

Alphas Bride 621

Chapter 621 Family planning (3)

Talia never did anything so scandalous, especially not for Damon to see, but the sensation of her touching herself was new and stimulating, and she couldn't stop. She didn't want to stop.

With every next raging heartbeat, Talia caressed and pinched her nipples with less reservation.

Unaware of the show that was happening right behind Talia's legs that were in front of Damon, Damon was gripping Talia's ankles while enjoying the sight of her ass and thighs rippling every time he slapped into her. The smacking sound of flesh against flesh was fantastic!

Damon was confident that the visual can't get better than that, but then Talia moaned, and he spread her legs slightly to see if she was OK. His brain froze when he saw Talia biting her lower lip while playing with her nipples. Damn, that was hot!

Little by little, without slowing the movements of his hips, Damon was spreading her legs further so he can get a better view of what she was doing. It was the most erotic performance he had ever seen, and he didn't dare to blink because he didn't want to miss a thing.

Talia noticed his heated gaze directed at her and she swiftly moved her hands away, unsure where to look. She would run away, but Damon was holding her and still rocking into her, and she couldn't run even if she wanted.

She was lost in lust, and she did something shameful, and Damon was watching her. How embarrassing.

"Don't!", Damon growled. Did she know that her shyness made her so innocently sexy that he wished to hide her in a small and dark place where no one can see her, and then he would devour her completely?

"Continue. Show me how you like it." He wanted to continue watching her.

Damon could already imagine the scene of Talia naked with her legs spread wide, touching her flower and sinking her dainty fingers into her while moaning, only for Damon to see. He really wanted to see that. He would bring a timer so he can measure how long he can watch without pouncing on her.

Her hands jerked toward her breasts, but then stopped halfway.

"Do it!", he squeezed through his teeth and rocked into her with a slight rotation that made her forget about her shyness.

"That's it, kitten. You are doing wonderfully", Damon praised Talia when she cupped her breasts and he loved watching her coming out of her shell.

The visual was so sexy that Damon's orgasm sneaked upon him, and he was not sure if he should slow down or keep going and maybe leave Talia behind. But she was enjoying it, and he didn't want to spoil it for her, so he reduced his thrusts to a bare minimum.

Talia's eyes snapped open to look at him. "Don't stop.", she said.

Damon licked his lips, wondering if he should admit how weak he was in front of her. There were times when he could go for hours, but Talia would make him come within minutes. It was just that good.

He decided to bite the bullet. "I won't stop but I need to slow down, otherwise, I will..."

"So will I", she said with a goofy smile, and she threw her head back when he increased his pace again.

Talia's body arched and she pinched her nipples harshly while shouting profanities. Damon really wanted to hear every word that escaped her lips, and maybe record her so he can listen to it later, but her insides tightened around his cock and started milking him in rhythmical pulses, and he blanked out for a moment.

His ass clenched and his knees nearly gave in as he shivered in his release with a throaty groan.

Damon leaned over her to rest his weight on his elbows on Talia's sides.

He caught her gaze and they smiled goofily while inhaling each other's breaths.

Their sex enhanced by the sparks of their bond was mind-blowing, but what made it better was the trust, and the affection, and all the good things that coursed between them. Unconditional acceptance.

"You are gorgeous", he said, and he really meant it. The way her body glowed after orgasm was the highest confirmation of his ability to please his mate.

Talia raked her fingers through his hair in an attempt to push those unruly strands back, only to have them fall over his forehead mischievously. She loved these intimate moments of bliss when it was just the two of them and the world was at peace.

"I could stay like this forever.", she said.

"Me too", he responded seriously. "From now on, the baby-making practice is my favorite activity. We should do it a few more times, to make sure we don't forget the important parts."

Talia stifled a giggle and her insides tightened around his shaft.

Damon cocked an eyebrow at her. "At this rate, we WILL stay like this forever." His lips lifted into a wicked smile. "You won't hear any complaints from me, Mrs. Blake. Forever inside you is just what the doctor prescribed. I will keep pumping my babies inside you, and when they want to come out, they will need to tell me to move."

Talia laughed at his outrageous baby-talk and she snorted a bit.

"I love you, Damon."

Damon hummed in approval, and he nuzzled Talia's neck with his nose.

"I love you more, kitten."

Slowly, very slowly, Damon tilted his head to reach the left side of Talia's neck, and then he kissed the spot where his mark was. He loved the sound of the shaky sigh that escaped her lips upon contact.

The mark on her neck was like a hickey with some pattern that was more distinct than before he marked her the last time, in the cave, yet it was obviously not fully formed. Will he need to mark her again? That possibility excited him.

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Talia and Damon went baby shopping in Darkbourne.

Damon suggested that they go to the human city because there were malls and many choices, but Talia reminded him that they were short on time. Besides, there were several clothing and toy stores in Darkbourne, and they should find something for babies.

Damon watched with amusement as Talia excitedly examined baby outfits. There was a decent selection in the back of one baby boutique that was specialized in merchandise for mothers and babies.

Talia was carefully inspecting things that piqued her interest before showing them to Damon, and Damon could see her picking clothes for their pups with equal enthusiasm, probably more. Talia will have a big belly and an even bigger smile. Soon.

"Look, look", she called to get Damon's attention, like he was not already looking at her. "This one has a bowtie... aww... look at this tutu..."

After keeping more than a dozen outfits on the side, completed with tiny socks, shoes, and hats, Damon was confident that Talia made her picks, but then she paused and pursed her lips.

"What's wrong?", Damon asked.

"We don't know if babies are boys or girls or one of each.", Talia said. "How can I get a tutu if both are boys?"

"Do you think babies will care about such things?"

Talia knew he had a point, but... "Parents will care."

"Should we give up on clothes and go for toys instead?", Damon suggested. Did they just waste an hour without buying anything?

Talia really was set on getting outfits. "No. We can go with gender-neutral." She moved to her right to look through the clothing rack again. "Yellows, greens... onesies, shirts, and shorts... that should work..."

Damon chuckled at the sight of Talia who was back to looking for perfect outfits that will fit the babies and please their parents. He knew she will be a wonderful mother. She always cared about others, and this was no different.

Talia and Damon didn't notice the curious gazes of the salespeople.

Their Luna was picking stuff for babies, and she was accompanied by the Alpha who was looking at her with approval! They never saw their Alpha smiling so dreamily, and they would take a picture, but they were afraid of being caught. However, that didn't stop them from guessing... Was their Luna pregnant already? Everyone knew that Talia was in the packhouse for a while, so anything was possible.

Chapter 622 Moving to a new home

Mindy was humming a tune while pushing the last box for the day to align with others in the back of a truck. Gideon was in the cabin, making sure they didn't miss anything important.

After double-checking that things were tucked in well, Mindy adjusted the net that covered all the things they put in there, and then she pulled a stretchy cord from one wall of the trailer to the other, to keep the things from tumbling.

Since there was no road to Gideon's house, the warriors drove there a massive truck for rough terrains, customized with an enclosed trailer that could store a lot of things.

The warriors wanted to help, but Mindy and Gideon said that they will need a few hours to pick things and pack them, and they needed to do it personally. Both Gideon and Mindy were werewolves, and it's not like they were lacking in strength.

At first, Mindy thought of packing only some clothes and toiletries, but now that they had a truck and a whole day at their disposal, Mindy and Gideon decided to take with them more. They already had a rough idea of a few pieces of furniture that Gideon needed for his workshop, and the rest will stay behind. Mindy had no emotional attachments to anything other than her clothes.

Mindy was happy. They were moving close to the packhouse, and Gideon didn't object to her idea to move and see if the new place will work for him.

Actually, Gideon didn't care about the location. He wanted to make his pumpkin-infused princess happy, and as long as he had space for his garden, workshop, and privacy, he wouldn't lack anything.

The lot around the house Talia let them use was more than what he needed, and guards would ensure that trespassers don't disturb them.

The rest was Mindy's criteria about being close to the town, number of rooms, and amenities, and with all that accommodated, neither of the two thought they will need to move further. Unless they find something unexpected, that house was perfect.

Mindy's ears perked up when she heard rustling outside of the trailer.

She thought it was Gideon, maybe searching for her. Why didn't he use the mind-link? She left him upstairs, and she was about to let him know she was inside the trailer of the truck when she heard a female voice, "Gidi?"

Mindy's expression stiffened. She didn't need to guess who that was. Nina. Why the hell was she there?

Mindy stuck her head from the back of the truck to see Nina visually inspecting the large vehicle.

"Can I help you?", Mindy asked without bothering to conceal her hostility.

Nina was visibly flustered. "Uhm... Is Gidi here?"

"Shaman Gideon is at home.", Mindy said while emphasizing the 'Shaman Gideon' part. "Why are you looking for him?"

Nina was not happy with the way Mindy (not) welcomed her. "Do I need a reason to come and check on my friend?"

'Friend, my ass!', Mindy fumed. If Nina wanted to check on Gideon, she could use the mind-link. She obviously wanted to see him in person. "Friend. I see.", Mindy mumbled. "Alright. Wait a minute. I will tell my mate that you are here."

"Mindy", Nina called. "I am aware you are his mate."

"If you are, that will make things easier.", Mindy said while walking into the cabin.

Nina made her appearance shortly before the pack run, Gideon told her that she was not needed, and then Gideon announced to everyone that Mindy was his mate. Why was Nina here? Obviously to stir trouble. Did she think that she can win Gideon back?

Mindy entered the cabin to see Gideon coming out of the side room with a bunch of papers in his hands.

"I had these in my desk upstairs.", Gideon said and started arranging papers in the small box that was on the dining table. "I think these are the last ones, but there are probably a hundred more. Once the soil for the garden is ready, I will get plants and seeds from here. At that time, I can check again to see what we left behind." After closing the box, he turned to look at Mindy. "Are we ready to go?"

"I don't think so.", Mindy said. "Nina is here."

Gideon's expression was calm, but on the inside, he felt like crying. Why was Nina here? It took him forever to pacify Mindy last time!

He glanced behind Mindy. "I assume she is outside."

"Oh, I'm sorry.", Mindy said sarcastically. "Was I supposed to bring her to the bedroom?" She knew that Gideon had drawn the line and that it wasn't his fault, but Mindy couldn't help herself from seething in jealousy.

Gideon exhaled helplessly. He walked to Mindy and wrapped his arms around her.

"You know I didn't call Nina to come here", he said. "Come. Let's go and see what she wants."

With one arm around Mindy's shoulders and the other holding the box he just closed, Gideon walked out with Mindy.

Gideon saw Nina looking his way, but he spoke to Mindy.

"Can you close the door, princess? My hands are full."

Mindy was not sure what he was up to. He could let go of her and close the door, but the fact he was holding onto Mindy in front of Nina, made Mindy feel good.

"Make sure you lock it because we don't want stray animals to get in while we are out.", Gideon said.

Nina frowned when she realized that Gideon ignored her, but she waited for him to address her.

"Nina", Gideon said. "I didn't expect you here. Did something happen?"

"I came to see how you are doing."

"As you can see, I'm doing fine.", Gideon responded and turned to Mindy. "You can forgive Nina for the intrusion. For a long time I was living alone here, and she would come and check on me from time to time." He spoke to Nina. "I am grateful for everything you did so far, Nina. But I have a mate now."

"Are you saying that I'm not welcome?", Nina asked, offended that he was dismissing her.

"Just like any other newly mated couple, we seek solitude to learn about each other.", Gideon said. "I hope you can respect our desire for privacy."

Nina's shoulders slumped. "I understand." She looked at the box in Gideon's hand and then at the truck. "Are you moving?"

