

Alphas Bride 61

Chapter 61 - Pillow Talk

Damon's gaze directed at Talia made her uncomfortable and she wanted him to leave.

"There is Tiramisu for dessert.", Talia said when she finished the food from her plate.

"You get dessert only if you join us in the dining room for a meal.", Damon responded.

"That's not what I meant.", Talia said quickly. "I thought that you might want cake so you can have it when you go down."

Damon cocked an eyebrow. "Instead of worrying about others, you should think about yourself more. What do you want to do now?"

'I want you to leave.', Talia didn't dare to say this aloud. "Sleep. I'm tired."

Damon nodded faintly and his eyes fell on two empty plates. He collected the plates and stood up. "Since you are tired, go to bed."

Talia understood this is the part where they say their goodnights and she gets her privacy. "Thank you for bringing me dinner."

Damon's lips lifted into a smile. "You are welcome."

Neither of them moved for a few seconds and then Damon's eyes darted from Talia to bed, silently telling her to go there.

Talia moved toward the bed, thinking that once he leaves, she can do whatever she wants, and she wanted to plan her exit strategies. She cursed her luck because she left the tablet in the kitchen. Maybe she can get it later, when everyone falls asleep, assuming that it's still there.

She was wearing a childish t-shirt with purple kittens and leggings that used to belong to Lisa, but Talia had no intention of changing into the oversized tank top which she uses as sleepwear. It's too revealing and she can change after Damon leaves. That was the plan, at least.

Talia got under the comforter, and she watched Damon as he walked to the door, opened it, squatted, and then he stood up and closed the door.

"I want to rest.", Talia reminded Damon when she realized that he didn't leave her room. He only left the plates and utensils in the hallway. And it's not that he didn't leave, but he was approaching her!

"Rest.", Damon said flatly while climbing on the bed next to her.

Talia was flabbergasted and she shrunk under the comforter. What the heck?!

Damon settled on the bed next to Talia while she looked at him in disbelief. The only thing preventing her from screaming was that Damon didn't go under the comforter.

"Your hand", Damon said, and Talia saw his hand hovering above the bed, palm up.

"What...?"

"A-a-a!", Damon interrupted Talia. "The deal was that I get to hold your hand whenever I feel like it, and you don't get to ask any questions."

"You want to hold my hand now?"

Damon wiggled his fingers impatiently, indicating that he was waiting for her to put her hand into his.

Talia couldn't believe this. But Damon said that she can work in the kitchen in exchange for him eating the food she makes, and holding her hand. She worked in the kitchen, and he ate that food, and... he wanted to hold her hand.

Talia put her hand into Damon's gingerly while wondering if she made a mistake by accepting that deal. When she agreed to handholding, she didn't think that it will include Damon climbing into her bed.

Damon's hand was warm, and his fingers laced with Talia's, and she took a deep breath which brought her the scent of the forest and dark chocolate and she didn't hate it. Not even a little bit.

He closed his eyes and savored the sparks which shot up his arm, filling his whole body with delightful energy that was amplified by the sweet citrusy scent of freesia.

Damon remembered that Talia said he brings misfortune, and how Stephanie said he should let her go, and that Maya mentioned different living arrangements, but this was the first time in a decade that Damon felt at peace and he didn't want to let go.

Since he became the Alpha, Damon sacrificed many things in the name of duty toward his pack. He even put his life on the line more than once.

But this was one sacrifice he was not willing to make. He didn't want to be apart from Talia. He couldn't.

How on earth was he supposed to let her go? It didn't matter if she moves to a different building or leaves the planet. Being away from her was unacceptable.

He knew that he was selfish, but he wanted her next to him because the thought of Talia not being close was suffocating.

"Talia", Damon called. "I don't want you to leave the packhouse."

Talia looked at him, and before she could object, he spoke again, "I want you to treat this place as your home. If anyone gives you a hard time, you can put them in place or let me know and I will do it for you, gladly. Just... don't leave. OK?"

"Alpha Damon...", Talia said, and her voice trailed when she saw Damon's frown of disapproval. She cleared her throat awkwardly before correcting herself, "Damon. I appreciate your kindness, but I don't belong here. It's too stressful."

"I banned Cassie from here. She will not return."

Talia shook her head. "Today was Cassie, tomorrow might be an Alpha or some other important person that I need to tiptoe around. You said that I should treat this place as my home, but I can't feel at home if I need to hide."

"You don't need to hide from anyone, Talia. My home is your home.", Damon said, and he saw that Talia was not convinced. He had to try something else. "How about this... Give me one chance. If anyone bothers you again or makes you uncomfortable, I will help you pack."

Talia was confused. "Why are you persistent?"

Because the thought of you not being here is agonizing! "I have a free room and you need one. If you move, this place will stay empty and collect dust, and it will be a chore to find you in order to hold your hand."

Talia's intuition told her that was not the reason. What was he hiding? Or maybe he was not hiding anything, but he was just regular Damon with a split personality and right now she was talking to the clingy Damon who wanted to hold her hand.

"I'm sure you can find someone else to hold hands with."

"You are right.", Damon agreed. "There are many women and many hands, but there is only one Talia Blake and if I hold hands with any woman other than my wife, that would be considered cheating. My reputation is not stellar but I'm not a cheater."

Well, Damon didn't lie. He was not a cheater because he never committed to a relationship, so even when he switched women every night (or a few within the same night), technically, that was not cheating.

Talia felt her face burning and she feared that she will spontaneously combust. "Please, stop talking like we are married."

"Is that bothering you?"

Is it bothering her? No. Not really, because she knew that Damon was joking. But if someone else heard it, they might not take it as a joke, and Talia would become the target of jealousy.

Cassie went mental because she thought that Talia stole a phone, and if Cassie suspected that Talia stole Damon, Talia was confident that Cassie would go for the kill.

Talia let out a slow breath while chanting internally that she should not allow Damon to fluster her. "I'm confident that you can find someone more willing to be your wife."

"Are you saying that you are not willing?", Damon asked without missing a beat, and his lips lifted into a mischievous smile. "It's too late for that, my dear wife. The whole hospital in the human city knows you are my wife, and the waiter in the restaurant also. Did you forget that I licked your wound? Healing wounds in such a way is usually reserved for family members and mates because it's considered to be intimate. Look at us, sharing the bed, and it's not the first time either. Or am I just a fling to you?"

Talia was exasperated. How much nonsense can he squeeze in ten seconds?

"Can you, please, stop joking about it. Maybe for you, that's normal, but for me..." Talia was not sure how to finish this.

"Normal? Do you think that I allow any woman to call herself Mrs. Blake?"

"You don't?", Talia asked sarcastically.

"You are the first one." The only one.

Talia stared into Damon's icy-blue eyes and searched for something but other than sincerity, she didn't find anything else.

Her breath was stuck in her throat.

Is it possible that he gives her special treatment? Why would he do that?

No, not possible. He is playing with her for some unknown reason. Probably because she is so gullible, and he gets a kick from making her flustered with a few words.

Talia gave up. There was no way to prove anything Damon said. Besides, even if he gave her special treatment and she was the first one to get the title of his pretend-wife, it wouldn't change anything. It's not like he was courting her or proposing marriage for real, and bickering because of a silly game he came up with was a fruitless effort.

"Fine. I believe you.", she said.

"I don't think you do."

"Let's drop that topic." Talia wanted to discuss something more pressing. "How long are you going to hold my hand? There must be some limit. I'm not sure I can sleep like this."

She was not sleepy, and Damon's proximity combined with teasing kept her on the edge.

Chapter 62 - Alpha's Apology

Talia wanted Damon to leave, so she used the excuse of being sleepy.

She needed space.

Ever since the incident with Cassie, Talia didn't find a moment to collect her thoughts.

First, it was Stephanie, then Maya, and now Damon, and Talia didn't get a chance to think about what happened and what she will do about it. Well, she knew that she should leave the packhouse, but the question was: how far away should she flee?

There must be some safe distance from Damon and the bullies.

Damon was amused by Talia's newfound spunk. She seemed determined to stay away from him, but he had no intention of leaving her side.

He chased Cassie away, and that must count for something.

"You can't sleep like this?", Damon asked.

"No. Not really.", Talia said and moved her arm.

The sleeve of Talia's t-shirt hitched higher, and Damon narrowed his eyes when he saw a fresh bruise on Talia's upper arm.

Damon pushed himself up and examined the bruise. It was a palm print with five fingers seen clearly. He didn't need to ask how that happened.

He gritted his teeth as rage swelled inside him. If Cassie was anywhere nearby, he would snap her neck.

Damon was not sure how to handle the whirlwind of emotions that swelled inside him. Anger, dejection, guilt, but somehow it was all soothed by the sweet citrusy scent of freesia and those delightful sparks that formed as he held Talia's arm, and the only thing he wanted was to get closer to the gorgeous girl who was looking at him with her big, honeyed eyes.

Talia thought that since Damon got into a seated position, he will finally leave so that she can have space to breathe without his proximity muddling her mind, but in the next moment, Damon was under the comforter, and she was in his embrace.

"What are you doing?", Talia asked while struggling to push herself away from him.

Everywhere Talia touched was hard, and she knew that unless he lets go, she will never free herself, but she still tried.

"Shh...", Damon shushed Talia and pressed her head to rest on his shoulder. "You said that you can't sleep when we hold hands, and I know that you like to sleep like this, so... sleep."

Talia couldn't believe this. Who said that she likes sleeping like that? This was worse than holding hands! She could feel him everywhere! Well, not really everywhere but the touching surface was much more than just hands.

"Talia...", Damon called, and she stopped her futile attempts to wiggle out of his hold.

Talia was exasperated. The bossy Alpha wanted to cuddle, and he was pinning her against him, just like when he found her in the attic, and the next day in the car and in the hotel room, and she already knew that she can't win. But he wanted to say something, so maybe he will let her go if she hears him out.

"I am sorry for what happened this afternoon. Cassie had no right to talk smack, and she had no right to hit you. I feel responsible for it and if there is anything I can do to make it up to you, just say it. My soul is aching at the thought that you got hurt on my watch, so... let me hold you. Please. It will make me feel better."

