her mouth closed. She will press Talia for more information later.

"I marked Damon, and after that, he was not waking up in the morning, and he had a fever, and I panicked. Axel told me about an incident in their pack when something went wrong during marking, so I called him. I thought he will give me advice on what to do, but he was nearby and came in person. That's how Damon and I ended up in the Midnight Guardians pack. Unfortunately, Alpha Sophia and Alpha Isaac thought that Damon was getting too powerful, and their Oracle used dark magic to suppress his power. Axel, Kai, Meg, and Tyler helped me get Damon out of there, but not before he was affected.", Talia said in one breath. She practiced this trimmed-down version of the story and she feared that if they interrupt her, she will mess it up.

Talia took a deep breath and said, "When Damon woke up, he seemed fine except for the fact that he couldn't remember me and he left."

Mindy and Gideon stared at Talia. She just said how two Alphas acted with malicious intent against their Alpha. That's war. And then she said how Damon had memory loss!

"Where is Alpha Damon now? Can he remember you?", Mindy asked.

"I believe he is on his way here. As for remembering me... No. That's why Cornelia is here with me. She will help me dispel the dark magic, but the ritual can be performed on the night of the full moon. Until

then, I have a potion that will suppress the effect of the dark magic, but I need your help to alert others and trick Damon to take the potion. Can you get me into the packhouse? I'm sure that Maya will help."

"What about Alpha Sophia and Alpha Isaac?", Gideon asked grimly. He couldn't believe that they made a hostile move against Damon and allowed him to leave. As Alphas, the duo definitely knew that their actions will start a war.

"They are not important.", Talia said. "Axel is there handling the situation. But we need to help Damon. When is the full moon?"

"Two days.", Mindy responded.

Talia did mental calculations and her eyes widened. That was one day less than she thought she had!

"Is Damon back already?", Talia asked.

"We don't have insight into what's going on in the packhouse.", Gideon said.

"Screw the protocol!", Mindy squeezed through her teeth, redirecting her previous anger from Cornelia toward Damon. "Let's go there! We will beat up Damon until he remembers what's important. How can he forget his mate? And when we are done with him, we will skin alive those shitty Alphas who made Talia suffer like this!"

Talia was glad that Mindy was so fired up, and she expected this from her firecracker friend, but...
"Acting rashly won't help. We need to get into the packhouse without alerting Damon that something is wrong."

"That's easy.", Mindy said impatiently. "In two days is the pack run. We will ask for rooms in the packhouse with an explanation that it will be more convenient to get things ready for the ceremony when we are there."

Talia liked this idea. She turned to Gideon. "You can mind-link Maya about this. Tell her that I'm back, but not to tell anyone about it, and... ask if Damon is already there. Also, if any of the guests are still present."

Gideon's eyes lost focus, and Mindy asked Talia, "What will you do when you reach the packhouse?"

"I want to know who all is there and who can help us."

Gideon's attention was back on Talia, "Maya is preparing two rooms. One for me and Mindy and the second one for my cousin.", Gideon said, and glanced at Mindy to gauge her reaction. "Maya asked who Cornelia is and I couldn't exactly say that she is a witch."

Chapter 491 Gaps in memory (1) [Bonus chapter]

Talia approved of Gideon's idea. "We can go with the story that Cornelia is your distant cousin, for now. What else?"

"I told Maya that due to an accident Damon has memory issues and that you will explain once you reach there. Out of guests, everyone left except the group from the Red Moon pack."

Mindy sucked in a sharp breath. "Marcy and Nora."

"Nora is in the dungeon and Marcy is in a separate house.", Talia said, and she hoped that was still the case. She turned to Gideon, and asked reluctantly, "What about Damon?"

"Three hours ago, Alpha Damon wanted to know if there were any immediate dangers to the pack and closed himself in the study. Maya assumed he had urgent matters to deal with and that you were resting upstairs. I told her to keep it a secret that you are back..."

Talia's ears were buzzing, and she didn't hear the rest. Damon was already there! She was running out of time.

"Cornelia, can you prepare a spell to take us to the packhouse as soon as the rooms are ready?"

Gideon's eyes lit up. A spell to move them to the packhouse? He really wanted to see that, but he didn't want to upset Mindy. The worst he could do was to make his mate insecure. Gideon pushed his spell-induced excitement down.

"Is there a clearing outside I could use?", Cornelia asked Gideon.

"Behind the house. Use any place that might be suitable.", Gideon responded, slightly disappointed that she won't do it right there for him to watch.

When Cornelia left to find a spot for the spell, Mindy reached over the table to give Talia's hand a squeeze. "Don't worry, Lia. We will help."

"Princess", Gideon called while pushing Mindy to stand up from his lap. "I need to pack materials. I assume we won't be back until the ceremony."

"I will pack a few changes of clothes for both of us.", Mindy said.

With that, Gideon and Mindy left the table and Talia took her phone and looked at it anxiously.

Eventually, she made a call. "Maya... Yes, it's me... I will explain later. Can you ask Zina and Dawn to come over to the room you are preparing for Gideon's cousin? I want to talk to all of you at the same time. I will need your help. If you can tell Caden that Damon has memory issues, that would be great. Try not to provoke Damon until we come up with a plan. The last thing we want is for him to lose patience and use his aura to have his way..."

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In the packhouse...

"Come in!", Damon called when someone knocked on the door of the study.

He lifted his gaze to see his Beta.

"Caden? Why didn't you use the mind-link?"

Caden shrugged. "I was here, so it was not a big deal to stop by."

Maya told him to wait until Talia comes so they find out the details, but Caden was worried when he heard that Damon has memory issues, and he came to investigate.

"I thought you won't come back until later tonight, or maybe in the morning. Actually, I thought you will come up with an excuse to stay longer."

Damon didn't understand Caden's words. Was he on a vacation? He couldn't remember.

Actually, since he came back, Damon was going through documents related to current and previous issues, and he was anxious that he couldn't remember more than half of them. The dates were there, and that was his handwriting, but he couldn't remember it. And based on the workload, it seems that he was absent for two days, no more than three. Why did it feel like it was so much longer?

It was not just the last three days, but for at least a month his memories were choppy, but he couldn't remember any accident or anything out of place. In bits and pieces he remembered, Damon could clearly see Caden, Maya, Maddox, Tony, and many others talking to him like everything was normal, but Damon knew that something was wrong. Really wrong.

There was a sense of loss and emptiness that was not there before, and it made him uneasy.

However, Damon couldn't admit that to his Beta. Not before he figures out what's going on.

"How can I stay away from here when there is so much work?", Damon said while gesturing at scattered papers on his desk.

"Maya and I got it covered. We prepared everything for your absence, and we said that if anything urgent happens, we will let you know, so you could relax."

Damon snorted. "Me? Relax?"

"Damon...", Caden called cautiously. "Why are you back early?"

Damon pushed the keyboard away and some of the documents fell on the floor, but Damon didn't pay attention to them.

"There was something urging me to come home like we have an emergency. What's the status in the packhouse?" He remembered Maddox and Tony. "Are the guests still here?"

"Most of them left. Only the group from the Red Moon pack is here."

Damon blinked and he remembered James with three teens from the Dark Howlers pack, George with Dawn sitting at the same table with Damon during the party, flashes of Nora coming onto him right in this office, and... "Is Marcy here?"

"She is in the side house, isolated, how you instructed."

Damon couldn't believe that he had a huge memory gap regarding Marcy. He remembered his time in the Red Moon pack, and Marcy coming onto him. And the next was her at the Dark Howlers pack, but it was just some random images that didn't make sense. How did she end up here?

And then there was a nonsense memory of Damon holding Marcy's hand and telling her to rest because in three days he will sort out people who tried to poison her and he will announce to the world who will be his Luna. Was he talking about Marcy as his Luna?