"Yes.", Gideon confirmed.

"Where to?"

Gideon thought for a moment about how to answer this. "We found a new home, one that will work for both of us. It's within the territory."

Nina realized that Gideon won't tell her. "You are the Shaman, how can people reach you? Or are you going to drop that also now that you found your mate?" Nina's voice was full of bitterness, and she couldn't conceal it.

"I am a Shaman", Gideon responded matter-of-factly. "But I am also a man. Other than numerous congratulations for finding my mate, I didn't hear any requests for my services. But in case of an emergency, people can reach me via mind-link."

Gideon ushered Mindy to sit in the truck on the passenger's seat in front, and he placed the box he was carrying next to her legs.

"Be careful with this one, princess", Gideon told Mindy. "My favorite mug is in there."

He closed the door for Mindy and then he moved to the back to ensure that the double doors were properly secured shut.

Seeing that Nina was watching him in silence, he decided to say something.

"Thank you for stopping by. I would stay and chat, but we have a lot to unpack. Take care, Nina."

Nina couldn't believe that he was leaving just like that. "Can I hitch a ride with you to town?"

"Sorry, Nina. There is no space. You will need to return in the same way you came here.", Gideon said and hopped into the driver's seat.

Nina gaped at the truck that moved over the uneven terrain until it disappeared out of sight among the trees.

Mindy scooted next to Gideon. She hugged his arm and smiled happily.

The truck was massive, and at least four people could sit in front, and there was space in the back also, but Gideon just brushed off Nina, and Mindy liked it. She liked it a lot.

Gideon glanced at his pumpkin-infused princess. "Happy?"

"Yes", Mindy didn't deny it. "I will make sure to show you how happy I am, tonight."

Gideon shifted in his seat to adjust his hard-on. Damn, the evening couldn't come fast enough!

Chapter 623 Preparations for the trip [Bonus chapter]

Damon went to get Talia for dinner, and he found her in their closet, packing things. He offered his help, and they divided work so that Damon packs things for the two of them, and she will handle the things that they are taking as presents.

Talia needed help, it was her first time packing, and Damon was happy to provide his assistance. He instructed her to put big items first, and that breakables should be in the middle, cushioned by layers of fabric, and Talia realized that packing a suitcase can be quite complex if one wants to do it properly.

Damon shook his head helplessly at the sight of a big suitcase that was full of stuff for babies. Did they really buy that much? There were clothes, toys, diapers, moist wipes, and swaddling blankets, and Talia asked Doctor Travis to provide the latest information related to pregnancy and babies; she printed it all out for Yasmin and Axel to read. Damon was amazed that Talia thought about all this.

Talia even got two maternity dresses that had adjustable waist to accommodate a growing belly, and a top that had hidden buttons in the chest area to allow for the fabric to open so that Yasmin can breastfeed. For werewolves (and witches) exposed breasts were not a big deal, but Talia wanted to introduce them to fashion trends popular among humans. It was novel.

Talia was aware that they didn't have babies in the Midnight Guardians pack for two decades, and Yasmin knew even less about pregnancy and motherhood, so Talia bought everything she thought might be useful for them.

Talia zipped the suitcase and looked at Damon victoriously. "Done."

"If I don't know better, I would assume that baby-related business is the reason for our trip.", Damon said teasingly while gesturing to a much smaller suitcase that was holding their clothes and toiletries.

Talia pursed her lips. "I know that seeing babies is not the reason why we are going, but I chose to focus on the positives. Whenever I think that we will face Alpha Isaac and Alpha Sophia to demand answers about me, about what they did to you, and about their involvement with the Guardians, I become unsettled. And all that gets worse when I think about witches and..."

Talia stopped talking when Damon engulfed her in his embrace.

"It will be alright.", he spoke into her hair. "You don't need to face this alone, kitten. We are going together. Let me deal with the unpleasant things."

"That's not what I want. I want us to share everything, good and bad."

"And that's why we are going together."

Talia was worried about the anger that swelled within Damon every time Alpha Isaac and Alpha Sophia were mentioned. "What will you do with the previous Alphas of the Midnight Guardians pack?"

"I don't know.", Damon admitted. "What they did is inexcusable. It goes against our nature. They harmed you and me and..." He paused. No matter what, they were her parents. Did she feel sorry for them? He decided to ask, "How would you punish them?"

Talia was not sure about the punishment, but she knew one thing. "When I think about them, I feel... nothing. Shouldn't I be angry?"

"Nothing?"

Talia tilted her head as her brows came together. "I have no desire to punish them or to make them suffer in any way. If I could never see them or hear about them again, that would be perfect."

Damon nodded knowingly. "Death sentence it is."

Talia's eyes widened in shock. "You can't joke about it." She said that she didn't want to hear about them or see them, but she didn't think about killing them.

Damon cocked an eyebrow at her. "Who said I'm joking?"

Talia swallowed hard. Damon told her that he doesn't crack jokes, and he proved it to her more than once.

"Death is permanent.", she said. "We don't have the power to give life, so we shouldn't take it away."

Damon's hard expression softened at her words. "You are kind." A true Luna. "The world would be a better place if everyone thought that way. Unfortunately, the reality is that every enemy you spare is an enemy that lives to attack you again and this pair of Alphas jeopardized both of our lives."

"They can't do much. I took away their powers."

"Can they talk? Did you remove their ability to persuade someone else to do their dirty work? Do you think that all murderers and schemers are Alphas with mystical powers?", Damon was shooting one question after another, and Talia couldn't find an opportunity to answer. "Alpha Isaac and Alpha Sophia were Alphas for a long time, and I'm sure that there are people who are supporting them. Not everyone is eager to see the new generation taking over, and the changes it brings. My parents were dead, I was their only child, the only Alpha in the pack, and still, some people said how I'm not the best choice."

Talia knew that Damon was talking from his experience, and she knew that he had a valid point. She never thought of Alpha Isaac and Alpha Sophia as her parents, but they were Axel's parents. Can she punish them harshly without antagonizing Axel? Axel was the only family she had.

"Don't kill them.", Talia said to Damon.

Damon was surprised by this request. "Did you forget what they did to me? What would happen if Cassandra was successful?" Damon looked into her eyes with grief veiling his handsome features. "If you didn't intervene with the ritual, if you didn't go to witches to find a way to reverse it, I would be a soulless puppet, not knowing who you are, and that, my kitten, is a life not worth living."

Talia's heart cracked when she remembered the pain of Damon not remembering her. It was more than alienation and his crass behavior. A piece of her was missing and it was agonizing. And he felt the same. Actually, after his memories returned, Damon was disgusted by himself, and part of that dejection still lingered in the back of his mind, disguised as fear of losing her and himself.

Talia jolted when Damon continued talking with fury sizzling behind his every word.

"What would happen to you if Alpha Howard told others how special you were? Do you think that they would wait until you are of age before they used you to give birth to the next Alpha of the Red Moon pack? Do you think you would have a choice? Even without your abilities, your bloodline tops all others. Would Alpha Howard take you, or would he give you to his son? Do you think their greed would stop

there? What if they decided you should give birth to Generals of their army also? What would...", his voice cracked, and he gasped for air.

The mental image of Talia being touched by other men was driving him insane. He could see her in tatters, crying and pleading for them to let her go while they had their way with her, and Damon wanted to kill them all.

Would anyone be swayed by her cries? Would anyone help? And he would be ignorant to her sufferings because they were wretched animals, concerned only about power without regard for who needs to suffer for it.

Damon's aura flared, solidifying the air around him. Luckily, Talia was not affected, not because of her strength, but because mates can't harm each other.

Noticing that Damon was unstable, Talia hugged him with all her might.

"It's OK. I'm here... it didn't happen...", she chanted, and she relaxed when Damon hugged her back and buried his face into her hair, taking deep breaths to fill his system with her sweet citrusy scent of freesia that had the power to calm his raging beast.

He knew that it didn't happen and that Talia was right there, safe in his arms, but the thought of what might have been told him that it could happen in the future if they were not careful. They needed to understand what they were up against and for that, they needed information from Alpha Sophia and Alpha Isaac.

"I won't kill them.", Damon said after some time. "Unless it's necessary."

"Thank you, Damon." She really meant it. She didn't really care if he would kill someone, knowing that it wouldn't be his first time, but she didn't want to lose him to the madness and desperation that was engulfing him.

They held each other in silence for a long time, listening to each other's matching heartbeats, and hoping that their nightmares won't come true.

Chapter 624 The blood oath (1)

Damon and Talia had dinner with Maya, Caden, Gideon, Mindy, Dawn, George, Zina, Keith, Liam, Pierce, Caleb, and Sandy.

Petra, Erik, and Zack officially left the packhouse earlier that day, James and Cornelia were still out on their date.

Mindy and Gideon would have a private dinner in their new home but because of the blood oath, they decided to come to the packhouse.

Hearing people discuss Talia's and Damon's departure, Gideon had to ask, "Is Cornelia going to join you?"

Damon and Talia exchanged blank looks. They didn't know.

Talia responded, "We were thinking of going, but today we finalized the details. James and Cornelia were out the whole day, and James was clear that he didn't want to be disturbed, so we didn't tell her."

"You might want to give her a heads up.", Gideon said. "I remember Cornelia saying that she wanted to go home."

"That was before she got together with James.", Maya chimed in. "Both of them know they are mates. Since James can't abandon the Red Moon pack without a plan, she will probably stay here."

Gideon was not so sure. "James is too young to feel the bond. As for Cornelia, she doesn't feel the bond as we do. You say that she will stay, and I will ask you: where? The Red Moon pack is not a good place to be. Cornelia doesn't have a wolf, and she won't be able to use her powers, which means they will think she is human. Does it make sense for Cornelia to stay here and wait for James to visit her? If I was her, I would go back to my Coven and stay there until James becomes an Alpha."

Talia agreed with this. Gideon didn't know that James didn't have an Alpha aura and that James' chance of taking over the Red Moon pack was close to nil, but the rest was true.

Everyone knew that the Red Moon pack was a bad place; Cornelia would be treated as an Omega or worse, and James won't be able to protect her unless he reveals they are mates, which will put her in greater danger. Without the pull of the mate bond, why would she go there? Considering how rarely James leaves the Red Moon pack, it would be meaningless if Cornelia stayed in this realm and wait for James to visit her.

Talia knew that it would be better for Cornelia to go home, at least until James escapes the clutches of his so-called father and establishes himself so that he can protect them both, but the idea of separating mates didn't feel right, even if they couldn't feel the bond fully. Talia was with Damon before she found out they were mates; she was happy with him, and no matter how much her reasoning told her to leave, something always pulled her back... back into his arms, where she belonged, and if she managed to leave, she would miss him immensely.

Talia jolted out of her thoughts when Damon gave her hand a squeeze.

"We won't leave before breakfast.", Damon said. He could feel Talia's emotional turmoil. "In the morning, we will tell Cornelia, and we will wait on her decision. It's not like we have a set schedule."

Talia was grateful for Damon's understanding.

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They all gathered at the clearing behind the garden that was illuminated with several tiki torches.

That was the area where the platform was erected for the ceremony before the pack run, but now it was just a big patch of grass that was patted down by numerous people who stood there two evenings ago, and by the crew that did the cleaning the next day.

Gideon and Mindy took the central position, with Keith, Liam, Caleb, Pierce, and Sandy standing in a semi-circle and facing them. Maya, Caden, Talia, and Damon stood on the side, and Dawn and George were further in the back.