Talia was ready to hear many things, but she was not expecting an apology. Do Alphas apologize?

The sincerity in his voice rendered Talia speechless. He was truly sorry that she got hurt.

But the strangest thing was that Talia got bullied, yet it sounded like Damon was the one who needed comforting.

Talia didn't understand why, but for some inexplicable reason, she believed him. Maybe it was because she wanted to believe that he cares and that he was sorry.

Talia knew that by tomorrow all that might change and Damon will go back to ignoring her, but at that moment, being next to Damon felt good and she didn't want to fight it.

Her thoughts of leaving the packhouse didn't disappear, but she pushed them aside for now because people treating her well was a rare occurrence and Talia wanted to enjoy every second of it.

Damon was pleased to feel Talia relaxing against him.

There was no skin-to-skin contact, but even through clothes, the sensation of Talia's proximity was out of this world.

Damon rolled on the side, to face Talia fully and he held her tightly against him with his nose resting at the top of her head as he inhaled the sweet citrusy scent of freesia that made him lightheaded.

Ever since their nap in the hotel when they shared the bed, Damon was itching to sleep with Talia in his arms and he was delighted that it was finally happening.

Talia was his drug, his addiction, everything about her was perfectly made for him, and the fact that her left arm was draped over his waist, improved the experience by several folds.

Damon chanted internally that it's just a hug, sleeping next to each other, and he will not do more than that, but his body had a mind of his own. He was thankful that due to the angle of their hips, Talia was unaware of how hard he was.

Damon knew that Talia was inexperienced and because she was oblivious to the fact that they are mates, if he makes a move on her, he will appear like a creep. He will take it slow. How far? He was not sure and he tried not to think about it.

"Damon?", Talia called, and he smiled because her voice was soft, and she didn't use his title.

"Yes?"

"You have women warriors in your pack, right?"

"OUR pack.", he corrected her. "And yes, we do."

"Can I train? I want to get stronger and maybe learn some moves to defend myself."

Damon didn't like the idea of Talia fighting, but he admired her desire to learn and improve.

"When Travis says that your physical condition is fine, we can start."

"I have an appointment with him at ten in the morning, so I will ask him then."

"I will go with you."

"Thank you. For everything." She really meant it. For punishing Cassie and for bringing her dinner, for saying that she can train, and even though she was not fully comfortable with him in the bed, Talia couldn't deny that if Damon didn't stay with her, she would think about Cassie and that slap and continue her plans about getting out of there.

"You are most welcome."

A pleasant silence blanketed the room.

Talia shifted a bit and Damon rolled on his back so that Talia's head ended on his chest, and she was surprised that their position didn't feel awkward.

She thought about the day that started with Talia waking up on Damon's hand as a pillow, and everything that happened after that, and it was undeniable that this day was the most eventful ever. Other than the unpleasant few minutes with Cassie, it was overall positive.

"Damon?"

"Hmm?"

"Do you plan on sleeping here?", she had to ask.

"Is that a problem?"

"Uhm...", she was not sure how can he act like this was normal. "You have your bed and..."

"Is something wrong with your bed?"

'There is nothing wrong with it, other than the fact that you are in it!', Talia didn't dare say that aloud.

"I'm sure that yours is bigger." She didn't peek inside the room across the hall, but she knew the size of the beds for Alpha, Luna, and their children in the Red Moon pack, and they were definitely bigger than this one.

Damon hummed ambiguously. "So, you think that this bed is small?"

"No, no, no...", Talia quickly said. "It's just that this bed is for one person. Aren't you more comfortable in your bed?"

"Well...", Damon drawled. "Technically, this IS my bed. In my personal opinion, this bed is just fine for the two of us.", Damon said and tightened his hold on Talia. It was a queen-size bed and he wished that it's smaller so that they can squeeze closer, if possible. "But I see your point. I will order a bigger one tomorrow."

"No, no. Please, don't."

"Is this bed small or not? Make up your mind.", Damon said with amusement in his voice.

Talia let out a long breath. "Forget that I said anything."

Damon chuckled and Talia felt his face pressing at the top of her head. Did he just kiss her there? She was not sure, and she didn't dare to ask.

Damon's hot breath caressed Talia's scalp and the unfamiliar sensation created butterflies in her stomach.

Talia was still undecided if coming to the Dark Howlers pack was a good thing or not, but she knew that spending time with Damon was anything other than boring.

Talia listened to his steady heartbeat and the slow rise and fall of his chest was lulling her to sleep.

Damon's hold was solid, and it made Talia feel safe like nothing bad can reach her, urging her to relax and drop her guard. For tonight, at least.

Damon's warmth enveloped her, and his scent of the forest and dark chocolate was soothing, and without knowing how or when, Talia drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 63 - The Woman Under Alpha Damon's Protection

~ the Steelbite pack ~

It was after midnight when Cassie arrived home, to the packhouse of the Steelbite pack.

Everyone saw that she was not in a good mood, and they stayed away from her.

Alpha Richard gave Cassie about one hour to steam out before he came to her room, only to find Cassie sprawled on her bed with her head buried into pillows that did a lousy job in lowering the volume of her sobs.

Cassie was not sad or heartbroken. She was humiliated and furious. How can she accept this outcome?

She experienced Damon's intimate embrace more than once, and even though he was never cuddly or lovey-dovey, he never hurt her. Cassie didn't take it against him. He is an Alpha, after all. He doesn't need to woo women because they come to him, just how Cassie did.

Everyone knows that Alpha Damon samples a woman for one night, and that's it.

Cassie had the pleasure of being with him repeatedly over the last few years. She thought it means something, yet now he was choking her and he kicked her out because she slapped one scrawny Omega? The image of Damon's furious glare is etched into Cassie's mind, and she is confident that it will become part of her nightmares.

In her pack, Cassie is a princess and everyone treats her with respect, and what she experienced from Damon was equivalent to hundred slaps on the face. It was one thing for Maya to mock her, but even the warriors who escorted Cassie out of Damon's territory looked at her with taunting smirks which made Cassie's blood boil.

Cassie was embarrassed and angry and she was not sure how she can show her face in public anymore.

"Will you tell me what happened, pumpkin?", Alpha Richard asked while taking a seat on the edge of Cassie's bed.

Cassie whipped her head to glare at her father. "What happened? You know what happened. Alpha Damon kicked me out and told me not to come anymore like I'm some kind of a criminal!"

"That was the outcome, but I'm missing the part why you assaulted one of his members. Didn't I tell you to act like his Luna and be compassionate while there?"

"Compassionate!? Compassion is for people who behave and know their place!", Cassie screamed. "That Omega is a thief! She had a phone that obviously didn't belong to her, and when I asked her to give it to me, she refused and tried to leave, like I'm not important. I only slapped her to make sure she knows her place, I didn't even hit her that hard, but then Alpha Damon grabbed my neck and slammed me against the wall. He wanted to kill me!" Cassie was hysterical.

"Sweetie, that's Alpha Damon you are talking about. If he wanted to kill you, you would be dead.", Alpha Richard said, and he knew that Cassie returned unscathed only because Cassie is his daughter.

"I told you to act like a Luna and be benevolent. Unless it was in an act of defense, you shouldn't be physical, even if your opponent is an Omega."

"So now it's my fault!"

"Alpha Damon thinks so.", he deadpanned. "How about you calm down and tell me what happened, from the beginning, since you arrived at the Dark Howlers pack. I don't think he would lose his temper over one isolated incident, so tell me everything you can remember. Let's analyze the situation together and see if we can salvage it."

Alpha Richard went through this exercise many times. Whenever Cassie returns from the Dark Howlers pack, he will find a reason to ask Cassie about details from her visit. Yes, Cassie is only focused on seducing Damon, but sometimes she would find other useful information that Alpha Richard could use.

Cassie took a few deep breaths and started... "When I arrived, Alpha Damon avoided our usual greeting. Well, he is not really warm and gentle but whenever I come, I hug and kiss him, but this time he dodged me..." She told him how Damon was distant, and one moment he allowed her to come close, only to push her away in the next; how he was always busy; about the incident in the kitchen when she caught Talia stealing; how Damon would eat in his room instead of joining them; and how Damon took another girl to human town while giving her a warning that she was too nosy, and then how she caught Talia with a pricy phone.

"Hmph! Why did he defend her, twice? She is so weak. You should see her, the moment I called her out for stealing she lowered her head in submission, and when I grabbed her hand, she couldn't get out..."

Alpha Richard didn't need to hear the details. He already got the gist of it about the reason why Cassie was kicked out: Cassie lost temper, crossed the line, and Alpha Damon punished her. To be honest, considering Cassie's personality, Alpha Richard was surprised that Alpha Damon didn't snap earlier.

"I thought that it's a mood swing. Maybe he found another woman. That's not unusual, but it never lasted for more than a day, and he would always accept my advances. However, this time, I was there for days, and he didn't touch me. Is it because of Marcy from the Red Moon pack? Did they really get engaged?"

Alpha Richard shook his head. "Nothing is conclusive with Marcy. Alpha Damon left saying that they will decide later how to proceed with the engagement."

Cassie frowned. "Is he actually thinking about it?"

"Alpha Damon is not a thinking type. He acts. Alpha Damon left the Red Moon pack without sealing the engagement, and that means he was not willing to make Marcy his Luna."

Cassie relaxed at those words. "But then, why was he avoiding me? Other than one woman who he took to the human city for an appointment, I didn't see any other woman around him other than Omegas and that annoying Beta Maya."

"Do you know who is the woman that Alpha Damon took for an appointment?"

"I never saw her before. But her clothes were high-end...", Cassie paused. "Actually, a day before that, Alpha Damon went shopping personally and I saw bags full of clothing. I'm confident that he bought clothes for her."

"Is that unusual? If he was courting a woman, it's not unusual to buy her gifts."

Cassie plopped on the bed and stared at the ceiling. "I don't know, daddy. Nothing was out of place, but my intuition told me that everything changed. So far, Alpha Damon was either indifferent or accepting toward me, yet this time, he scolded me more than once, and he even hurt me. Man doesn't change like that unless he found someone else. Maybe buying clothes is normal for courting women, but I'm watching Alpha Damon for years, and he doesn't court women."