Damon clearly remembered Marcy's enamored gaze full of hope directed at him while bile rose in his throat because he lied. Why the hell would he lie like that? Did he lose his memories or his mind?

Damon didn't want to admit this liability to his Beta, so he asked coolly, "What's the situation with her?"

"Marcy is keeping busy with television and books, and she baked a ton of some super-sweet cookies. She will expect you tomorrow to break the news to her."

"The news? What does she hope I will say?"

"You know, that she will be your Luna.", Caden said while eyeing Damon's reaction. "It's all going according to James' plan."

Damon's brows came together. What James' plan? Did James make a plan for Marcy to be Damon's Luna, and Damon went along with it? What the hell was going on?

Chapter 492 Gaps in memory (2)

Based on Damon's lack of reaction at the mentioning of Marcy being Damon's Luna, Caden confirmed that Damon had issues with his head and that was scary because Damon was an Alpha, and the fate of the whole pack was in his hands. He needed to get Damon to open up, at least a little bit.

"We know each other for a long time, Damon. I can see that something is weighing on your mind. Talk to me. I was your wingman since middle school."

Seeing Caden's earnest expression, Damon hesitated. Caden was always by his side as his Beta and as his friend, and if not for Caden watching his back, those Elders would get him many times. Damon shook his head while thinking that this memory issue made him paranoid.

Regardless of if Marcy was a good Luna candidate or not, the mere fact that Damon was being forced into that union was making him reject her. What's the point of being an Alpha of the largest pack in North America if others can dictate his actions? No one can make Damon do anything against his will. No one!

"Can you jog my memory a bit? What stunt did Alpha Edward pull so that Marcy comes here?"

"You really don't remember?", Caden asked. It was not Alpha Edward, but it was Talia who said that Marcy should come so that Damon can deal with her. Even Caden was not sure why Damon agreed with that ridiculous request, but both Damon and Talia were confident how that was the right thing to do, yet now Damon seemed to be oblivious. This was worse than Caden thought.

Caden pointed at the second desk in the study. "Do you remember who sits there? Did you forget why you went on a vacation?"

Damon was still shaking his head. "No."

'Caden!', Maya's voice boomed in Caden's head. 'Where are you? Talia is here and we are waiting for you.'

'Coming.', Caden responded.

Maya warned him not to push Damon's buttons before they come up with a plan, but Caden had to say something.

"You went to the cabin, and asked that no one disturbs you and...", Caden paused.

It's not that Caden didn't want to tell Damon, but Caden knew that this behavior of Damon burying himself in work was Damon before Talia. Damon would spend his days stuck in the study, and when training with warriors was not enough to release steam, Damon would go and find himself a few women to keep busy for a night, and then the cycle would repeat.

If Damon truly reverted to that, he would not listen to anything related to mates, and if Caden brought up Talia, Damon would call him crazy, and probably kick him out. The only way this would work was for Damon to remember on his own.

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"Do you expect me to tell you what you are missing?", Caden asked. "Will you believe me if I tell you that you met your perfect Luna? In two days from now, we have a pack run that the two of you should lead."

"I found my Luna?", Damon asked with disbelief obvious on his face.

"Three nights ago, there was a party, Damon. All Elders were here. Do you remember that?"

Damon's nod stopped abruptly as Caden continued to rain questions, "What happened at that party? Do you remember talking about the pack run? Who was sitting by your side?"

Caden frowned at the sight of Damon who looked at him with a blank face.

"I am telling you as a friend, Damon. Instead of burying yourself in work and risking to make wrong decisions because you don't remember some things, I suggest that you face the elephant in the room. What do you remember from our trip to the Red Moon pack last month?"

Damon frowned. "I remember us going there, Luna Layla welcomed us while making excuses for the rest of her family not being present, luxurious dining room, inspecting warriors. Alpha Edward wanted me to come up with a date when Marcy will be my Luna, but I was not willing." How did he leave without committing to a date or exposing Marcy as not worthy?

"What about our trip back, Damon? How did we get back?"

Damon paused. "In a car, maybe?"

"You don't remember, do you? How far did you go with Marcy?"

An image of Marcy kneeling between his legs flashed in his mind, and her bare ass, but that was it. There was a memory of him taking Nora from behind, but it was fuzzy like it happened to someone else, and he just listened to the story.

"You didn't shag Marcy, even though she was throwing herself at you. You had more than one opportunity to have a go at her, yet you didn't. Do you know why?"

"No.", Damon admitted.

"When we came from the Red Moon pack, Cassie was here. Did you sleep with her?"

Damon remembered Cassie, but nothing more than interaction in the common areas downstairs. "I don't think so."

"How did Cassie leave? Do you remember Maya escorting Cassie after she assaulted our pack member? Who was the MVP of the tournament at the Summer Solstice festival? Who was your date at the Luna announcement party at the Lightclaw pack? Do you remember why the Steelbite pack is giving us an annual tribute? When was the last time you bedded a woman, Damon?"

Damon was frustrated. "Is there a point in these questions, Caden?"

"Since we returned from the Red Moon pack, our lives changed, your life changed, for the better. Look around and notice what is different and remember why before you hurt the people who are dear to you."

Damon couldn't believe that Caden left the study just like that.

Did Caden think that Damon didn't try? Even his wolf was not responding, damn it!

Damon knew that something was off, really off, but he couldn't put his finger on it.

But... Caden mentioned the second desk in the office, and he said that Damon should look around. Was it really possible that someone was sharing his office? It was not Caden nor Maya, they have their space. Who could it be?

Damon stood up slowly and sat on the chair in front of the second desk. The laptop was closed, there was a pencil holder, and otherwise, it was clean. He opened the drawer on the side to see a few notebooks, and when he flipped through them, he saw clumsy handwriting that would belong to a middle schooler. And the content appeared to be matching, maybe high school. Did he adopt a child? A big one?

It didn't make sense.

He opened the laptop that lit up with 'Welcome Talia'.

Damon blinked. Talia. Where did he hear that name? He remembered the girl who was with him in the cave when he woke up.

Did she infiltrate his packhouse before she kidnapped him? But then... she didn't trick only him, but Caden and probably Maya as well. What about Stephanie?

Damon's head ached and he realized that his memories were flakier than he thought. When was the last time he spoke with Stephanie in person?

He had no idea what to think about this, but he had a strong hunch that this was related to the Red Moon pack and Marcy. Caden told him to face the problem head-on. Maybe if he talks to Marcy things will fall into place?

Chapter 493 Plans with friends

In a guest bedroom on the second floor of the packhouse...

Cornelia stood next to the window and looked outside while Talia spoke about the current situation to Maya, Caden, Dawn, George, and Zina.

Mindy and Gideon were also there, listening to the same story and hoping to hear more compared to what Talia told them the first time.

Maya was upset to hear about this development, but she was a bit excited to be in the same room with a witch. "What kind of magic can she do?", Maya asked Talia while gesturing toward Cornelia.

"I'm sure you can ask about it later.", Caden said.

"Just don't get on her bad side or she will jinx you.", Mindy grumbled.

"Cornelia is not violent.", Talia said. "Cornelia is my friend, here to help, and she jinxed you because you attacked her."

Maya wanted to ask more about that incident, but Caden was now talking.

"I spoke with Damon, and I could see that he was confused. He didn't remember why he left the packhouse, why we had the party with Elders, or why Marcy is here. When I mentioned the pack run, he looked at me like I was talking in a foreign language. It seems that his memories of Talia are gone."

"I am so sorry, Talia...", Dawn said with a shaky voice, on the verge of crying. Dawn couldn't imagine how she would feel if one day George just didn't recognize her. She remembered how cold he was when he arrived; that was while his bond with Marcy was still there. Dawn's heart ached at the thought that he might ignore her like that again.