Zina was not there, as she went to clean up after dinner. Dawn wanted to help Zina with her chores, but when Zina told her that two other Omegas were helping already, Dawn decided to attend the oath. She never saw one.

Gideon and Mindy prepared incense burners and several other things needed for the blood oath, but the most important thing was the square-shaped stone tablet that was etched with ancient symbols. The tablet was large enough for a big palm to rest on it with fingers spread wide.

"Luna", Gideon called Talia and gestured for her to come closer.

Talia slowly moved there, reluctance in her steps reflecting her unwillingness to go through with this oath.

"You will need to hold this." Gideon handed Talia the stone tablet that was light gray and unusually cold to the touch like it was refrigerated previously.

Talia wondered if the stone she was holding was that heavy, or if that was the heaviness of what it represented. Those five people will use the tablet to entrust their lives to Talia, and that was heavier than anything. Would she be able to do the same if the roles were reversed? She was not sure. They were her friends, and Talia trusted them, but the only person who had her unconditional trust was Damon.

Damon explained how their pledge of loyalty to Alpha and Luna was normal. Pack prospers together and everyone has their role. As warriors, their duty was to fight and protect, and protecting their Luna was the highest honor a warrior could have because only the most skilled ones get to serve at the top.

Even with that explanation, Talia didn't feel it was right. Was it because she didn't grow up as part of a pack? Damon was her home and she would do anything for him, but she couldn't understand the concept of a tightly-knitted community where people will make sacrifices for someone else's benefit. That's not how things went in the Red Moon pack where even Omegas wouldn't hesitate to backstab others even if they didn't gain anything from it.

Talia looked at Keith, Liam, Caleb, Pierce, and Sandy, silently giving them one last chance to back out from taking this oath, but determination in their eyes told her they will stick to it.

Keith stepped forward first.

Gideon handed him the ceremonial knife made out of white bone, the same one that Mindy used when she joined the Dark Howlers pack.

At Gideon's nod, Keith ran the blade over his palm, drawing blood.

Talia's brows furrowed when she saw Keith's blood dripping, indicating a deep cut, and he placed his palm on the tablet Talia was holding without hesitation.

Gideon murmured ancient chants, while Keith looked up at the Moon that was nearly full and spoke in a clear voice, the sound carrying through the forest, like it was amplified, "With the Moon Goddess as my witness, I, Keith of the Dark Howlers pack, pledge my loyalty to Talia Moonrider, the Luna of the Dark Howlers pack." Keith lowered his gaze and locked eyes with Talia. "I will treat your safety as my priority until there is breath in me, and if I ever think of harming you, may the Moon Goddess take my life."

Talia felt that the tablet in her hands was heating and she gripped it tighter when it started vibrating.

The tablet emitted a burst of red light, and Talia's breath hitched at the sensation in her chest she couldn't identify. Was that the bond of the oath? Did Keith feel the same?

Chapter 625 The blood oath (2)

A gust of wind swirled around Keith and Talia, making the flames of tiki torches dance wildly, and a second later, everything was calm again.

Keith removed his palm from the tablet, and Talia clearly saw that his flesh was crimson red, yet the cold stone tablet was completely clean.

Keith bowed to Talia and then to Damon before stepping away.

The next one was Liam. He cut his palm and said the pledge, the tablet reacted, there was a sensation in the chest and a gust of wind, and he was done. One by one, all Talia's guards present pledged their loyalty to her, their sincerity overwhelming her emotionally.

Gideon ended the oath with his arms raised up toward the moon while another stirring of ancient words no one understood left his lips.

Gideon had an appearance of a modern mature man, yet in these moments he extruded an ancient aura full of wisdom, like a sage from centuries ago. The only things missing would be a long white hair and an equally long beard fluttering in the wind to make it completely fantastic.

"It's done.", Gideon declared.

Talia looked at her five guards with the focus on their bleeding hands. Mindy was giving them gauze that was soaked in aromatic herbs, and bandages to wrap around their wounds.

"Let me heal you", Talia said.

All five of them refused, and she heard Damon's voice in her head, 'That's the proof of their oath and they carry those wounds as badges of honor.'

Talia exhaled helplessly, and spoke to her guards, "I am touched that you were willing to do this. I hope that you never face danger while protecting me, but if you do, keep in mind that I'm not a porcelain doll that needs protection at any cost. Don't endanger yourself recklessly because if you are harmed, you can't guard me. I am your Luna, I am not weak, and I will fight by your side so that we can keep each other safe. Is that clear?"

They nodded and everyone's attention moved to the tablet in Talia's hands that was now glowing in silvery light.

"What is this?", Damon asked, uneasy feeling telling him this was not part of the ceremony.

"I believe that the Moon Goddess acknowledged Talia's words as her oath.", Gideon said, his eyes sparkling with excitement because he had never seen anything like that happening before. The tablet reacted to blood only, but now it seemed that it reacted to Talia's silvery magic-like ability. Gideon really wanted to do some tests and confirm if his guess was correct, but how can he express such a request without making it sound that he wants to treat his Luna as a test specimen?

Damon's brows were together, forming a deep frown. Which part of Talia's words was the oath? That she didn't need protecting? Or that she will protect her guards? What nonsense was that?

Before Talia could say anything else, Damon snatched the tablet from her hands and shoved it into Gideon's.

"Don't let her hold such things.", Damon said to the Shaman in an ominously low voice. If he knew this would happen, Damon would be the one holding the tablet, so that those five wretched guards pledge to Damon that they won't harm his mate.

Gideon lowered his head in submission. "Yes, Alpha." Well, so much for doing tests, Gideon thought. If he asks Talia to try something like that again, Damon will skin him alive.

Sandy clapped loudly, ignoring that her left hand was freshly bandaged.

"Now that this is over, let's celebrate in Shifters!", Sandy exclaimed cheerfully, breaking the tense atmosphere.

Damon didn't like the idea of partying. As Talia's guards, they should always be ready for action. "We will leave tomorrow morning. Do you have the luxury of time for drinking?"

Sandy's face fell and she looked helplessly at Liam, Pierce, and Caleb to see that their stony expressions didn't show how disappointed they were. Sandy didn't bother looking at Keith because even as a Coach he would tell them to skip on the fun before the game.

Talia hugged Damon's arm and spoke to her guards, "Enjoy at Shifters, but remember that you need to be here for breakfast."

Sandy fist-pumped into the air. "You are the best!"

Damon looked at Talia in disbelief. Did she just override his order, in front of others?

"Don't worry.", Keith said to Talia and Damon. "I will go with them and make sure they don't overdo it so that everyone is ready on time."

Somehow, Damon and Talia sounded like concerned parents, and Keith was the responsible child in the family who will keep his younger siblings out of trouble.

They all wished each other good night and Keith walked away with Liam, Caleb, Pierce, and Sandy.

"They are in a good mood.", Maya said in a singing voice. "You have good guards, Luna Talia."

Talia acknowledged that the mood was good. Was she overthinking this?

The only one missing was Lulu and Talia hoped that this wasn't the beginning of a rift forming between them.

...

James woke up with a big smile on his face and Cornelia in his arms.

He buried his face in the crook of her neck, taking deep breaths and allowing her sweet scent of wild berries to fill his system.

As if his morning wood was not enough, Cornelia's closeness made him hard to the point of aching, but James didn't want to move away from his chocolate-colored Goddess. She was beautiful and enchanting, and he felt that disturbing her sleep would be sacrilege.

James smiled foolishly while thinking about the previous day. They spent it together and it was fantastic.

The day included a lot of hand-holding and kisses, and they broke that skin-to-skin contact only when absolutely necessary.

First, they went to a mall to shop for clothes.

James was never into fashion, but his logic told him that outfits in the display windows and on mannequins were from the current season, and he stayed away from the clearance section where clothes were on sale. That's how he picked a few dresses for Cornelia and made her try them on. Everything looked good on her. He bought it all, happy that Damon arranged a credit card with the name James White. Alpha Edward had no way of knowing that his son was shopping with his mate instead of sweating it out in the gym. James felt a sense of accomplishment in that.

Since coming to the Dark Howlers pack, for the first time in his life, James had an opportunity to act like a teenager, defying his parents and enjoying life, and this day was definitely one of those.

Next, James and Cornelia went into the aquarium. He heard how those two warriors wanted to take Cornelia to the aquarium, but they never did, so James decided to take her there. Cornelia was fascinated with jellyfish, sharks, and many other creatures. She got to touch starfish and clams, and she said how seahorses look nothing like horses, and then they got soaked while watching a show where dolphins performed.

With her clothes wet, Cornelia thought that her options were to stay wet or return to the packhouse, but James was ready for this. Why else would he take her shopping first?

Chapter 626 The gravity of being a Luna (1)

Cornelia changed her wet clothes in the back of the white Lexus, and James waited outside, his fingers itchy to open the door and get in with her. He really wanted to see her changing; well not exactly changing clothes, it was mostly about removing her clothes but he controlled himself.

James was also wet, so he went into the car after Cornelia was done and she waited outside. He hoped she will stay inside, but she was avoiding his gaze nervously, and suddenly he became aware of how that back seat and tinted glass will provide privacy. And just like that, he was hard again. Damn!

He was done in a minute, and then he found the bag where Cornelia kept the dress she wore previously, and he took a few deep breaths to inhale her scent that lingered there. Even when it was wet with a hint of fish, it was still fantastic. He knew it made him look like a creep, but he couldn't stop himself.

Dazed by her scent, the moment James exited the car, he pulled Cornelia into his embrace and kissed her senselessly until their lips were numb, right there in the parking lot of the Aquarium. James knew

kissing won't be enough as he really wanted to make love to her, and the way she melded into him told him that she wanted the same. Oh, and then there was the scent of her arousal that confirmed without a doubt that her body wanted to be explored... but James knew that this was as far as they can go, so he stopped himself. For now.

After that, James and Cornelia had lunch in an Italian restaurant that was on the seventh floor and it provided a wonderful panoramic view of the city.

Next was the museum of history, and James bought them ice cream while they walked downtown. Chocolate for him and raspberry for her.

Cornelia loved the ice cream, but she didn't approve of the concrete jungle. They were outside, yet it was stuffy and noisy, and her connection with nature was severed. She wondered how humans could live like that.

To lighten up the mood, James led the way to a park where Cornelia removed her shoes and walked on the grass happily. Park had a merry-go-round, benches where older people played chess, and a playground for kids. Cornelia observed all that with curiosity.

James took Cornelia for dinner that was not too extravagant because they didn't wear fancy clothes, and they rounded their date with a movie.

Cornelia's eyes were open wide as they watched the latest sci-fi action movie. She was asking James questions about all those gadgets she saw there, making others shush them as James was explaining what the special effects are while ignoring the irritated movie-watchers around them. Annoying humans.

To Cornelia, things on the big screen looked like magic, especially lasers and teleportation gates.

When they returned to the packhouse, it was late, and after freshening up, Cornelia fell asleep quickly. She told him that she had fun and kissed him good night and that was all it mattered.

The date ended well, and James loved that he woke up first.

James greedily soaked in Cornelia's relaxed sleepy expression, and he wished that he could wake up like that every morning, with Cornelia in his arms. The raging boner was a bit of a problem and James used all of his will to control himself and not start grinding on her.

His gaze moved to her breasts which were rising and falling as she breathed. He swallowed hard. Could he touch her there and maybe lick a bit without waking her up? She slept in his t-shirt that was roomy and he could probably get his hand in there and she won't notice as long as he moves slowly.

James shook those thoughts away. She was beautiful, and her scent of the wild berries was driving him nuts, but he didn't want to act like a horny savage.