Alpha Richard agreed with this. He knew very well from his experience that Alpha doesn't need to show off in order to get a woman to warm his bed because there are always women who are attracted to status and power... unless Alpha Damon found a woman worth pursuing. But he didn't want to say that to Cassie and risk her throwing a fit.

"Tell me about that girl. I will see if I can find out who she is."

"Which one? The Omega who is the reason why Alpha Damon hurt me, or the one in the car?", Cassie asked and before her father could respond, she continued talking, "Actually, they kind of look alike."

"Sisters? Or is it possible that it's the same person?"

Cassie didn't take a good look at Talia when she was in the car, but she noticed a few things. "Both had copper-colored hair and a petite frame. I didn't notice more than that but..." Cassie's eyes widened. "What if it's the same girl?" That would explain why the girl in the car was quiet.

"If that's the same girl, it sounds to me that Alpha Damon is protective of her. Did you get her name?"

Cassie shook her head. "I can call him and..."

"No.", Alpha Richard cut her off. "Let me investigate this. Stay low, Cassie, promise me."

Cassie was not willing. "Why?"

"Because you just enraged Alpha Damon and he told me that if you get close to him, he will treat you as an enemy. Trust me, you don't want that. Give him time to cool off and forget about the incident. If that's the same girl, and he was protective of her, she might be more than just an Omega."

Cassie frowned. "You are telling me that some woman is latching onto my man, and I should stay quiet?"

"No. I'm telling you that some woman is under his protection, and you shouldn't provoke him. There is no proof that there is anything romantic between them. She could be a relative or someone he treats well because of benefits. There is also an option that she is a spy who is training to go undercover. If her mission is important, Alpha Damon would personally check her abilities. Let's not risk doing anything rashly. I will find out who she is, and we will take it from there."

Cassie pursed her lips. "OK. I will not contact Alpha Damon, but only if you promise to tell me what you find."

"Alright.", Alpha Richard said. "Now get cleaned up and sleep. I want to see you in high spirits in the morning."

Cassie let out a long sigh before agreeing. "Good night, daddy."

"Good night, pumpkin."

He kissed Cassie's forehead and left her room.

Chapter 64 - While She Was Sleeping

Alpha Richard was thinking about Cassie's words and he had a feeling that he might be on to something.

Just like many other Alphas and Elders, Alpha Richard is keeping an eye on Damon (and on the movements of the Dark Howlers pack), and Alpha Richard is aware that no matter how much they tried to pressure Damon, it was nearly impossible to influence him because Damon didn't expose any weakness.

The circle of people who can approach Damon is small, and he doesn't have any close family members. No matter what girls they send Damon's way, none of them kept him interested for more than one night. Well, Cassie is an exception, but she never went beyond occasional hookup.

However, if there is a girl who managed to invoke Damon's protective side, she might be someone important.

Alpha Richard's story of how the girl might be Damon's relative or a spy was just nonsense to pacify Cassie; she was never the sharpest tool in the shed; far from it. Actually, Cassie is not stupid, but her rash personality and short fuse make her susceptible to external influences and unless someone is guiding her, she easily loses focus.

Alpha Richard was stuck on the part where Cassie described the woman as weak; it was unusual. He knows very well that Cassie has no oppressive aura and that she is weak by werewolf standards. Any average teenage werewolf can defeat Cassie, so... why was this woman powerless in front of Cassie? Did the woman pretend to be weak, or did Cassie exaggerate to make herself look better? Is it possible that the woman is not a she-wolf?

Maybe, just maybe, Cassie returned from the Dark Howlers pack with something useful, but Alpha Richard knew better than to say that in front of Cassie because she will probably ruin it.

Alpha Richard never found his destined mate. Over the years, women by his side changed, and one of them gave birth to Cassie. The woman expected benefits and Alpha Richard chased her away before Cassie turned three years old, but he kept the child because an Alpha without family is frowned upon. He made sure that all kinds of rumors about Cassie's mother were spread so that she doesn't dare to show her face, and the image of a doting father worked in his favor.

Cassie grew up with nannies (who doubled as Alpha Richard's bed warmers) and Alpha Richard didn't bother much with Cassie; he bought her things and made sure everyone treats her like a princess.

It didn't take much effort to convince Cassie that Alpha Damon is the man for her, and Alpha Richard rejoiced thinking that Cassie will finally become useful.

To his disappointment, Cassie failed, just like many others before her, and Alpha Richard used his connections to get Cassie back into Damon's arms. After the third time Cassie showed up, Damon

started tolerating Cassie's presence and he didn't question when she appeared unannounced, and even though she didn't make much progress, it was more than all previous bride candidates.

Alpha Richard told Cassie to play stupid and stick close to Damon while keeping her eyes open with the hope that she might find something useful, and so far, there was nothing. However, now Cassie brought news: there is a woman who is close to Alpha Damon, and Alpha Damon was protective of her. Coincidence? Alpha Richard doesn't believe in coincidences.

It didn't matter if Damon's interest in Talia was romantic or not, the fact that Damon moved for her was the key point. Something that could be used.

...

~ the Dark Howlers pack ~

Damon held sleeping Talia in his arms and counted her slow breaths while playing with the strand of her hair.

He remembered Talia saying how she wants to leave, and he firmed his resolve to keep her by his side at any cost.

Damon knew that unless he tells Talia they are mates, she will doubt his intentions, but... what if that scares her away? What if she doesn't believe him?

Without Talia's wolf, Damon had no way to prove to Talia how much she means to him, and he feared that his significance in her life is not enough for her to stay.

Damon was confident that Talia is not a wolf-less Omega.

She moved freely through the dark kitchen and through the forest, which proved that her wolf is enhancing her sight. When she gave a lesson to Mr. Mendez at the hospital, Talia projected an aura only a queen could have. Definitely not an Omega. He didn't imagine any of those.

Damon didn't care if Talia is an Omega or a human, but he knew that if she can find her wolf, Talia will become stronger and incidents like the one with Cassie will not repeat.

'Travis. Travis!', Damon called through the mind-link. 'Are you awake?'

'I am now...', Travis responded drowsily, and it took him a moment to snap awake, 'Alpha!? What happened? Is there an emergency?'

'Not an emergency. This is about Talia.'

Travis couldn't believe this. It was the middle of the night! But that's Alpha Damon and he didn't dare complain. 'Is she OK?'

'I don't know. Can you keep a secret?'

'Everything about my patients is confidential.', Travis responded right away.

'I told you that she doesn't have a wolf.'

'Yes.', Travis confirmed. 'That's why her healing is slow.'

'Talia is physically weak, and her healing ability is just like humans. But what if I told you that she has night vision comparable to mine?'

'You are saying that her wolf is crippled?'

'I don't know. I was hoping that you might have some answers.', Damon said honestly. 'I have a feeling that her wolf is not gone, but something weakened her, and she can only enhance Talia's vision. Are you aware of any cases like that?'

There was silence, and Damon waited patiently, knowing that Travis was thinking about it.

'Wolves are our spiritual halves that enhance our bodies', Travis spoke after some time. 'There are cases when a werewolf was hurt physically or mentally, and the wolf side would be sacrificed in order to save the human half. If we take into consideration that Talia is malnourished and abused for years, I can see as a possibility that her wolf's vitality reduced in order to preserve Talia's life. Talia's medical history would help us get more information, but Talia told me that she saw a doctor the last time when she was a child, in the Red Moon pack. I didn't find it relevant to her condition because it was a long time ago, but if you want me to investigate her wolf, I can contact the pack doctor there...'

'No!', Damon cut him off. 'I need you to keep to yourself that Talia is from the Red Moon pack. If there is a record about it, erase it.'

'Got it.', Travis agreed right away. Considering Talia's condition, he had a vague idea that she came to their pack to seek asylum and if the Red Moon pack gets a whiff about Talia's whereabouts, it might be troublesome.

'Is there something we can do without her medical history?', Damon asked.

'You want to awaken her wolf?', Travis guessed.

'Is that possible?'

Travis was not sure. 'Technically, yes. Talia's body and mind are weakened. Assuming that her wolf is not beyond salvation, if Talia improves her physical condition, and is in a supportive environment that will help her mentally, there is a chance of her wolf recuperating. But keep in mind that her condition is deteriorating for many years, and it might take even longer for her to bounce back. There is no way for us to get any timelines or estimates that make sense.'

Damon didn't like the uncertainty, but some chance was better than none.

'I will come with Talia tomorrow. I want you to do tests for her senses and strength and keep track of any changes without letting her know about this.'

Travis was surprised by this last part. 'You don't want her to know that there is a possibility of her wolf coming back?'

'Not yet.', Damon said. 'Getting her wolf back is a big deal and Talia is currently fragile. You said it, it can take years and there is no guarantee that it will work. I don't want her to get disappointed if it doesn't work out. I want you to schedule weekly appointments on the pretense of checking her weight and health, and I will take care of everything else. When we are fairly confident that we are making progress, we can discuss telling her.'

Other than tracking Talia's progress, Damon wanted Talia to have more attachments to the pack, starting with regular doctor's appointments. That will make it more difficult for her to leave.

Travis hummed in agreement. 'Sounds good, Alpha. It's good that you are going to get involved because Talia has a big challenge ahead of her.'

Damon didn't understand. 'What do you mean?'

'I noticed her mental scars. She needs surrounding that will allow her to feel safe so that she can be herself. If she finds herself in a stressful situation, it can pull her back and destroy months of progress...'

Damon listened to Travis, and he wondered if keeping Talia in the packhouse is the right thing to do. But he couldn't let go, because the fragile girl in his arms gave him a sense of purpose beyond leading the pack.

Damon wanted to take care of Talia because, in a way, that was taking care of himself, and besides, no matter where he sends her, he can't guarantee that someone won't pick on her.

When Travis was done talking, they confirmed Talia's appointment at ten o'clock in the morning and Damon was back to staring at Talia's sleeping face.

Her lips were slightly parted, and he really wanted to kiss her.

