

Alphas Bride 571

Chapter 571 The pack run (8)

Damon released Talia's wrists and his hand glided along her arm, on the side of her body, stopping to hold onto her waist that was exposed between two leather garments.

"Get off her!", Keith shouted while dashing toward them from the nearby bushes.

"Keith, no!", Talia exclaimed, but it was too late, as he was already on his knees and struggling to get up under Damon's aura that held him down effortlessly.

"Well, well...", Damon drawled. "Who do we have here? Why does the Coach think that he can interfere when his Alpha is about to claim a woman? And there is more than one idiot."

Damon's eyes didn't move from Keith, but Talia could see that Liam, Pierce, Caleb, and Sandy were also down on their knees, forming a strange circle about ten steps away from Talia and Damon.

Lulu was more in the back, hiding behind a tree and Talia was grateful that at least one of them knew that it was suicidal to go against Damon.

"Damon...", Talia called.

"Shut up!", Damon hissed at Talia.

"Don't talk to her like that!", Maya exclaimed from the back.

Dawn and George were approaching them, but Talia stopped them with, "Don't! If you come closer, you will only make it worse." They needed to handle this peacefully, or everything might fall apart.

Damon narrowed his eyes at Talia. "These are my people rebelling. Did you put them up to this?"

"They are our friends.", Talia responded. "My guards. You are the one who assigned them to protect me. They are only doing their job."

"Protect you? Against their Alpha?"

"My Alpha would never force himself on a woman.", Keith struggled to speak. "My Alpha wouldn't treat his mate like this. Let her go."

Damon smirked. "Why don't you make me?"

Keith groaned as Damon's aura threatened to crush him.

"Damon...", Talia called in a trembling voice. "Don't do this. This is not you. Even if you don't remember me, you should know yourself. Don't you feel me running through your veins? You asked me not to leave you. You said that you will never let go. You said that if we are ever apart, you will turn heaven and earth to find me. You said that even if you lose your power, your money, and your pack, I will still have you because we are one. You are my home, and I am yours. That's not something you can forget."

Damon was not smiling anymore, and he was not sure if he was breathing.

Mental images flashed in front of his eyes. It was Talia in a red swimsuit, and Damon rushing to cover her up. He didn't want others to see the shape of her body, and he could feel the possessiveness of wanting to keep this female only to himself.

The words echoed in his head, 'Mine to touch, mine to kiss, mine to hold, mine to love...'

Damon cursed under his breath. Was that really him?

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Damon buried his face in the crook of Talia's neck, and he took a deep breath.

"You smell good.", he murmured. Her scent was citrusy sweet, not overwhelming, but it was more than enough to make him dizzy and crave for more.

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"This..." His hand moved lower, reaching under the length of her skirt and he gave her thigh a squeeze. "It feels right." Why did it feel so good to be close to Talia? He didn't want to separate from her, like being skin-to-skin was the only way to go.

Talia released a shaky breath. His touch felt good and repulsive at the same time.

She responded in a whisper while choking on her tears, "That's because we are mates, Damon. I have your mark on my neck and you are wearing mine. The dark magic is blocking our bond and your wolf. I need you to let me do the ritual to remove the black runes, so you get Sapa back and your memories of us."

Damon's grip on Talia's thigh tightened and she winced.

"You expect me to believe that?", Damon asked angrily.

Talia looked into his icy-blue eyes which were full of questions.

"You don't need to believe me but believe your wolf. Ask him. He is not saying anything, is he?"

Damon frowned at these words. How did Talia know that his wolf can talk? He never told anyone. And how did she know that the old guy was unreachable?

"Don't you feel that your wolf is sealed? I know it's not in your nature to trust others, but this time...", she licked her lips nervously. "I need you to trust me."

Damon looked into her honeyed eyes that pleaded with him to believe her, and for some unknown reason... he did.

Talia was not sure what to expect when he released her thigh. His emotions were unreachable, and she was nervous. The only good thing was that Keith, Liam, Pierce, Caleb, and Sandy were breathing normally now, which meant that Damon stopped pressuring them with his aura. She hoped that they were not hurt too much, but she didn't have the capacity to check on them as Damon was unstable.

"What do you want me to do?", Damon asked.

Talia's heart leaped in her chest. "We need to go there." She gestured with her chin to her left. Damon moved from her, and they got on their feet at the same time. Talia took his hand into hers and their fingers interlaced.

"This...", Damon said while staring at their connected hands. "This feels right as well."

Talia smiled a little. "It always did." She wanted to celebrate this small victory, but she also felt that it was too early.

Talia led Damon to the diagram she made previously and both of them stood in the middle to face each other.

"Don't let go, Damon.", she said while tightening her hold on his fingers.

Something flashed in his eyes, like recognition of some kind. "Never.", he responded.

Talia looked up to see the full moon and she silently prayed that this will work. It had to work.

She took a deep breath and started saying ancient chants, when Cornelia interrupted her with, "You can't cast a spell if you are in the circle."

"Can you do it?", Talia asked Cornelia. She didn't know about this limitation, but she really didn't want to let go of Damon. There was a familiar part of him awakening and she feared that if she lets go, that part will be gone.

Cornelia didn't approve. "We don't know what effect it will have on you."

"I will be fine.", Talia responded.

"What you are doing is reckless.", Cornelia said sternly.

"I am doing what feels right, Cornelia.", Talia responded without breaking eye contact with Damon. "Without him, nothing matters." She didn't care about being Alpha or Luna of the Dark Howlers pack, and if anything happened to her, Axel would take care of the Midnight Guardians pack. In a way, everyone had someone, and Talia had only Damon and nothing mattered without him.

Chapter 572 The pack run (9) [Bonus chapter]

Damon didn't understand the meaning behind Talia's words, but he knew they were heavy. Something told him that the small woman in front of him would risk everything for him, and support him with no questions asked, even when he was an asshole and when he mistreated her. Unconditional acceptance. It was something he didn't remember, yet he knew that it can be given to him only by the woman who stood in front of him.

Damon reached with his free hand to touch her cheek.

"Kitten...", he murmured, and a lone tear escaped her eye to settle on his index finger.

Damon's eyes were distant and full of confusion, and she knew that memories were struggling to emerge, but that was still not her Damon. She needed this spell to remove black runes once and for all, so she can stop worrying that he will forget about her and about everything they've been through so far.

Cornelia opened her mouth to try and reason with Talia, but James grabbed her hand and gave her a squeeze.

"Do what she asked.", James said. "I know you don't approve, but I would do the same for you in a heartbeat."

Cornelia looked at James for a long moment and then she nodded in understanding. She would do the same for him as well. But there was one problem. "What about the payment?", Cornelia asked.

"I will pay.", Damon said, surprising everyone. "It seems that this ritual is for me. If my memories return, and I realize that the girl in front of me is my mate, then... I will pay whatever you want." It was more of a challenge than a promise, but Cornelia didn't care about his motives.

"I will take your word for it, Alpha.", Cornelia said with a smirk.

"Didn't I pay already for this?", Talia asked with urgency. Actually, Axel agreed to pay, but then Evanora waived the fee, a mate for a mate.

Cornelia looked at Talia like she asked something silly. "That was to provide you with a ritual, and it didn't include me performing it. But don't worry, I won't ask for too much. I'm confident that your mate can afford it." Seeing Talia's disapproval, Cornelia spread her arms, hands up. "Do you want this to happen or not? It's not like you have other options unless you step outside."

'She is right', Liseli spoke in Talia's head. 'Let her do this.' How Liseli saw this, Damon should suffer because all this mess was caused by him, and Liseli didn't forgive Damon for how he treated Talia just a few minutes ago.

Reluctantly, Talia gave a nod of agreement.

Happy to get this confirmation, Cornelia glanced at James to say, "Stand back."

Cornelia raised her arms, and her fingers twisted to form complex seals. James wondered if the wind gathering there was a coincidence or Cornelia's doing.

A few seconds later, Cornelia's whole body was shrouded in a silvery glow and ancient words came as whispers from her lips.

The diagram below Talia and Damon lit up in a pulsating white light that was getting stronger with every beat.

The light rose from the ground to envelope two figures who stood there holding hands, until they were just outlines.

The wind picked up to carry leaves and small branches, creating a twister around Talia and Damon. Cornelia's voice echoed into the night, causing goosebumps to rise on the skin of everyone who heard her. The whole scene was magical.

Talia observed Damon and her eyes narrowed on the black runes that pulsed on his skin, as if an invisible force was ripping them from his flesh.

Damon groaned as his whole body felt like it was set ablaze, but his eyes didn't leave Talia's that were now glowing in silvery light.

Damon's vision blurred and he bit the inside of his cheek in an effort to stay conscious. Talia's form was glowing, and her hair turned silvery; she looked like a Goddess. Was this really his mate? She was beautiful.

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Damon gasped at the sharp pain that assaulted every cell in his body, and he remembered a girl in the dark kitchen who gave him the slip when he was dazed by her scent which he couldn't track... and then he saw her in the attic, hiding behind her knees... he licked her wound and smuggled her out of the Red

Moon pack... he tended to her wounds clumsily in a hotel, and he fed her, and he took her shopping for clothes... amusement park... the Summer Solstice festival... party at the Lightclaw pack... it all came to him like an unstoppable flood that filled his mind with memories and his chest with emotions that were always there, yet he couldn't reach them. And pain. So much pain for what he had done.

She was his most precious person, yet he treated her like she was not important. Again.

'You are such a prick!', Sapa shouted in Damon's head and Damon agreed with the old beast.

Damon closed his eyes. Maybe he should stop resisting and just lose consciousness, and when he wakes up, he will see that this was another bad dream.

"Ahhh!", Talia's scream over the howl of the wind around them made Damon's eyes snap open to look at her in panic. What happened?

He could see black lines slithering on her skin.

'What is that?', Damon asked his wolf in panic.

'I don't know', Sapa responded. 'It could be remnants from the dark magic.'

Damon's heart tightened. 'Will she forget about me now?'

Sapa had no idea if those small lines will have any effect on Talia, but he didn't feel like comforting Damon. 'Maybe that's not a bad thing.'

"NO!", Damon shouted, and his arms wrapped around Talia. He looked up in the tunnel of white light that opened up to show the full moon at the top. "You can't take her away from me. She is the only one I care about. I know I fucked up, more than once, but I can't fix it if you take her away! Please... don't take her away. You can't take her away, not now. I just found her..." For nearly three decades he was wandering on his own. When he found Talia, he was not ready to acknowledge her, and now when things fell into place... "IT'S NOT FAIR!", Damon hollered against the howl of the wind, desperation breaking his voice.

The white light around them pulsated strongly once, twice, and then it dispersed as a silent explosion in all directions that carried leaves, twigs, pebbles, and dust. Everything was numbly quiet.

Maya blinked to see the dust settling and Damon holding Talia in his arms. They were covered in fine powder and looked like statues. If not for Damon's chest heaving, Maya would think that they got petrified and for a few long seconds, no one moved.

Chapter 573 The pack run (10)

"Kitten...", Damon called in a low voice while touching Talia's cheek gently, as if he was afraid that he will break her. "Can you hear me? Say something."

Talia blinked to see Damon's concerned expression as he examined her face, and her lips lifted in a crooked smile when she recognized the flood of emotions. Her Damon was back. But her happiness lasted only for a second because she remembered how they found themselves there.

Damon forgot about Talia and didn't feel the bond, and she ended up sparring with him, and Damon manhandled her like she was a cheap woman willing to sleep with him for everyone to see, and then he hurt her guards.

The mental image of Keith struggling on the ground while telling Damon to get off Talia was painfully etched into her memory. Keith knew that he didn't stand a chance, yet he still struggled in an attempt to keep her safe.

Talia was not sure if the pinch in the back of her throat was because of Keith's readiness to sacrifice himself for her, or because Damon was the one who caused Keith to go to such an extreme.

Talia pushed Damon away and she looked around to see that Liam, Sandy, Pierce, and Caleb were getting up to stand. Dawn, George, James, and Cornelia seemed to be OK, and Maya was helping Zina to stand up.

Talia sucked in a sharp breath when she saw that Keith was still on the ground. The poor coach got the biggest hit from Damon's aura.

Talia swiftly moved to kneel next to Keith, leaving Damon to stand awkwardly with his arms half-outstretched where Talia used to be.

"Hey...", Talia called Keith. "How are you feeling?"

Keith smiled a little when her hand touched his cheek.

"I'm glad you are OK.", he said, and he grimaced when he moved.

Talia was quick to put her hands on him.

"Shh...", she urged him not to move. "Relax and let me in."

Talia's hands lit up in a silvery light that spread to envelop Keith, and a series of crunching sounds were heard, as if someone was cracking knuckles, but the sounds were coming from Keith's back.

Keith felt warmth spreading through his body, from the points where Talia's palms rested on his skin. The sensation was comforting and numbing, and somehow, he knew that she was mending his bones and muscles. As a werewolf, he would heal, but she reduced a few days (or maybe weeks) into a minute, and Keith admired her even more. He always knew that Talia was special, but at that moment, Talia looked like a fairy.

"How is that?", Talia asked.

"Thank you.", Keith responded breathily. He wanted to get up, but Talia was quick to press on his shoulder.

"Don't move.", she said to Keith and glanced at Maya. "Call Doctor Travis and tell him to bring a stretcher. Keith needs a full checkup." She turned back to Keith. "Only when Doctor Travis says you are fine, you can resume your duty as my guard. Is that clear?"

Keith nodded obediently.

Damon was observing the scene from the side and jealousy was eating him alive. Why was Talia so warm toward the measly coach? Can't she see that he was smitten with her? Was she encouraging him?

"Does he deserve your care?", Damon squeezed through his teeth.

Talia whipped her head that way, just in time to see George's fist connecting with Damon's jaw.

'POW!'

Damon stumbled backward. "What the fuck is wrong with you!?", Damon raged at George.

"That's for treating your mate like shit.", George said grimly. George could feel Dawn's anger and dejection, and he had to let out some steam, for both of them.

More than being angry at George for hitting him, Damon turned to look at Talia, desperate to get her forgiveness. He needed to hear her say it was OK, and that she was not upset about what happened.

"I'm sorry for pinning you down like that.", Damon said. "You know I wouldn't go through with it if you were not willing. I would never force you."