As if she could feel his hungry stare on her, Cornelia's eyes fluttered open, and she smiled, that small action made James' heart sing. Even when she was drowsy, her instinct was to smile at him. Wasn't that beautiful?

During his sixteen years of existence, James' sister was not present, his mother was indifferent, and his father would mostly give him frowns, yet here was Cornelia... smiling. It was so simple, yet it made him happy beyond belief.

"Good morning, Cora.", he said in a singing voice while tightening his hold on her.

"Mhm...", she hummed in response, too lazy to say anything, and other than her lips puckering when he kissed her, she didn't move a muscle.

Cornelia's eyes closed slowly, and James thought that she will sleep more, but then she asked, "What's the time?"

"It's almost time for breakfast."

Cornelia yawned. "We should get ready and eat. Did you plan something for today?"

James' heart skipped a beat. She wanted to spend another day with him! It's not that James was doubting it will happen, he made plans for the next three days. However, considering how the last few days went, James thought that he will need to persuade her first. This was definitely progress.

...

On the third floor of the packhouse, Damon stared at Talia who was waking up.

He was up for a while and he discussed with Sapa the best approach to tell Talia that he didn't approve of her actions, without upsetting her. What if the black magic in her was triggered again? Damon wanted to talk to Talia last night, but she was too happy and he decided to leave it for the morning. Well, it's morning.

Talia blinked herself awake before greeting him, "Good morning, handsome."

"Good morning, kitten."

"What's wrong?" She could feel that he was struggling with something.

Damon pressed his lips into a line. He didn't want to spoil the mood, but he didn't want to keep it in either.

Sapa told him that the only way to deal with it is to talk about it because postponing things will make them pile up and form a big one, and then just a talk might not be enough.

"I am concerned about the oath.", Damon said.

Talia didn't get it. "What about it?"

"If you don't want your guards to protect you, then it will be better that you don't have any." There, he said it.

Talia pushed herself into a seated position. She knew what Damon was talking about. "I didn't mean to make an oath, Damon. It just happened."

Damon also sat up and faced Talia. "Our word is our bond, especially in front of our pack members and in front of other Alphas. Whatever you say, you need to mean it."

"But I do mean it.", Talia responded. "I don't think that my life is more valuable than any other."

Damon frowned. "This is not about lives. This is about our pack. I know they are your friends and if anything happens to them, you will grieve, and so will their friends and family, and the whole pack will honor them for the price they paid in the line of duty. But do you have any idea what will happen if you die?"

Chapter 627 The gravity of being a Luna (2)

Talia didn't respond, and Damon continued talking.

"If you die, I will follow right after. Don't think that it won't happen because I won't rest until I find who caused your demise, and once I make sure they are in hell, I will lose the reason to exist, and then the Dark Howlers pack will collapse."

Damon's voice softened. "The pack is depending on their Alpha and Luna to guide them; without us, they are vulnerable, like a boat in the stormy sea without a helmsman and there will be no one to take over the wheel because no matter how many skilled warriors we have, without us, other Alphas will make them submit. The stubborn ones will be killed, and the submissive ones will be enslaved."

Talia lowered her head. She knew that he was right, but still... "So, what do you expect me to do? To hide while my friends risk their lives to fight off the bad guys?"

"Not to hide.", Damon responded. "But I don't want you on the front lines either. I know that you think I'm exaggerating. And I probably am. Not everyone will be out to kill you, but they will want to capture you, manipulate you, to make you submit. Imagine that a rogue gets his hands on you. Will Keith dare to jump on him if the rogue is holding you by the neck?"

Talia shook her head, silently admitting that he won't.

Damon didn't want to push it, but he wanted her to understand the gravity of the situation. She was a Luna now, the Luna of the largest pack in North America, and there was also the point of Talia being the Alpha of the Midnight Guardians pack, and she needed to stop acting like her existence was not important.

"You are a kind person, Talia", Damon said, and Talia knew this was serious because he used her name this time. "You value life, but don't assume that others are the same. Some people out there will kill for the slightest provocation without blinking. They use and abuse others and don't even bother to justify it."

Talia's chin shook as Damon sent her mental images of a scene in the forest. She was being restricted by a muscular rogue, and a few more guys stood there and held wolfsbane-laced weapons. Keith, Liam, Pierce, Caleb, and Sandy were forced to kneel and to submit under the threats of the rogues because if they refused, the rogues would harm Talia.

"I know you have powers.", Damon said. "But if your guards have knives under their throats, will you dare to act? Can you take out all the bad guys without harming your friends? Can you guess what will happen next?", Damon continued probing. "You are important, so they will take you away without caring what's going to happen to you as long as they get paid. In their eyes, your guards are useless, and the rogues won't hesitate to dispose of them. Keith and the guys won't fight back because the big guy will harm you if they retaliate. By stepping forward recklessly, you WILL put them in danger."

Damon raised his hands and wiped the tears from her cheeks, wet pearls that were trickling down silently and wetting the bedsheets which covered them from the waist down as they sat facing each other.

"Sorry, kitten. I had to do this so that you understand. You are a queen now. For the Dark Howlers pack, you are the most important player, the most powerful one, and you shouldn't move unless absolutely necessary."

Talia blinked. "Are you using a chess analogy?" She never played the game, but she read about it.

"The whole life is a game of chess, kitten. You are not a pawn. You are a queen. My queen. I want you to stand tall and protect yourself and me, and let your guards do their job because if we fall, it's game over."

Talia almost smiled at Damon's words, but her expression froze when she saw that he was serious as he continued.

"There is another thing... I will treat you as my equal. In front of our people, we need to be united, and if you don't agree with my decision, tell me in private. Last night, I told your guards not to party, and you contradicted me."

Talia remembered it, and she didn't think it was a big deal. "You didn't order them. You only asked if they have the luxury of time to party."

"It was obvious that I didn't approve of them going to the Shifters. They got it, you got it, everyone got it, yet you still stepped forward and told them to go ahead with it."

Talia bit her lower lip. He was right. She didn't mean to undermine Damon's authority, she only wanted her friends to have fun, but she ended up talking over Damon.

For an outsider, she probably looked shallow, boasting how she had Damon wrapped around her finger. Damon was wise enough not to start an argument in front of others, but for them, he looked like he was too love-stricken to contradict her.

Talia felt irritation and helplessness bubbling inside her. Why did being Damon's mate come with so many rules and restrictions? Will her life from now going to be about watching her words and expressions? How can she enjoy it like that?

Talia looked at Damon who patiently waited for her to speak and Talia steeled her resolve. She will learn. If Damon could take over the pack at the age of seventeen and not only survive and protect it but make it better, she can definitely learn how to be a good Luna. Besides, she was not alone; she had friends and she had Damon, and she needed to clarify, "I'm sorry. It was not my intention to challenge your authority, I was just speaking my mind."

"And that's fine. You have a beautiful mind. I love your mind, kitten. Remember, you are an Alpha also. Your wolf and your spirit match mine and you have every right to challenge me, and I will do the same to you. However, our disagreements will be handled in private."

Talia nodded at Damon's words, and he had to add, "If you didn't say anything last night while we were outside, Sandy and the guys would go home. Once you convinced me that I was too strict, I would mind-link them that they can party as long as they do it in moderation. They would get their party, and not think of me as a henpecked husband."

"I didn't..."

"I know.", Damon cut her off. "But this is more than just my bruised ego. Right now, all Alphas are keeping their eyes on me. I can't trust that any of them would stick his neck out to save mine."

"What about Max?"

"I consider Max to be my friend, but if he needs to pick between siding with me and watching over his pack, I'm not confident he will have my back. The reality is that not every situation is black or white. Most of the life is shades of gray and we need to pick an option that minimizes our losses without the possibility where we can save everyone." Damon released a long breath. He didn't want to sound like a paranoid person who didn't trust anyone.

Chapter 628 The gravity of being a Luna (3)

Damon touched Talia's chin, making her look at him, and he spoke, "My point about everyone watching me was that now people know I have a Luna and they will be watching you. I don't want to think what they will try once the word spreads how much influence you have over me. Some will try to befriend you, some to manipulate you, and if they get a hint of how powerful you are..." Damon couldn't finish. Would they kill her? That would be an easy way out compared to the torture they might put her through in order to understand the secret behind her abilities and to force her to work for them. And he didn't even want to think about the breeding nonsense that was making his blood boil.

"I'm not saying that you should be silent. I'm not saying that you should hide. But I'm begging you to stay safe.", Damon said to Talia with all the sincerity in the world. "It doesn't matter how much you value your life, but I need you to understand that for me, and for our pack, you are indispensable. If anything happens to you, we will all perish."

Talia's expression was so dejected that Damon couldn't scold her anymore. "It's OK, kitten. You will learn."

"I don't have the time to learn.", she said. "I am already a Luna and I need to do things right."

"That's OK, kitten. Don't stress over it. You are doing great already.", he assured her.

Talia shook her head. How can he do great if just last night she did two things worth getting reprimanded for?

"Can we come up with some way of communication where you will let me know on the spot when I make a mistake?"

Damon was amused that she forgot about their private mind-link. It only showed how flustered she was by this situation, and he found her cute and worth teasing.

Damon pursed his lips while thinking. "I can spank you.", he said with a straight face.

Talia rolled her eyes. "I was serious."

"So was I."

"You can't spank me in front of others."

"But you can walk over me in public?", Damon fired back.

"Of course not. Just how it's not appropriate for me to challenge you in public, it's not appropriate for you to spank me in public."

Damon's lips lifted into a smile. "That sounded like I can do it in private."

Talia's eyes widened. Why did he look like a hungry wolf who cornered a sheep? Was she a sheep?

"Tell me, kitten", Damon spoke, his voice lowered by an octave, sending tingles straight to her core.
"Can I spank you?"

"You know you can. In private."

"I can?"

Talia bit her lower lip as graphic images of Damon taking her from behind flashed in his mind. She had pink palm prints on her butt cheeks, and there was loud moaning, and Damon looked at Talia who was sitting on the bed and smiling at him coyly.

He yanked the cover away to expose both of their naked bodies completely, including his erection that was standing in attention.

"We have time until breakfast.", Damon said while inching toward her. "Let me make that wish a reality."

"What wish?", Talia squeaked. His proximity left her breathless.

"What you showed me. It looked like a wish." He pushed her on the bed with his body and hovered above her. "But first, I want you to promise me one thing."

"What?", Talia asked anxiously, even though she was ready to promise anything. Considering that his demand was postponing carnal pleasures, Talia guessed it was important.

"I want you to prioritize your safety, kitten. Keith and the guys are your guards for a reason. They are trained warriors who pledged their loyalty to you. Let them do their work. Promise me that you won't be reckless."

"I can do that. I promise.", Talia said right away.

Damon knew she meant it and he also knew that if her guards were at risk, she would plunge into that fight without a second thought.

"I want you to think about me every time you are in danger.", Damon continued. "If anything happens to you, I will kill your guards. And if anything serious happens to you, it will kill me." He saw that Talia's expression fell. "It's not pleasant to think I will die, isn't it?", he asked. "I feel the same about you, kitten. Be safe. For me. OK?"

Talia nodded earnestly.

He leaned lower to kiss her lips, and then his kisses traveled down her chin, over her jaw, along her neck... and reached the spot where his mark was still looking like an elaborate hickey. He will definitely need to bite her again.

Damon licked his mark and sucked on it gently as Talia shivered below him, her body coiled in the rhythm of his tongue on her flesh.

"Good girl. Now turn around and let me see my ass. I hear that it needs some spanking."