Damon wondered if that would be her first kiss. But no matter if it would be her first kiss, it would be THEIR first and he didn't want to steal it. He wanted her awake and aware and willing... for much more than just kissing.

Damon leaned lower and left a soft kiss on Talia's forehead.

Delightful sparks tingled his lips, and he inhaled a shaky breath which filled his system with the sweet citrusy scent of freesia. This was far from enough, but it would have to do until the time is ripe and he gets to put that kiss where it belongs, on Talia's lips... and on the rest of her.

Chapter 65 - The Morning After

Through her sleepy haze, Talia heard water.

It sounded like a downpour.

No matter what the weather was outside, Talia was in a cozy bed, surrounded by the scent of the forest and dark chocolate, and she didn't want to wake up. She pulled the comforter over her head and drifted back to sleep.

Talia's mind stirred, and her eyes fluttered open.

There was no sound of rain. It was sunny outside. Did she dream about the rain? Or was it raining during the night and then it cleared up? It didn't matter.

Talia turned lazily and her nose touched the pillow that was full of delicious smell which confirmed that the last night happened. She didn't imagine it.

Alpha Damon was there, and he asked her to continue using this room and he said that no one will disturb her anymore and she doesn't need to hide, and that she can train self-defense.

Talia didn't remember when she fell asleep, but she knew that Alpha Damon slept with her, or at least held her while she was sleeping. The sheets next to her were cold but based on the strength of the scent, she concluded that Damon left recently.

She bit her lip guiltily at the memory of her sticking to Damon. She felt guilty because it was not allowed, not for someone like her.

His body was solid and warm, and his presence made her feel safe. It felt good, more than good, but if Marcy or Cassie or any other Damon's woman saw them like that, Talia was confident that she would get a beating, so the events from last night will definitely stay a secret buried in her memory.

Talia let out a sad sigh and reminded herself not to get used to Damon's clinginess because his mood swings are unpredictable, and she should not expect that he will treat her with kindness. If she expects it and it doesn't happen, she will end up hurt.

Talia could describe Alpha Damon as confusing. Why can't he pick one personality and stick to it?

If he is mean to her or ignores her, it would be so much easier to leave and not look back.

Talia chided herself for wavering. She was resolved to leave as soon as Doctor Travis says that she recuperated, but then Alpha Damon brought her dinner and climbed into her bed, but he was not intrusive. It was the opposite. Yes, he pressed her against him, but he was kind and he listened, and she didn't hate it.

But no matter how good it was to fall asleep in Alpha Damon's embrace, Talia didn't dare to hope it will happen again.

Does she want it to happen again? Does it matter what she wants?

She justified Damon's behavior from the previous night as something he did because he wanted to comfort her and apologize since Cassie bullied her on his watch. Those were his words.

Yeah... it will not happen again.

Talia glanced around the room, to make sure she is on her own and no one can see her, and then she buried her face in the pillow and took a deep breath. How can a man smell so good?

She really loved Damon's scent, but she would never admit that. Not even to herself. Those kinds of thoughts were not allowed.

Talia jolted when the bathroom door opened, and her eyes widened in shock at the sight of Alpha Damon standing there with only a towel hanging dangerously low on his waist.

His hair was damp and messy, increasing his visual appeal by a notch; not like he needed that to look delicious.

Talia swallowed a mouthful of air while struggling to maintain eye contact and not gape at the magnificent landscape of his body.

"Good morning, my dear wife.", Damon said with his signature lopsided smile.

"Good morning...", she responded in a squeaky voice, too flustered to address the 'dear wife' part, and her face exploded in blush when his smile widened.

Damon raised his arm and leaned on the doorframe, giving her a spectacular view of his V-shaped torso.

Talia's breath hitched when their eyes met and she saw his knowing gaze.

Oh, God! He noticed her staring! But she couldn't look away.

"Why are you here?", she managed to force words out of her mouth.

"I didn't want to leave before you wake up. It would appear that I sneaked out after we spent the night together.", he said like it's a totally normal thing.

Talia paused. That was ambiguous but in a way, it was true. However, was all that exposed skin necessary? "Why are you wearing a towel?"

Damon's hand fell on this waist. "Should I remove it?"

"No! NO!", Talia screamed in panic and Damon burst into a hearty laugh.

He loved her variety of expressions. He loved everything about Talia.

Talia loved seeing him laugh like that, a carefree laugh. His features softened and he didn't appear scary. At that moment, he was Damon. Just Damon.

"Aren't you going to freshen up before your doctor's appointment?", Damon asked.

Talia wanted to say, yes, but he was standing at the door of the bathroom, and if she went now it would only bring her closer to that sinful devil who liked to tease her.

She gathered her courage and responded with a question, "Aren't you going to leave?"

Damon stalked to the bed and sat on the edge.

Talia inhaled a shaky breath when his scent hit her, and she hoped that he didn't notice.

"Unfortunately, I need to leave. There are no clothes for me in this closet.", Damon said while his eyes darted over Talia's face as he searched for signs of approval or discomfort at the idea of them sharing a closet, but there was nothing.

"Breakfast is in half an hour, and after that, I will accompany you to see Travis."

Talia blinked herself out of her Damon-induced daze. "Oh, no. Breakfast! I was supposed to help in the kitchen."

Damon pushed a lock of Talia's hair behind her ear. "Don't worry about it. I told Stephanie that you had a rough night and will sleep in. She will expect you to help with lunch."

"Thank you.", she really meant it. Not just for telling Stephanie about her absence related to breakfast preparations, but also about staying with her overnight. Talia doesn't remember if she ever slept that well.

She understood that this Damon is playful and teasing, and he would never harm her. After all, if he wanted to do anything inappropriately, he had the whole night for it and she would be unable to fight him off, yet her clothes are still in place.

A small voice inside Talia's head whispered that no matter what Damon's mood is (or which personality he switches into), he will never harm her.

"I will see you at breakfast.", she said.

She didn't want him to leave, but he was kind of naked, and she needed to get ready.

Damon stood up with difficulty.

He really wanted to get under that cover and snuggle with Talia.

...

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...

Damon came to the dining room and found Caden and Maya there, with a cup of steaming coffee each.

The table was set with serving plates filled with sausages, bacon, and scrambled eggs.

Damon went to get himself a coffee first, he will eat when Talia comes, which should be soon.

"Nice of you to join us.", Caden grumbled when Damon took a seat.

Damon didn't understand Caden's attitude. Yes, he is usually the first one up and working, but he didn't want to cut short his morning with Talia.

"Did I miss something important?"

"Alpha Richard called, three times. He wants to talk to you in person and apologize for Cassie's behavior.", Caden said.

Damon didn't want to talk to him. "Tell him that's not necessary. Apology accepted, but I won't change my mind about Cassie coming back here. Starting today, I want us to increase border patrols. Outsiders are not allowed to step into our core territory without approval from me or my Betas, and they are to report when they leave. If the number of requests is too much for the three of us to handle, we can authorize a few more people to deal with it."

They discussed this previously, so Damon didn't want to go into details.

"We will need to clarify who falls into the category of outsiders.", Maya said.

"Whoever is not a pack member.", Damon said without missing a beat and added, "Send a memo to all packs, so that we avoid unnecessary misunderstandings. I want us to keep track of all outsiders in our territory. That shouldn't be hard to do."

Caden and Maya agreed. That's not hard to do. And it's not unusual either. Many packs have rigorous checks about others who are staying with them, it's just that the Dark Howlers pack was rather lax in this aspect, until now.

"Anything else?", Damon asked, and the way Caden and Maya exchanged glances, told Damon that he won't like whatever they were about to say.

Caden responded, "Marcy wants to come."

Damon's face darkened. "I thought I have at least a week until I need to deal with her again."

"You are giving her a silent treatment and Alpha Edward is getting nervous.", Caden said.

Damon couldn't believe this. "Silent treatment? It's been only a few days. If anyone is going back on the agreement that's them."

Maya made a face. "They want to use our celebration of Summer Solstice as an excuse for Marcy to come."

Damon rubbed his forehead forcibly. He didn't want to entertain Marcy and he definitely didn't want her to come for this event or any other. Damon imagined walking with Talia and showing her around, and if Marcy is here, none of that will happen. Damn it!

Chapter 66 - Shady Business Under The Table

Obviously, Damon didn't like the idea of Marcy visiting the Dark Howlers pack, and he also didn't like that his two Betas were talking about it like it's not a big deal.

Sure, he didn't tell them that Talia is his mate, but they should at least be aware of the consequences if Marcy recognizes Talia as the girl from the attic.

"If Marcy comes, what will happen to Talia?", Damon asked.

Maya had a solution ready, "We can move her with Omegas, and tell her to stay low profile until Marcy leaves. Actually, Talia wants to move out of the packhouse, and this can be a good occasion to start the process..."

Damon's ears were buzzing and he didn't hear the rest.

Is Maya serious? How dares she think about separating him from Talia?

But... can Talia stay in the packhouse with Marcy around?

Only last night Damon told Talia that this is her home and that she won't need to hide, yet if Marcy comes, Damon will need to eat his words and suffer the consequences of breaking Talia's trust. Again.

To make things worse, Marcy will stay in the packhouse and stick close to him and how is he supposed to explain that to Talia?

Not acceptable.

"No!", Damon snapped, making Maya stop talking in the middle of her sentence. "Talia is still recuperating, and she will NOT leave the packhouse. Marcy's presence will disturb us all. We need to find another way to deal with this."

"What should I tell Alpha Edward?", Caden asked Damon.

"Come up with a reason so that Marcy doesn't come.", Damon said. "Tell her I won't be here. I will be away on business, training, vacation, pick one or combine a few. It's not like this will be the first time for you to provide an excuse for me."

Caden was not sure if Damon is joking. "Do you expect them to believe that you are not going to be here for one of the largest celebrations our pack is holding? We will have several other Alphas visiting and I'm confident that Alpha Edward knows about it."

Yes, several delegations from other packs will come, but not all of them are Alphas. Some of them assumed the role of an Alpha recently, but most of them are heirs, sons of Alphas (and their mates), and they are all approximately Damon's age. They are coming with a goal to establish and maintain good relationships with Damon that will come in handy when they take over the leadership of their respective pack.