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This was not just about Talia, but about any woman. Damon did many things he was not proud of, but he never did anything against a woman's will. A no was a no, no matter how angry, drunk, or horny he was.

When Talia didn't respond, Damon asked, "Are you affected by the dark magic? Is that impacting your behavior?"

"There is no dark influence in her energies.", Cornelia said.

Damon frowned at the witch. "Why is she not by my side then?"

Cornelia cocked an eyebrow at him. "Do you really need me to answer that?"

"You went too far." It was Maya who said this and Zina's stubborn expression showed that she agreed.

Damon gritted his teeth. "I was confused, and I didn't remember Talia. I was confident that she just wanted to seduce me, that she turned you against me and..." He was not sure how to finish this.

"If your goal was to humiliate her, congratulations on a job well done." This came from James. "You were a prime example of why women with self-respect stay away from Alphas."

Damon groaned in frustration and turned to Talia. "You know that was not me."

Talia gave Keith a comforting tap on his hand, and then she stood up to face Damon.

'No, Damon. That was you.', she responded through their private mind-link.

Damon's stomach fell. 'Kitten...'

'Don't.', she interrupted him. 'I couldn't make myself hurt you, and instead of seeing that as my care for you, you saw it as a challenge, and in the end, you made me feel... not safe.'

Damon gasped as anger, anguish, and helplessness poured into him through their mate bond. He could feel all the love Talia had for him mixed with embarrassment and fear and many other emotions he couldn't identify, but he knew they were not good.

Damon was her home, yet he made her feel not safe, and he had no idea how to fix this.

"Don't follow me.", Talia said. "I want to be alone."

"Talia...", Damon called and moved toward her, but instead of grabbing her arm, he grabbed only an afterimage as Talia was already gone among bushes, proving that in their previous spar she held back on her speed. Actually, she disappeared from sight so quickly that Damon suspected that might be one of her magical abilities, but he didn't want to clarify it in front of everyone present. They already saw too much.

"Go after her!", Sandy exclaimed at her fellow guards while approaching Keith who still didn't move from the ground how Talia left him. "I will stay with Keith until Doctor Travis reaches here."

At Sandy's words, Liam, Pierce, Caleb, and Lulu dashed in the direction where Talia went.

"Where are you going!?", Maya shouted after Damon.

"What do you think?", Damon asked without stopping his steps. It was obvious that he was going after Talia.

"What about the pack run?"

This question made him pause and look at Maya. "Nothing matters without Talia."

"What are we going to tell the pack?", Maya asked. "You know that Elders are only waiting for you to slip and call you incompetent?"

"Tell them that their Alpha screwed up. I am incompetent. If I can't keep my own mate, how can I take care of the pack?"

Maya wanted to tell him to stop, but she could hear how broken he was, so she only nodded in understanding.

Chapter 574 The pack run (11)

'Caden!', Maya called through the mind-link when Damon disappeared from her line of sight. 'We have a problem!'

'Now what?', Caden asked anxiously. 'The ceremony is almost done. Don't tell me that you couldn't remove dark magic from Damon.'

'It's the opposite.', Maya said. 'The runes are gone, and Damon now knows how badly he treated Talia. Actually, he added to his endless list of offenses. Talia left, and he went after her. What should we do?'

After a few seconds of cursing, Caden responded, 'You are asking the wrong person. Don't you have a genius there next to you?'

James was looking at his chocolate-skinned Goddess who was collecting energy crystals from the ground that Talia left behind, when he felt hairs rising at the back of his neck. James turned in slow motion to see Maya looking at him with sparkles in her eyes. He had a bad feeling about this.

"What?", James asked.

"We need your brilliance.", Maya responded.

James was on high alert. No one would flatter him like that without reason. He didn't want to meddle with these needy people anymore, and he had a hunch regarding what Maya wanted, but Cornelia was right there, and if he refuses Maya, won't that make him look like a weakling?

James raised his arms, palms toward Maya. "I can give you advice, but I am not a miracle worker. If you need me to turn back time, that's out of the scope of my abilities."

"Well, it's a good thing I don't need you to turn back time.", Maya said. "I need you to save the future. Our whole pack is depending on this but I know you can do it."

James groaned. "Stop buttering me up and get to the point."

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Damon walked through the bushes while following the pull of his mate bond. Talia didn't leave a single trace and her scent was impossible to track. She was fantastic.

Damon could track Caleb, Pierce, Liam, and Lulu, but there were no guarantees that they were actually following Talia, so he disregarded their traces.

Talia shut down her emotions, and Damon couldn't sense her current state. Was she upset? That was very likely, and Damon realized that by keeping him out, she was telling him that he was not worthy of sharing her anything, and she was right.

'I can't believe you messed up so badly!', Sapa grumbled in Damon's head. He finally got a chance to be with Liseli, and Damon spoiled it!

'Shut up and help me track mate!', Damon grumbled back. 'And help me figure out how to apologize.'

Sapa snorted. 'Get on your knees and beg. Let her sense how guilty you feel, and the mate bond will do the rest.'

Damon was not sure that will be enough this time. Should he jump into a waterfall again? Or maybe he should find an active volcano.

In truth, Damon didn't understand what the big deal was. It's not like he violated her. It was just a game of dominance he played many times before.

If this was a guy challenging him, Damon would beat the crap out of him. But Talia was a girl, and Damon was not a woman-beater, so he pinned her under him in order to show that he was in charge. But she was his mate he couldn't remember, and things escalated.

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Damon released a long breath. Maybe this mate business was too much for a knucklehead like him. Or was this Moon Goddess' idea of a joke?

Since Damon met Talia and brought her home, time after time, he was trying to do the right thing, yet he ended up hurting her. He remembered overhearing when Talia called him a jinx. Was she right about him bringing misfortune? Would she be better off without him? That was a possibility that made his heart ache to the point of insanity because if Talia really leaves him, he will be left with nothing.

Damon's steps halted when he saw two pieces of leather on the ground. "What the...?"

'Mate shifted!', Sapa said excitedly. 'I can meet Liseli!'

Damon sniffed the area carefully to confirm that only Talia's scent was there.

Damon shoved a hand in his hair. Talia shifting into her wolf form was wrong on so many levels!

The first shift is painful, and Damon was supposed to be by Talia's side and hold her and tell her that things will be alright, yet Talia went through that on her own!

Also, her being in wolf form meant that she was faster, and if Liseli was in charge, Damon was in a bigger predicament because the old creature hated him.

'Stop feeling sorry for yourself and either go and get mate, or let me do it!', Sapa shouted. He really wanted to meet Liseli.

Damon thought how that was not a bad idea. If he shows up in front of Liseli, he will get a bashing, but if it's Sapa, there might be a chance for a better outcome. Actually, Damon would take bashing gladly, he would take any punishment, as long as Talia doesn't leave him.

Damon's consciousness shifted as his perspective changed, sharpening his senses and instincts. Sapa dug his paws into the soft grass before the foliage around him turned into a blur as he moved along the invisible path that led him toward the source of his desires.

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Damon's paws halted on the hard ground among the twigs as he sensed that Talia was close. Her four guards were in the area as well, but Damon ignored them.

A gentle murmur of water told him that the river was nearby, and the gentle breeze carried with it the sweet citrusy scent of freesia that was so delicate that he would miss it if he didn't know what he was looking for.

Damon's snout peeked from between two bushes, and he paused at the sight of a majestic light gray wolf whose fur shimmered in silver light under the moonlight as it was caressed by the breeze.

'Liseli!', Sapa shouted, only for Damon to hear. 'She is beautiful, isn't she?'

'Yes, she is.', Damon responded.

The light gray wolf was perched on top of the massive rock with her head resting on her paws and staring into the calm surface of the river that rippled to create an illusion of the moon and stars dancing on it.

'Make some noise.', Damon said to Sapa. 'We are down the wind, and we don't want to startle her.'

'She knows we are here.', Sapa responded with confidence.

Damon was not sure how Sapa could be so optimistic, but then... if Talia knew that Damon was approaching her, and she didn't run away, that should be a good thing.

'Slowly...!', Damon reminded his wolf who was too excited to see his mate. The last thing Damon wanted was to appear aggressive and spook Talia away. He had already done a lot of damage, and he was determined to approach her slowly and do this right. He had to make it right. Somehow.

Chapter 575 The pack run (12)

From the moment the painful shift into the wolf form ended, Talia retracted to the back of her mind, letting Liseli take over. The old beast was craving freedom and to stretch her paws, and Talia was not in the mood to interact with anyone, so this worked for both of them.

Liseli felt Caleb, Pierce, Liam, and Lulu in the area but since the four guards were only keeping watch from the distance, she didn't bother with them.

After a short run, Liseli settled at the top of a rock, and she gazed into the water while enjoying the wind that ruffled her fur.

'Do you want to talk about it?', Liseli asked Talia.

'No.'

'Are you sure?'

'There is no point.', Talia responded. 'I have no right to judge Damon for how he acted before we met, and tonight the dark magic blocked our bond so he couldn't recognize me. When I think about it from that perspective, I shouldn't be upset and I should forgive him, but I can't erase this feeling of disgust. He hurt me. Should I neglect how he made me feel because he was not himself?' Talia wanted to punch something and release the frustration that was bubbling inside her. 'And here I am, talking about it even though I said I won't. Why am I this angry? Why can't I shake it off?'

'It could be the effect of dark magic.', Liseli responded. 'I feel remnants of it inside us. It happened during the ritual.' And when they found Damon collapsed on the bedroom floor when the potion was taking the effect.

'I don't feel anything.', Talia said.

'Yes, you do. It's the anger you spoke off. It's messing with your emotions and preventing you from forgiving Damon.'

Talia was not convinced. 'Does he deserve to be forgiven? He was an asshole and now suddenly he changed his ways, and he gets a clean slate? Shouldn't he pay for all the wrongs he did?' Talia paused when she realized that this was not her usual self. Maybe she was corrupted by negativity. 'How can I get it off?'

'I'm not sure.', Liseli responded honestly. 'Only light can chase away the darkness.'

Talia groaned irritably. This was not the time for riddles. She needed solutions!

Liseli's words were simple, but Talia's thoughts and emotions were a mess, and she couldn't suppress the darkness she never felt before. It was gnawing at her heart and making her feel uncomfortable in her skin. Was it really due to the dark magic? How can she get rid of it? Talia wanted to be herself again, this didn't feel right.

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'Damon is here.', Liseli said to Talia.

Talia's heart skipped a beat. She was really missing his proximity, but... 'I don't care.' She didn't want to talk to him. Not yet. The negativity bubbled inside her and Talia feared that she will say something that can't be taken back.

The memory of him taking advantage to feel her out while others were watching was making her nauseous.

Would he go all the way if she was willing? How many women allowed him to go all the way without privacy? And did he really think that any woman would enjoy such an experience? He was such an idiot!

Actually, females like Nora would enjoy having witnesses to confirm she spread her legs for an impressive Alpha like Damon, but that didn't make Damon any less of an idiot!

For Talia, making love was intimate and sacred, every touch was meant only for the two of them to share, and he ruined it!

'You could have blasted him.', Liseli said. 'But instead, you allowed it to happen while trying to talk sense into him. On the bright side, it worked.'

Talia snorted. 'Great. It's my fault that my mate is a lecherous bastard. Thank you, Moon Goddess!'

'It's what the Moon Goddess arranged.', Liseli said. 'Damon is a handful. You are probably the only female that can handle him.'

'You wanted to say that I'm the only female stupid enough to forgive him repeatedly! What about ME? Don't I deserve a caring man who will respect me after all I've been through?', Talia asked grumpily. 'Besides, since when are you taking his side?'

'He is your mate, child.', Liseli responded. 'You have two choices. Accept him or reject him, and I know you won't do the latter, so it's better if you embrace the reality that you are stuck with him and shorten your suffering.'

'It seems to me that suffering is all I do.', Talia was NOT happy.

'Don't allow negative emotions to guide you. Think about things before you do something you might regret.', Liseli advised Talia.

'I know it's not fair. Since we met, Damon was trying and what happened tonight was not Damon's fault. It was the dark magic, it was Cassandra, and Alpha Isaac and Alpha Sophia and Alpha Edward, and Elders. Oh! And it was Marcy and Cassie and Ashley and Nora, and it was how he grew up on his own, and it was always someone else, and it was NEVER his fault. Even before I realized Damon was my mate, everything with him was a struggle. Why can't we just be happy?', Talia ranted. She wanted to be happy, damn it!

'Happiness doesn't come easily.', Liseli said. 'I should know.'

'I'm sorry, Liseli.', Talia said quickly. She forgot that Liseli was apart from Sapa for centuries and that she was fed lies about how Sapa moved on and forgot about her, yet Liseli survived, and here she is, finally able to be with Sapa, but Talia was ruining it for her.

'Don't be sorry, child.', Liseli said. 'It's normal to feel what you are feeling. It would be strange if you could set aside your grievances and just forgive him. But I have a feeling that remnants of dark magic are amplifying your negative emotions and you aren't thinking clearly. Alphas are dominant, overbearing, and crude, but they would never hurt their mate. Don't judge him based on how he treats others.'

Talia was confused. Was Liseli telling her to forgive Damon or not? 'What should I do?'

'You love him, and I can tell you from my experience that every minute with your mate is worth it. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't let him grovel and show his sincerity.'

'How about I give you privacy and you spend time with Sapa?', Talia suggested. By tomorrow, her emotions will simmer down, and she might be able to talk to Damon.

Liseli disapproved. 'I can't be happy with Sapa if you have this tension. We are sharing emotions, girl. So out with it.'

'What are you expecting me to do?'

'For a start, listen.', Liseli said and turned her head to see a big black wolf approaching them slowly with his head lowered in submission.

'Don't allow one bad incident to ruin everything Damon built so far.', Liseli continued advising Talia. 'Damon changed, and he did it for you. No one would make an Alpha humble himself like this other than you. Open your mind and your heart and hear him out...'

Damon was almost at the rock where Talia was when his steps halted. His head went even lower, nearly touching the ground, and he whimpered.

Chapter 576 The pack run (13)

Talia looked at the mighty Alpha lowering his head in front of her while asking for forgiveness.