Talia's arousal swelled within a second and she swiftly moved to lay on her stomach, hoping that Damon won't come up with more stories and demands for promises that would delay their morning fun.

Damon took his time adjusting her hips and pulling her backward until she was on her knees, her two white half-moons up in the air with the perfect pink flesh below that was glistening with her arousal. The image was erotic beyond belief.

With his index finger, Damon traced the curve of her spine, going lower right in the middle between her butt cheeks.

Talia jolted when his finger paused on her puckered hole, applying slight pressure while rotating without going in, and she gasped as unknown tingles increased her arousal. What was that?

"Soon, kitten...", Damon murmured, hunger evident in his voice. "Soon, I will claim your every cavity."

Before Talia could process the meaning behind his words, Damon continued tracing the pinkish path that led him to the treasure cove which called for him.

Talia moaned softly when his fingers found their way between her drenched folds.

"You know, kitten...", Damon said, and she felt the loss of his touch when he pulled his hand away. "You were a bad girl, and I shouldn't give you what you want."

Talia was alerted. What did that mean? She craned her neck so that she can see him. "What?"

Damon was on his knees, behind Talia, visually inspecting her bare ass, and that raging hard-on was impossible to miss.

"You should be aware of your position, and how important you are.", he said. "How should I punish you?"

Talia wiggled her hips. "Can we talk later?"

"How about we talk now?"

Talia exhaled in frustration. She didn't want to play games. She wanted to feel his majestic cock stretching her insides! "What do you want me to say?"

"Tell me that you are sorry and that it won't happen again."

"I am sorry, and it won't happen again.", she said with urgency.

Damon put his hand back at the cradle of her thighs and caressed her clit. "What won't happen again?"

"I won't..." She moaned. "Undermine you... in front of others."

"And?"

"I won't be..." Talia moaned again. "Reckless. Ahh!" She shrieked when he entered her in one mighty thrust without any warning.

"Tell me again, kitten.", Damon said while gripping her hips to hold her in place.

"I wo..." She gasped when he rocked into her, but the moment she stopped talking, he stopped moving. Talia groaned in frustration, and she tried to move against him, but his grip cemented them together.

Talia tightened her kegel muscles, clenching his cock in rhythmical pulses.

Damon's breath hitched and he released a barely audible sigh. Seductress!

Damon took a moment to compose himself. He will NOT give in. Not this time. This was about control and he was in control, damn it!

He leaned over her and reached to pinch her nipple.

"Ahh...", Talia moaned, irritated that he could prevent her from moving with just one hand on her hip.

"Talk to me, kitten.", he insisted, and she could hear that he was smiling. "If you don't tell me, I won't let you come."

Talia was alerted. Will he really rob her of her orgasm? That was pure evil!

But he was inside her, and around her, and she really wanted him to plunder her insides.

Talia inhaled a shaky breath. "I... won't..."

He resumed rocking into her.

"I... mmm... reckless... ahh..."

Damon enjoyed her struggle. Was this punishment enough? It was a start.

Chapter 629 Ready to go

Talia and Damon came down for breakfast, and they found at the table Maya, Caden, Dawn, George, Zina, James, Cornelia, as well as three of Talia's guards that came to the packhouse with backpacks, ready to depart on their mission or accompanying their Luna: Keith, Liam, and Sandy.

Mindy and Gideon were in their new home, enjoying the privacy. They announced last night that they probably won't be coming out for a few days, unless absolutely necessary. Gideon said that they will be settling in their new home and preparing the garden, but everyone knew that the only garden he will be tending to was between Mindy's legs.

Talia was happy for her friend. Mindy was glowing.

Even without the Shaman and the dildo-gifting woman, Damon found that the dining table was crowded. For years, it was just him with Maya, Caden, and occasionally Stephanie would join, and this was definitely different. Was it a good different or a bad different? Damon was not sure, but he knew that these changes were because of Talia. Like a real Luna, she was attracting people and she did that even before she found out that she was Damon's mate. Talia was natural.

After wishing everyone in the dining room good morning, Damon held a chair for Talia to sit on, and then he got busy with putting food on her plate.

Talia couldn't stop her lips from lifting into a smile whenever Damon's obsession with feeding her sparked. By now, Talia knew that every male werewolf had a need to provide for his mate (food included), but for her, it had another meaning. Talia was starving during her time in the Red Moon pack, when the food was limited while she was a child, and it became scarcer while she hid in the attic. Having a full stomach was rare, and since coming here, Damon was making sure she never goes hungry again.

Now that she thought about it, Talia chided herself for dismissing the signs. From day one, Damon was treating her as his mate, and if not for her insecurities, she would be able to see it.

Damon was putting bacon on Talia's plate and his movements halted when he noticed Talia staring at him. He shot her a side glance and his smile reflected in his eyes. "What?", he asked.

Talia was not sure how to respond, so she opened her emotions so he can feel all the love she had for him.

Damon bobbed his head happily and then he leaned to put a soft kiss on her lips.

"I love you too.", he said and then he continued putting food on her plate.

Talia's cheeks reddened when she realized that Damon confessed his love, and they were sitting at the table full of people. Did others hear that? Probably.

She admired that Damon didn't shrink in front of their audience. He was totally focused on her, and not caring for his Alpha image. Wasn't he the sweetest?

Talia remembered that she had a task, and she turned to talk to Cornelia.

"We will go the Midnight Guardians pack."

"When?", Cornelia asked.

"After breakfast.", Talia responded. "We are not sure how long we will stay in the Midnight Guardians pack, but unless something unexpected happens, we will go to the Silver Flame Coven next. We were wondering if you want to come with us or maybe prepare a message for Evanora."

James saw Cornelia's expression changing and his stomach tightened. Why did it take so long to respond? It should be a simple yes or no. Why was she avoiding to look at him? He knew that expression. She was thinking of going without him!

James had no intention of letting Cornelia out of his touching distance.

He reached to hold her hand and gave her a squeeze to get her attention.

"We can go if you wish.", James said to Cornelia. Actually, he knew that she wanted to go home, and he was curious about the place from where she came. Also, the time difference was awesome to extend their time together without the influence of his father.

Seeing that Cornelia only blinked at him, James turned to Talia and Damon. "We will be ready in half an hour."

Damon's brows furrowed. "Are you sure you can come?"

James didn't expect this. He feared that Cornelia will refuse him, and not Damon. "Why not?"

"How long will you be away? What if Alpha Edward asks for your presence?" It was George who said this.

James thought for a second before responding. "You can give him daily reports. Tell him that I went with a group of warriors to train in the mountains for a few days and I will be off-grid. In case any emergency happens, there should be a way for you to contact me." James looked at Damon. "You have a way to contact the Midnight Guardians pack, right? Your Betas can reach you."

"Riiiiight.", Damon drawled. "But my concern was something else." Damon glanced at Talia before adding, "The location of the Midnight Guardians pack is a secret. I'm not sure if you can go."

James pointed at Talia. "Alpha of the Midnight Guardians pack is right here. She can approve my request to go there. And besides, we are too deep in each other's secrets to nitpick about things like the location of a portal. Do you think I will tell my father about it and bring the army to occupy Talia's pack? You should know how that move would bring my father closer to Cora's home, and I would never put her in danger!"

Damon raised his hands, palms toward James, indicating for him to calm down. "I was not doubting you. However, what if Alpha Edward uses his aura to make you submit and spill the truth?"

"He won't.", James said with confidence. "For your peace of mind, I will accept to be blindfolded so I don't know where the portal is. My father won't waste his aura on me. He has no idea what I'm capable of. I will tell him that I was having fun with friends in the evening, and he will flip. He might smack me a few times, but I am used to it."

Cornelia was alerted by the possibility of James being questioned and beaten. Her heart tightened. "Are you sure you want to come? It will be better if you stay here."

James frowned. Why was everyone discouraging him from going?

James spoke to Cora. "It seems you decided to head back without me. I know you have doubts because I don't feel the bond fully, but how can I prove myself if you leave me behind? I have at least a few days before I need to return to the Red Moon pack, and I'm determined to spend them with you. If you are going, so will I."

"What will happen after those few days?", Cornelia asked.

"We will think about it then. Things are changing quickly. I thought that after breakfast I will take you to the amusement park, yet here we are, about to pack our things and head to another realm. How I see it, a few days is waaaaay too far away into the future.", James spoke quickly and before Cornelia could object, he stuffed a piece of sausage in her mouth. There, he fed his mate. And he will also stick to her until she loses the last shred of her reluctance to be with him.

Chapter 630 Back in the Midnight Guardians pack (1)

~ The Midnight Guardians pack ~

Axel got a message through the mind-link that Alpha is back with six other people, and Axel rushed from his office to welcome them.

He found at the main entrance Damon, Talia, James, Cornelia, and three new faces (Keith, Sandy, and Liam).

Meg was there already instructing Omegas where to take the suitcases.

Axel was surprised to see that Talia came with so many people. James and Cornelia were familiar faces, as Axel saw them in the Lightclaw pack, but he didn't know who Keith, Liam, and Sandy were. Talia was quick to introduce them as her guards.

"Why didn't you say that you are coming?", Axel asked Talia and pulled her into his embrace while ignoring Damon's low growls of warning.

Talia patted Axel's back. "If I told you we are coming, you would make a fuss about it. Besides, didn't you say that this is my home? Do I need to announce my arrival?"

Axel puffed his cheeks in frustration. "I wouldn't make a fuss, but we would at least prepare some snacks and I would make sure everyone important is here."

Talia glanced behind Axel who was now shaking hands with Damon, to see Yasmin and Kai coming down the stairs.

Cornelia swiftly moved toward Yasmin, and the two witches hugged and started talking at the same time excitedly. For Cornelia, it was a few days since she saw Yasmin, but for Yasmin, it was months without seeing a fellow witch. It was good to see a familiar face.

Talia noticed that one person was missing. "Where is Tyler?"

"Tyler is on his shift to guard the portal toward the witches' realm.", Kai responded. "He will be back in time for dinner."

"I hope there are no incidents there.", Talia said and looked at Axel curiously.

"No incidents.", Axel confirmed. "We were busy here and we didn't get a chance to visit, but now that you came, we can go together."

He didn't want to say that he was nervous about meeting Evanora without Talia. What if Evanora doesn't approve that he knocked up Yasmin so quickly? Or what if Evanora wants to keep Yasmin there? Axel needed Talia as assurance that things will go well.

Meg got an idea. Since their Alpha was back, they could do something extra. "We should organize a welcoming dinner, something better than the cafeteria."

"Please, don't do anything extra for us.", Talia urged them. "I am fine with the cafeteria and everyone else is curious to see how things are done here."

Meg refused. "How can that be? People will be delighted that you are back."

Yasmin interjected. "However, it's already mid-afternoon, and if we try to organize a feast, it will be rushed. Let's have a regular meal today and announce a feast for tomorrow. Like that, we will have time to prepare a proper welcome."

Kai was on it. "For tonight, our warriors can go hunting."

Axel grinned. "Barbeque for everyone! We can make it lunchtime so that party continues until wee hours of the night..."

Meg ushered Damon, Talia, and others up the stairs. "Let me show you to your rooms. When you settle, we can all meet in the living area..."

Talia exhaled helplessly when she saw that Axel, Yasmin, and Kai were already planning the feast. They were visibly excited, and she couldn't stop them without being a party pooper.

...

Damon and Talia found themselves in a massive suite that had an entry and a sitting area. It was a corner room on the topmost floor with large windows on the left and in front that provided views of the forest. On the right, was a door that led to a bedroom, bathroom, and a walk-in closet.