Most of the Alphas take over the pack in their late twenties, but it's not uncommon for some to reach their thirties, and some do it as early as twenty years old. There is no rule other than for the previous Alpha to be ready to hand over his position, and that he believes his successor is ready for the role of an Alpha.

At Caden's words, Damon made a face. He forgot that guests are coming, and he will need to attend meetings and entertain them, and he won't be able to spend much time with Talia, and... his face lit up when he got an idea.

"That's it! Others will be visiting! Tell them that my schedule is full with official business, and I will have no time to entertain Marcy. Work comes first and I don't want her to come and be neglected." Damon paused and made a thoughtful face. "Yes. Spice it up with something like... When I'm with my future Luna, I want to give her my undivided attention. And make sure to add that our engagement is still not set, and I don't want my guests to get the wrong idea when they see Marcy here."

Caden and Maya exchanged confused glances.

"You must be kidding." It was Maya who spoke. "If we respond with this, it's the same as saying that you are backing off from the engagement."

"You know that I have no intention of making Marcy my Luna." This was true, with or without Talia in the picture.

"And you know that you can't back off from an engagement with a casual response from your Betas.", Maya responded with a frown. She hated this part where Damon would mess around with women, and Caden and she were left with damage control.

Maya never approved of Damon's games where he would meet the bride, explore her thoroughly, and then reject her. But Damon and Caden were doing this from before Maya met Caden (and she became Beta), so she couldn't stop it. Besides, it was two against one, and Damon is the Alpha, so she had to obey and follow their lead.

If it's up to Maya, Damon wouldn't meet any of those women, and if that causes a war... then, so be it. They will fight.

Maya is a strong warrior and she prefers a straightforward approach compared to schemes, but since they are already neck-deep in this mess, she had to come up with a viable solution.

"Our plan for rejecting Marcy is still not ready, so the safest thing is to let her come here for a few days. Talia will move..."

Damon bolted to his feet and glared at Maya. "No!"

Caden stood up, ready to defend Maya, and Maya stood up as well.

"There is no use shouting at me.", Maya said irritably. Yes, Damon is her Alpha, but he is stubborn and not willing to admit that Talia is his mate. Actually, even if he admits that Talia is his mate, Maya's solution wouldn't change. They need to protect (aka to hide) Talia and to pacify Marcy. It's that simple. "We need a plan and unless you have something else that will work and not start a war, Marcy is coming."

Damon was exasperated. He knew that Maya and Caden were right, but he was not willing.

Is there really nothing they can do to prevent Marcy from coming?

He felt like a cornered animal, with no way out, and he hated it. He is an Alpha, damn it! Why are others telling him what to do and with whom to do it?

Damon hated that he was still tangled in the web that Alpha Edward set for him with Marcy in the middle.

"Anything from our men in Europe?"

Caden and Maya knew that Damon was asking if they managed to dig out any dirty secret from Marcy's past.

"Nothing yet.", Caden responded.

"Should I assume that we will not find anything? Is she good in not leaving traces, or is she clean?", Damon asked stiffly.

They spoke about this several times already. Everyone has something to hide. It can be evidence that Marcy was fooling around with men, or it could be just a party where she drank and danced, and the rest will be photoshopped.

They already have a video of Marcy naked with Damon, but they need her acting lewdly with someone else as well. As long as they can portray Marcy as a loose woman, Damon can use the old belief how a good Luna should be pure before meeting her Alpha and discredit her as such.

It wouldn't be the first time.

Those old geezers lose their fire when Damon asks them how would they feel if their mate was sampled with an array of other men before she became their Luna. That argument works wonders.

Caden wanted to placate Damon. "Let's not give up. It's been only a few days since we sent them to search..."

"How long does it take?", Damon's voice was rising.

"They are trying!", Caden was the one who lost it now. Why is Damon acting like this is his fault?

"Make them try harder!"

Both Caden and Damon froze when they saw Talia standing at the door warily.

Damon wondered how much she heard. Did she hear that they are digging dirt on Marcy? Or that Maya wants to send her away? What if Talia agrees to leave?

"Good morning, Talia!", Maya wished cheerfully.

"Good morning", Talia responded.

Talia's eyes were darting from Damon to Caden to Maya, and back to Damon again. All three of them were standing and Talia was not sure if she should come in or not.

Damon told her to come down for breakfast, but then she heard them arguing and she wished to go back to her room.

She can skip food. It's not a big deal.

But her legs moved on their own and brought her to the door and this awkward situation.

Damon cleared his throat and spoke calmly to Caden, "Tell them to hurry. We will continue this conversation later." He turned to Talia. "Nice of you to join us, come here." He gestured to the chair on his left. "What will you drink? Orange juice, milk, tea, coffee..."

Talia approached the table gingerly. "Orange juice."

Damon pulled a chair for Talia and she watched as Damon poured her a glass of juice.

Talia was not sure how they can all resume eating as if nothing happened. She didn't understand what the shouting was about, it seemed random, but she clearly heard that the seemingly calm conversation exploded into a heated argument. Or is that a normal occurrence?

Her desire to leave the packhouse swelled. This place is too stressful.

By the time Talia snapped to her senses, the plate in front of her was heaping with food.

"That's plenty", Talia told Damon who was ready to put another sausage on her plate.

"You didn't say, 'enough', so I assumed you want more.", Damon responded casually and then he started piling food into his plate.

"How was your night, Talia? Are you feeling better?", Maya asked.

"It was good, and yes, I'm better. Thank you.", Talia responded while wondering if Caden and Maya are aware that Damon spent the night in her bed. She tried not to think about it.

Talia looked helplessly at the small mountain of food in front of her, and she poked a piece of scrambled eggs.

The fork nearly reached her mouth when Talia jolted.

She glanced under the table and saw Damon's hand on her knee, palm up, and his fingers were wiggling.

Talia knew what that means, but she couldn't believe it.

She leaned closer to Damon, over the table, and asked in a whisper, "Now?"

"No questions asked, remember?", Damon responded without removing his gaze from his plate.

She was not sure if she should laugh or cry, but she knew that Alpha Damon is not the one to give up easily and she didn't want to cause a scene.

Talia glanced nervously at Maya and Caden who were busy with their food. Good. It seems they didn't notice.

She jolted again when Damon squeezed her knee, silently telling her that he is still waiting.

Talia shifted the fork in her left hand and her right hand went under the table.

The moment her palm landed in Damon's, their fingers interlaced, and Talia's heart skipped a beat.

She couldn't help but steal glances at Damon who was eating with one hand, and if not for a small smile at the corner of his lips, she would assume that she was holding someone else's hand.

Chapter 67 - Permission To Learn

Damon worked on his breakfast while focusing on his hand under the table that held Talia's.

Talia's warmth and delicious sparks calmed his restless mind and heart, and there was some mischief because of the discomfort Talia was trying to hide whenever his thumb moved gently over her knuckles.

Damon was upset at the thought of Marcy wanting to come, and he needed Talia's touch to comfort him.

Unfortunately, just hand-holding under the table was not enough.

Damon really wanted to hug Talia, and much more, but he knew that this is as far as he can go in the current setting, and it needs to be enough. For now.

"Talia", Maya called, and Talia's head snapped at her.

Talia's heart raced, does Maya know what's going on under the table? Will Maya and Caden tease her if they know that Damon is holding her hand during breakfast?

"Do you have plans for today?", Maya asked.

Talia released the breath she was holding. "I have an appointment with Doctor Travis in the morning, and then I will help in the kitchen."

"How about the afternoon?", Maya continued probing and Talia instinctively glanced at Damon.

Damon liked this, it showed that Talia is depending on him.

"Talia wants to train, so she probably hopes to start as soon as possible. But she is not allowed to move a muscle until Travis says that she is fine.", Damon responded.

Maya nodded in understanding. "A walk is fine, right? After lunch, I can show you around. You can see the training facilities, and if Travis gives his OK, we can get you sweaty."

Talia's eyes widened and she smiled. "That would be wonderful."

Damon didn't like this. Talia, outside, sweating? Without him? "Where are you taking her?"

Maya bobbed her head. "Just around the area. We will start with a walk to the lake and see community buildings on the way, and take it from there." Maya continued talking to Talia, "The town is especially lively with all the preparations going on. We can stop whenever you feel tired. There is a lot to see and one afternoon won't be enough. We are the biggest pack in North America, after all. It might take a few days, but I will show you everything we have here."

"Thank you.", Talia said and without thinking, she gave Damon's hand a squeeze under the table. She was excited.

Damon wanted to protest because the idea of Talia not being in his visible range was unsettling, but she was happy, and he didn't want to spoil it, so he swallowed his objections with the piece of sausage that was in his mouth.

He knew that he has a mountain of work waiting for him and it wouldn't be fair to keep Talia in her room until he is available to show her around.

Damon was determined to spend time with Talia as soon as he clears up the backlog that's waiting on his desk. But... where will he take Talia? Forest? Picnic? Romantic dinner? Beach? There are so many options!

However, if he could have his way, they wouldn't leave the room. Just he and Talia, that's enough, and any room is fine.

...

Ignoring Caden's complaints, Damon accompanied Talia for her appointment with Travis.

Talia was not sure why Caden was in a bad mood because all bickering between Damon and Caden happened through the mind-link and she would probably resume her thoughts about leaving if she knew that Marcy plans to come in a few days.

"Thank you for coming with me. I'm sure you have a lot of work, yet you still took the time for this.", Talia said to Damon while they made their way through the forest.

"You are welcome. It's my pleasure.", Damon responded and gave Talia's hand a squeeze.

Yes, going in a car will take only five minutes, but he wanted to walk with Talia. It takes longer and he gets to enjoy holding her hand and chatting casually.

Damon noticed that Talia is relaxed when they are outside, just the two of them. He liked that.

In the pack hospital...

With Jill and Cathy, the exam didn't take long and in less than an hour, Talia and Damon sat in Travis's office to hear the results and recommendations for going forward.