She never saw Damon being so vulnerable, and she could feel that he was truly sorry. He wouldn't act like that if he remembered her. If damned runes didn't block the mate bond, Damon would probably flip because Talia was out in public while wearing those skimpy ceremonial garments.

Damon lifted his gaze to meet Talia's honeyed eyes and the world stopped.

Two majestic wolves, one light gray and one black were looking at each other, silently exchanging intense emotions that made their hearts beat wildly.

Damon and Talia knew they love each other and that staying apart was impossible, yet there was a chasm between them created by the two of them and many other events they couldn't control. Shit happened and they needed to find a way out of it because this situation was killing them both.

Damon tried reaching to Talia through their mind-link, but it didn't work. He could exchange thoughts with Talia, but Damon wanted her to know that this was him talking and not Sapa.

'I need to talk to her.', Damon said to Sapa. Being in his wolf form allowed him many things, but not to talk for the technicality of wolves not having vocal cords.

Talia's eyes widened as she observed the black wolf transforming into a human form right in front of her eyes. It lasted just a second, but it left a lasting impression. The magnificent beast turned into a handsome male who had only a necklace of white teeth around his neck and the rest of his muscular body was exposed for her to see.

Damon looked up at Talia and he fell to his knees while placing his palms on the rock where Talia was sitting in her wolf form.

"Thank you for staying to listen and giving me a chance to explain.", he said.

After a brief pause, Damon exhaled dejectedly as Talia's skepticism poured into him and he realized the gravity of his situation. He showed her who he was before they met and he treated her like any other non-important person. Did he want her to accept that side of him? Absolutely not. That was old Damon, Damon that shouldn't appear ever again, yet he was there and he hurt his mate. Damon felt like an idiot. Were there any words that can make it better?

"Actually, there is nothing to explain. That was me. It was all me. I am a cancer of our society who took advantage of many women who would do anything to be with me."

Talia gaped at Damon. She expected explanations, excuses, and pretty lies, but she never expected the blatant truth. Was this really Damon? The same one who would never admit that he was mistaken? And he was still talking.

"You are the one who made me realize how wrong I was, and instead of thanking you, I ended up hurting you. You see, I am not a saint, far from it. From the moment we met, I started questioning my choices. You make me want to be a better person and without you in my life, I am back to being the scum I used to be." Damon paused to lick his lips nervously. "I need you to see how important you are to me. Without you, I am a machine without a soul. You make my life worth living..."

Damon stopped talking when the silvery wolf moved, and his breath caught in his throat when Talia leaped off the rock. Did she just leave him?

'SPLASH!'

Talia's furry form disappeared under the surface of the water, and a second later, a head full of wet hair emerged.

Talia found a bunch of small rocks to stand on, bending her knees so that water was up to her shoulder level, which was perfect to hide her private parts because her guards were nearby, and she had no clothes to put on.

"Talia!", Damon exclaimed and dashed toward the river without hesitation. His plunge barely disturbed the surface. Damon was not sure if she would stay there or continue running, but he had no intention to let her leave his sight.

Damon's head appeared a few steps away from Talia.

Talia eyed Damon suspiciously while wondering what he was up to. Yes, she heard what he said when he was next to the rock, but the dejection in her was still bubbling. She knew Damon as cheeky, caring, domineering, but she never knew the side of him that was disgustingly egotistical, and she hated it.

Damon licked his lips nervously. "I'm sorry, kitten."

"Do you think your sorry will fix things? You made me feel cheap. You made me feel like crap. Is that what you wanted? Even if you didn't know I'm your mate, you should never do that to any woman."

Talia released a frustrated breath. Why the hell was she explaining to the most promiscuous person on the planet about him mistreating women? And the sad part was that many of those women came onto him, and they liked it. Talia really didn't want to think about it. It was making her sick.

It seemed like everyone enjoyed getting frisky with whoever was interested, and only Talia saw that as an invasion unless it was between two people who really cared about each other. Was she the odd one? Maybe she was, but that didn't change the fact that Damon made her feel uncomfortable to the point of her wanting to scrape her skin off together with the memory of his touch.

Talia's vision blurred from the tears. "You made me feel wanted and needed and special and then you took it away! My whole life I was hiding from the bullies, and tonight, you became one of them.", Talia said in a shaky voice.

"I didn't..."

"I KNOW!", Talia snapped. "You didn't recognize me. You didn't know. But is that a valid excuse? Every woman has a story to tell, and none deserves to be treated like a disposable item, even if they are throwing themselves at you! Regardless of if you are mates or not, your choices are to be a gentleman and make the woman feel special or move on, and not... this!"

"Aren't I making you feel special, kitten?", Damon asked in a low voice. To him, Talia was the most special existence in the world. How much did he fail if she didn't see that?

Talia opened her mouth to argue back, but she realized that she had nothing to say. Did he make her feel special? He did. Many times. Actually, all the time, as long as he knew who she was.

Seeing that Talia's anger was crumbling, Damon inched closer to her while talking.

"The truth is that you don't need me to be special. You were always special. The way you handled the bullies and didn't allow their darkness to corrupt you, that was special. You are a fighter, always eager to improve without putting down others, and that's special. You are making me want to be a better person, and that's special."

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Damon was so close to Talia now that he could reach her if he only extended his arm, but it was not close enough because she could easily escape his grasp, so he continued inching closer.

"Between the two of us, you don't need me. It is I who needs you, kitten. I need you so I know what it means to be a decent person. I have the largest pack, more money than I could ever spend, and enough influence to rock our society, but none of those are worth a squat without you in my life. I know I asked for your forgiveness too many times already, and I am ashamed that I need to ask for it again. Please, forgive me."

Talia jolted when their legs touched underwater.

Damon slowly spread his arms around her. "Please. Let me hold you. I know you are angry and hurt and it was all my fault. Ask me for whatever you want and I will make it happen, just don't push me away. I need you, kitten. Don't leave me." The last few words splashed on her face.

Talia's chin trembled as she blinked her tears away. She was hurt and upset, and her heart ached because she could feel Damon's emotions and his desperation to get her acceptance.

"Easy, boy...", Talia squeezed through her teeth and Damon swallowed hard. It was Liseli.

Damon cursed under his breath. Why did Liseli appear now? Talia was just a fraction away from him hugging her properly!

Damon lowered his head, but he didn't move away. "Tell me what I need to do to fix this. I will do anything."

'Liseli?', Talia called her wolf. 'Didn't you want me to forgive him?'

'It wouldn't last.', Liseli said. 'I told you not to give in to your emotions. You need to decide with your head so it doesn't happen again.'

'You think it will happen again?'

Instead of answering Talia, Liseli spoke to Damon, "Do you think that being humble will be enough? What is to say that you won't go back to your snotty self the moment this child forgives you? What is to say that you won't go to your philandering as soon as the right opportunity presents itself? When will you be satisfied? When you crush her heart completely? Is that what you want?"

"No. I...", Damon was not sure what to say. Liseli showing up right now had such bad timing.

'Old guy! Get out and fix this!'

'Why would I fix your mess?', Sapa asked in outrage.

'Would you rather let me mess it up further?'

Sapa groaned. 'Fine!'

"Lis", Damon called in a gravelly voice. "Are you really going to make it difficult for these kids to get together?"

Talia narrowed her eyes, knowing that this was Sapa talking, and Liseli responded, "It's just like you to want to kiss and forget. Are you expecting me to dismiss the fact that this boy acted like Rasputin while you were advising him? Maybe this incident can be attributed to dark magic, but what about before?"

Damon shrank a little at these words as Sapa cursed in their mind. Sapa always retracted at the back of his mind whenever Damon was getting frisky. Did Liseli expect that he will stick around and watch!? But if Sapa said that, Liseli would just accuse him of making excuses, and she was still talking angrily.

"Why is the female always the one who needs to forgive? What will the male do to earn that forgiveness?"

"How about an eternity of love, care, and servitude?"

Damon's heart thundered against his chest while Damon's and Sapa's emotions amplified each other, as the duo felt that Liseli's defenses were crumbling.

"I vow that no other woman, ever, will enter my eyes. It's just you, Liseli. It always was only you, just how this boy only has eyes for Talia."

Liseli sneered. "It seems you polished your sweet-talking."

"I had centuries of practice.", he responded and when Talia's expression darkened, he quickly explained, "I practiced in my head while imagining what I will say when we reunite. I never said this to any other woman. I swear." Seeing that she relaxed, he continued calmly. "How about we let them make up? It's still not too late for them to lead the pack run, and then the two of us can complete mating." He touched her cheek gently. "I was waiting to complete mating with you for centuries, Lis. Now that both of us have bodies, and are finally together, I don't think I have any patience left. What do you say?"

'What do you think?', Liseli asked Talia. 'Do you trust that Damon won't hurt you again?'

'No.', Talia responded. 'After everything we've been through, I would be stupid to believe that he won't hurt me. But I know that he wouldn't do it on purpose. Under that handsome and powerful exterior is a clueless dum-dum.'

'Good that you are aware of that.', Liseli said. 'The only thing I give him credit for is that he is learning and changing.'

With that, Liseli retracted at the back of Talia's mind, letting the human part take over.

Damon looked at Talia expectantly. "Kitten?"

Talia gave him a small nod, and in the next moment, she found herself engulfed in Damon's embrace.

The heat of his body contrasted with the icy water all around them and it made her wish to sink into him completely, knowing that it was warm and safe in there. Talia couldn't believe this. Even in the middle of an argument, when she was angry at him, and they were completely naked, he still made her feel safe and she craved his proximity, and she loved it and hated it at the same time.

"I'm sorry...", Damon spoke into her hair. "I am so sorry for everything I've done. I wish that there is bleach to erase my past and all the bad things I've done. I wish that I never hurt you. I wish that I can take it all back, but I can't. I am ready to make it up to you until the end of our lives, just... don't leave me."

Talia exhaled helplessly as her arms moved around his torso.

Damon inched away so that he can look into her eyes.

"I know that one good can't erase a bad, but I will keep doing good things until bad ones are completely covered up and you forget about them.", Damon said in one quick breath. "I will pamper you and spoil you and I will selfishly cling onto you because you are the only one for me. Do you believe me?"

Talia smiled a little. She could feel his emotions and she knew he meant it.

Damon's brows came together in a frown as he rubbed her cheeks. "What's wrong, kitten?"

Talia inhaled a shaky breath. Was she crying? It seemed like it.

Her Damon was back, and she was happy. She really was.

'I love you, Damon.', Talia spoke through their mind-link and Damon froze.

"Oh, kitten...", he said with relief obvious in his voice. "I love you more. I love you the most!" He craned his head and shouted to the night sky, "I LOVE YOU, TALIA!"

Talia's eyes widened in shock. Why was he yelling?

Damon looked at Talia with a boyish grin on his face, and he was about to kiss her when rustling noises got their attention and they whipped their heads to look into the dark foliage.

Someone was coming.

Chapter 578 The pack run (15)

Damon put himself between Talia and the source of the noise protectively while cursing himself for his negligence. He was so consumed in his interaction with Talia that he forgot to check their surroundings for intruders. And what about Talia's guards? Even if they couldn't fight off whoever was coming, they could at least warn them, damn it! Useless bunch!

The noises were getting louder by the second and Talia subconsciously gripped Damon's arm while wondering what will come from there.

It was one furry head after another and within a few seconds, the riverbank was filled with hundreds of wolves, and the crowd was still increasing as they were huddling together to accommodate everyone on one side of the river.

'That's our pack.', Damon told Talia through their mind-link. 'The two in front are Maya and Caden. On their left are Gideon and Mindy.' Damon recognized many others, but he stopped explaining because he realized that Talia was not listening.

Talia was overwhelmed with anxiety. Did they find out what happened in that clearing? Were they upset because she ran away from Damon? Or did they see the ritual and assume that she bewitched him? Many questions swirled in Talia's head, one possibility worse than the previous one.

This was Talia's first time to face so many wolves. They were all staring at her, and the fact that she was naked in the water hiding behind Damon was not helping. She felt vulnerable and exposed and she leaned closer into Damon's back in an attempt to hide.

'Kitten?', Damon called through their mind-link.

'Why are they here?', Talia asked Damon.

Damon's eyes lost focus for a moment before telling Talia. 'James advised them to come here like it was part of the run to find their Alphas.'

Talia needed a moment to understand that James wanted the pack run to be successful despite Talia's and Damon's absence, and also... 'James knew that we won't fight in front of an audience.' It was social pressure!

Damon turned to face Talia and he touched her cheek to make her look at him. "What do you say, Alpha Talia? Should we lead the pack run? Or should we tell them to go on without us?"

Talia swallowed hard as Damon's words sank in. Were all these wolves here because of the run? They didn't come here to lynch her?

Something sounded off with him calling her 'Alpha Talia' in this setting. The Dark Howlers pack was Damon's pack. Damon grew up here and he built his reputation for a decade and his people loved him. No matter what she did, she would always be Talia, his mate, never his equal. But the truth was that Talia didn't want to compete for that spot in the eyes of his people.

'One condition.', she responded through their mind-link. 'Can you stop calling me Alpha? I want to be your Luna.'

Damon's brows came together. 'Are you sure?'

'It's just a title.', Talia said with a smile. 'Your people worship you and if you force them to address me as an Alpha, it might backfire. Let them get to know me as your mate, as your Luna, and we will take it from there. If I prove myself as worthy, you can tell them to call me Alpha.'

Damon stared at Talia as his love for her swelled even more. He knew how amazing she was, and it was normal in their society for people to crave titles even when they were not due, yet Talia was shrinking her importance on purpose.

Luna was the second position in the pack, but the reality was that it could mean various things. For many Alphas, Luna was their companion, the pretty thing that hung on Alpha's arm during parties, but Luna didn't necessarily wield power.

Denying herself the Alpha title meant that Talia would diminish in the eyes of the Dark Howlers pack, but Damon knew Talia meant it. She didn't care about positions or titles, she really wanted to be with him, and she would do the same even if he was not the Alpha. And no matter what her official title is, Talia will always be his kitten.

Damon cupped her cheeks and kissed her on the lips. "You have a deal, Mrs. Blake."

Damon straightened his posture, making the water reach just above his waist level, and he turned to the crowd of wolves that gathered at the riverbank.