The design was traditional, with upscale elegance that offered comfort.

Pastel blue patterned chairs and cushioned ottomans were in the sitting area around a long coffee table. There was a fireplace, a fluffy carpet, and antique-looking paintings and statues.

It should be warm and inviting, yet Talia walked around the furniture like it was dirty even though everything smelled fresh. The room was cleaned thoroughly and recently. Talia guessed that Omegas maintained it regularly, even in Talia's absence.

She couldn't stop her mind from wandering to the past and things that might have been.

Was this where her mother was sitting and caressing her belly while Talia was inside? Were her parents happy to have a child before they found out about the prophecy? Is this where Alpha Isaac and Alpha Sophia discussed giving Talia away? Were they sad to give her away? If she grew up in this pack, would she spill juice on that coffee table? Or would she play on that carpet?

So many possibilities and things that didn't happen filled this space, and Talia found it suffocating.

From the moment they stepped into the suite, Damon could see that this was an important area, worthy of the Alpha family.

Damon observed the paintings that hung on the walls, landscapes and animals mostly. He noticed a faint rectangle-shaped outline on the wall above the fireplace, where wooden art décor was hanging now. It was obvious that a big painting was there previously, for a long time; Damon guessed that it might be a family portrait of some kind and Axel removed it in order not to upset Talia.

Damon turned to Talia when he noticed that her emotions became unstable. He had an idea of what caused it and he knew that it won't be good to ignore the elephant in the room.

"Is this where Alpha Sophia and Alpha Isaac lived before you took away their Alpha positions?", he asked.

"I believe so.", Talia responded. Axel said that he will let her use the main bedroom.

"Where are they now?", Damon asked.

"I'm not sure. The last thing I knew, they were in the main house."

Damon peeked into the bedroom and then dashed into it.

"Come!", Damon called, and Talia followed to find him sprawled on the king-sized bed that had a floral cover.

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

Talia hesitated. "I don't think we should use this." She released a long breath. "I want to talk to Axel and tell him that he should take over the position of the Alpha of the Midnight Guardians pack." Talia felt that it was the right thing to do, yet her heart was aching.

Damon turned to the side and propped his head on his elbow. "Do you hate it that much?"

"This is not about me hating or not. It's about what people need and about what's practical.", she responded and Damon raised his hands, indicating that he won't meddle.

"No matter what you decide, kitten, I will support you."

Talia nodded gratefully.

Talia thought about this many times, and the conclusion was always the same.

No matter how Talia felt about it, the reality was that she wanted to be with Damon, in the Dark Howlers pack, and she never heard of an Alpha working remotely. Would she be able to think about the Midnight Guardians pack while being Damon's Luna?

On this side, Axel already knew people, and he knew the work, and it shouldn't be a big deal to let him take over everything, officially.

Chapter 631 Back in the Midnight Guardians pack (2)

Damon and Talia came to the living room, and they found Yasmin there with Meg.

"Is the room to your liking?", Meg asked. "If you need anything, let us know."

"It's wonderful.", Talia responded.

"Don't treat her like a guest.", Yasmin reminded Meg. "This is her house."

"I don't treat her like a guest.", Meg snapped back. "I treat her like Alpha. Since Talia was not here for a while, I don't want her to feel awkward."

Talia smiled at this banter between Yasmin and Meg. It showed that they are getting along well.

"Where is Axel?", Talia asked. She wanted to talk about giving him the Alpha position.

"He is dealing with some urgent matters. Axel will join us soon.", Yasmin responded and gestured toward several plates on the low table that had snacks on them. "Please, help yourself. I hope you can feel at home and I don't need to urge you to eat. I can show you where the kitchen is and other amenities."

Talia smiled at Yasmin who was acting as a wonderful Luna. "We can do the tour later when others join us."

Damon and Talia sat on the sofa, and Damon was quick to start picking snacks and feeding Talia.

Talia wondered when would be a good time to give baby-related presents to Yasmin, and then James and Cornelia entered.

Yasmin was also busy putting snacks on her plate.

"Do you have any food restrictions because of pregnancy?", Cornelia asked Yasmin, and then she looked at James who had a palm-sized plate in his hand, filling it with snacks from the table, and Cornelia knew that was for her. Silly werewolf.

Yasmin rubbed her perfectly flat belly. "They are doing fine. I can eat whatever I want."

Talia paused. While getting pregnancy-related information from Doctor Travis, he told her a few things. Pregnancy for werewolves lasts five months, even when the female is human. Considering that Talia discovered Yasmin's pregnancy three days ago in the human realm, shouldn't that be three months for Yasmin? Yasmin should be more than halfway along, so... why didn't she have a big belly? Or was it different for witches?

"Did you see a doctor?", Talia asked Yasmin.

"Healers are checking on me every few days.", Yasmin responded with a smile, and she noticed Talia's puzzled expression. "Is something the matter?"

Talia cursed internally for allowing her confusion to show. Doctor Travis said that pregnant women are emotional and they should avoid stress. Wouldn't hinting that something was wrong, be stressful for Yasmin? But Yasmin was already looking at her, so she couldn't brush it off.

"I was just wondering, how far along you are."

Yasmin was not sure how to respond to this. She caressed her belly. "The healers said that everything is fine with my babies, and they are growing well."

Talia facepalmed. How did she forget that they don't have ultrasound machines here? In order to avoid more confusion, Talia decided to explain, "The time here passes thirty times faster than in the human realm. Considering that three days passed for us, that would be at least three months into your pregnancy. You are carrying twins so your belly should show. That's all."

Yasmin never gave much thought related to the time difference between realms, but... "Are you saying that my babies are growing slower than they should?"

Cornelia spoke, "Maybe the time passes thirty times the speed, but the energies here are not matching it."

"What does that mean?", James asked. Did that mean he had less time with Cornelia than he thought?

"Energies make everything move. They affect the flow of a river, the strength of the wind, the speed at which we age, as well as our perception of time.", Cornelia started explaining. "The flow of energies here is almost the same as in my realm, but it's not thirty times faster than in the realm of humans."

Everyone was processing this in silence, and James summarized, "You are saying that even though the day and night here pass thirty times faster compared to the human's realm, creatures are not aging at the same rate."

"Correct.", Cornelia confirmed. "Time is relative. Think of it as a movement. The faster we move, the slower we age. In theory, if we could move at the speed of light, we would stop aging." Cornelia smirked, obviously proud of herself. "I read that on the internet."

She spent hours cooped up in the room with a tablet in her hand, researching history, humans, and anything else she found there.

Several books in the library of the Silver Flame Coven describe humans as creatures without any specific abilities. However, from the information she found online, Cornelia realized that humans are perceptive, curious, and ingenious.

Humans can't feel the energies, how witches can, but they see the things happening around them and they developed technology that helps them accomplish things they couldn't with their bodies. In a way, Cornelia was fascinated by humans, and she hoped for a chance to find out more about them.

"Wait, wait", Talia said. "You are saying that even though three months passed, Yasmin is not three months pregnant?" It didn't make sense.

"If she is in the human realm, it would be three months into her pregnancy.", Cornelia said. "But Yasmin spent that time here, where energies flow differently, and you can't apply your measure of time to this realm."

"You seem disappointed.", Damon said to Talia.

Was she disappointed? "I'm just trying to wrap my head around this information."

"Maybe the creator didn't intend for us to pass through portals and spend time in different realms.", Yasmin said.

"Or maybe he did.", Cornelia chimed in. "Every realm has its advantages."

Damon frowned at this. "This validates that we need to be cautious when revealing to the world existence of other realms. For us, the difference in time and aging doesn't mean much, but short-lived humans would definitely not stay in their realm if they can come here and extend their lifespans. With their technology and numbers, it would be a matter of time until they find the entrance to this place." He shook his head. "Imagine the fortune one would make if they can monopolize access to the portal and control who gets in or out."

Talia puffed her cheeks in frustration. Her wish was to get everyone together, but with every next step, she found more reasons to back down.

"I get it.", Talia said grumpily. "People are greedy and vicious, and they won't hold back from harming others in their quest for power. But..." Her expression stiffened. "Is that the reason for everyone else to suffer? Hundreds of members from the Midnight Guardians pack are withering here without their mates because they fear what awaits them on the other side of the portal. Don't tell me that everyone is evil. I'm confident that most of our pack members are not power-hungry villains. They want to find their mates, and live with their families, without looking over their shoulder if they will be hunted. That's not too much to ask. How can we make it happen?"

Talia noticed that Axel was standing at the door with a small smile of approval of Talia's words.

"That's easy.", James said, getting everyone's attention. "We live in a world where power rules. Do you want to change things? Get to the top. Be the most powerful one and suppress everyone who opposes you."

Chapter 633 Back in the Midnight Guardians pack (4)

"First of all...", Axel's voice trailed and he sucked in a sharp breath as he steeled his resolve to continue talking.

"It's embarrassing to admit, but the truth is that you are stronger than I am. Alpha is the strongest one in the pack for a reason. Other than leading our people, you are also representing our pack in front of others. One needs to earn that honor. If I accept being the Alpha while you are alive and kicking, I won't be able to look people in the eyes. That alone will make me unfit to be an Alpha."

"I don't see myself as stronger than you are, Axel. You can overpower me in a second, and even if I miraculously dodge your first attack, you will defeat me with a polished fighting technique."

Axel shook his head, rejecting Talia's arguments. "You should know that strength is not defined by how heavy a punch is. Just as you are aware that I can overpower you, I know that your abilities can't be measured. You are kind and determined, and you will go above and beyond to improve the livelihood of our people."

Talia was not willing to give up easily. "Why are you making a big deal out of it? How is this different than Alpha Isaac stepping down so that you can take over?"

Axel cocked an eyebrow at Talia. "Father would step down because he is tired and because he believes I'm ready, and that means I am stronger than he is. My wolf won't allow me to challenge you, and that means you are better than I am because my wolf is always eager to fight, but he is not stupid to start something he can't win. Your existence is enough to make me unfit to lead."

Talia was not sure how to respond to this. She knew that Alphas were proud creatures who thrived when their people admired them but what was that about his wolf not allowing him to challenge her? There was no need for a challenge when she would step down on her own.

"You said that was the first thing. What's the second one?"

"Let's assume you abdicate, and I become the Alpha. If our pack is in danger, will you sit aside and watch?", Axel asked.

"No.", Talia responded right away.

Axel smirked. "You can't see our pack members suffer, and you will not only help, but you will also do whatever is necessary to protect our people. That's an Alpha."

"I will help anyone who is in trouble.", Talia tried to reason with him.

"It's not the same, Talia. Because these are our people, we share the bond, and you can feel their emotions. I can assure you that even though you have a good heart, you will treat the needs of the Midnight Guardians pack with urgency."

Talia puffed her cheeks in frustration. Why did he have reasonable counterarguments ready? "And? Is there a third thing? A fourth one? Or more?"

Axel reached to hold Talia's hand. "Just one more." He clasped her hand between his and instructed, "Close your eyes, Talia. Open your mind and soul to the pack and tell me what you feel."

Talia closed her eyes and did as instructed.

A few seconds later, Talia was looking at Axel.

"They are happy.", she said.

"Do you know why?"

"Because of the feast.", Talia responded.