"Don't be sappy.", Zina said to Dawn. "Talia called us here because she has a plan. Right?"

"Right.", Talia said. "Thanks to Cornelia, I have a potion that will suppress the dark magic and help Damon remember. The potion is temporary, but it should last until the night of the full moon when I can perform the ritual that will purify him completely."

"How will we get him to drink it? Mix it in the water?", Dawn asked.

Talia scrunched her nose. "I'm not sure. It doesn't smell much, but it's green in color."

Dawn grimaced. "Green? How big is the dose to make it effective?"

"One big gulp will do.", Talia responded.

Zina got an idea. "Leave it to me. For dinner, I will make steak, Damon's favorite. I will mix the potion in his serving of herbal sauce. No matter how it tastes, basil and garlic will cover it up."

"I will help.", Dawn volunteered.

Talia looked at the people in the room and she was about to thank them when she saw that Caden's expression changed.

"Did something happen?", Talia asked anxiously.

"Damon asked for Marcy to be brought to the packhouse for dinner.", Caden said and turned to Maya. "He also said to prepare a room on the second floor for her."

Maya couldn't stand the idea of Marcy in the packhouse. It was just like Cassie, but this was worse because Talia was here, and Damon couldn't remember her, and Marcy's crazy obsession with being Damon's Luna overshadowed even the nastiest things that Cassie did. "I refuse. Marcy can't..."

"No.", Talia interrupted Maya. "Damon shouldn't suspect that something is off."

"I agree with Talia.", Caden said. "Damon was always cautious and he is not stupid. He might not remember Talia, but he knew from day one that Marcy was part of Alpha Edward's scheme. Damon wouldn't make Marcy his Luna even without Talia in the picture. That didn't change."

"Maybe he wouldn't make her his Luna. But what if he...", Maya gagged. "With... Marcy..."

"If you refuse to set up the room, he will start doubting you and find someone else to do it.", Talia said sadly.

"Why is Marcy here?", Mindy snapped. "Can't we send her home? Or lock her in the dungeon?"

"No.", Talia responded. "She is part of the bigger plan. Until she fulfills her role, we can't touch her."

Talia didn't like it, but Talia knew that the final part was for Marcy to make a public statement about how she is leaving the Red Moon pack and giving up on being Damon's Luna voluntarily. James got it all figured out. This should relieve the pressure Alpha Edward can exert on Damon and hopefully avoid open war.

Mindy frowned in disapproval. Why did it sound like Marcy was important? What bigger plan? But before she could say anything, George spoke.

"I will make sure Marcy and Damon don't get too close." George turned to look at Dawn. "I know that Talia is your friend, and if she is sad, you will be sad as well. I don't need to get close to Marcy in order to remind her of my existence, and I won't let her touch you. Maybe Damon doesn't remember that Marcy came here to be his Luna while having a mate, but she does."

"We also won't make it easy for her.", Caden assured Talia. "And we should get James on board, or at least warn him about what's going on here."

"No need.", George said. "James is smarter than all of us put together. The moment he sees Marcy in the packhouse, he will figure out that something is off. Besides, this is about getting Damon to remember Talia. Once we accomplish that, everything will go back to normal."

Talia was happy to see her friends gathered and willing to help.

They discussed several strategies for making Marcy's life difficult and not allowing Damon to do anything rashly, and then the people left the room one by one, each with a task.

Dawn and Zina went to start dinner preparations, Stephanie was on her way to the packhouse, and she had no objections to switching the dinner menu to steak instead of meatloaf.

Maya was in charge of getting a room for Marcy, and Caden and George went to keep an eye on Damon.

"We will be in the room next door.", Mindy told Talia and she and Gideon left.

--- ---

Cornelia waited for the door to close before speaking to Talia, "You don't trust them."

"What makes you think so?"

Cornelia smirked. "You told them that your mate doesn't remember you, but you didn't tell them that his spirit is weakened. The potion will suppress the rune for memory, but it will have limited effect on freeing his spirit from the shackles of black runes."

"There is no benefit if they know that his power is diminished. In two days, after the main spell is completed, Damon will return to normal. Some things should stay only between mates.", Talia said. Like glowing magic and talking wolves. "Why are you smiling?"

Cornelia shrugged. "Nothing. I just find you interesting. Your mate doesn't remember you, yet you still treat him with care. Don't you feel the urgency to get things back in order? You are above all these people, yet you speak to them as equal. Why don't you use your ranking?"

"I don't need subordinates. If our plan fails, we will end up in a lot of trouble, and I don't want them to think they were forced to follow orders.", Talia said. "Damon is smart and strong, but the most dangerous are his instincts." And there was a chance that he got a power or two because Talia marked

him. "If we take the risk to attack him and push the potion down his throat, he will fight back and probably call for reinforcements. Under his aura, Maya, Caden, Marcy, and Gideon will submit. Our chances for a sneak attack are close to zero. We need to approach him with caution." And she didn't want to risk hurting him.

"You don't act like a werewolf."

"I didn't grow up as one."

Cornelia smirked. "As I said, you are interesting."

Talia had a feeling that Cornelia's words had an underlying meaning, but she didn't have the brain capacity to think about it.

She was in the packhouse, and so was Damon. The mate bond urged Talia to get to Damon, but she suppressed it because if she gave in to her instincts, it would only make things worse.

Chapter 494 Encounter in the kitchen [Bonus chapter]

Cornelia stood in front of the window to look outside, and she pulled on the collar of the t-shirt she was wearing. It was obvious that Cornelia was not comfortable in the clothes that Maya brought.

"How long are we going to be stuck in here?"

Talia knew that Cornelia was eager to explore the world. She didn't cross two realms in order to be trapped in a room.

"Sorry, but until things are back to normal, we need to stay low.", Talia responded, and then she thought of something. "Dinner will be in half an hour. You can join them in the dining room."

Cornelia didn't want to move from one room to another. She wanted to go out.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea. Your mate is already confused. My presence will make it worse because I'm a stranger. It's best if we eat here."

Talia didn't think about it. "It makes sense. Do you want me to bring food here now?"

"That would give us something to do." Cornelia was planning to go out and explore the area while everyone was busy with dinner. She heard that there is a town nearby, and she really wanted to see it.

...

After confirming with Caden that Damon was in the study, Talia made her way to the kitchen.

She didn't want to bump into him even though her heart pulled her toward the study they used to share before this mess started.

Talia wondered if they will ever get a break. Talia loved Damon and she knew that he loved her back. What they had was real, yet one way or another something would come between them to prevent them from enjoying their happiness. She really didn't need anything other than Damon, but everything was a struggle like they were passing through a series of challenges that would test their commitment to each other.

So far, it was either Damon fighting for them, or they were together. This was the first time for Talia to feel all alone in this struggle, and she feared that she won't have what it takes to preserve and fight for him.

'You are not alone', Liseli said.

Talia was grateful for her wolf, otherwise, she might drown in her insecurities and hide in the corner.

Talia peeked into the kitchen to see Dawn and Zina walking out while pushing a tray with napkins, glasses, utensils, and covered serving plates.

"What can we do for you?", Dawn asked Talia and inched closer to say in a whisper. "Don't worry, Zina and I got everything figured out. The first serving will be plated in advance and we will make sure Alpha Damon gets the right one. Just sit tight and wait for good news."

"Thank you, Dawn.", Talia really needed this encouragement. "I came to grab some food for me and Cornelia."

"You have plenty on the stove or in the oven on warm.", Zina said. "Help yourself. We are going to set up the dining room."

"Where is Steph?"

"She is outside waiting for the baker who is on his way with a lemon cake for dessert.", Zina responded and walked out after Dawn.

Talia got two plates and turned toward the food. She was not hungry, but she knew that she needed to eat something as well. No one will benefit if she collapses from hunger.