"Good job in finding us.", Damon spoke in an official tone. "I am excited to lead this pack run with my fated mate. It will be the first pack run out of many. I hope you will welcome Talia to our pack as your Luna." He reached for the necklace made out of teeth that was around his neck and he put it over Talia's head. "I want you to keep in mind that regardless of her title, Talia is my equal, and for me, she is my moon, my sun, my everything. Take care of her how you would take care of me."

Talia smiled foolishly and she wanted to get up and give him a kiss, but Damon's eyes flashed in warning when he realized that her breasts were nearly exposed, so he quickly sank to get down on Talia's level. No one will get to see her body. That was only for him to see.

Talia couldn't believe that she was completely naked in the water, hugging equally naked Alpha in front of a lively audience of wolves, but there she was, kissing her mate who embraced her ardently like no one was watching.

"Awooo!", Maya and Caden howled at the same time, and a second later, the entire forest shook as the whole pack howled in celebration of their Alpha and Luna.

Damon grinned into the kiss.

"Ready, Mrs. Blake?"

Talia nearly choked on emotions that poured into her through their mate bond. She couldn't believe that Damon was this happy, and it was because she was by his side, in front of his pack, as his Luna. She was delighted to know that her presence impacted him this much.

Talia clung to Damon, and they sank under the surface of the water.

Intense silence blanketed the whole area and all wolves stared at the river while wondering where their Alpha and Luna disappeared.

With a loud splash, two wolves emerged from the water and landed on the side of the river that was not crowded with wolves.

'Liseli?', Talia called, surprised that the old creature was not present.

'This is between you and Damon.', Liseli responded. 'Enjoy your time with your mate. I will take my time with Sapa later.'

Talia felt Liseli retracting at the back of her mind, and she was really moved. Even after centuries of waiting, Liseli was letting Talia and Damon do the pack run first. Talia was not sure if she would have that much patience.

Now that she was on her own, Talia paid attention to her surroundings. Her senses were sharper than ever before, and she found it overwhelming.

Talia looked down to see a pair of light gray paws and another wave of anxiety hit her. Will she know how to move in wolf form without Liseli? What if she trips on her own paws and makes a fool of herself?

Chapter 579 The pack run (16)

Damon was the first one to shake off heavy droplets of water from his completely black fur, and Talia followed suit, making the necklace around her neck jingle. It was the necklace Damon gave her, and she already treasured it.

Damon stared at the light gray wolf that shimmered in silvery light under the moonlight. She was slightly smaller than Damon but equally impressive.

'You are beautiful.', Damon spoke, more to himself.

'You are not so bad yourself.', Talia responded through their mind-link.

Damon paused. The mind-link was working in the wolf form? 'I tried to talk to you before, and it didn't work.'

'I didn't want to talk to you.', Talia responded, feeling guilty about it now.

Damon sneered, showing her his long fangs. 'How many secrets are you keeping from me?'

Talia tilted her head. 'I guess you will need to stick around and find out.'

All Damon's dejection sizzled away in a second. Damon approached Talia and licked her cheek. 'I accept that task gladly, Mrs. Blake.'

Talia felt an ocean of emotions bubbling inside her, and she was not sure where the outlet was. 'What do I do with this?' She opened up for Damon to sense what was going on with her.

Damon chuckled. 'Follow my lead, kitten.'

He raised his head to look at the full moon, and then... "AWOOOO!"

Talia felt silly to just howl at the moon, but Damon was doing it, and something stirred inside her, so she did the same.

"AWOOOO!"

The whole experience was amplified when the pack members joined, and Talia could feel that this was much more than just howling; it was sharing the excitement with the pack, it was primal and raw, and she was glad to be a part of it.

Something nudged Talia from her right, and she turned to see Damon rubbing his head on her side.

'What are you doing?', Talia asked.

'I'm leaving my scent on you.', he responded matter-of-factly. 'I want everyone to know you are mine.'

'I'm pretty sure everyone knows.'

'Not like this. Let me do this, kitten. It's my first time, so I'm not sure if I'm doing it right...'

Talia's heart expanded. The big bad wolf was admitting his insecurities. And he wanted everyone to know that she was his. Wasn't he adorable?

Talia turned her head and licked Damon's nose, making him freeze on the spot.

'Did I do something wrong?', Talia asked nervously. Why did he just stare at her like that?

'No, kitten. Everything you do is right.', Damon responded. 'But... don't you dare do that to anyone else. Got it?'

Talia nodded obediently. She had no intention of licking other wolves. She didn't want to lick Damon either. She wanted to give him a kiss, but her lips were strange, and her tongue came out on its own and it happened.

Ah, this whole wolf thing was completely new to Talia, and she was not sure if she can handle it, but she had a feeling that as long as Damon was by her side, things will be alright.

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From the crowd, a brown wolf with black patches was watching, and if wolves could pout, that would be it. It was Lisa.

She sensed that something was off when Damon was attending the ceremony on his own, and then he left without explanation, and Lisa was confident that her hunch was right.

People around Lisa spoke about Talia being Damon's fated mate and their Luna, yet Lisa was confident that was wrong because Talia was a wolf-less she-wolf. How can she be Luna? Luna should be beautiful and powerful, able to contribute to her Alpha, and Damon would never accept as his Luna someone without background who had such a big defect. That would be suicide for the whole pack, and Lisa knew very well that Damon prioritized his pack above everything else.

Lisa was aware that Damon was cold and calculative. If he allowed his emotions to guide him, with all the voluptuous she-wolves throwing themselves at Damon, one more impressive than the other, Damon would have had a Luna a long time ago, and not wait for his late twenties to name as his Luna a weak she-wolf.

Lisa remembered her mother's warnings about not stirring trouble, so she held her thoughts to herself while eagerly waiting for the evening to unfold. No matter what Talia was scheming, once the run starts, she will be exposed, and Lisa will be there to see it.

The Shaman ended the ceremony with all pack members feeling high due to the boost of energy from the Moon Goddess, and then Caden announced how the pack had a task to find their Alphas.

Lisa couldn't believe this. Alphas? Like, two of them? What kind of nonsense was that?

But everyone was cheering and getting excited, and she followed the crowd by shifting into her wolf form and following after Caden. They didn't run much when they met Maya and Zina, and a few more figures were further away, but they were not Damon or Talia, so Lisa didn't care much about them.

Lisa was delighted to see Damon and Talia in the river, both in their human form, which proved that Talia can't shift. Talia was definitely a wolf-less she-wolf, and Lisa was confident that the whole pack will ostracize her. Surely, no one will accept a Luna with a critical flaw, and Damon won't make her his Luna under all that pressure. Assuming that Talia was Damon's fated mate, at most, Talia would be Damon's mistress while a more prominent she-wolf takes the spot of his Luna.

Lisa remembered how she was discarded by Tony, and how all her so-called friends turned their back on her the moment they heard that Tony found his fated mate. No one cared about Kalina's background, it was all just because she was Tony's fated mate. Lisa came home only to see a no-name Omega sticking to Damon and pretending that she was important. And how can Talia be Damon's fated mate if she didn't have her wolf?

Lisa's belly full of grievances was directed at Talia as she recollected numerous scoldings she got because of Talia, and Lisa even ended up in the dungeon! Someone applied tremendous pressure on Lisa when she confronted Talia, and even some of Lisa's bones cracked, but Lisa didn't think it was Talia. It must be Maya or Damon or some other powerful wolf, and not a wolf-less she-wolf like Talia.

Lisa couldn't wait for Talia to be exposed as the weak fraud she is. Everyone will get to see that she was no one, and then Lisa will proudly say, 'I told you so!', and people will know that she was not just bitter because she lost her chance to be the Luna of the Lightclaw pack, but they will know that Lisa was right.

To Lisa's horror, Damon gave a speech where he said that he and Talia were equals and how Talia was important, and he gave her his necklace, and then they both emerged from the river as two wolves, and Lisa couldn't believe this! Was that a substitute?

Chapter 580 The pack run (17)

Before the pack run, Lisa heard Stephanie say how Elders might spoil the mood because Damon didn't accept the Luna of their choice. Elders didn't approve of Talia as their Luna, yet now everyone was excited and no one whispered a word of displeasure. Even the mighty Generals were squirming feverishly and Lisa couldn't believe that the whole pack turned ga-ga just because Damon announced he found his Luna.

Lisa gritted her teeth. Was this how Kalina was accepted in the Lightclaw pack?

'Waaaah! Isn't she beautiful!', Ester gushed next to Lisa. 'Our Luna's fur is glowing under the moonlight like she is the blessing from the Moon Goddess herself!'

Lisa needed a moment to collect herself. 'Why are you so excited?'

'How can you not be excited? Didn't you see Alpha doting on her? She is so lucky!', Ester spoke breathily, and her tail was wagging wildly just like many others. 'It proves they are fated mates!'

'Do you expect me to be happy because Alpha is doting on a random she-wolf?'

Ester paused. 'Random? Don't tell me you have a thing for our Alpha?'

Lisa rolled her eyes. 'Of course, not. Alpha Damon is like my brother.'

Actually, he was like Lisa's brother while she called him Damon, but then Talia appeared and Lisa was kicked out of the packhouse, and Damon ordered Lisa to use his title when addressing him, and she even ended up with the duty to clean the dungeon!

How can Lisa not hate Talia?

Her life turned bad when Tony found his mate, and it all became worse when Talia appeared!

Lisa thought that she will see Talia fail and that will make Lisa feel better, but now Talia stood there like a shiny wolf and Damon was rubbing himself on her while everyone gushed how amazing their Luna

was, and warriors were chattering that this was the first time for any wolf to get close to their Alpha in wolf form, and Lisa was on the verge of exploding!

'It is time!', Damon's voice sounded through the mind-link for the whole pack to hear. 'Prove your loyalty to your Alpha and Luna by following us and marking the territory of the Dark Howlers pack with our presence!'

"AWOOOOO!", the whole forest shook with the howls of agreement, and then two wolves moved away from the river to disappear into the nearby bushes.

Caden and Maya were quick to climb the rock where Talia was sitting previously and they used it to jump over the river cleanly and land on the other side. A few high-ranking warriors followed them, and then the mass of wolves raced to cross the river and go after Damon and Talia and their Betas.

'Lisa?', Stephanie's concerned voice sounded in Lisa's head, and she looked around, but she couldn't see her mother.

'Yes?'

'Where are you?', Stephanie asked.

'I'm here.', Lisa responded dryly as she guessed that probably Ester ratted on her that she was lagging behind. Lisa was still among wolves, but Ester and other enthusiastic wolves were far ahead now as Lisa didn't care about the crowd that was milling much faster than she was.

Lisa was not in the mood for this socializing, but she knew that her mother will give her a hard time if she just bailed on the pack run, so she decided to make a quiet exit.

'Don't worry about me, mom. I'm not used to being so close to other wolves and staying in my wolf form this long is making me uncomfortable. I'm thinking of heading back. I will see you at home!'

Stephanie knew that Lisa rarely shifted in her wolf form, so she didn't want to pressure her to stick around. The fact that Lisa stayed this much was progress.

'Are you sure?', Stephanie asked with concern in her voice.

'Yes. I am fine, I promise. Enjoy, mom. I know you were looking forward to this. Who knows, maybe you find your second chance mate?'

With that, Lisa took a right turn and got out of the crowd.

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Lisa felt relief when the noise from the wolves disappeared into the night, because she didn't need to pretend to be excited about this. But the truth was that she also didn't feel like going home.

Lisa found a hollowed tree trunk with clothes. They were all over the place as the Dark Howlers pack had these stashes of clothes for werewolves to put on so that humans don't see them wandering around naked like exhibitionists.

Lisa shifted in her human form and pulled one oversized dark gray t-shirt over her head before finding a spot on the grass to sit.

The forest around Lisa was quiet as the full moon was hanging low on the starry sky without a single cloud, but Lisa was not in the mood to appreciate the scenery. She stared in front of her blankly while wondering if this is how her life will be from now on. People looked at her like she was an Omega and expected her to do menial work, and that was such a difference from what she had before Tony found Kalina, that Lisa couldn't shake off the feeling how things shouldn't be this way. Why was she the inadequate one? Why was a skinny no-name wolf-less she-wolf like Talia getting all attention while Lisa was invisible?

A rustling sound from Lisa's left got her attention. She groaned. Now what? Did her mom come to check on her? Or was it Ester? Or a patrol? Or... why didn't they mind-link her?

Lisa raised her head to look in that direction and she saw three shadows emerging from there, humanoid figures, definitely not Ester or Stephanie.

'I'm resting here.', she spoke to them through the mind-link, but there was no response.

"It's just a she-wolf.", one of the guys said. "Was there a need for us to reveal our presence?"

Lisa's eyes scanned three figures, and then her gaze stuck to the one in the middle. He was tall and muscular and even through the darkness she could see that his intense gaze was trained on her behind dark brown strands of hair that partially covered his eyes.

He moved toward Lisa stealthily, and her throat went dry. The strangest thing was that her wolf was stirring, as if she was trying to say something and this didn't happen even with Tony around.

"We need to leave before we are found out.", one of the guys from the back said. "Do you hear...?" His question was cut short when the middle guy raised his hand to shut him up as he continued walking toward Lisa and he crouched when he was only one step away from her.

From this distance, Lisa could see his face. He had a strong jaw covered in stubble, and a straight nose; she would place his appearance in his late twenties.

His musky scent made her dizzy, and she heard a voice in her head, 'Mate!'

Chapter 581 The pack run (18)

Lisa's heart was thundering against her chest. Did she hear a voice in her head telling her how the guy in front of her was her mate? She stared at the completely naked male whose intense gaze made her skin break into goosebumps.

Her impulse was to call for help and alert the patrol because these guys were definitely not from the Dark Howlers pack, but then Lisa remembered that they connected borders with the neighboring Spring

Leaf pack, and she assumed that these guys were from there. Besides, it's not like anyone would care even if these guys were trespassing because everyone was drunk with happiness about the pack run.

When coming here, Lisa just followed the crowd, and she was not aware of how close to the border she was and that this was far from the Spring Leaf pack.

"Why are you here alone?", he asked.

Lisa swallowed a mouthful of air before responding, "I didn't feel like socializing."