"You have several markers that are just below or above normal, but it's nothing too concerning, and I can see slight improvements compared to your previous checkup. Continue regular meals and vitamins and I will see you in a week.", Travis said. "If you feel anything out of the ordinary, give me a call and we will get you an appointment. In the meantime, I recommend adding fennel, ginger, and cayenne pepper into your food, based on your taste. They will help with appetite and digestion."

"I didn't know that.", Talia said.

Travis noticed that Talia's tone had a hint of surprise, and asked, "Do you know about the medicinal effects of herbs?"

"A little bit.", Talia responded humbly. "I know how to take care of simple wounds."

"Simple wounds? Tell me more...", Travis asked, unable to contain his curiosity.

In general, werewolves are divided into ones who follow a traditional lifestyle, and the ones who are modernized. The traditional ones will go to their shaman when they are ill, and they use herbs, crystals, and prayers to feel better, while modern ones rely on technology and the latest advances in medicine.

Talia obviously believes in modern medicine, yet she is familiar with herbs, so Travis was eager to probe how deep are her knowledge and interest.

Talia told him about a few herbs that she mixes to treat open wounds and the ones that are good for reducing swelling and fever.

"Do you want to learn more?", Travis asked. "There are books I can recommend."

"Yes, please!"

Travis stood up and walked to the wall shelf where a number of books were arranged. He pulled one thick book with dark blue covers. Based on the worn-out look, it was obvious that the book was used a lot.

"Start with this one.", Travis said when he gave the book to Talia. "I don't have many here, but I can always accompany you to the library and help you pick. As you read through it, take notes of your questions and if I don't know answers, I can help you find them."

Talia's eyes sparkled. With his readiness to help and teach her, Travis definitely reminded her of Olivia.

Talia realized that this is one step closer to learning medicine and maybe even working in the pack hospital (if she stays in the pack). This also gave her a reason to reach out to Travis and learn from him, and once they get close enough and she gets the right opportunity, Talia will ask him about working in the hospital.

"Unless you have more questions for me, we are done for today.", Travis said while his eyes darted from Damon to Talia.

"One question...", Talia started and nervously glanced at Damon. "Am I well enough to start training?"

'I don't want her to get hurt', Damon said to Travis through the mind-link.

So far, Damon was quietly observing the exam, and this was the first time he spoke, so Travis understood that this was important.

Travis let out a long exhale. He didn't want to offend his Alpha, but he already said to Talia that she doesn't have anything serious.

He decided on something in-between.

"There is nothing wrong with you, Talia, however, your stamina and muscle mass are below average. I want you to take it easy.", Travis said. "I recommend that you take walks and gradually increase duration, distance, and difficulty. While doing that, listen to your body. If you feel a strain, pain, or you run out of breath, take a break. OK?"

"So, I can't train?", Talia asked dejectedly.

"I didn't say that.", Travis quickly said. "If you want to lift weights, take the lightest ones and work your way up. If it's running, start with a brisk walk and gradually increase your pace. But no matter what it is, if you feel discomfort, stop. Moderation is the key, and until you gain weight, I fear that if you overdo physical activity, you might faint or worse. Until you figure out your limits, don't do things on your own without supervision."

Travis glanced at Damon, and he relaxed when he saw Damon nodding in approval.

On their way back to the packhouse, Talia noticed that Damon's mood was a bit off.

"Is something bothering you?", she asked, assuming that it's workload and that he will tell her that it's nothing.

"Yes.", Damon said flatly. "I want you to take it easy and you got yourself not only into training but also into learning about medicine." Damon gestured toward the thick blue book that Talia carried in her hand.

Talia was not sure why that would bother Damon. It's not like she did anything other than ask questions and borrow a book. "I promise to start training slowly, and reading a book is not much effort. I will do it in my free time."

"If you are reading, then it's not free time."

"Is there a problem if I learn things?"

"No, no.", Damon backtracked quickly. "It's just that..." He stopped walking and she had to stop as well because they were holding hands. Damon stepped closer to Talia, and she looked up at him.

"I am worried about you, and I would prefer that you consult me before you take on more responsibilities."

Talia blinked. Is he really worried about her? That would be first. No one ever worried about her.

"I apologize.", she said. "I didn't mean to worry you. Is there something I can do to make it up to you?"

Damon's lips lifted into a smile and Talia's eyes moved nervously over his handsome face while trying to figure out what he was up to.

Was he going to ask her not to train? Or not to read the book? Ah! What if he asks her to stop helping in the kitchen?

Talia was oblivious to the fact that during breakfast, Damon narrowed down the list of places where he wanted to take Talia, and this was the perfect excuse for him to pick one and go for it.

Damon lifted her hand and placed a small kiss on her knuckles without breaking eye contact, and he enjoyed the sight of blush that invaded her cheeks.

"Come with me tomorrow.", Damon said, and she felt his breath splashing against the spot he kissed a second ago.

"Where?" Her voice came a bit breathy.

"You will find out tomorrow.", Damon responded mysteriously.

"Alright.", Talia agreed reluctantly.

Damon hummed in approval and resumed walking toward the packhouse.

He gave Talia's hand a squeeze, content that she got used to holding hands. He wondered when the right time will be to move on to the next step. A hug, a kiss, a... ah! He can't wait!

Chapter 68 - Sandwiches For Lunch

Talia's excitement related to preparing lunch dwindled when Stephanie told her that they are just making sandwiches.

Talia didn't mind washing lettuce leaves and cutting tomatoes thinly, but she was hoping to learn cooking techniques, and toasting bread didn't require any mastery.

"Did you expect something more elaborate?", Stephanie asked.

"Yes.", Talia admitted. "It is lunch, after all."

In the Red Moon pack, every meal was like a feast for Alpha Edward, Beta Raymond, and their family members.

"We don't put a lot of importance on meal ceremonies unless there are guests in the packhouse.", Stephanie said. "Normally, I prepare breakfast and eat in the kitchen. I don't like to join them in the dining room because those three kids discuss their plans for the day, and it can get noisy."

Talia agreed with this. She heard Damon, Maya, and Caden shouting that morning. Definitely noisy.

"Lunch is something easy to eat since everyone is busy and no one takes elaborate lunch breaks. Dinner is more formal because Alpha and Betas usually have free time, and it is time to unwind, so I try to make something special and I join them."

Talia liked this casual atmosphere. It sounded like everyone is part of the family and pulling their own weight.

It was definitely different from what she saw in the Red Moon pack.

Talia was curious about one thing, "Are you the only one preparing meals?"

Considering that the Dark Howlers pack is the largest pack in North America with thousands of members, she imagined numerous Omegas maintaining this massive packhouse and serving the Alpha and other ranked members of the pack.

Stephanie smiled at Talia. "You are helping me, right?"

"Yeah, but. Don't you have Omegas to help?"

Stephanie shrugged. "It's not a lot of work to make a meal for a few people. I don't mind cooking and it keeps me busy. More hands in the kitchen could be useful, but it would also make it crowded."

"Am I making it crowded?"

"I enjoy your company. You remind me of my daughter. This is also something to keep you occupied until you get used to the pack and figure out what you want to do." Before Talia could respond, Stephanie asked, "Do you have plans for the afternoon?"

Talia confirmed. "Maya will show me around."

Stephanie pursed her lips. "That might need to wait. A pipe burst in one of the community buildings and they have water damage. Caden is dealing with what needs to be fixed, and Maya is resettling Omegas who are impacted."

"Oh...", a disappointed sound left Talia's lips. She was really looking forward to spending time with Maya.

"I'm sorry.", Stephanie said. "I would give you company, but I need to deliver lunches, and then I'm busy with personal matters until dinnertime. I will tell Maya to find you as soon as she can."

"No, no.", Talia quickly said. "Maya has important things to do and walking around with me is not a big deal. We can do that any other day. Doctor Travis gave me a book to read, and I will do that. I just wish that I can be of more help. I feel that I'm getting food and a place to stay and I'm not doing much."

Stephanie got an idea. "You can help me with delivering lunches. Since you are not familiar with the area, you can't take food to Caden and Maya who are out, but you can take it to Alpha Damon. He is in his study..."

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"Come in!", Damon called when he heard a knock on the door.

The moment the door opened, Damon picked up the scent of pepperonis and Canadian bacon, and he knew it's food.

"Put it on my desk, Steph", Damon said without lifting his head from the documents.

He didn't hear steps approaching him, and he was surprised to hear a light clink of a plate on his desk.

Damon looked up and he didn't expect to see the girl in front of him. "Talía?"

"Sorry to disturb you", she said while taking a step back. "I only brought you lunch. Please continue."

His eyes landed on Talía's hand which held a sandwich wrapped in a napkin.

"Wait!", he called.

Since they returned from the pack hospital, Damon was busy with documents while trying to finish his work as soon as possible so that he can follow Talía and Maya during their tour, and now that Talía was in front of him, how can he let her go?

"Did you have your lunch?", Damon asked, even though he knew the answer.

"Not yet. I will eat in my room.", Talía responded while showing him her sandwich.

"How about you join me?"

She was about to say that her plan was to eat while reading the book that Travis gave her, but then she realized that rejecting a meal with Damon for the reason of reading a book might get her into trouble.

"Aren't you busy?", she responded with a question.

"I can't work and eat. I would love your company.", Damon said honestly and gestured toward the sofa on the other side of his study.

Talia gave him a tight smile and made her way to the sofa while resigning herself to having her sandwich in Damon's study.

'It's not a big deal', she told herself. 'I will eat the sandwich quickly and leave.' That will still give her a few hours to read the book before she needs to help Stephanie with dinner.

"What will you drink?", Damon asked while reaching for bottles in the mini-fridge.

"Anything is fine."

Damon got two sodas.

Talia observed the room. One wall was covered with built-in shelves that had numerous books, two windows allowed ample light, and there was one big portrait on the wall behind the executive desk where Damon was sitting previously.

Between the windows were filing cabinets, and above them was a big map with a shaded area that Talia guessed is the territory of the Dark Howlers pack. There was also a fireplace with several photos on the mantle, but they were too far away for Talia to see what's on them.