Axel shook his head. "They are excited about the feast, but it's not about the food. They are happy because you are here. Our pack worships you. I know that you will say how you barely spent any time here as an Alpha, but you left a lasting impression. You connected with our people, understood what they want and need, and you are working to make it happen, and that's what a good Alpha does. Do you think I would be a better Alpha than you are? They see me as an extension of our parents while you... you are a fresh breeze that brings exciting changes. Previous Alphas believed they were keeping their pack safe, but they created this cage that was beautiful and suffocating. I can assure you that without you as the Alpha, our people will lose hope, and that will make them suffer."

He gave her hand a squeeze. "You feel the bond with the pack, right? The thought of abandoning our people is hurting you and they will be hurt if you go through with it. They believe in you, and you should believe in yourself because I know you can do it."

Axel smirked, feeling that Talia gave up on the idea to step down. "Don't worry about the workload. I will be your proxy, and with Yasmin, Kai, Meg, and Tyler, we won't disturb you unless it's necessary. We can schedule to meet occasionally where we will discuss current issues and plans for the future. We can create instant transportation points between us and the Dark Howlers pack. That will allow our members to mingle, and you can come here in an instant. Of course, we will be visiting as well."

Talia narrowed her eyes at Axel. "You were preparing for this, didn't you?"

Axel chuckled. He had a lot of time to think about things, and also... "If I didn't see this coming, I wouldn't be worthy of being your proxy, Alpha Talia.", Axel said smugly. "Meg told us about what happened at the Council of the Alphas. I hear that you are the most powerful Alpha. I would be stupid to let you go without a fight."

Talia knew what he was talking about. It was about the glowing sphere and the Guardians, and that reminded her... "I want to look into existing records to see if there is a connection between our pack and the Guardians."

"That's not a problem." He stood up and walked to one of the desks and then he got something from the top drawer.

Talia wondered if he had that information handy already, but then Axel handed her a notebook.

Talia opened the first page, and she saw writings organized in bullet points. Names, timestamps, and descriptions.

Axel explained, "The Red Moon pack wants a meeting with the Alpha of the Midnight Guardians pack, and it seems they are eager to meet with you. Among several emails, Beta Raymond called twice, and Alpha Edward personally called once. They also asked for an address where they can send a package."

"A package?", Talia asked, confusion obvious on her face. What would Alpha Edward send her? A bomb?

Axel shrugged, indicating that he didn't know more than that. "Of course, I didn't give him an address. That's a human thing and it's not like we have a post office handy. I asked them what they want to send, but they said how that's for Alpha Talia to find out."

Talia frowned at this and continued reading things that were written while Axel spoke.

"You are invited to the party to celebrate the sixteenth birthday of young Alpha James."

Birthdays of high-ranking pack members were used as a way to strengthen existing and create new connections. She would be invited as Damon's Luna anyway. Will she go? James is a nice guy, and by then Dawn will be there also, so Talia could visit her to ensure that her friend was doing well. However, Alpha Edward made Talia's skin crawl and that packhouse was full of bad memories. What if she bumps into Anna (aka her personal Omega bully) and Anna recognizes her? Will Damon go?

There were too many things to consider and Talia decided to think about James' birthday later.

Talia turned the page of the notebook and paused. "Guardians?"

Chapter 634 Back in the Midnight Guardians pack (5)

Talia turned the page and paused. "Guardians?"

"Yes.", Axel said. "They also want to meet with you. A person introduced himself as Julian. He said he has information that might interest you."

Talia released a long breath. She wanted to know more about the Guardians, and she would love to meet with them. However, that was before they implied how powerful people would want to get their hands on her and that if she doesn't join them, she will be either corrupted or killed. And weren't the Guardians powerful? Also, they concealed their nature as magic users, and Talia didn't believe that she can join them and swear to neutrality. And there was a problem with her injecting with the memory-erasing potion. What if he remembered, or someone saw it? There could be security cameras they didn't notice. The more Talia thought about it, the more reasons not to meet with the Guardians piled up. What if it's a trap? They could use runes or other items to seal her abilities and she would be a lamb going for slaughter.

"Problem?", Axel's question pulled Talia out of her thoughts.

Talia didn't want to share the gruesome scenarios that her mind conjured, and she decided to stick to the facts. "They want me to join them."

Axel needed a moment to process this. Everyone thought about the Midnight Guardians pack as mysterious, but the even more mysterious were the Guardians.

The Guardians were practically invisible unless there was an important issue that required the involvement of the packs. Axel remembered his parents talking about Guardians with respect and a hint of fear, and that meant the Guardians were dangerous.

It was one thing to meet with them; Talia was a new Alpha of unknown origin, so it would be normal for Guardians to be curious, but to ask her to join them? That was unheard of.

Seeing Axel's confused expression, Talia confirmed. "After the Council of the Alphas was done, they asked me to stay behind. I told Meg that she can head home because Damon was accompanying me. At that time, they invited me to join them as a Guardian." Talia looked at Axel seriously. "They have powers, like witches. When we were in the room where the meeting was held, they used runes to suppress the Alpha aura."

"My advice is not to meet with them.", Axel said solemnly.

Talia gestured to the notebook. "They called twice. Ignoring Alpha Edward is one thing, but I fear that ignoring Guardians will come with consequences."

Axel didn't like this. "Every pack has its strengths. Are you saying that you will obey Guardians because they have abilities?"

Talia was not sure what to do about Guardians inviting her, and the thought of meeting Alpha Edward again was making her skin crawl. The Midnight Guardians pack was known as difficult to approach. Maybe she can use that and just ignore them.

Talia was glad that Damon was there. She will talk to him. It's not that she didn't trust Axel, but Damon came with knowledge and experience, and he was her home.

She decided to see if there was something else in that notebook.

One page after another was filled with information.

"What is this?", she asked.

"Alphas who want to meet with you.", Axel said, like it was obvious.

Well, it was obvious that people wanted to meet with her, but Talia was wondering if that was normal. She met those people at the Council of the Alphas. She was the youngest, and the only female Alpha, and these were not only messages from Alphas, but other high-ranking pack members also, and the WW Magazine.

Talia guessed that people who attended that meeting were curious about her, and they spread the news how the Midnight Guardians pack has a new Alpha but did she really leave such a good impression? Or were they calling her to trap her somehow? Or was this just curiosity and she was overthinking it?

Talia remembered Alphas who were leaving the Council of Alphas and she felt a headache coming. Who knew what was hidden behind those sickly smiles?

She pursed her lips when she saw that Alpha Richard from the Steelbite pack also wanted to meet with her. Can she secure another tribute?, Talia wondered. That was a possibility. Talia saw that his invitation

was for Talia to visit the Steelbite pack with her delegation and to stay in their packhouse. Will Cassie be there? Talia couldn't imagine Cassie's reaction if she recognizes Talia (aka Damon's date) as the Alpha. That would probably turn ugly quickly.

...

Kai and Meg were giving a tour of the place to Damon, Keith, Liam, and Sandy.

After going through the few common areas of the main building, they went to the garden and Kai was telling them how that was the place where Talia became the Alpha of the Midnight Guardians pack.

Kai and Meg were visibly excited as they don't get visitors often, and these people were associated with Talia, their Alpha, so Kai and Meg tried to leave the best impression.

Damon listened about the ceremony with great interest, and he felt sorry for missing it. His emotions changed into guilt and self-loathing when he realized how all that happened while he was under the influence of the dark magic, unaware of Talia as his mate. At that time, he thought of her as an enemy, someone who tried to seduce him and manipulate him, and the only thing she wanted to do was to help him. His shy kitten even accepted this Alpha position and she stood on her own in front of the crowd and went to a different realm and... he was not there to protect her and to provide support.

Damon wondered if he will ever be able to make it up to Talia. Well, it was not really making it up to her, because Talia obviously put all that behind them and she was happily planning for their future, but Damon couldn't forget how he mistreated her, and he wished to scrape those memories out of his mind so that he could breathe freely again.

He craved Talia's proximity, to press herself against him, look at him with her doe eyes colored with honey, and tell him that things are fine between them while allowing him to feel her love. Unfortunately, Talia went to the study with Axel, obviously wanting to talk to her brother in private and Damon forced himself not to go after them.

It was the first time that she asked him to stay behind, and he felt neglected.

Damon didn't approve. What did Talia want to say that Axel could hear and not Damon? Damon never left her behind. He wanted her to know everything he was up to.

Talia was his mate, but in this place, Talia was the Alpha and he needed to show her the respect she deserved.

Damon frowned. If Talia was the Alpha, as her mate, wasn't he the Luna of the Midnight Guardians pack?

Male Luna. That was unheard of!

He was not just any Mike or Joe. He was Alpha Damon Blake, the most powerful Alpha of their generation, yet now he wondered if anyone would be brazen enough to address him as Luna Damon. Whoever does that, will get a taste of Damon's fist.

Chapter 635 Back in the Midnight Guardians pack (6)

Sandy took the opportunity to ask Meg, "Where are the people?" Somehow, she expected a bustling scenery of desirable virgins, yet they didn't see a single werewolf other than their hosts and Omegas that were moving silently through the main building.

Where are the hot untouched guys!?

Meg missed the hint of lust in Sandy's words, and she responded innocently. "In this pack, most of the things are happening underground."

Meg also thought that living underground was strange when she arrived at the Midnight Guardians pack.

Sandy wondered if she heard Meg right, and Keith and Liam also perked up their ears to listen.

Werewolves were free spirits, craving open space without walls and restrictions, always looking up at the moon and the stars, and how can any of that be possible unless one was outside? Underground was only for storage and dungeons.

"Underground?", Sandy asked, obviously wanting more information.

Meg confirmed. "It's our way of living without disturbing nature. Think of it as a system of interconnected burrows. We have our personal quarters and common areas. Exits are made in such a way that you could pass by them and not notice unless you knew what you were looking for."

"Don't you feel suffocated?", Sandy asked.

Meg stifled a giggle. "I had the same concerns when I came here because I was imagining cramped dark caves. However, the inside is well-lit and spacious, and we can come out anytime to stretch our paws. When I run through the forest that doesn't have any marks of us living here, it's all worth it. You will see."

Sandy shook those thoughts away. Who cares if living underground was suffocating or not? It's not like she was going to live here. Her question was more related to... "So, where are the warriors?" The unmated ones. "You must have training grounds of some sort."

Sandy hoped that she sounded like a warrior who was eager to train and expand her horizons, and it was not like that was completely false. If she could spar with a half-naked muscular guy who never experienced pleasures of the flesh, that would be great.

Kai responded to Sandy, "If you think about training grounds how the Dark Howlers pack has, you will be disappointed. We are not a militaristic pack. The number of our warriors is small, as we mostly have scouts and people with other skills."

"You mean, people with abilities.", Keith chimed in and when he saw Kai and Meg giving him puzzled looks, Keith quickly said, "Luna Talia told us how special this pack is."

Meg's expression stiffened. "It's ALPHA Talia. It would be good if you remember that. Or are you always so disrespectful?"

Keith stared at Meg awkwardly, unsure how to respond. Why was Meg hostile? And why did she accuse him of disrespecting Talia?

Sandy tried to smoothen out the situation before it escalated. "Keith was not disrespectful on purpose. It's just that we all met Talia before she was Luna, and her Alpha position is new for us. It takes time to form a habit of calling her with the right title."

Meg didn't see that as an excuse. It was the same for them. When Meg met Talia, Talia was a girl without any status, staying in the packhouse of the Dark Howlers pack; Talia didn't even call herself Damon's girlfriend.

"If anyone overheard you, her own guard, talking about Alpha Talia casually, they won't inquire about your circumstances. Instead, they will assume that she is a pushover.", Meg said sternly. "People close to Alpha Talia need to set an example for others. If you need to get used to addressing her with the right title, I suggest you practice in private before you meet others and make irreparable damage."