"Isn't your Alpha leading the pack run with his Luna?"

Lisa's insides stiffened at the thought of Talia. "How is that related to me?"

His expression darkened. "Are you jealous that your Alpha is taken?"

Lisa shook her head like a rattle drum. "Jealous? No. Damon is like a brother to me."

"A brother? How much I know, Alpha Damon is a single child, and he has no females who are close to him."

Lisa realized that he thought she was lying.

"It's not like that. I grew up in the packhouse because my father was Beta to Damon's father, but after my father passed, I moved to live with my aunt in the Lightclaw pack."

He regarded her for a moment before saying, "And now you are back."

"I came back a few weeks ago.", she confirmed.

"You wouldn't be lying to me, right?"

"What would I get by making up something like that?"

He chuckled lowly and reached to touch her cheek.

Lisa jolted at the sensation of sparks prickling her skin, but she didn't move away.

"Do you know what this means?", he asked.

"Mates.", she responded in a whisper.

His lips lifted into a devilish smile. "I am Tristan. What's your name, love?"

"Lisa", she responded breathily. She really wanted to touch him, but her instincts told her to stay put because everything about him screamed danger and she didn't dare to move.

"Woah!", one of the guys from the back exclaimed once he processed the scene in front of them. "Fuck me sideways and call me daddy! Our leader found his mate!"

The other one stifled a laugh. "Janine will be pissed."

Lisa's stomach burned with jealousy and her eyes darted from the guys in the back to Tristan who was now so close that she could feel his heat splashing on her skin.

"Who is Janine?", Lisa asked.

"Not important.", he said, and Lisa's brain short-circuited when his lips landed on hers in a possessive kiss that made her toes curl.

She never felt anything like it. Tony's kisses were gentle and soothing, while Tristan's kiss made her feel like she was drowning, and she gripped his shoulders to steady herself.

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"You shouldn't do that here.", one of the guys said, making Tristan pull away from Lisa. "We are risking being caught."

"This will take just a minute", Tristan responded.

"What if she notified the patrol?", the other guy asked.

Lisa's eyes widened. "I didn't."

Tristan cupped her cheek with his palm. "I believe you."

His nostrils flared when the scent of Lisa's arousal hit him. "Are you eager to feel me?", he asked with amusement in his voice.

Lisa pressed her legs together. She couldn't believe that just a kiss affected her so much. Lisa was not into hookups and the only man she ever slept with was Tony, but this guy was nothing like Tony. Tristan was wild and unrestrained, and his touch was electric, and she really wanted to get closer to Tristan, much closer than they were.

He didn't break eye contact as his palm landed on her thigh and moved higher, and her legs parted on their own to give him easy access. She was wearing only an oversized t-shirt, so there were no obstacles for him to reach his destination. A shaky breath escaped Lisa's lips when he touched her down there.

He smirked smugly. "You are dripping for me."

Lisa closed her eyes as his thumb found her clit and his index finger sank into her tender flesh. It was all charged up with addictive sparks and she was confident that she will come within a minute.

He stroked her once, twice, and by the time she realized that his breath was on her neck, it was too late to react.

His big hand covered her mouth to muffle a scream as his fangs pierced into her flesh. Tears ran down her cheeks as the scorching sensation spread from her neck through the rest of her body. It was his venom.

He marked her just like that, and the only thing she knew was his name, Tristan.

Lisa whimpered as he licked her neck, to seal the mark that will form there.

"You are coming with me.", he said as he stood up.

She was still processing what happened, and he wanted her to go? "Where to?"

He leaned toward her and pinched her chin with his index finger and his thumb. "The circumstances are not the best, but the moment we are out of here, I will fuck you thoroughly, so you know that you belong to me and that you shouldn't ask too much."

Lisa's eyes involuntarily moved to his cock which was erect and waving at her. Lisa's core throbbed in need of his touch. She was almost there, but then he marked her and didn't let her come!

She should be outraged at the way he treated her, but why couldn't she hate him?

Was this what it meant to find a mate?

The guy was domineering, and her marking was not romantic or majestic as she imagined it to be, but she didn't think her mate will be a handsome stranger that came out of the dark either. He was a total bad boy, and Lisa loved it.

Lisa wondered, should she go with him? Why would she refuse? If she stays in the Dark Howlers pack, she will live as an Omega under her mother's watch while everyone admires Luna Talia. That didn't sound glorious.

On the other hand, Lisa had a handsome mate whose name was Tristan and other guys addressed him as their leader. Was he the leader of the guards? It didn't matter. She didn't want to delude herself with dreams of how she will be a Luna, but it was obvious that Tristan had some authority, and that should be enough.

Besides, wasn't it a custom for a she-wolf to follow her mate once they find each other?

Lisa wondered how long will it take for people to notice her missing. Will they make a fuss about her disappearance? Her mom will probably notice the moment she reaches home, definitely not later than morning. Should she mind-link her mom and tell her that she found her mate?

Chapter 582 The pack run (19)

Talia was having the time of her life.

Her four-legged steps were wobbly at the beginning, but Damon told her to give in to the call of nature and not overthink it, and within a minute, she was running through the bushes in a game of tag with a massive black wolf. Her mate.

Damon would playfully nudge her or nip at her tail, and she would squeal every time he caught up with her.

Talia thought that she had an advantage in speed, but no matter how fast she ran, Damon would always be one step behind her.

The sense of freedom was overwhelming, and Talia wished that this could last forever.

Talia knew that there were many other wolves behind them as she could hear steps and rustling of foliage that mixed with howls and yelps occasionally, but her focus was completely on Damon.

Eventually, the two of them stopped at one clearing. The moon was gone completely and only the starry sky illuminated the world, yet both Damon and Talia had no problems seeing the slightest details like grass and pebbles on the ground.

Damon turned to Talia and rubbed his head against hers.

Both of them could feel that their mate bond reached another level and they wondered if there was such a thing as too much good stuff because they were intoxicated by the happiness and love that coursed through them.

'That's it, kitten...', Damon murmured into their mind-link. 'This is how things should have been from the beginning. Just the two of us and no one else.' Everything would be so much simpler if he was not an Alpha and if she was just a regular she-wolf.

Talia giggled while rubbing her head against Damon's. How can he say that there was no one else? 'You are forgetting that the whole pack is following us.'

'They are not following us anymore.', he responded. 'The moment we finished the circle, they dispersed to find their own fun with mates or with other company for tonight.'

Talia blinked. 'Are you saying we are alone?'

'I even told your guards to take a break.', Damon responded, and she could hear that he was smiling.

Talia took a moment to sense their surroundings and confirm that he was right. Other than small night critters, it was just the two of them. She was surprised how her senses were much sharper in wolf form.

Talia sat on the ground and Damon was quick to sit next to her.

'Our first pack run was a success.', Damon said. 'I can tell you that our people love you.'

Talia was not sure about people loving her, but she was content with Damon loving her and she didn't want to nitpick. She had a question, 'What about Elders?'

'They all attended the ceremony, and a few of them participated in the pack run. None of them said a word against you.'

Talia was glad to hear this.

They both knew that Talia coming out as Damon's fated mate will bring another set of worries and that the Council of Alphas exposed significant changes in the society of werewolves, and there was a detail of her being Damon's Luna and her being the Alpha of the Midnight Guardians pack, but they didn't want to talk about it, not tonight.

She remembered... 'Now that the pack run is over, we should let Liseli and Sapa come to the front.'

Damon groaned in disapproval, but he knew that Talia's words made sense. 'That's a big sacrifice. I will need you to make it up to me, kitten.'

'We have our whole lives for that, Mr. Blake.', she responded coyly. 'I will be making it up to you over and over again.'

Damon's eyes widened. 'Do you think this will make me want to let the old guy come in front?'

Talia burst into laughter, and Damon joined her. They were truly happy and if anyone saw two wolves wiggling while releasing whimpers and snorts, they might think that the animals ate some funny mushrooms.

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'Lis', Sapa called while looking at the light gray wolf in front of him.

'Hi, Sapa', Liseli responded. 'It's good to see you.'

Sapa's tail was wagging wildly. He was excited.

After a round of sniffing and licking, Sapa suggested, 'Should we go for a run?'

'Don't you think we are old for games?'

'You are old how much you feel, and when I look at you, I'm charged up like a young pup.', Sapa responded enthusiastically. 'Come on. You always loved a good chase.'

'You remember.'

'Of course.', Sapa responded right away. 'I remember every single detail, as long as it's related to you.'

Liseli tilted her head. 'Then you should also remember that I'm faster.'

'True. But I also remember that you wouldn't let me struggle for a long time and you would slow down so I can catch you.' He inched closer and touched her nose with his. 'You were just playing hard to get. Like now. Come on, Lis, we both know you want it.'

Liseli sneered. 'You are overconfident.'

'With a good reason.', Sapa responded confidently.

Without any warning, Liseli dashed into nearby bushes with Sapa hot on her trail and a wild chase began.

After an unknown measure of time, Sapa and Liseli stopped at a clearing where their evening started. It was the clearing where Damon's parents were buried and where Cornelia conducted the ritual to remove black runes from Damon.

The dawn was cracking to light the sky in oranges and purples that were getting brighter by the second.

Two wolves stood in front of a diagram that was still visible on the ground.

'I have remnants of dark magic inside me.', Liseli said.

Sapa was alerted. 'Is it serious?'

Liseli shook her head. 'I'm not sure. So far, it showed when this child was overwhelmed with negativity.'

'We should talk to witches and see if they can help.'

'We should', Liseli confirmed. 'And we should also clarify what the witch will want from you as payment for conducting the ritual.'

Sapa lowered his head at this. He was not present to prevent Damon from accepting the deal with Cornelia, but he was not sure if he would prevent Damon even if he was there.

'Sapa, why are we here?', Liseli asked.

Sapa turned toward the gravestone that was under a big tree. He walked there and Liseli followed.

'Jacob...', Sapa spoke to the gravestone. 'I know that you never forgave me for not mating with Violet's wolf, but I couldn't because she was not my mate. This is Liseli. She is my mate, and now you can see that I was not being mean.'

Liseli realized that Sapa was apologizing to Damon's father. 'Do you think he can hear you?'

'Probably not, but it's making me feel better.', Sapa responded. He wished that he could visit the graves of all people where his spirit lived since he was punished with an immortal soul and an eternity without Liseli. Sapa knew that if they could see Liseli, they would forgive him for not mating with wolves who were not his soulmate.

Liseli looked at Sapa and her heart cracked. For centuries he lived with people who were unrelated to him; he formed bonds and memories, and there were regrets as well.

'I can't imagine what you've been through, Sapa.'

'Whatever it was, it was worth it because we are together now.'

'Show me.', she demanded. 'I want to see everything.'

Without hesitation, Sapa turned to face Liseli and he leaned his forehead against hers.

Countless images flowed between them, accompanied by sounds, scents, and emotions as Liseli and Sapa opened their minds to each other to share everything they missed while being apart for centuries.

The air around two wolves hummed while white light enveloped them, getting thicker with every heartbeat as their souls were getting entangled in unimaginable ways.

Everything stilled in deafening silence as if the whole world anticipated what will happen next.

The pulsating light reached critical mass and it exploded silently without disturbing a single strand of grass at the exact moment when the sun peeked behind the mountains in the East.

The new day brought unknown new beginnings as the two strongest Alphas were finally fully mated, the depth of their bond making them feel as if they were one.

Chapter 583 Growing old together (1)

The sun was rising when Talia's eyes fluttered open to see that she was sleeping next to Damon with her head on his shoulder. They were in bed, in the master bedroom of the packhouse.

She was home.

The previous night was eventful and heart-stirring, and she couldn't believe that they did it. Damon was free from the dark magic and there was no more danger he will forget about her, and she stood in front of the Dark Howlers pack as Damon's Luna. It happened.

Talia feared that the Dark Howlers pack will complain how she was not Marcy or some other high-profile she-wolf that could bring benefits to the pack, but the last night's pack run passed without incidents of such sort. The overall mood was good, and people were excited, but what touched her the most was the pride she could feel from Damon. It was as if he achieved something monumental and it amplified her joy to know that she only needed to exist next to Damon for him to be happy.

Talia took a deep breath to fill her lungs with her favorite scent of the forest and the dark chocolate and her world was at peace. Damon's heat warmed her skin, his solid arms were around her, their legs were entangled, they were naked, and everything about their current position was right.

The moment she moved a muscle, Damon's hold on her tightened. She loved that his instinct was to pull her closer to him.

"Good morning, kitten...", he greeted her in a gravelly voice from sleeping, and his lips pressed on her forehead in a soft kiss.

She looked up at him and smiled. Why did it feel like her heart was singing? And it was a happy song.

"Good morning, handsome", she responded and shifted a bit because the necklace made out of teeth that was around her neck was poking her. "How did we get here?" She really didn't remember.

Sapa was sleeping contently at the back of Damon's mind and Damon guessed that it was the same with Talia's wolf.

"What's the last you remember?", he asked.

"Sapa and Liseli went for a run. After that, I've got some bits and pieces, but nothing that makes sense", she responded, and her expectant look told him how that was it.

Damon filled her in with, "Our wolves completed their mating last night. They shared thoughts and emotions and when things became frisky I stopped watching."

Talia was not sure how to respond to this. Should she ask for clarification about the friskiness? Probably not. Yes, it was Liseli, but technically it was her body also. Sniffing, rubbing, and licking was one thing, but did they do more than that? Did Sapa jump on Liseli to...? Talia tried not to think about that possibility, but it was hard.

Damon chuckled at the myriad of emotions that he could pick up from Talia. "What are you thinking, kitten?"

"Nothing."

"That doesn't feel like nothing."

Talia knew he won't give up easily, so she responded, "I am getting used to the idea of having a wolf and sharing a body and... stuff."

"I see. If it makes you feel any better, it's new for me as well. I used my wolf form to fight or move quickly, and last night was different. But regardless of what Sapa does with Liseli, considering that she is part of you, I can't say that he is making me get close to another female..." Damon's voice trailed as another thought popped into his mind. "Sapa was not able to complete mating with other she-wolves because they were not Liseli."

Talia was alerted. "Other she-wolves?" Did Damon want to mate with other women? That was new and unsettling.