The steak looked just right, and there were also salad, mashed potatoes, roasted vegetables, and gravy. Everything looked tasty and Talia confirmed that the green gravy smelled of basil and garlic.

Talia was scooping mashed potatoes when...

"Why are you here?"

Talia whipped her head toward the door from where a bitter female voice came. Marcy.

Fury swelled inside Talia.

'How dares this impostor walk here freely and act like she is the boss of everything!?', Liseli shouted in Talia's head, amplifying Talia's displeasure. 'Let's rip her head off!'

'No one will rip anything.', Talia responded.

'Are we letting her have her way?'

'Of course not. Her way would be me to leave, and that's not happening.'

Talia crossed her arms over her chest. "I could ask you the same thing."

Marcy walked into the kitchen to stand in front of Talia confidently. "Damon called me to come here."

"It's ALPHA Damon to you.", Talia squeezed through her teeth.

Marcy smirked. "Not anymore. Didn't you hear? He was protecting me so far, and now that he called me back to the packhouse, it means that the danger is gone. You don't need to be my cover anymore."

"Your cover? Is that what you think I am?"

Marcy lifted her chin and challenged Talia. "You should learn your place, assistant Talia. Starting tomorrow, I will be the future Luna of the Dark Howlers pack, and you will be what you are... just an assistant. It will be up to me to determine your duties. Maybe you could clean my shoes, or maybe you get banished from the pack."

Talia's eyes flashed. "It seems you forgot what happened the last time you flapped your mouth in front of me without thinking it through."

Marcy's smile fell. "You won't dare hurt me. Not now when Damon decided to make me his Luna. I will see that he punishes you."

"You won't be his Luna, Marcy."

"Because you say so?"

"Yes. And because I am his mate."

Marcy blinked a few times rapidly, but she quickly composed herself. "That's just a lie Damon said to make you the target of attackers instead of me, don't tell me you actually believe it. But even if it's true, it doesn't matter. A man like Damon can choose his mate, and he chose me. You are a nobody, an anomaly. He will reject you and mark me and I will be his Luna while you will remain a nobody."

Talia stared at Marcy. Is this why she healed her after George accepted Marcy's rejection? Sure, Marcy didn't know it was Talia, but Marcy should know that she was on the verge of dying and this was her second chance at life. Instead of fixing her ways, Marcy plunged further into darkness.

Would Marcy really get between fated mates just because she wanted to be a Luna? She would destroy two lives, for what? For power? But then, she rejected her bond with George in order to be with Damon. Luckily, George got his second chance for happiness, as for Marcy... she just blew her second chance.

Seeing that Talia didn't respond, Marcy smiled victoriously. "It's difficult to face reality, right? But I advise you to take a step back now and accept your defeat before things get worse."

Talia's shoulders shook as she suppressed a wave of angry laughter. What will Marcy do? Lock her in the attic and beat her up? Marcy did that already and here was Talia, stronger than ever. She came out of that hell thanks to Damon and Talia will be damned if she gives up on him so that wenches like Marcy can have him.

"You have no idea what I went through, Marcy. Do you think you can make it worse!?"

Chapter 495 Uncomfortable dinner (1) [Bonus chapter]

Marcy's survival instincts warned her to step away when hair at the back of her neck rose as Talia's face hardened.

"You want to take what doesn't belong to you, Marcy.", Talia spoke in a dangerously low tone and Marcy felt it was difficult to breathe. "I suggest you rethink your priorities and what you want to do because your life will depend on it. Literally."

Marcy swayed when the pressure from all sides increased, and she grabbed the kitchen counter behind her to stabilize herself. Marcy wondered if Talia was crazy. If anything happened to Marcy, Damon would definitely punish the culprits. Wasn't Talia aware of that?

"You... stop...", Marcy spoke with difficulty.

Talia sneered. "You want me to stop? Make me. Shouldn't Damon's Luna be capable of stopping a nobody like me? Look at yourself."

"You can't... Damon..."

"It's ALPHA Damon to you!" Talia was shaking from anger.

How dares this pampered princess say Damon's name like they were familiar? Marcy didn't know anything about Damon. She saw him as a powerful Alpha because her daddy told her that she needs to be Luna. What kind of a Luna will Marcy be? Like her mother? The Dark Howlers pack will be ruined! And Marcy had no idea how caring and cheeky Damon can be or how much Damon's smile made Talia's heart sing. Damon and Talia were one in body and soul even if his mind couldn't remember her, and Liseli had no intention of giving up on Sapa either!

Marcy's face was pale as a sheet of paper, and she was losing consciousness due to pain that assaulted every cell in her body. Talia suppressed her before, but this was much worse.

"Talia...", Dawn called from the door in a strained voice. Zina was behind Dawn in the hallway, on all four, on the floor. "Didn't you say... we need her..."

George's mark gave Dawn a power boost, but in front of Talia's wrath, it was not much.

At the image of her two friends suffering even though her fury was directed at Marcy, Talia took a deep breath and suppressed her aura.

"Sorry, Dawn. Marcy expressed her desire to take what's mine and I lost it. Is Zina OK?"

"I will be fine!", Zina squeaked from the hallway.

"Good.", Talia said and turned to continue putting food into two plates, ignoring Marcy who was scrambling out of the kitchen, nearly crawling while pushing herself with her arms and legs.

Marcy forgot why she came to the kitchen, but she knew that she needed to get away from there. What the hell was wrong with Talia? From where did all that power come from? And how dare those two Omegas (aka Dawn and Zina) ignore the fact that Talia was hostile? Did they forget that Marcy is their future Luna?

Marcy gritted her teeth while cursing Talia silently. 'As soon as Damon makes me his Luna, I will show them who is the boss here!'

The only thing Marcy needed to decide was if it will be a dungeon or hard labor, or just to kick them out of the pack while blacklisting them so that no other pack will dare to take them in.

Marcy decided to drag herself to her room. She was drenched in sweat and shaky. She needed rest and a shower. Once she cozies up to Damon, Talia and everyone else who looks down on Marcy will get what they deserve.

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Marcy entered the dining room to see Maya, Caden, Gideon, Mindy, and George already seated. No one acknowledged her presence, but she didn't let that bother her because of how much she saw, no one knew about pleasantries in this pack. She will teach them basic manners when she becomes their Luna.

Marcy decided to focus on the positives. At least that crazy assistant was not there. Marcy had lingering fear from her previous encounter with Talia and she hoped that Damon will come before Talia.

She thought about where to sit since there were no plates set up, only napkins and utensils were arranged in glasses that were grouped in the middle of the table.

Caden was sitting at one end of the table, so Marcy could guess that Damon will sit opposite Caden. She decided to take a seat on the left from where Damon will be, mostly because that spot gave her the largest distance from George.

Marcy was re-folding the napkin in front of her to keep busy while silently counting seconds until Damon arrives and hopefully make this less awkward. She was happy that she didn't need to wait long.

Damon paused at the door and glanced over the faces of the people present before he moved to his usual seat.

Maya and Caden were expected, but then he saw George, Gideon, Mindy, and on his left was Marcy.

Damon didn't remember mending his relationship with Gideon but it probably happened because there was no other explanation as to why the Shaman was sitting there. Why was Mindy here? Didn't Caden say that the group from the Blue River pack left? And why was Mindy so close to the old guy? Was that a mark on her neck? Did Maddox know about it?

Damon was exasperated. Just how big were his memory gaps?

But Gideon and Mindy aside, Damon didn't like Marcy sitting there; that was the place his future Luna should hold. He shook off the unease. It's just a seat and he shouldn't overthink it.

"Will James be joining us?", Damon asked. He knew there should be one more person, but he didn't want to bother with Nora.