Talia observed the big portrait that had a man and a woman on it, and Talia saw traces of Damon in both of them. The man was tall and imposing with dark brown hair and icy-blue eyes, standing with his arm around the waist of a woman with long raven-black hair and a set of warm chocolate-colored eyes.

"My parents.", Damon said briefly while putting one soda in front of Talia.

Talia only nodded in acknowledgment. She didn't know what would be appropriate to say, considering that she heard stories about how they were a lovely family and they perished too soon, leaving Damon behind.

Damon was bossy and overbearing, with an unstable personality, but Talia felt sorry for him. It was undeniable that Damon carried a lot of weight on his shoulders, and he lost the protection of two exceptional people who loved him. She was confident that it was hard on him.

Talia lowered her gaze from the portrait and saw several stacks of documents on the desk and some scattered papers around the computer.

Talia let out a long breath. "I feel guilty."

Damon didn't get it. "About?"

"You have so much work, yet you accompanied me to my appointment. Next time, I will go on my own."

Damon had no intention of letting Talia go on her own. He wanted her in visual range, preferably in touching distance and he realized that Talia feels indebted to him. Should he take advantage of that?

Talia took a bite of her sandwich, thinking that Damon will say it's not a big deal and she shouldn't worry about it; that would be a normal response, but Damon was anything other than normal and he had his own agenda.

"Yes. I neglected my work because of you. How will you make it up to me?"

Talia's chewing paused and she stared at him in disbelief.

"What's with that reaction?", Damon asked teasingly. "I didn't ask you to repay me with your body."

Talia's face exploded in blush. Damon was too much!

She collected herself before asking, "How can I make it up to you?"

Damon shrugged. "You can help me with my work."

"I have no idea what to do.", she said honestly.

Damon didn't think it's a big deal. "I will show you. What do you say?"

'Do I have a choice?' Talia's lips twitched. "Sure. As long as you tell me what to do, I will do my best to help you."

Damon hummed in agreement and glanced down at the space between them.

Talia followed his gaze and her eyes widened when she saw his hand resting on the sofa, palm up, and his fingers were wiggling.

This time, she didn't ask anything. It was just the two of them, and this confirmed that she was having a sandwich with the clingy Alpha Damon.

Talia placed her hand in Damon's, her fingers slipped between his, and even though no one could see them, she felt jittery in her stomach.

Why did the atmosphere suddenly become intimate? Or was that only in her head?

Talia wished that Caden and Maya are in the room. Someone, anyone would do.

Damon observed as Talia's blush increased and he wondered what's on her mind. He thought that she was adorable.

They ate in silence and after cleaning their hands (the ones that were holding sandwiches), Damon got a box that was resting on top of the filing cabinets and placed it on the coffee table.

"Sort this mail into official correspondence and spam. From the official pile, separate the ones that are from Alphas. If you are not sure, ask me, and if you can organize them into different categories based on topics, that will help me a lot."

Talia looked at the envelopes. There were at least one hundred envelopes. When was the last time he checked his mail?

"How will I know what's official and what's not?", she asked.

"Open it and check."

Talia paused. "Aren't some of these confidential?" She was certain that there are things only Alphas should know.

Damon smiled a little. "I trust you."

Talia stared at Damon who was back at his desk, looking at the documents, and a warm and fuzzy feeling spread in her chest.

People called her names, some ignored her, some bullied her, a few were nice to her, but this was the first time that someone said she is trustworthy.

It was a big deal.

It made her feel important.

Chapter 69 - Delaying The Inevitable

Later that evening...

Damon was sitting in his office with a glass of whiskey in his hand and thinking about the talk he had with Caden and Maya after dinner.

They discussed the upcoming festival and the issue of Marcy.

The preparations for the festival were on schedule and increased security was already in effect, so they focused on discussing Marcy.

They decided to work on delaying her visit.

It was Maya's plan.

"Instead of telling her not to come, we will tell her WHEN to come."

Damon didn't like it, but he gestured to Maya to keep on talking.

"Two weeks.", Maya said. "We will tell Marcy that your schedule is packed and that you can't entertain her now, but in two weeks she can come, and you will make it up to her."

"You think Marcy and Alpha Edward will accept this two-week delay?", Damon asked.

"No.", Maya said bluntly before elaborating, "This is not about getting two weeks, but about negotiating. I expect that they will ask for Marcy to come sooner. I believe that we can settle for somewhere between one week and ten days. I will tell them that we will move your schedule around and you will work overtime so that you can see Marcy sooner. That will soothe their bruised ego while keeping their belief alive that you are interested in making her your Luna, and we will get an extension to find something tangible to discredit Marcy."

It sounded OK as a short-term solution, but Damon had a bad feeling about this overall.

If Marcy was a careless party girl, they would find things right away.

Caden summarized to Damon that they already checked schools Marcy attended and dorms where she stayed, forums, media, her personal pages, news involving her classmates and roommates... there was nothing.

Every day passing without finding evidence of Marcy's wanton behavior, confirms that whoever was with her when she acted in a non-ladylike manner, knows that it should be kept lowkey. Caden said that their people are trying to find people who are willing to talk, but the problem is that if they are not careful, they can actually tip off Marcy that they are digging her dirt.

But no matter how bad it sounded, with no better plan, Damon agreed.

"Alright. I will let you handle that. Let me know if you encounter problems, otherwise, I will expect that we have at least a week before we need to revisit this topic."

Maya and Caden confirmed and left Damon's study.

Damon really didn't want to waste any time thinking about Marcy. For Damon, Marcy became insignificant the moment they left the Red Moon pack with Talia in the trunk of their car.

Damon also needed to figure out what to do with Talia during the Summer Solstice festival while he entertains guests that are coming from other packs.

Damon has one meeting with them in the afternoon, and they will stay in the guest bedrooms of the packhouse. That will change the dynamics they currently have, and Damon was not sure how many will stay overnight.

He never liked entertaining guests, and now that Talia is here, he really wanted to cancel everything.

Damon knows people who will come, and they are not enemies, but they are not friends either, so he is not comfortable letting them know that Talia is important.

The best thing would be to spend that day away from Talia, or even better... away WITH Talia. But how can he do that? He is the Alpha and can't disappear.

Should he let Talia go to the festival with Maya or with someone else, outside of his sight? Or should he lock her up in her room?

Damon didn't like any of this, and if he could have one wish, he would wish that he is not Alpha, at least for that one day. Then he would spend it with Talia and no one would care.

There was one more thing related to Talia that distracted him. Shortly before dinner, Travis contacted him through the mind-link.

'Alpha, is this a good time?'

'What is it?', Damon responded.

'It's about Talia and awakening her wolf.'

Damon was alarmed. 'Get to the point.'

'We spoke about food and mental state, but we didn't discuss the spiritual.'

Damon didn't get it. Does Talia need to pray or take a bath in holy water? 'Go on.'

'It is known that we recuperate faster from illness and injuries when our mate is nearby.'

Damon perked up. 'Are you saying that if she is with her mate, the probability of her wolf awakening will increase?'

'It's just a guess, but it's worth trying. That's if we can find out who her mate is. Considering that her wolf is weak to the point of her being unable to shift, she probably can't find her mate, but he should be able to identify her.'

Damon nodded at these words. Travis is smart. Damon's mood dropped drastically when he heard Travis's next words.

'If we expose Talia to unmated males and let her interact with them, the closer the better...'

'ENOUGH!', Damon roared into the mind-link. What was that nonsense about exposing Talia to unmated males? What if some of them make a move on her? What if she ends up liking someone? Damon was back to thinking about locking Talia in her room.

'Alpha?', Travis asked weakly while wondering what did he do.

Damon took a few breaths before responding, 'Good work, Travis. Let me know if you come up with some other ideas.' He cut off the mind-link before Travis could respond.

Part of Damon approved the news Travis gave him because now he had a medical reason to stick close to Talia. The only problem was how to make it look natural and not spook her.

Back to the present...

Damon downed the amber liquid from his glass and remembered Talia's focused expression while she sorted the mail that afternoon.

Was that job essential? Absolutely not.

If there is anything important, Damon gets it in email while urgent matters are discussed over the phone, and only copies are sent through regular mail. But he wanted to keep Talia with him.

When Talia finished sorting that mail, Damon asked her to get them some snacks from the kitchen.

Talia returned with apples, grapes, and pineapples, and Damon asked her to feed him, with an excuse that his hands were busy.

He truly enjoyed the feeding service Talia provided.

After that, Damon gave Talia a task to place documents he previously signed in corresponding filing cabinets. That would be Maya's or Caden's job, in the evening, but Talia did it perfectly.

It was mid-afternoon when Maya peeked into Damon's office and when she saw that Talia was busy, they agreed to do their walk the next day.

According to Damon, everything played out perfectly. He finished his work and got to enjoy Talia's presence. Just knowing that she was there put his mind at ease, and he was able to focus on things that needed to be done.

...

Talia put on the oversized tank top (aka the sleepwear) and looked at her image in the mirror above the sink of her bathroom.

She thought how another day passed in the Dark Howlers pack and she didn't decide if she will stay or leave, and other than helping with dinner preparation, she didn't make much progress toward learning something useful that will lead toward her independence.

OK. The appointment with Doctor Travis was good because she got the book, but she didn't get a chance to read it.

She spent the afternoon in Damon's study, and overall, she didn't hate it.

Talia was uncomfortable at first. Who eats sandwiches while holding hands?

But after that, Damon gave her work to do, and he said that he trusts her.

From the mail she went through, Talia got a glimpse into the Dark Howlers pack and Alpha Damon.

There were reports on movements of the rogues, and she found out that Alpha Damon is collaborating with several other packs on not only handling rogues, but also on resettling refugees and finding them jobs. Damon also donates to an orphanage in the Blue River pack and is the main contact for a coven of witches who are responsible for creating a memory potion that will erase memories from humans who saw werewolves.

She also saw several letters in which members of other packs confirmed their attendance at the Summer Solstice festival. Some guests are high-ranking members of other packs, and there were several teams who are coming to compete in various sports.

Talia thought that the festival is only for the Dark Howlers pack, but now that she confirmed how people from other packs will come as well, she realized that it will be on a much bigger scale and her heart fluttered from excitement. She couldn't believe that she will get to attend such a festival. It will be her first.