"Did you forget that Sapa was my father's wolf, and my grandfather's before that?", Damon reminded Talia before explaining, "Full mating strengthens the bond and gives us a power boost. This means I am stronger than yesterday, probably stronger than my father was. We should go to the gym and do tests. Both of us."

Talia had no desire to go to the gym or to leave the bed. She wanted to stay there with Damon as long as possible, in their slice of intimacy and peace. Why was he eager to run around to other places? "Not all tests can be done in the gym. If you are interested in power boosts, you should think about the possibility that you got an ability after our marking. Dark magic blocked it, but now that it's gone, you should be able to tap into your ability."

Damon's eyes lit up. Could he turn invisible? Or fly? Or something else super-handy? "How do I do that?"

"I don't know.", Talia admitted. "Axel told me that sometimes it takes months to figure out what your power is and how to use it." She remembered Axel telling her about useless abilities like detaching one's limbs at will, and that some people never tap into their abilities, but she didn't want to dampen Damon's enthusiasm. "You could talk to Cornelia about feeling the energies but be wary if she asks for another payment." It would be one thing if Cornelia wanted money, but Talia had a feeling that human money won't interest witches.

Damon pouted for a second but then he shook it off. It didn't matter. They had so many things to deal with, that him figuring out if he had some mysterious ability was low on the list of priorities.

What really mattered was that Talia was back in his arms and her proximity made his soul hum in pleasure.

Damon's heart skipped a beat at the sight of Talia's honeyed eyes that smiled at him. He could see the happiness radiating from her and it seeped into him and bounced inside his chest, and Damon was confident that he could fly just from this feeling alone, without the need of any mysterious ability.

"Are you happy?", he asked. He really wanted to hear her say it.

"Very much.", Talia responded. "Do you think that all mates are happy together?"

"I am not an expert in that topic, but I heard that the Moon Goddess matches us with our mates for a reason."

"Why do you think she matched us?"

Damon paused while thinking how to answer. Since they met, Talia bloomed from a scared girl in the attic into a confident young woman who can kick the ass of any Alpha who dares to challenge her. But Damon thought that his changes were more drastic.

"I am addicted to you, kitten. Your mind, your soul, the touch of your skin, I need them all, or I will suffocate. You run through my system like ice and fire, and I realized that I didn't know how to live before we met. But most of all, I believe that the Moon Goddess matched us because it was our time to be happy."

Talia smiled foolishly. She really didn't expect this confession.

"I wish that every person can find her or his mate.", Talia said, and she really meant it. "Do you think we can organize some kind of a mixer for unmated pack members and invite people from other packs?"

Chapter 584 Growing old together (2)

Damon looked at Talia's earnest expression as she asked to organize a cross-pack party, and Damon couldn't refuse her. "We can have an event for unmated individuals of several packs. I believe that Max, Cristian, and Tony will be willing to join."

"Axel also!", Talia added. "And we could invite witches as well."

Damon was not sure about that. "We should talk to our people about powers and witches before they come here. Witches might pass as humans, but members of the Midnight Guardians pack are a different thing." He saw that Talia's face fell, so he quickly added, "I'm not saying it won't happen. However, people get to marking quickly and we don't want them to be surprised when they start glowing or things float around them without an explanation. If we act rashly, it could backfire by people ostracizing them or capturing them for... you know."

Talia nodded in understanding. She knew what Damon wanted to say. It was for breeding purposes. Will they ever be able to contain the greed for power that runs among werewolves? "We have so much work ahead of us." To investigate the whole breeding thing, and to educate their people about creatures that are different. Talia wondered if that can be done at the same time. What if they capture and punish individuals who were behind those sick schemes? If they make it public, then society can find out about creatures with powers and how using them was wrong. Talia hoped that it was just a few power-hungry individuals and that it was not widespread.

Seeing Talia's concerned expression, Damon coaxed her, "Don't worry, kitten. We will figure out the best way to tackle this challenge so that it works out for everyone."

Talia leaned on his chest. "I believe that we can do anything, as long as we are together."

Damon chuckled. The amount of trust she put in him was immense and he really didn't want to disappoint her. As long as they get enough people on their side, and they don't act rashly, things will work out. He already knew that James will be on their side because Cornelia was a witch, and James proved that he can come up with an elegant solution on the spot.

"We should pick a date for your Luna ceremony.", Damon said. "Now that our people know about you, we shouldn't delay it."

Talia had no idea what all was needed, and she didn't feel like rushing it. "Max said that he and Tanya will have an event in about ten days. How about after that?" That will be the first Luna ceremony for Talia to attend, and she could get some ideas.

"Let's not delay too much. People will want answers, and we should tell them the date in advance." If it was up to him, it would happen on the same day.

"We can talk to Gideon and see if there is any day that works better than the others.", Talia suggested, and she thought how the next full moon sounds good. That will give them four weeks to prepare, and hopefully deal with other pressing matters in the meantime. She snuggled closer to Damon. "Do you think that we can take some time off after the ceremony?"

"Like a vacation?"

"Mhm...", Talia confirmed with a hum.

Damon approved. "Definitely. Think of a place."

Talia didn't need much time to come up with options for their vacation. "How about a place with beach access? Swimming and snorkeling sound fun. Or maybe we can visit the cabin again. I promise that I won't call Axel no matter what happens."

At the mention of Axel, Damon got an idea. "You said that time passes differently for the Midnight Guardians pack and witches. How about we go there?"

Talia's face lit up. They could spend two-three months there and it will be just days for the Dark Howlers pack!

"I will ask Axel and Yasmin to see if they have a place we could use. We can combine visiting their territories with taking time for ourselves. Axel told me that the main house at the Midnight Guardians pack is for the Alpha family, and I have a dedicated space, but I would prefer something with more privacy..." Talia stopped her excited chatter to look at Damon dreamily. "I like that we can chat about things like normal people."

"Are you saying that we are not normal?"

Talia rolled her eyes. "You know what I mean."

He knew, and he enjoyed these moments of normalcy as well, but he was aware that they couldn't spend the whole day in bed. "Are you ready to face the world now that people know you are my mate and the Luna of the Dark Howlers pack?"

"No.", Talia responded right away and hugged him tightly. "I wish that nothing changes. I wish that we can stay like this forever. Why are you so eager to part from me?"

"I have no intention of parting from you, kitten.", Damon said while running his hand through her hair. "Our people are eager to see you by my side. They were looking forward to me giving them their Luna, and now that it happened, it will be alright. The whole pack loves you and they will help me in protecting their Luna."

'At least on the outside', Talia thought but she didn't want to say that aloud. She was confident that Damon was aware of how all kinds of intentions could be hidden behind a smile. "What do we do now?"

"Now we will get ready for the day and head down for breakfast and take it from there.", Damon responded. "But first..."

Talia yelped when Damon rolled them over unexpectedly, ending on top of her.

He nipped her jaw playfully and spoke against her skin, "Luna of the Dark Howlers pack needs to take care of her Alpha."

Talia thought that he will do something naughty, but he buried his face in the crook of her neck and took a deep breath.

"I love you, kitten", he murmured. "I need to feel you close because only like this I feel complete." He released a long breath. "Twice. Twice the dark magic made me forget about you and twice I experienced how it would feel if I lose you. I didn't remember you, but I felt the loss of compassion, the loss of emotions, an important part of me was gone and I became a person I don't want to see again. I am scared of losing you..."

"Shh...", Talia coaxed him while patting his back. "It won't happen again. The dark magic is gone, and I am here now. If anyone dares to mess with you, I will make him regret it." She really meant it.

Damon relaxed against her, lowering himself slightly so that his body pressed on hers, but he still kept most of his weight on his elbows.

Damon arranged kisses on her temple and forehead while talking, "I am proud you are mine and I want to show you off. I love you with all my heart and soul and I want to share the rest of my life with you."

Let's grow old together, kitten. I will cherish you and protect you and I won't allow anyone to endanger you in any way because even if I live forever, my life will have no meaning without you in it..."

They say that the strength of one's wolf determines the rate of aging, and considering how strong Sapa and Liseli were, Damon guessed that they had close to forever.

Damon didn't want to ruin the mood, but Damon's parents, his grandparents, and many other powerful werewolves met their untimely demise. It was the greed for power that made people act against them as most Alphas died either in a war, in a challenge, or in suspicious circumstances; sometimes they were targeted by their own family members, but it was almost always by people close to them.

Damon protected himself by keeping everyone at bay, and the way Talia accepted people was opening doors to potential spies and backstabbers, but Damon didn't want to spoil this for her, seeing how happy she was to finally not be alone.

Damon was determined to keep Talia safe. He really wanted them to grow old together.

Chapter 585 Making progress (1) (J&C)

James exited the shower enclosure while wrapping a towel around his waist.

He stopped in front of a mirror to make sure that the towel was low enough to tempt Cornelia.

James was confident in his physique. Years of strenuous exercise made him look more mature and no one would think of him as a teenager. James caught Cornelia stealing glances at him more than once, and he hoped that this will work.

After they returned to his room last night, James was convinced that they will make progress, but then Cornelia asked him to shift into his wolf form and they ended up sleeping like that. Well, James didn't do much sleeping, but Cornelia used him as an oversized furry bolster pillow.

At this rate, he will never get laid!

James was not really desperate to get frisky with Cornelia, but she was gorgeous, and she smelled of wild berries, and he was aroused since last night when she rode his wolf without panties!

He wanted to hold her, skin to skin, and he wanted to taste her lips and much more. It was maddening but he knew that he couldn't rush this, and even though all the signals were there, something was wrong. Whenever he approached Cornelia, she would pull back at the last moment. However, this morning, James was determined to get his answers and make progress.

He tussled his damp hair to look a bit messy but not too messy, and he pushed the towel to stay dangerously low on his hips. With that, he was ready to face Cornelia.

James opened the door of the bedroom and his eyes immediately found Cornelia who was sitting on his bed with a tablet in her hands. He introduced her to the wonders of modern technology on the previous day and since then Cornelia was stuck to the tablet, researching about humans, unless something else pressing was going on.

James cleared his throat to get her attention.

Cornelia was painfully aware of James' presence, and she pretended that she didn't notice him nearly naked standing there, but when he cleared his throat, she couldn't fake being deaf, so she glanced his way.

He looked edible.

"Did you forget your clothes?", Cornelia asked.

James frowned. Why was she pretending not to be affected by him?

He decided to face this issue head-on and he moved to sit on the bed next to her.

"Cora", he called. "Is there something wrong?"

"What could be wrong?", she responded with a question without looking at him.

James took the tablet from her hands and kept it on the side.

"Talk to me, Cora. Why are you avoiding me?"

"We spent the night together. I wouldn't call that avoiding you."

He didn't want to let her wiggle out of this. "You know what I mean. You are not even looking at me."

"You are almost naked.", she pointed out the fact.

"Is that a problem? Isn't that helping me feel the energies better?" He glanced at the t-shirt she was wearing. "Actually, feel free to remove your clothes. Now that it's just the two of us, there is no need to cover up."

Cornelia puffed her cheeks. "There is."

"Why?"

"Because...", she paused while wondering how to respond to this. "You are underage, and you don't feel the bond."

James' face fell. Was that the problem? He could fix many things, but his age and feeling the bond were different issues. "You don't like me because I'm younger than you are?" Did she treat him like a child? He could tell her that he explored many women already and that he was not innocent nor inexperienced, but he had a feeling that might explode into his face, so he kept those words to himself.

"I read there...", she gestured toward the tablet. "That being in a relationship with a minor can get me into trouble."

Did she believe he will buy that nonsense? "If I'm human, the age of consent here is sixteen years old, so us being in a relationship won't be against the law, and we are not human so those don't apply to us."

"That doesn't change the fact that you are not sensing the bond. THAT is a sign it's too early for you." She released a long breath. And then there was the possibility of witches being hunted for experiments or for breeding and even though she could refrain from using her powers, Cornelia didn't feel safe. James already had so many things going on, and if she was with him, it would only add to his existing problems. "I think that I should return to my realm and stay..."

"No!", James exclaimed. "You are kidding, right? Tell me you are kidding." But her stubborn expression told him she was serious, and his stomach started churning painfully.

"Cora, you can't do that. Are you planning for us to not see each other for two years?" For her, it will be decades and he was confident that for him it will feel like two eternities! "I admit. I don't feel the bond fully, but I am confident you are my mate. If I am not ready, the Moon Goddess wouldn't arrange for us to meet. Now, is there any other doubt I need to dispel?"

Cora cocked an eyebrow at him. "Do you think that your little speech made things right? Did you suddenly get older or did the problem with your father disappear?"

James was not willing to give up. "We spoke about my father. I will deal with him and your presence won't affect that." But her absence will make him go nuts. "Let's think about this rationally. Two weeks, two years, or two centuries, it won't change the fact that I am younger than you are and that we are mates. If we stay apart, we will only torture each other. Is that what you want?"

"No.", Cornelia admitted. If she knew that her mate would be this young, she wouldn't come here, not now at least. It was better not knowing because now that she was aware of James' existence, the pull was driving her crazy and she feared that her control will snap, and she will jump on him. That's why she asked him to sleep in his wolf form, it was safer.

Was she worried about him being sixteen years old? Not really. For witches, they perform the Coven initiation ceremony at twelve years old, and after that point, they are treated as grownups. Sure, they can't identify their mates at that time, as that's the age when they start studying systematically different types of energies and it takes years until they can feel the pull toward their soulmate, but the fact that James couldn't feel the bond was a problem.

James put his hand on Cornelia's cheek and forced her to look at him. "Cora, I could lie and tell you that I feel the bond, but I can't pretend that I don't feel anything."

Cornelia realized that he was right. If he said that he suddenly could feel the bond, there was no way for her to check. She should appreciate his honesty and not punish him for it.

"So, what do you suggest?", she asked.

Chapter 586 Making progress (2) (J&C)

James was happy to see that Cornelia's attitude softened. He knew that she could feel the pull of their bond and that she needed only a bit to give in.

"Let me take you out so we can officially start dating." Actually, he previously promised her a day out, just the two of them, but things with Marcy happened, and the Council of Alphas, and the pack run, and even though they were inseparable, they didn't go anywhere like a couple.

"What does dating mean?", Cornelia asked.

James smiled. She didn't refuse.