"James is in town with his friends. They are having dinner out and will be back late.", Caden responded.

"Friends?", Marcy asked, unsure if she heard Caden right. Since when did James have time for friends? He was always either training or studying.

"He met three teens from the Dark Howlers pack, and they hit it off well.", Caden said. "They are all exceptional talents, and we have warriors shadowing them to make sure they don't end up in trouble. After hard training, one should enjoy relaxing."

Marcy responded with a stiff smile. She thought that James didn't come to visit her because he was busy training, and now that she heard he was having fun while she was stuck in that house, Marcy didn't like it.

Dawn, Zina, and Stephanie entered with the cart that had plates where food was already arranged, and Zina was quick to snatch the plate closest to her and take it to Damon.

Zina released the breath she was holding when Damon didn't comment on the extra sauce on his plate. It seemed he was hungry because he immediately got busy with food, without waiting for others to be served. Well, Damon never cared much about protocol when eating.

Dawn helped with putting food on the table, and then she grabbed the last two plates, one for George and one for herself before she sat at the table with him.

Marcy was still shaken after her previous encounter with Talia, and she relaxed a bit when she confirmed that Talia won't join them. Did Damon discard that damned assistant already? Or maybe he found out about what happened and Talia got punished. Ha! Suits her well!

But Marcy had another problem at the sight of Dawn... "Do Omegas get to eat at the table with the Alpha?"

Chapter 496 Uncomfortable dinner (2)

"Who is the Omega you speak of?", Maya asked Marcy even though they all knew she was referring to Dawn.

Marcy glanced at Damon and when he didn't show any visible reaction, she gestured toward Dawn.

"Dawn is not an Omega.", George responded without looking at Marcy. He was already cutting the steak on Dawn's plate. "My mate was kind enough to help in the kitchen. It was her choice to work. Dawn likes to be useful and not idle and wait to be served." His voice was icy, but there was some pride in it also.

"Thank you, babe.", Dawn gushed.

George shot her a smile with, "Anything for you. Feel free to put others in their place. Ignorant people will think of your kindness as a weakness."

George lifted a fork to offer Dawn a piece of steak he cut, and she opened her mouth obediently.

Marcy glared at George and Dawn. Did George call her ignorant?

She felt like someone squeezed her throat because she couldn't breathe at the sight of a mark on Dawn's neck.

Marcy's mind was spinning. Did she hear that right? Dawn was George's mate? Was that his mark on her neck? How was that possible? Was he doing this only to rile her up? Marcy was confident that George was lying because just a few days ago the bond between them broke. Marcy was upset that she collapsed while George was fine. And it's not just that he was fine, but he was already lovey-dovey with another woman, and he even marked her! No, it can't be true. He was putting up a show only to rile her up because she was about to become Damon's Luna!

Marcy had plenty of time to think while she was stuck in that house alone, and she remembered George accepting her rejection while identifying himself as an Alpha. In a way, it made sense because he was strong and there was an air of dignity around him. Marcy thought how that's just a bearing of a Commander, but now she knew that her mate was an Alpha, and she was stupid to reject him.

But she didn't allow herself to dwell on that seatback. It was the right thing to do because she will be Damon's Luna. Yes, yes... she will focus on the handsome man on her right because that's her future.

George, the sparks, his scent of clover, and everything else that happened between them was gone and she shouldn't dwell on it. How can that emotional stuff compare to a life of comfort and security that Damon can provide her?

What was the point of George being an Alpha if he didn't have a pack? George was just a lapdog to her father, while Alpha Damon had thousands of warriors at his disposal, enormous territory, and the massive packhouse.

With that, Marcy pushed unnecessary thoughts about George to the back of her mind.

No one spoke and Marcy's discomfort rose. Why did she feel like an outsider?

Now that she thought about it, it was only couples at the table.

Maya and Caden ignored Marcy, so she didn't bother with them.

George and Dawn were obnoxiously lovey-dovey. Did they need to feed each other? And it was not just them, but Gideon and Mindy were also talking in whispers while Gideon fed both of them. Why were Mindy's hands under the table?

Marcy looked at the fine man on her right who was supposed to be focused on her, yet Damon was stuffing food into his mouth like he didn't eat in days, and he acted like Marcy was not there.

Marcy wondered if this was some kind of test. Surely, as Damon's Luna, she should entertain guests and ensure that the atmosphere was pleasant.

Out of everyone present, Marcy thought that she might try interacting with Mindy.

"Miss Mindy, who is the man by your side?", Marcy asked sweetly.

Mindy's eyes snapped at Marcy and Marcy could clearly feel the hostility rising.

Maya cleared her throat. "I apologize for not introducing everyone." She gestured while talking. "This is Shaman Gideon, Mindy, you all know me and Caden, Commander George, Dawn, Marcy, and our Alpha Damon. James, Petra, Erik, and Zack are also staying in the packhouse, but they are currently out. Oh, and Shaman Gideon's cousin...", Maya's voice trailed, and she looked at Gideon questionably.

"Cornelia was tired from her trip, so she asked for food to be delivered to her room.", Gideon said.

Damon listened to this, and he brushed off mentioning of Cornelia like not important. He had so many gaps in his memory that one more didn't add much to his already bad state. But he noticed that previously black holes in his mind were becoming hazy like something was coming back but he couldn't grasp it yet.

Marcy smiled when Maya ended the introductions of people without mentioning Talia. She was obviously not important.

Marcy turned to look at Damon and she froze when she realized that he was staring at her while chewing absentmindedly.

"Is something wrong?", Marcy asked Damon.

"I don't know. Is it?", Damon responded with a question.

Damon didn't mind that a person was sitting on his left, but Marcy didn't seem right for that position. Was this him remembering something? Damon was not sure. But he kept staring at Marcy like there were answers under her skin.

He put another piece of steak into his mouth and turned to look at Marcy, slowly inspecting her face which was now slightly flushed.

"How is the food, Alpha Damon?"

Dawn's question pulled Damon out of his thoughts. She noticed that Damon's behavior changed, but she expected him to go and find Talia or maybe slap Marcy, but none of that happened.

"It's good.", he said.

"Do you need seconds of anything?" She really wanted to know how much sauce he ate, but she didn't want to be too obvious about it.

"No. If I do, I will help myself.", he responded, thinking that she was being servile because of her past as an Omega. Even if the first serving was plated in advance, they had more food available on the table, and anyone can take more if needed. That's how it always was, Damon remembered that much.

"Why don't you ask me?", Marcy asked Dawn with a smile, thinking that George's so-called mate should serve her. Marcy saw Dawn in the kitchen, and she was sure that Dawn was just an Omega. Marcy didn't buy the story of Dawn working willingly. Who would dirty their hands if they had a choice?

Dawn looked at Marcy and blinked. "Why would I ask you? You have hands."

Marcy's nostrils flared in anger, but she swallowed the curses that threatened to spill out of her mouth. Damon was watching. Marcy plastered a fake smile while chanting silently how she will get back at Dawn after Damon announces her as his Luna.

"Alpha Damon...", Marcy called sweetly, and she put her hand over Damon's wrist that rested on the table as he held the knife.

Damon frowned at the point where their hands connected. Somehow, it didn't feel right. He had no idea why, but it was as if his body was telling him that a touch from a woman shouldn't be this... empty.

Chapter 497 Uncomfortable dinner (3)

Damon pulled his hand away from Marcy's grasp. "Yes?"

"I was wondering, what are your plans for tomorrow? Is there anything that involves me?" Marcy really wanted him to talk about the announcement that she will be revealed as his future Luna. Then everyone at the table will get a reminder of how important she is.

Damon put a piece of meat into his mouth, and then he scooped some mashed potato and gravy, and he chewed all that slowly while remembering Caden's words about how Marcy expects Damon to announce that Marcy will be his Luna, but Damon had no intention of doing that. However, he couldn't tell her that without remembering the missing pieces.