Other than asking Talia to feed him, Alpha Damon didn't tease her and he was dedicated to his work.

He went through numerous documents on paper and his computer, and other than a few brief phone calls, he worked in silence.

This was another side of Alpha Damon that Talia got to see.

He was serious and focused, and he projected the aura of a reliable and knowledgeable Alpha, someone worthy of leading the largest pack in North America. Her opinion of him rose by a few notches.

Talia was surprised when Damon said, "When you finish sorting those from your hands, you can go to the kitchen. Steph is looking for you."

"Is it already time for dinner?"

She didn't realize how quickly the time passed.

That afternoon was an eye-opener for Talia. She thought that being an Alpha means bossing around between attending (or hosting) parties, but now she saw that there is a lot of work in order to lead a pack. Fascinating.

Talia helped Stephanie and she wanted to clean up after dinner, but Stephanie said that there is no need because post-dinner cleanup is done by a few Omegas, so Talia went to the garden for some fresh air, and then she went to her room to call it a day, with an intention to freshen up and read the book Doctor Travis gave her until she gets sleepy.

And here is Talia, ready to get sleepy with a book.

Talia exited the bathroom and paused at the sight of Alpha Damon who was on her bed, with his back resting on the headboard, fiddling with his phone.

His hair was damp and slightly messy, a giveaway that he showered, and his light gray t-shirt and dark gray sweatpants didn't hide his impressive physique.

It was a mesmerizing sight, but after a few seconds, Talia pulled herself from her daze and wondered, why is Alpha Damon in her bed again?

Chapter 70 - Different Sleeping Arrangements

Damon turned to look at Talia who was standing at the door of the bathroom, and his eyebrows rose in approval.

That oversized tank top covered Talia's private parts, but it was also low on the chest, giving him a glimpse of Talia's cleavage... high on the thighs, exposing her legs, and loose around arms... Damon swallowed hard as the image of Talia's side-boob flashed in his mind. Yup, he remembered that.

He really wanted to suck her there. Everywhere.

Talia squirmed under Damon's gaze. Why did he look at her like she was naked?

Talia was about to tug the tank top and cover her legs more, but she held that urge back due to fear of how that will lower the opening at her neck and expose her girls, so she just pressed her legs together and folded her arms over her stomach in a feeble attempt to protect herself from Damon's x-ray vision.

"Can I help you?", Talia asked.

Damon tilted his head and smiled a little. "There is no need to be so cautious, wife. Do you remember me treating your injuries in the hotel room? I've seen and touched almost everywhere." Emphasis on 'almost'.

Talia exhaled helplessly. The playful Damon is here.

She decided to get to the point because asking in a roundabout way will only give him more material to tease her. "Why are you here?"

"I'm here to sleep.", Damon said like it's a totally normal thing. "I was waiting for you to finish your evening routine, my dear wife."

He patted the bed next to him, obviously telling her to join him.

Talia was not willing.

Last night was one thing, but now she was not properly dressed and there was no need for comforting.

She didn't want to get used to sleeping with Damon because someone will see them, and the rumors will spread. Talia could imagine numerous she-wolves exploding in jealousy, and when the blood gets spilled, Talia was confident that will be her blood.

Talia straightened her back and stood her ground. "That's my bed. You can't come here every night to sleep. It's not proper."

Damon's brows furrowed a bit and he scooted off the bed. "You are right."

Talia pinched her arm to confirm that she was not dreaming. Did it work? It was that easy? He is leaving?

Her excitement deflated when she saw Damon stalking toward her.

Damon stood half a step from Talia, and his piercing icy-blue eyes didn't allow her to look away.

She realized that she was in trouble. What kind of trouble? Talia was not sure, but there was a storm brewing in Damon and Talia felt the urgency to fix the situation.

"I apologize, I didn't mean to disrespect you.", she quickly said.

"No, no. There was no disrespect. Your argument is reasonable."

"It is?", Talia asked reluctantly.

"It is.", Damon confirmed. "It's not proper for me to come here every night and sleep in your bed."

Talia was aware that he only repeated her words, but why did it sound like they had a different meaning?

Talia didn't have time to react when Damon scooped her into his arms.

By the time she came around, Damon was walking out of her room and into his.

"What are you doing?", Talia squeaked when Damon lowered her into his bed.

"Since you don't approve of us sleeping in your bed, we will sleep in mine.", Damon said with all the seriousness in the world.

He moved swiftly and she had no chance of escaping his embrace or the comforter that covered them.

Talia felt like crying. This is NOT what she meant! How did things end up this way?

Talia realized that she was wrong. This was not playful Damon, this was the bossy one, and the bossy Alpha wanted to cuddle.

Talia took slow breaths to calm her raging emotions, but the silky bedsheets and Damon's scent made her flustered. The fact that she was scarcely dressed only made things worse.

But Damon didn't move, and she reluctantly looked up at him.

Talia was surprised to see that his eyes were closed, and his breathing was slow and even.

It took her a minute to pick up a scent of alcohol.

'Is he sleeping?', Talia wondered. 'Is he drunk?'

She waited for some time in silence, before calling in a whisper, "Damon... Damon?"

There was no response.

She reached to touch his hair. It was softer than she imagined it to be and other than a small twitch when a strand of hair fell on his forehead, Damon didn't react.

Talia moved a bit to check if she can escape his hold.

Just as she feared, it was hopeless. They were both sideways, facing each other. Damon's arms were around her, and his right leg was over her as well. She was trapped.

She closed her eyes and resigned herself to her fate. It seems that she will sleep with Alpha Damon again, but this time in his room.

It's not that she hated it, but she regretted that she won't be able to read the book that Doctor Travis gave her.

On the bright side, Alpha Damon was like a nice-smelling heater, firm, and solid, and his proximity made her feel safe.

She chanted internally how she shouldn't get used to this because Alpha Damon's mood is unstable.

With those thoughts, Talia shifted how much she could, to get more comfortable.

Talia slowly pushed her hand between his arm and his torso until her fingers reached his back.

Once she settled her head on his arm and his breath fanned the top of her head, Talia realized that their position was way too intimate for two people who are not in a romantic relationship, but she was aware that someone unpredictable like Alpha Damon probably has his own definition of what's normal.

She told herself not to overthink it. It's just sleeping next to each other and nothing more.

After all, considering what princess Marcy did with Damon and he just left like it's nothing, Talia could assume that this sleeping position for him is a regular occurrence, like a handshake.

Maybe Damon is one of those people who can't sleep alone and now that Cassie is gone, he needs someone to hold until his next bedmate comes, and Talia is right there so... is she his bedmate?

No. No. This doesn't mean anything, and she shouldn't get attached to this soothing warmth because soon another she-wolf will come, and Talia will go back to her room, or maybe she can use that opportunity to move out of the packhouse.

In a way, it made sense.

Cassie left on the previous night, and that's when Alpha Damon came to Talia's room.

Talia's heart cracked a bit at the thought that she is Damon's bolster pillow in the absence of women that interest him and she blamed herself for dejection that swelled in her because she allowed herself to get attached. Damon was an important existence in her life, yet for him, she was easily replaceable.

She confirmed that many women want to be with Damon, and Talia was painfully aware that she doesn't qualify.

After all, she was barely dressed, their bodies stuck close to each other, yet he didn't try to touch her inappropriately. If he was interested in her, he would definitely try something. Alpha Damon is many things, but inexperienced and shy are not on that list.

Talia let out a long breath. Does she want him to do more than just holding her? If he makes a move, how would she react? Talia was not sure about that.

Talia suppressed any bold thoughts that formed, just like any other time when Damon was kind to her because it will only lead to heartbreak.

Talia smiled sadly at the thought of Alpha Damon breaking her heart and he wouldn't even know about it. But even if he did, would he care? Probably not.

Right now, she is like a pet project for him, and she shouldn't delude herself that it's anything more than that because soon he will find something (or someone) else to occupy him.

For tonight, Talia decided to enjoy the comfort that comes with Damon's embrace. Who knows? Maybe this is her last chance to experience a man holding her. After all, there are no guarantees that she will ever find a man who will fall in love with her.

Talia buried her face in Damon's chest, allowing his scent of forest and dark chocolate to fill her up. Talia had no idea at what point it became her favorite scent, probably from before she met Alpha Damon because she always loved the forest and dark chocolate; those are scents Talia associates with freedom and forbidden delicacy, and Damon's scent combined those two perfectly.

Within a minute, all her anxiety dissolved into nothing, and she savored his warmth, firm hold, and there was the sound of his heartbeat and his chest moving as he breathed... and Talia drifted off to sleep.

Unaware of Talia's internal conflict, Damon counted Talia's slow breaths and waited for her to fall asleep.

He was pleased when her arm snaked under his, to hold him. That was progress.

It was torturous for Damon to be a gentleman with Talia so close and scarcely dressed, but he forced his hands to stay in place and not wander to explore her body.

Damon was confident that with a few kisses and caresses, Talia would become putty in his hands, but he didn't want that. If he acted like that, there was a risk for Talia to think that he treats her like one of the numerous hookups from his past and she is anything other than that.

Damon didn't want one night with Talia; he wanted a lifetime of her proximity. He wanted to enjoy the sound of her voice, and her intoxicating scent, and he could spend an eternity staring into her beautiful, honeyed eyes that hide a million secrets he is yet to unfold.

Damon confirmed that Talia is intelligent, kind, sharp, adorably naïve, and his to hold and protect. Only his.

He remembered Travis's words about increasing chances of awakening Talia's wolf if Talia's mate is with her, the closer the better.

Is this helping her wolf heal? What will happen if her wolf awakens, and Talia finds out that Damon is her mate? He had no way of predicting what her reaction will be, but he was certain that Talia will feel the pull and she won't think about leaving his side... and that should be enough.

When he confirmed that Talia was sleeping, Damon lowered his head and pressed a soft kiss on her forehead.

Damon's body was ablaze as delightful sparks ignited all his nerve endings, and at the same time, his heart was at peace, knowing that Talia was not going anywhere. For tonight, at least.