He wanted to talk about romantic candle-lit dinner and dancing, but what he really wanted to do was just for them to get naked and he decided not to give specifics at this point.

"It means that we get to spend time together, and..." His heart thundered wildly as he inched closer carefully while gauging her reaction. She didn't pull back and he decided to go for it.

"I get to..." His breath splashed on her lips and then he kissed her right there, on her full lips that were soft and velvety, and he was quick to wrap his arms around her and deepen the kiss because she definitely kissed him back and she tasted divine.

Cornelia gripped James' bare shoulders to steady herself. She didn't expect that he will kiss her like that in the middle of a sentence, but she didn't hate it, not even a little bit.

Every stroke of his tongue against hers made her feel like another layer of an invisible cord was tied around them, and she wondered if they will ever be able to separate.

This intimacy was new to Cornelia, and it made her tingly all over.

The scent of her arousal hit him hard, and he chanted internally that they needed to take this slow.

James cursed himself for messing up the first evening when they met. If he didn't act like an idiot, he wouldn't push her away and she wouldn't be so reluctant to lower her defenses around him. Due to that, gaining Cornelia's trust was more difficult than anything he faced so far because he couldn't risk making a mistake.

The kiss ended, but James and Cornelia still stayed like that with only a fraction between them, inhaling each other's breaths, obviously wanting more.

He relished the feeling of Cornelia's arms around him, and he could feel the rise and fall of her breasts against his chest. Damn, he really wanted her to remove that pesky t-shirt she was wearing.

James licked his lips to collect any flavors Cornelia left behind as he didn't want to waste any of it. He kissed females before, but this was a kiss that shook his core and even his wolf stirred, and James knew that they crossed a line after which there was no coming back.

The idea of her returning to her Coven without him was making his heart tighten painfully but he also understood that she had her reasons to be reluctant.

Cornelia grew up in a realm without men, and since coming here she heard about witches being used for breeding, and James told her about his father sleeping around even though his Luna was right there, and Cornelia heard how misogynic Alpha Magnus was, and she even saw Damon mistreating Talia... Cornelia really didn't have many good examples to go with.

"You are mine.", James said possessively. "I am not like others." He didn't mention names, but he knew that she understood what he wanted to say. "I won't look at other women and I will treat you like what you are, the most important person in my life. We will stay together, and I will put my life on the line to protect you. Whatever comes, we will deal with it, and you are not allowed to leave me. Do you understand?"

Cornelia blinked once, twice, and then she responded, "Yes."

James' heart soared. She said yes! He had no idea how he will deal with his father or with any other challenge coming their way, but for the first time in his life, he was selfish, and he knew that life without Cornelia in it would be meaningless. He was confident that they will come up with a way to make it work. They had to.

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"Now that we are dating, how does that change things?", Cornelia asked. She didn't understand the whole dating concept.

James wondered how far he can push this.

"I get to hold you like this...", he tightened his hold on her. "And I get to kiss you, and for anything else, we will do it when both of us are ready. Will that work?"

She barely nodded when he kissed her again.

James pushed her down on the bed with his body and they held each other and kissed, her sweet scent of wild berries tortured him, and he realized that this will be the biggest test of his control. Ever.

But no matter how much he tried to control himself, his hands started wandering over Cornelia's body that somehow melted into him as their legs intertwined and her fingers dug into his back.

"James... James...", Cornelia called breathily between kisses.

"Hmm?"

"Your hands."

"What about them?"

"They are under my t-shirt."

He chuckled. "They are where they want to be. You have no idea how badly I want to touch you. Keeping them on your back is fine, right?"

"How much I know, that part of my body is called a breast."

While his hands were on her back she didn't say anything, but little by little his right hand moved and now he was cupping her breast.

James didn't want to move his hand. That part of her flesh was round and tantalizingly soft with a hard bud at the peak, and it filled his palm perfectly.

"I thought we were talking about my left hand." As if to prove his point, the fingers of his left hand moved along her spine, and she shivered.

"The position of that hand is also questionable.", Cornelia said. Everywhere he touched her was electrifying.

"But you are touching me without obstructions. It's fair that we are equals.", James protested. Her hands were on his back.

"You could put a t-shirt on.", Cornelia said.

James was not discouraged. "Aren't I the considerate one? I don't have it on because I want to make things easier for you. Admit it, you love touching me. It feels good, right?"

Cornelia stared at the cheeky young man who didn't look like a teenage boy. He reminded her of a hungry wolf who wanted to eat her up.

James stared into her deep brown eyes. "You have no idea how happy I am that I get to hold you, Cora. Your scent, your flavors, your everything is out of this world, and the fact that you are holding onto me is making everything several folds better."

Chapter 587 Making progress (3) (J&C)

Cornelia's eyes darted from James' blue eyes to his lips and back up again as she was torn between her desire to kiss him more, and her reasoning which screamed that they should stop. She knew that he had only a flimsy towel around his midsection, and her t-shirt and shorts didn't provide much coverage either.

She was aroused and she definitely felt his erection pressing on her thigh. If they didn't stop, they might go all the way and she was not sure if that was a good idea. Just until a few minutes ago, she was confident that leaving was the best choice, yet James melted all her arguments away with one hug and a kiss and she was aware that she was sinking deeper with every next heartbeat.

Should she continue resisting this madness that was reinforced by the pull of nature?

James' hands on Cornelia's skin felt good, like they belonged there, and she really wanted to kiss him more.

Her breath hitched when his thumb moved over her hardened nipple, sending an electric current straight to her core.

Somehow, he knew exactly where and how to touch her in order to set her body ablaze. Other than his impressive physique, James' mind also put her in awe, and now this. Was he really just a teenager?

Seeing that Cornelia's eyes were getting clouded with lust, James gave himself a mental high-five. He got her to lower her guard completely and she was his. He inched closer, and their lips touched when...

'KNOCK-KNOCK-KNOCK!'

James cursed under his breath. What's up with that timing?

Unsure who was on the other side of the door, he pulled a blanket and covered Cornelia with it, feeling that her t-shirt and shorts were too revealing.

"WHAT!?", James shouted at the door.

"It's time for breakfast.", Maya's voice sounded. She didn't open the door. "I called and texted you, but you didn't respond, so I came to let you know that your presence is..."

"FINE!", James interrupted Maya. He got the message and was not in the mood for pleasantries.

Hearing Maya's steps diminishing as she walked away, James turned to Cornelia who lifted the blanket all the way to her chin. It was obvious that she was embarrassed.

He felt like crying. The mood was ruined!

"I think you should dress up, so we can go.", she said.

"Dress up?", he asked like he had no idea what she was talking about. "If we are in your realm, this type of garment would be acceptable." He glanced at the towel that somehow was still set around his waist, but it didn't do much to conceal the tent that was formed in his crotch area.

Cornelia's eyes flashed in understanding. If he wears clothes that were common for witches, he would be totally exposed! "You will need to wear more clothes."

James smirked. "Do I hear that my mate won't like other women looking at me?"

Cornelia paused. Was she jealous? "Nonsense."

James chuckled and yanked the blanket out of Cornelia's hold.

"It's perfectly fine to be possessive of your mate.", James said. "I won't give you any reason to suspect my loyalty, Cora. I am yours and yours only."

He was hovering above her, and Cornelia thought that he will kiss her again, but in one swift move he rolled them over, ending up on his back with Cornelia on top of him.

"We should go to breakfast.", she reminded him.

"I'm not holding you.", he said while waving his hands to make a point that she was not restricted.

Cornelia was in a predicament. Their position was intimate and outrageous, and she could definitely feel his erection at the cradle of her thighs. There was nothing holding her down on him, but why was it so difficult to increase the distance between them?

His cocky smile irritated her, and she knew that he could see through her. Her desire to stick close to him was tangible.

"Cora", James called while running his fingers along the groove of her spine under her t-shirt. "Now that we are dating, you also have privileges."

"Like?"

"Like..." He paused to lick his lips. "You get to hug me and touch me and kiss me whenever you feel like it. Don't you...?"

His next words were muffled by her kiss because she really wanted to kiss him again, and she did.

...

James and Cornelia entered the dining room to see that Damon and Talia were there with Caden, Maya, George, Dawn, Gideon, Mindy, Petra, Erik, and Zack, and there was another face James didn't approve of. Calvin, the reporter from WW Magazine. James remembered him because Calvin interviewed Marcy and then James after that.

At that time, Cornelia was not present, and this might be a problem.

James's mind was racing. Why was the reporter there? Was he trustworthy? What if he publishes in his article how the young Alpha of the Red Moon pack was with a woman? That probably won't mean much for anyone else, but Alpha Edward would definitely pick up that Cornelia was someone important.

James' instinct was to stay away from Cornelia because if the reporter doesn't see them being close, they would avoid many troubles, but contrary to his instincts, his hold on Cornelia tightened as he pulled her closer to him.

Just a while ago he was pleading with her not to leave and he promised to keep her safe and if he backed away because of one measly reporter, all their progress will go down the drain.

Maya noticed James' discomfort.

"James, Cornelia, nice of you to join us.", Maya said while gesturing toward free spots where they could sit, and she remembered to introduce new faces. "Cornelia, I don't think you met Calvin. He is the reporter working for the WW Magazine, and he is here to interview Alpha Damon and Luna Talia. Calvin, this is Cornelia, she is Shaman Gideon's distant cousin."

"Don't worry about him.", Damon said to James from the side. "Calvin knows that nothing should be published without our approval."

Damon was smiling, but Calvin felt his hair rising. That was definitely a warning!

James relaxed a bit as he held a chair for Cornelia to sit on. Surely, he was overthinking it. Even if information about him and Cornelia ends up in a magazine, James can downplay it. Unless people suspect that things with Cornelia were serious, no one will care, and who will think that it was serious when he was only sixteen years old?

But James had a feeling that all these were just temporary patches because in no later than two years things will start collapsing and if he didn't come up with a solution to his predicament until then not only will he find himself in hot waters, but he will end up dragging Cornelia down with him.

"That's enough", Cornelia's words got James' attention and his hands froze mid-air. Was he really putting food on Cornelia's plate? And it was overflowing!

James cleared his throat awkwardly. "We can share this if it's too much."

Cornelia looked at him helplessly and she took a fork only to see that there was already one with food on it hovering in front of her face.

"You don't need to feed me.", Cornelia told James in a low voice, but it was useless as everyone around them was a werewolf with a very good hearing.

"But I want to.", James responded, and he smiled when she opened her mouth obediently so that he can put the food in there.

James had no idea why he had this inexplicable need to feed her, but he had an urge to stuff her mouth with food, and then he would stuff her down there with his pups. He gaped at his own thoughts. What the hell was wrong with him?

James looked around the table to see that Damon was feeding Talia, George was feeding Dawn, and Gideon Mindy, and even Caden was making sure that Maya's plate was not lacking food. James never saw his father feeding his mother, but maybe that was a trait only fated mates had.

James' mood soared. If he had this urge to feed and impregnate Cornelia, wasn't that another proof that they were fated mates?

James shifted a bit to adjust his hard-on, and then he continued feeding his chocolate-colored Goddess. His worries about the reporter being present were long gone as he was thinking about how to avoid the whole out-for-a-date thing, so that he and Cornelia can spend the day in his room.

Chapter 588 Influencing the public opinion

James was feeding Cornelia and himself, lost in the world of imagination where he and Cornelia were embracing each other completely naked.

Thanks to their make-out session from earlier that morning, James could vividly taste Cornelia on his tongue, and feel the heat of her body against his. It was exhilarating. He really wanted them to do it again. James wondered how her nipple would feel in his mouth. He would suck on that hardened bud and graze her there with his fangs for added stimulation. He could hear her moaning his name and asking for more when...

"What do you think? Is it a good idea?"

Cornelia's questions pulled James into a reality where they were sitting at the dining table with a bunch of other people, and she was looking at him eagerly.

James had no clue what was going on, but he had no heart to reject her, so he responded, "If you like it, I'm all for it."

"Great! Then it's settled!", Cornelia exclaimed and turned to Petra. "I can't wait to see the mall and try Italian food. We can go after breakfast..."

James' mental images of naked Cornelia crumbled one by one. Did she say, a mall?

It took him a few long moments to realize that Cornelia was talking to Petra about visiting the human city with Zack and Erik, and... what the hell!? What happened with them staying in his room? Oh, right, that was just his imagination. But still, he hoped to make it real. It looked real, damn it!

Initially, Cornelia was not willing to hang out with teens, but considering the failures of her previous plans to see how humans and werewolves live, she decided to go with this. If James was willing to join, then Cornelia didn't need to compromise between satisfying her curiosity and spending time with her young soulmate.

The more James listened to Petra and Cornelia talking, the more James' mood dropped.

It was all preplanned and that was why Maya called him to join for breakfast; Petra, Zack, and Erik wanted to do something that included Cornelia. And they made plans for the whole day!

If he knew, they wouldn't come!

James wanted to object to them spending the day as a group of five, but Cornelia was visibly excited, so he stretched his lips into a painful smile.

He knew that she came here to explore this realm, and it wouldn't be fair to keep her in one room.

But... Will he need to wait until tonight for him and Cornelia to have privacy? At this rate, he will lose the evening with Cornelia as well! That's not happening!

James decided to put his brain to good use. Surely, he can come up with a reason for him and Cornelia to ditch those three unwanted people by lunchtime. In that way, she gets to see the city, and the rest of the day will be theirs to enjoy.

...

After breakfast, Damon and Talia met with Calvin to give him the exclusive interview related to Talia being Damon's fated mate and the Luna of the Dark Howlers pack.

Talia forgot about her promise for an interview on the morning after the pack run, but Calvin didn't. He was in the dining room at the table before anyone else from the packhouse got there for breakfast.

Damon let Talia handle the interview, but he advised her through their mind-link which gave her the confidence to talk like someone who was knowledgeable about the pack-related matters.

As they reached the end of the interview, Calvin had to ask, "What can you tell me about guests from the Red Moon pack?"

Talia and Damon knew that he was talking about Cornelia and Dawn, and Talia was quick to respond before Damon sent the poor reporter to the dungeon.