Marcy thought that a forever passed before Damon spoke.

"I have a lot of things pending that need to be prioritized. When I have something solid, involving you, you will be informed."

Marcy was not pleased with this response, but there was nothing much she could do.

Damon was not rejecting her, but he was not welcoming either. Was this another test? Or was this how her life will be going forward?

Marcy pressed her lips into a line while thinking about her parents. They were not lovey-dovey either, at least not in front of others. Will Damon be more caring when it's just the two of them? It's not that Marcy was expecting sizzling passion and romance, but after experiencing bliss in George's embrace, Marcy's idea of how a couple should act included desire and some level of conversation that goes beyond Damon issuing orders and Marcy sitting obediently until she was needed.

Marcy got an idea.

"Alpha Damon, I was wondering if you can join me for a walk after dinner."

Damon looked at her blankly. "A what?"

"A walk.", Marcy repeated. "There are a few things I would like to discuss with you, in private. Maybe in the garden?"

Damon's vision blurred as Marcy's image overlapped with another face. That other face was barely noticeable, but Damon saw honey-colored eyes and copper-colored hair and he really hoped to see more of it, because it made him feel something.

"Sure.", Damon responded robotically. "Whenever you are ready."

Marcy gulped some water with haste and stood up. "Now is fine." She couldn't eat in this awkward atmosphere anyway.

Damon followed after Marcy, and they left the dining room in silence.

"Do you think she will try something?", Mindy asked in a whisper.

"Definitely.", Dawn responded, and she went to check Damon's plate and she frowned. "He didn't finish his food."

"How much did he have?", Maya asked.

"Well, he finished the steak and for the rest... about three quarters. It's difficult to tell because he mixed gravy with mashed potatoes.", Dawn said.

"Now what?", Mindy asked.

Gideon responded, "Now, we wait. Cornelia said that it will take some time for the potion to work and if he didn't have the full dose, then..." He was not sure what then.

"Wouldn't it be best for Talia to be with Damon?", Maya asked. "If the magic is cracked even a little bit, the bond could break through."

They all looked at Gideon. He was the expert in that area.

Unfortunately, this was beyond Gideon's expertise. He wanted to tell them to ask Cornelia, but he remembered that the witch said this was the first time for them to create a potion that would suppress the dark magic, and they didn't have much time to test it.

However, Gideon knew one thing. "If Damon's emotions are unstable and Marcy and Talia meet in front of him, it might push him either way."

Mindy groaned and Gideon turned to talk to her. "I know it's hard, but we can't forget that Marcy knows she is the second woman, and she is consciously taking over Talia's spot. If Damon is not accepting of Talia decisively, Marcy will take advantage of it and Talia will be deeply hurt just by the fact that Damon is entertaining Marcy. I suggest that we give him some time. They are just walking in the garden. In the worst case, the potion didn't work, and we need to try again." Cornelia said that there are three doses.

"In one minute, I will go and check.", Caden volunteered.

"No.", George rejected Caden's idea. "If you go, your Alpha will look at it as disrespect. Remember what Talia said. If this fails, we can't risk that he puts all of us in the dungeon because there will be no one to watch over him and the Dark Howlers pack. You and Maya need to stay neutral unless Damon is on the verge of making a big mistake."

"Should I go?", Mindy offered. She had no problems telling Damon what was on her mind or giving a slap or two to Marcy. Mindy was still vexed by what happened earlier with Cornelia, and Mindy had extra energy she would gladly spend on Marcy.

"I will go.", George said. "I am not Damon's subordinate, and I can get Marcy to back down just by reminding her of a few things."

Dawn frowned at George's words, and he gave her hand a gentle squeeze to reassure her that he got this under control. George didn't want to get close to Marcy either, but there was no one else better for the job.

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In the garden...

Marcy walked half a step behind Damon, wondering how to start a conversation. She was really itchy to get confirmation of how she will be his Luna. That will make her father happy, but more than that, Marcy saw that as her ticket to freedom. Sure, she will be tied to Damon and to this pack, but in her opinion, anything was better than being stuck in the Red Moon pack as a princess without any real power.

They passed by one bench nestled between two tall rose bushes, and Marcy frowned a bit when Damon paused to stare at the bench, but then he continued walking.

Marcy wanted to say how that was a good spot to chat with privacy from any prying eyes, but Damon was moving further into the darkness, making Marcy uneasy.

There were no lights in the garden, and with every step, the visibility was reducing. This was Alpha Damon's territory and if he wanted to get frisky, they could go to his room, or hers, or just about anywhere... was there a need for the darkness?

Lost in her thoughts and diminishing visibility, Marcy's leg brushed against one rock, and she lost balance. Her hand waved wildly, and she latched herself on Damon's arm.

It was accidental, but Marcy thought of this as a happy accident and she had no intention of letting go.

Damon paused and stared at Marcy who was now holding him, and she didn't let go even after she regained her balance.

"Alpha Damon...", Marcy called sweetly, and she squeezed his firm bicep.

Damon didn't like that she was holding him, but something else got his attention.

Damon inched closer, his face hovering above Marcy's and she thought that he will kiss her, but to her disappointment, he just sniffed the air.

"Your scent is not right."

Chapter 498 Wrong scent

Damon looked at Marcy who licked her lips in anticipation of a kiss that was not coming.

"Your scent is not right.", he said.

Marcy's scent was heavy, reminding him of sweetened coconut that stayed in a sealed bag for too long. For some inexplicable reason, Damon expected a much lighter scent, sweet and citrusy, a scent that was more pleasing than the freesia his mother used to plant.

In reality, Marcy was an attractive young woman with curves in all the right places, obviously offering herself to him, and regardless of what were her motives, he should pounce on her right then and there; it wouldn't be the first time for Damon to take advantage of a woman in such a situation. Yet, Damon found himself repulsed at the idea of being intimate with Marcy.

Damon observed her unblemished skin, silky blonde hair, and meticulous makeup that was just enough to accentuate her light blue eyes and full lips... nothing about Marcy was really wrong, yet nothing was right either.

Marcy's eyes widened at the sight of Damon frowning. Did he say that she smells bad?

"I showered before dinner.", Marcy blurted out. She really did. But then she understood that something else might be off. Just how for Marcy George's scent was better than any other, if Talia was Damon's mate, no other scent would compare to Talia's. At least not until Damon rejects the annoying assistant.

"Are you thinking about Talia?"

"Talia?" The name on his lips sounded oddly familiar like he said it many times before.

Marcy hummed in confirmation. "Talía, your assistant. You shouldn't bother with that nobody. Once you mark me, you will forget about her completely."

"You think I need to mark you in order to forget about my assistant?" What a strange thing to say, Damon thought.

Marcy giggled, feeling that his words confirmed how Talía was not Damon's mate and that Talía was not important. "Of course not. It's just that she has an unhealthy attachment to you. Once I become your Luna..."

"Alpha Damon!", a stern voice came from the side and Marcy's insides jolted when she realized that it was George. Why was he here?

George frowned at the point that Marcy was holding Damon's arm. "It seems you are bolder, princess Marcy.", George said ominously. "I wonder what Alpha Damon will say if he knew what happened on the way here..."

Marcy let go of Damon's arm, like she burned herself. She knew very well what George wanted to say. What was with that smug smirk that she could see clearly in the darkness? Was George blackmailing her? It definitely looked like it.

"Damon", George called without his title. "Why are you allowing Marcy to stick to you?"

Damon sneered. On top of this confusion, George came here to tell him what to do. Was everyone trying to manipulate him? "What is it to you?"

"When I told you that Dawn is my second chance mate, you told me to treat her well otherwise Talía will be upset. It seems to me that you forgot about who is important because you are set on breaking Talía's heart."

Damon blinked. Somehow, the fact that Dawn was George's second chance mate was important, but Damon was not sure why. And here was George again, talking about Talía. His headache increased.

"Let's leave this talk for the morning. I had a busy day and I still have things to do...", Damon mumbled this last part and walked into the packhouse.

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Marcy was about to go after Damon, but George extended his arm, blocking her way.

"Why are you meddling? Don't you have that Omega to entertain you, or did you already get bored of her? Go, find another one and leave me alone!", Marcy hissed at George, and then she remembered what George said before. "That Omega is your second chance mate?"

"Her name is Dawn.", George said. "I suggest you don't provoke me or her because you will realize that Dawn is more than just an Omega."

Marcy snorted and she made a wide curve to walk past George into the packhouse, but she froze when George spoke again.

"How is your wolf, Marcy? I wonder if Damon will choose a Luna who lost her wolf."

"It's none of your business!", Marcy hissed.

"True. It's not mine, but I think it's Alpha Damon's. How about we go after him and see how he takes this news." George walked closer and smiled maliciously while talking in a low voice, "Or will he be more upset to find out that the woman who is picturing herself as a perfect Luna is not only wolf less, but she also gave herself to another man in his packhouse, right under his nose."

Marcy gritted her teeth so hard that it felt like they were about to crack. "What do you want?"

"Know your place, Marcy. Or I will show it to you."

Marcy exhaled irritably. "You have your mate. I won't tell my father that you are an Alpha. Can you just let me be?"

Georg's expression darkened. "Don't think that you have something on me. If you spread that shit around, everyone will know that I was your first mate, and that rejection of that bond killed your wolf right after you gave your body to me. Think about who will suffer more between the two of us but be certain that I won't go down without dragging you with me."

"What will your mate say if she..."

"She knows.", George deadpanned. "My mate knows everything." He enjoyed Marcy's sour expression. "You see, Marcy, mates don't manipulate each other. No secrets. No games. Just accepting that we were meant to be together. If the Moon Goddess shows pity and gives you a second chance mate, try not rejecting the poor bastard before you figure out who he is."

Marcy's face was contorted into an ugly grimace as she glared at George's retreating back. And she didn't miss the scene of Dawn standing on the terrace and hugging George as soon as he got close.

Marcy wanted to go into the packhouse after Damon, or maybe into her room, but George and Dawn were right there, hugging, and Marcy didn't want to get close to them, so she ended up standing in the garden stupidly.

"Are you OK?", Dawn asked George while inspecting his face anxiously.

George smiled and planted a kiss on Dawn's forehead. "We are fine, Dawn. She is a nobody. I wish I knew that earlier. Then I would accept her rejection right away and come here to find you."

Dawn's lips lifted into a smile as relief washed over her. She could feel that George's emotions were unstable as he spoke to Marcy, but it was not longing. He was angry and upset and Dawn was happy that all negativity disappeared the moment Dawn entered his visual range.

This little episode confirmed to Dawn that George was hers and hers only.

"I love you, George...", Dawn said, and she could hear his heart beating faster.

He cupped her cheeks and looked into her eyes. "You are my light, Dawn. You are my everything." And then he kissed her like he meant it.

Chapter 499 Losing a mother-figure

Damon made his way toward the stairs, with the intention to go to his room. He needed rest, or maybe a drink because facing people without understanding what was going on was not helping.

Since he exited the portal that leads to the Midnight Guardians pack, Damon was running in his wolf form which took a toll on his body because his wolf was not there, and then he worked in the study without rest and he really wanted to shower and wash his arm where Marcy touched him. Twice. It felt dirty. Damon wondered from where that came. He touched many women and they touched him in return, and it was never a big deal, but this really felt wrong to the point of his skin crawling.

Damon was about to climb the stairs when he noticed an angry presence that rooted him in the spot. He turned slowly to see Stephanie standing there with her arms crossed over her chest.

"Damon, Damon, Damon...", Stephanie called repeatedly while shaking her head. Her face was stern, and her voice was full of disappointment, and it reminded him of the moments when his mother would scold him because he messed up big time.

What did he mess up now? Was this another thing he couldn't remember?

"What, Steph?"

"What did I tell you when you brought Talia here?"

Damon stiffened at the mention of Talia. It seemed that everyone here knew about that girl, and they all cared for her. Everyone, except Damon.

"What did you tell me?"

"You knew that she didn't have an easy life. Goddess knows why you were stubbornly keeping her here and refusing to let her relocate to another place, even though she asked for it, and Maya and I told you that's the right thing to do because everyone here was looking down on her. I thought that she made you feel something. I told you not to play with her. I told you not to harm her..."

Stephanie's words were like knives stabbing into Damon's heart.

"What makes you think I harmed her?", Damon asked.

"Are you kidding me? You went on a vacation with Talia. She was happy when she came to pick up the food for the road, only for you to return on your own and to allow that bloodsucker from the Red Moon pack to take Talia's place. Tell me, what did you do to Talia? Where is she?"

Maybe all of them thought that Stephanie was oblivious because she didn't talk about it, but she could see how Damon and Talia looked at each other, how they changed over time, and those small interactions where Talia's eyes would always search for Damon, only to find him looking at her already.

Stephanie thought it was real, but when she saw Marcy sitting at the table on Talia's spot and Damon acting like it was a totally normal thing, Stephanie had enough.

One glance at Marcy gave Stephanie a Cassie-like déjà vu. Marcy was just another she-wolf who was after Damon's money and power. Stephanie thought that after kicking out Cassie, Damon learned his lesson, but now that Marcy was acting like she was about to own this place and Damon was fine with it, Stephanie wondered if Damon was mentally challenged or if he was just thinking with his pecker. In either case, that's not how an Alpha should act if he cares about his pack. And Stephanie thought that Damon cared about the Dark Howlers pack. Maybe she was wrong. About everything.

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Damon couldn't believe this. Why was Stephanie treating him like he was the bad guy? He might be many things, but he was not a person who would abuse women! Or maybe he was an abuser, the worst kind, but he forgot about that also.

"Why do you think I did anything to her?"

"Stop talking to me like I am an idiot, Damon!", Stephanie snapped. She was not talking to her Alpha, but to a grown-up man who was acting like a child and like his actions don't have consequences.

"Maybe this is some twisted game to you, but Talia came here broken and I thought you wanted to help her heal. I saw you taking care of her food, training, doctors, and you were there for her. I watched her transform from a scared girl who hides her insecurities behind a smile into a confident young woman who was glowing. I thought you were serious for once in your life. And I loved the fact that she was fixing you in return."

Stephanie's expression hardened. "If I knew that all was just an act so you can break that poor child again, I would never allow it to happen! You should know that I stayed here only because of the friendship I had with your mother. I hoped to repay Violet's kindness by helping you, but seeing you do this..." Stephanie released a long breath. "I realized that I overestimated myself. Since my presence here is a waste of time, I suggest you find someone else to manage your packhouse. I will leave before the pack run, and I hope you will allow me to take Lisa with me. No matter what she did to end up in the dungeon, I guarantee that she won't be a problem because we will be far from here."

Damon felt his stomach sinking. He didn't care much about Lisa, but Stephanie was always by his side, offering support and scolding when needed, keeping him grounded and acting like his mother. The fact that she was giving up meant he really crossed the line, and he didn't even know what that line was, damn it!

"Where will you go?"

"I don't know. I will stay with my sister at the Lightclaw pack until I figure out where to go next. No matter where I go, I will pray that The Moon Goddess forgives you for how you treated all women who

fell for you, especially Talia. I knew that what happened to Violet and Jacob messed with your head, but I didn't know that it messed your heart beyond repair. Set her free, Damon. Don't make Talia pay for your mistakes."