"At this point, they want to keep their relationships private.", she said and as expected, Calvin's expression fell. "Considering your position as the seasoned reporter, you should be aware of the tense relationship between us and the Red Moon pack." This got Calvin's attention, and Talia continued, "If Alpha Edward finds out from WW Magazine about Dawn being Commander George's mate, he might give them a hard time. Why didn't Commander George tell him? Was Dawn a spy? It would open all kinds of possibilities to a person who feels wronged. We are not telling you not to publish news, but we hope you will consider Dawn's safety."

Calvin had to agree that news about Dawn being Commander George's mate paled in comparison to the exclusive interviews he got with Marcy and Talia.

"What about Cornelia?", Calvin asked carefully.

"Cornelia is not a she-wolf.", Talia responded with a knowing look.

Calvin's brows came together. He didn't really pay attention, so he didn't notice. "I thought you said that she is Shaman Gideon's cousin."

"Distant Cousin.", Talia reminded him. "She is more human than a she-wolf and as such, Alpha Edward won't allow for James' relationship with Cornelia to go beyond what it currently is, no matter how smitten they are with each other." This was the truth. "By writing about James and Cornelia, you will make their life difficult. After the way Marcy left, Alpha Edward might think that we planted Cornelia by James' side to control him."

Calvin was disappointed that there were no benefits in writing about Dawn or Cornelia, and actually, it might cause sparks of war. He was not willing to carry that weight.

But he left the packhouse happy because Talia promised to call him for any future scoops, and... "As soon as we decide on the date of my Luna ceremony, we will let you know before we announce it to the public." With that, Calvin entered his car and drove away.

The moment Calvin's car disappeared behind the tree line, Talia slumped against Damon who was already holding her.

"This was more difficult than dealing with Marcy", Talia said. She didn't have bad feelings toward Calvin, but all her answers were tiptoeing around sensitive topics and telling the truth while omitting crucial details and she found it mentally exhausting.

Damon chuckled. "You did great."

James was the one who brought up the point of the value WW Magazine had in swaying the public opinions.

Everyone from the werewolf society was reading the WW Magazine, and it served as a credible source of news because they wouldn't publish anything unless it was confirmed as the truth. The WW Magazine served no one, and it served everyone.

But no matter how objective WW Magazine was, there were always several sides to the truth, and the tone of how the story is told can make the difference between people accepting or rejecting the idea.

By having a good relationship with Calvin, Calvin's career will skyrocket due to the exclusive access to the news, and in return, Damon and Talia get to control what news gets out and in which way, as a way to influence the public.

With them preparing to integrate witches into their society, they will need a person like Calvin on their side.

Damon and Talia agreed with James on this. The boy was smart, and his ability to plan ahead was scary.

Chapter 589 Luna Talia's high-ranking member (1)

With the interview business over, Damon and Talia hugged each other in front of the main entrance of the packhouse, and they just stood there for some time. Other than the birds chirping, it was a quiet morning.

James and Cornelia went with three teens to the human city. Dawn, George, Mindy, and Gideon were in their rooms. Maya and Caden were handling their tasks away from the packhouse. Talia was not sure if Zina, Rose, and other Omegas were working silently or they left, but it felt like it was just Damon and Talia and no one else in the world.

Damon asked Talia, "What do you want to do now?"

They didn't have any firm plans for the rest of the morning.

Talia wanted to discuss urgent matters and figure out the schedule before they can plan their trip to the Midnight Guardians pack and witches' realm, but before that, she had one thing to handle.

"I want to visit Keith in the hospital.", Talia responded.

Maya checked on Keith, so Talia knew that he was in the pack hospital for observation. Doctor Travis wanted to do extra tests and to ensure that Keith's condition was stable before he releases him.

Travis knew that Keith sustained severe injuries and that Talia healed him, and Travis regretted that he didn't do the tests before and after the healing in order to assess Talia's ability. But Travis couldn't say that aloud because Damon warned them not to mention what happened. He didn't want people to talk about Talia glowing and healing people. That's why Travis hoped to catch some remnants of Talia's energies in Keith or at least something he could work with.

Travis was always interested in modern and traditional medicine, and if he could get a chance to peer into things they call magic, that would be fantastic!

Damon didn't approve of the idea of Talia visiting Keith. Did she need to socialize with a guy who obviously had a crush on her? But Damon knew that the Coach was in the hospital because of him, and that Talia felt responsible. She won't give up on this, and Damon had no intention of giving them privacy. "I will go with you."

Talia was not sure if Damon should go, considering that he was the reason why Keith ended up in the hospital, but they couldn't avoid each other forever either.

"I will pack some fruits, and then we can go."

"Fruits?", Damon asked.

"Isn't that what you take when you visit patients in the hospital?"

Damon frowned. "He gets food there."

Talia couldn't believe how petty Damon was. "We can't go empty-handed."

'Yes, we can!', Damon grumbled in his mind, but he didn't want to argue with Talia on this. He went to the study to handle some emails, and Talia said that she will find him when she prepares a basket with goodies for Keith.

The truth was that Talia had no idea what to pack, but she felt guilty to go empty-handed, so she got her phone and did a search online to see what was appropriate to take when visiting someone in the hospital.

Talia was leaning on the kitchen island and watching a video about apples when Mindy appeared.

Mindy came to grab snacks for her and Gideon. The two of them were enjoying solitude in their room now that the pack run was over.

"What are you watching?", Mindy asked Talia while peering at the latter's phone.

"Ways to cut apples before serving them to a patient.", Talia responded.

"Who is sick?"

Talia realized that Mindy was not there to see what happened, so she gave her a short version: Damon forgot about her (again), he was crude, Keith came to her rescue and ended up hurt by Damon's aura and was now in the hospital.

Mindy made a face. "Alphas can be such cavemen." Her brother was not a violent guy, but something was hardwired in Alpha's mind to trigger unreasonable behavior whenever he felt the challenge. She saw Maddox using excessive force more than once.

"It's all good.", Talia tried to soften up Mindy's fiery temper. "Keith is fine now, and Doctor Travis is holding him back for observation, but since he ended up there because of me, I want to check on him and get him some treats. I hope that Keith won't blame me for this."

Mindy's expression didn't improve. "Keith won't blame you. As your guard, he was doing his duty. But you are making excuses for Damon. Aren't you?"

Talia exhaled helplessly. Mindy got her there. "Damon is a good person. He changed, just how Max changed since he met Tanya."

Mindy frowned at these words. "Max didn't change. He is still the same, with the difference that Tanya gets special treatment while he ignores other women."

Talia didn't want to talk about the behavior of Alphas. Each Alpha has good and bad sides, and they all have in common pride and stubbornness and their own set of values. Alpha is the king in his territory where his word is the law. Everyone is sucking up to them, and in time that twists their way of thinking no matter how righteous they want to be. And here she was again, making up excuses for Damon.

If they discussed that, both Talia and Mindy will only get upset, so Talia decided to change the topic.

"How was the pack run for you?"

"After a rocky start, it was good.", Mindy responded.

Talia's ears perked up. "A rocky start? What did I miss?"

Mindy told Talia about Nina and the bad vibes she felt. "Gideon didn't confirm, but he didn't deny it either. The way she looked at him and called him Gidi, was enough for me to know. He slept with her, and she is not happy that he found his mate." Mindy made a grumpy face. "And who knows how many Ninas are out there."

"Mindy?", Talia called carefully. "Are you and Gideon fine?"

"Yes, yes.", Mindy confirmed right away. "Gideon is great. We are both adjusting to the mate bond and to each other. But to be honest, it's difficult to find the middle ground. Last night, Nina got too close, and Gideon didn't notice, and on the other hand, he is not talking to Cornelia about magic because he doesn't want to spend time with another female and get me worried."

Talia understood that Gideon was keeping his distance from Cornelia because Mindy and the witch had a bad start that included tumbling in the garden. As for the other woman... "Do you think Nina will cause problems?"

Mindy shrugged. "I don't know. After we cleared the air between us, Gideon told her that he doesn't need her, but I'm not sure if she got the message that she needs to scram." Mindy pursed her lips and looked at Talia. "How long can we stay in the packhouse?"

Talia's expression lit up. "You can stay as long as you want. We can make it permanent if it works for you."

Mindy realized that Talia was up to something. "Out with it. I'm having difficulty believing that you are so happy about my company."

Chapter 590 Luna Talia's high-ranking member (2)

"Of course, it's about your company! I love your company!", Talia said to Mindy right away. "I was also hoping that you will accept to be a high-ranking member in the Dark Howlers pack."

"How high are we talking about?", Mindy asked suspiciously.

"I didn't think that far.", Talia responded honestly. "Caden and Maya are working as Damon's Betas and Maya mentioned that she will reduce her duties because they want to expand their family. I have no

idea what it means to be Damon's Luna, but I know that I will need trustworthy people by my side. Qualifications are that the person is smart, reliable, and not afraid to tell me when I'm about to make a mistake. Who is better for that role than you?" Talia ended enthusiastically.

Mindy was Talia's first friend who was not related to Damon, and Talia knew Mindy as a straightforward person who doesn't mince words and is not afraid to speak her mind. Being surrounded by people who will blindly obey Talia's order sounded nice, but she needed someone who will keep her grounded. Even Damon would let her wreck the world and she hoped that Mindy will prevent her from doing that.

Mindy was flattered by Talia's offer, but Mindy grew up in the Alpha family and she was aware that under all that glitz and glam which comes with a high position, there was a lot of work. "It sounds great, but I know that it involves responsibilities, and I still didn't figure out what it means to be Shaman Gideon's mate and how it all fits with my existing work."

"I understand. That's why I didn't bring it up so far.", Talia responded. "There is no rush. We can talk about it next week or next month or whenever you feel that you are ready. Until then, think of things that will work for you."

Mindy was grateful that Talia was not pressuring her for a response, but she had a few questions of her own. "Lia, how will you balance your Luna role in the Dark Howlers pack with your Alpha position in the Midnight Guardians pack?"

"I'm not sure. Do I need to give up one? On the other side, I doubt I can have both roles." This was more than just balancing conflicting interests. Did she have the time and resources to take on both roles with the dedication they require?

"There is always an option to merge packs.", Mindy suggested.

Talia loved the idea but, "Damon is being targeted because other Alphas fear that he is too powerful. Imagine their reaction if our two packs merge into one."

Mindy understood what Talia was saying, however, "Eventually, they will find out that Luna of the Dark Howlers pack is also the Alpha of the Midnight Guardians pack. Considering that the two of you are fated mates, merging your two packs will be only a matter of formality."

Talia's intention was to abdicate her position as the Alpha of the Midnight Guardians pack for Axel to have it. She was not interested in titles and if Axel was doing all the work, he should get the credits as well. However, every time Talia thought about stepping down as the Alpha of the Midnight Guardians pack, her heart tightened painfully, as if something really bad will happen if she made such a move.

"Ideally, we would find a way to live with other packs and erase borders, or at least to stop thinking of each other as competition. We are all werewolves with common goals. But I know that is just wishful thinking.", Talia said. "To answer your question, I don't know what to do. I will think about it and gather opinions. I'm sure we will come up with something that works for everyone."

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"Can you tell me what challenges you are facing with Gideon?" Talia was genuinely interested. For Talia, staying with Damon was normal. Can it be more difficult to be Shaman's mate compared to Alpha's?

Mindy didn't want to talk about her and Gideon, but Talia was her friend and Mindy thought that even if Talia can't help, she can listen, and that meant a lot.

"Most of our talks are related to where we are going to live. Gideon's current place provides privacy, but it's lacking many amenities and it's far from everything so it's not convenient as a permanent location. We discussed moving closer to Darkbourne, but we need a house with several rooms and enough land for him to plant his garden and to provide privacy, and some of those requirements are clashing. I didn't understand the privacy part until I saw how Nina was acting friendly with him. She was arranging the herbs I prepared, like she belonged there! Now I fear that when people find out we are close to town, everyone will come and act like they are in their own home. That's why I asked how long we can stay in the packhouse. No one dares to seek him here and I will appreciate it if we can intrude until we figure out something that will work..." Mindy's voice trailed when she realized that she was blabbering. "I'm sorry. I need to stop oversharing."

"Nonsense!", Talia exclaimed. Considering the war-sparking issues she was facing so far, Talia thought that Mindy's problems were not a big deal. "First, you are not intruding. Second, I think I have a perfect house for you."

"You do?"

Talia nodded confidently. "It's a new construction with three bedrooms upstairs, and plenty of unused land around it. Gideon can make a garden as big as he needs, and you can even expand the house if you wish. It's about five minutes from here, so you are close to town while not actually being IN the town."

Talia was talking about the house where George and Marcy were staying after George accepted Marcy's rejection. Damon told Talia that the house was unoccupied, and there were a few similar houses further from the packhouse. They used them when someone needed to stay temporarily and the packhouse was not appropriate, like for a family of refugees.

Mindy shook her head, rejecting the idea. "That won't help with people coming over and treating my home as a bus station."

"I'm not done.", Talia said. "No one needs to know where you live. Gideon can get himself an office in town where he will meet people who need advice, medicine, or whatever service he is providing. Appointments in advance will ensure that he is there when needed, and only your friends can know where you actually live. As a benefit of being close to the packhouse, guards will prevent any uninvited guests from intruding on your time."

Talia could see that Mindy was considering it, so she pushed a bit more, "If I was you, I would give it a try. In the worst case, it won't work, and you need to keep searching, but living in that house will give you a better understanding of what you need. If it's a total failure, you are always welcome to return here. I will keep the room ready for you. What do you think?"

"As a benefit, I will be close to work with you."

"Work, fun, hanging out, call it any way you want. I will pay you fairly and it will come with benefits.", Talia grinned. "But I won't ask you to be available 24/7 as my aide. We can decide if it's every day, every other day, how many hours..."

Talia stopped talking when Mindy gave her a hug.

"I knew it's a good move to befriend Luna of the pack.", Mindy said and both of them burst into giggles.

Talia was genuinely happy. Only a few weeks ago, the idea of being Damon's Luna was overwhelming, but now she had Zina and Rose to help in the packhouse, and with Mindy accepting to be by her side, it was not so scary anymore.

OK. Mindy didn't accept yet, but Talia had a feeling that it was only a matter of time.

As for being the Alpha of the Midnight Guardians pack, Talia decided to deal with that later.