Stephanie was about to leave, but then she remembered one more thing. "People follow you because you are a good Alpha. If you continue treating people who love you like trash, you will find yourself either all alone, or surrounded by snakes like Marcy. In either case, you will discover that managing a pack is quite difficult on your own."

Damon stared at Stephanie who gave him a sad smile and then she turned and left. Just like that.

He jabbed his hand into his hair. All this was such a mess. What the hell was going on?

Should he tell Stephanie that he doesn't remember? How will that help?

But no matter how angry Stephanie was, she actually told him more than anyone else.

Stephanie said that Talia came here in a bad state and Damon spent time with her, caring for her, and then... then what?

Chapter 500 Memories and the painful reality

"How are you doing?", Maya asked Talia when she entered the room.

"I'm fine.", Talia said. She was far from fine, but she didn't want to talk about it.

Ever since Cornelia left, Talia was pacing through the room, torn between the reason that told her to stay put and emotions that were urging her to go to Damon.

Seeing Maya in the room, Talia wanted to ask about the situation with Damon, but she knew already what happened during dinner because she watched them through the security video feed, and Talia couldn't make herself continue watching what was going on in the garden even though cameras had night vision.

If anything happened between Damon and Marcy, before the potion took effect, Talia didn't want to know about it. And what if the dose was not enough for Damon? Or what if it was not effective at all?

Talia knew that Caden was watching Damon from the distance with the task to notify Maya if anything important happened, and if Caden didn't mind-link Maya, things were fine. Or at least not worse. Hopefully.

"Where is Cornelia?", Maya asked.

Talia shrugged. "She said that she will explore the area."

"Is she really a witch?", Maya asked with sparkles in her eyes.

"Do you think that Mindy lied when she said that Cornelia took her voice with a wave of her finger? And didn't you hear that we teleported here from Gideon's house?"

"How did you meet? She doesn't have a wolf, so I assume she is not from the Midnight Guardians pack."

Talia pursed her lips. It's not that she didn't want to tell her, but... "Can we talk about it some other time?"

"Sure. Do you think that Cornelia will be willing to do a demonstration of what she can do?"

"I don't know, Maya. Cornelia is a priestess, not an entertainer."

Maya pouted. "I know, but I still hope to see some of that magic."

"Thank you for being here, Maya."

"It is I who should thank you.", Maya said seriously. "I can only imagine how much it hurts that Damon forgot about you, yet you came here with a plan instead of trashing the place or just leaving him behind to deal with this on his own."

"I had to come."

"No, you didn't. With the mate bond weakened, you could turn your back on all this mess, but you didn't. Damon doesn't remember you which means he is the same Damon he was before he met you and I can tell you that Damon with Talia as his mate is much more pleasant to be around. The whole pack should thank you for this sacrifice."

Talia realized that Maya was right. Actually, if this was Talia from a few weeks ago, she would run and not look back. Talia changed. Thanks to Damon she found strength she never thought she had. Or maybe she just found something worth fighting for.

Talia put her hand over her chest. "I can feel the bond fluctuating as the potion is eroding the dark magic." There was irritation and confusion, and Talia hoped it will continue.

Maya's eyes lost focus for a moment and she smiled a little. "Damon left Marcy in the garden, and he is heading upstairs." She didn't want to mention George. The version where Damon left on his own sounded better. "Will you go and see him?"

Talia's body ached in need to go to Damon and ease his anxiety, yet her insides tightened at the possibility of him pushing her away again. "Not yet. I want to make sure he can feel the bond, or I might make it worse. His guard is down because he doesn't feel threatened. If he sees me with all of you backing me..."

"If the potion doesn't work, that will need to happen, Talia. Right now, he is unstable. We can't let him stay in power and endanger the whole pack. If he goes through with making Marcy his Luna, Alpha Edward won't hesitate in taking advantage of the situation."

Talia inhaled a shaky breath. "What are you saying?"

"I am saying that Caden is his friend, and I am Caden's mate, and we both respect Damon as an Alpha. But we will not allow Damon to ruin this pack just because he can't remember who should be his Luna."

Talia held her breath as Maya's words sank in. They would rebel against Damon. But how can they do that if Damon can suppress them with a thought? "Let's hope it doesn't come to it."

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Damon was in his bedroom, the same one he used for the last decade, but it was different.

There was another scent mixed in with his, and he noticed two plush toys on the sofa. One was a small dog, brown in color, and the other one was a black wolf with blue eyes. Damon heard a voice in his head, 'Look, Cinna, this is your brother. He is bigger, so he will be your big brother, Blackie.' And Damon's voice responded, 'Blackie Blake'.

Damon's mind was spinning.

He walked to the bathroom and splashed cold water on his face. When he lifted his gaze, he saw himself in the mirror. It was a familiar face, but everything about it felt strange.

His gaze moved to the second sink to see another set of toiletries. Female.

Damon rushed to the closet to see female clothes. Did he have a woman in here? The scent was what he was looking for, sweet and citrusy... a few days old.

Part of him was relieved that this was not Marcy's scent, but who was the woman?

An image flashed of a young woman in a revealing red babydoll-style garment. Her face was hazy, but he knew that she was looking at him shyly. 'Is it working?', she asked. 'You asked me if I'm trying to seduce you...'

Damon blinked when the vision disappeared, and he realized he was hard. What the hell? Why did his body respond to that image? She was not tall nor super-curved, yet he was confident that he has never seen a more attractive woman in his life.

He looked around the closet, trying to see if anything else will trigger more images, and when that didn't happen, Damon walked back to stand in the middle of the bedroom.

And there she was again, right in front of him, and this time he could see her face clearly. She had honeyed eyes and copper-colored hair and he heard himself talking, 'I really want to kiss you, but I fear that you won't like it. I fear that you will reject me. Tell me, kitten, can I kiss you?'

He rubbed his face with force. When on Earth was he the one to ask permission to kiss a girl? Damon was not sure if the memory was real, but he knew that emotions were real. He was really afraid that she will reject him.

"Kitten...", Damon murmured and his eyes fell on the side table where a headband with cat ears was resting and somehow it made him think about an amusement park and sitting with a girl on his lap in the shade of a tree.

'Old guy!', Damon shouted in his mind. 'I need you to wake up and tell me what's the truth!' But his wolf didn't respond. It was like he was not there at all.

Damon turned to look at two plush toys, hoping they will tell him where they came from, but then he heard a female voice, 'We don't need to think about moving. Daddy Damon won't kick us out when he finds his Luna because it seems that's me...' And his heart cracked because he could feel her love and sincerity, and... he fucked up big time.

Damon's head hurt like it was about to split open, and he pressed his palms on his temples firmly when he fell on his knees as images flashed in front of his eyes, always the same girl, blushing, smiling, crying, bruised up, surprised, determined, bashful... and he knew her name, Talia.

Each of those images came with a surge of emotions and tugged on his heart, ripping it into pieces, and he really wanted to touch her and hold her and make things better because he could see her shock and feel her desperation as she called for him after he pushed her away in that cave.

He curled on the floor in the fetal position and chanted, "Talia... Talia..."

'Don't leave me... I promise that you will be my last. No one will come after you... Do you accept me as your mate willingly?... Say that you are mine... Do you trust me?... I would flip the heaven and earth to find you, and I wouldn't stop until I do... I want to love you in every way possible...', those were his words directed at the little woman who looked at him with eyes full of love and hope.

Even when she was scared and insecure, she chose to believe him and he betrayed her trust.

He said that he will protect her forever. She was his most precious person in the world, yet he left her behind in the enemy's territory like she was not important. She told him they were hunted, that it was dangerous, and he left!

He was such an asshole!

Damon had an urge to scream and howl, but he was unable to make a sound. His body refused to move, and then everything turned dark.