"Of course. I apologize.", Keith said, his apology more directed at Talia than at Meg.

Damon observed this from the side, and he approved. Meg was a good Beta. They will keep her.

...

In one of the guestrooms, Yasmin and Cornelia were talking and James was with them.

James was invited on a tour of the area by Meg and Kai, and he knew that Cornelia wanted to talk to Yasmin, but James was uncomfortable separating from Cornelia. What if Yasmin says something that will encourage Cornelia to leave him behind?

He was happy that Cornelia didn't chase him away and she didn't object when he pushed his chair close to Cornelia's and held her hand.

Cornelia was telling Yasmin how werewolves live side-by-side with humans while concealing their true nature, about different lifespans, and how they should research the time difference between realms. Among all that, Cornelia noticed that Yasmin was throwing glances at James occasionally.

Cornelia assumed that Yasmin was wary of James.

"It's OK", Cornelia said. "You can talk in front of him." She told James a lot about witches anyway and she doubted that Yasmin will reveal anything new.

Yasmin cocked an eyebrow suspiciously. She knew that James and Cornelia were soulmates because they met at the Lightclaw pack when Tony took over the Alpha role from his father. But Yasmin also knew that James couldn't feel the bond because of his age, and Cornelia obviously didn't have the mark on her neck.

"Can you tell me what's the status between the two of you?", Yasmin asked.

"What?", Cornelia squeaked. She thought that Yasmin will ask something about humans or about the Dark Howlers pack, and not about her and James!

Yasmin's lips lifted into a mischievous smile at the sight of flustered Cornelia. "I can see that you are not marked. Did you have sex?"

Cornelia's eyes were open so wide that they nearly popped out of their sockets.

Seeing that Cornelia was on the verge of fainting, James responded.

"With all due respect, you shouldn't concern yourself with our private matters."

Yasmin stifled a giggle. "I will take that as a no." She turned to Cornelia. "How long will you torture the youngster? Just give in. As a werewolf, he is gifted down there and has good stamina. I can tell you from my experience that sex with a man is fantastic."

James was never so conflicted! He wanted to scold Yasmin for being so forward with Cornelia, but he also wanted to give her a hug for the same reason. Will Cornelia run away, or maybe open up to him?

"James", Cornelia called stiffly. "Can you let me talk to Yasmin in private?"

James wanted to refuse, but how can he? "Sure, love.", he said, kissed her cheek, and walked out.

"What's your problem!?", Cornelia hissed at Yasmin the moment the door closed behind James. Yasmin was always mischievous, but this was completely rude! How much did these few months with werewolves spoil Yasmin?

"I don't have a problem. But you do.", Yasmin responded.

Yasmin was unphased but he silent threats behind Cornelia's glare. In their Coven, Cornelia is a respected priestess, second only to the high priestess Evanora, but Yasmin was always the baby no one would dare to touch. On top of that, they were not in the Silver Flame Coven, this was the Midnight Guardians pack, and Yasmin was the Luna. Yasmin felt that she had an advantage.

Cornelia was aware that an argument with Yasmin can easily escalate into something unpleasant, but how can she let the young witch do whatever she wants?

Chapter 632 Back in the Midnight Guardians pack (3)

Talia made a face. That was James' solution?

He wanted Talia to become power-hungry and to suppress everyone who opposes her? Should she become a monster in order to fight other monsters?

At this time, Keith, Sandy, and Liam entered the living room, to see that James raised his hand, palm toward Talia, indicating to her that she should be patient and hear him out.

The newly arrived trio wondered what they missed because this seemed important. Meg waved at them to come and get some snacks.

"I know what you are going to say." James smiled at Talia meaningfully. "Do you think I would speak those words if I don't believe you can do it? This is not about you doing everything on your own. Start by looking at yourself and then look around you. You are the Alpha of the Midnight Guardians pack. I saw you healing your guard and dispelling dark magic in a mystical ritual that caused a tornado. On top of that, you lived right under my father's nose, and it's not that he didn't realize you are an Alpha, but he was not aware of you presence at all. I can see that you don't think much about yourself, however, you

can't deny that you are the catalyst of many changes in our society. People gather around you and want to follow you out of their own will, and that speaks about you as a natural leader."

James gestured toward Damon while continuing to talk to Talia, "Your mate is the strongest Alpha of the current generation. Look at people you call friends and see how many of them are Alphas, high-ranking members, exceptional warriors, and let's not forget the witches." His arm tightened around Cornelia's waist. "On top of all that, you have the most brilliant mind to help you." James cockily pointed at himself. "It won't be straightforward, but if there is a way, we will find it and we will succeed without spilling unnecessary blood."

Talia's eyebrows were so high that they nearly reached her hairline. "You will help?"

"Of course.", James confirmed. "I am personally vested because I want to live with my mate in any of our realms without worry that someone will try to snatch Cora from me because she is beautiful, smart, magical, and perfect in every way possible."

Cornelia was visibly flustered, and she was confident that James could hear the way her heart thundered wildly against her ribcage.

That was not the first compliment James gave her, but now it was in front of people, and she didn't know how to respond. Should she thank him? Hug him? Kiss him? Or pretend like everything was normal?

James smirked in satisfaction when Cornelia leaned on him and he extended his hand toward Talia, waiting for a handshake.

"What do you say, Alpha Talia? Will you accept me as your ally in weeding out the power-hungry individuals who are threatening our peace so that everyone can enjoy with their mates?"

Without a delay, Talia put her hand in James' and gave it a shake, formally sealing the alliance.

James already had a few ideas. "When we go to the Silver Flame Coven, we should discuss this with the high priestess. I don't recommend that witches join us openly and expose themselves this early in the

process but they could definitely provide insights and magical tools that can give us an edge..." Cornelia told him about scrolls and items imbued with magic that non-witches can use.

James was confident in his fighting abilities, and not many things scared him. However, it was undeniable that he was helpless in the face of the Alpha aura, and it would be fantastic if Cornelia could help him get his hands on an item that will make him immune to such things. He would love to stand tall when his father tries to punish him and show how he can't be controlled. Soon.

Damon looked at Talia with sparkles in his eyes. Talia's genuine surprise was cute, but her most impressive feature was that she was not aware of how amazing she was.

Even before Damon became the Alpha of the Dark Howlers pack, numerous eyes were on him, waiting for the opportunity to strike and take him down, and now that he revealed Talia was his fated mate, the amount of dangers increased several folds. Damon was painfully aware that he will need a good strategist, and he was trying to come up with a solid plan to reel in James to his side, yet Talia got James to volunteer his services; just like that. And the best part was that it all sounded like it was James' idea.

Damon realized that none of this would happen without Talia. They wouldn't be here, because the Midnight Guardians pack doesn't welcome outsiders. They wouldn't be aware of witches without Talia opening the portal, and that meant that James wouldn't find his mate, nor become their ally.

...

Before dinner, per Talia's request, Axel and Talia went to the study.

They entered the study that Alpha Isaac and Alpha Sophia used. It was spacious to accommodate a sitting area and two massive desks.

Talia sat on the sofa and Axel realized that Talia didn't consider this study as her own. Well, she never used it, and since Talia was absent, Axel claimed one of the desks, and the other one was used sporadically by Yasmin, Meg, Kai, and Tyler.

Axel scratched the back of his head awkwardly.

"We should talk about this office. Do you want us to share an office, or should I arrange a separate space for you?" He paused when he realized how that was not right. "Actually, you should keep this office, and I will get another one for me. One desk will be removed..." He stopped talking when he realized that Talia didn't approve. "Or do you want new furniture? Is that it? We can arrange for..."

"Axel", Talia called, interrupting his chatter. "I wanted to talk to you about something else."

Axel moved to sit on the sofa, next to Talia, and he looked at her, silently telling her to go ahead.

"I thought about this a long time, so please, don't interrupt me until I'm done.", Talia started. She took a deep breath. "We had a pack run where Damon announced me to the Dark Howlers pack as his fated mate and as his Luna. I realized that there is a lot of things to do, and I don't think I will be able to give the Midnight Guardians pack the time and attention it deserves. I want you to be the Alpha of the Midnight Guardians pack."

Axel's expression didn't change. "Are you done?"

"What?"

"You said that I shouldn't interrupt you until you are done, so I'm asking, are you done?"

"Yes. I'm done.", Talia confirmed.

"No."

Talia was lost. Did he say that she was not done? It didn't sound right. "What do you mean, no?"

"I said, no. You can't give your Alpha position to me."

"Why?"

"Because I don't want it.", Axel said with finality.

"But I can't..."

"Being an Alpha is not about the time. It's about the heart."

Talia was totally confused. "What?"

Chapter 636 Back in the Midnight Guardians pack (7)

"You can stay stubborn and ruin your chance for happiness or listen.", Yasmin said, and Cornelia recoiled in the chair like someone pushed her back physically.

Actually, Cornelia felt the push, but Yasmin didn't use any chant. How was that possible? Did she use an enchanted item? But her hands were empty.

Cornelia shifted in her seat, to confirm that she can move without restrictions.

"Can you talk normally?", Cornelia asked while eyeing Yasmin suspiciously and wondering if she imagined the push.

"What is normal talk, Cornelia? Do you want me to lie or keep quiet while you destroy your best chance for happiness?"

Cornelia was offended. "What am I destroying?"

"I see you are holding your mate close, without giving yourself to him. What kind of a sick game is that? Do you enjoy torturing him?"

Cornelia huffed at Yasmin. Who gave Yasmin the right to meddle? "What do you know about torture? He is too young to feel the bond."

Yasmin didn't think that was a big deal. "If he doesn't feel it, he wouldn't stick to you despite your rejections."

"I'm not rejecting him."

"Keep telling that to yourself and see how long it takes. James will reach his breaking point and either force a mark on you or leave you. Which one do you prefer?"

Cornelia frowned. What kind of choices were those?

Yasmin released a long breath, and she continued with compassion, "Cornelia. I know you as a high-ranking priestess who has all the answers, but this time, I need to tell you that you are wrong. Being with a mate is special. It completes you, it completes both of you."

Cornelia sneered. "Easy for you to speak. Your mate can feel the bond."

Yasmin waved, indicating to Cornelia to calm down. "Is that something that can't be fixed? Are you telling me that priestess Cornelia can't boost one man's perception of the energies?"

Cornelia looked at Yasmin in disbelief. "Are you telling me to use magic on James and force him to mature?" Witches experimented with plants and animals, and even though the faster maturing was successful, it came with side effects of quick deterioration and uncharacteristic behavior. Natural order shouldn't be rushed.

"Not mature.", Yasmin said quickly. "Just to increase his perception of the energies. It will make him feel the bond and you will get your piece of mind that he won't abandon you." Yasmin smirked when she saw Cornelia shifting uncomfortably at her words.

"That's it. Right?", Yasmin said victoriously. "You are afraid that he will leave you. But James is by your side, which means that he wants to be with you even without the bond."

Cornelia shook her head dejectedly. "He is with me because we are together. What will happen when he needs to return to his pack? He will see other women and where does that leave me?"

Yasmin clicked her tongue. "And we are back to boosting his perception of..."

"Enough!", Cornelia snapped and stood up abruptly.

"You can try a temporary spell and see if you like the result.", Yasmin said with urgency while trying to salvage the situation.

Cornelia rubbed her forehead while reminding herself that this was not Yasmin's fault, it was not Yasmin's problem, and Yasmin was offering solutions. They were not the solutions Cornelia would accept, but they showed Yasmin's care and concern.

"I know you mean well, but some things can't be rushed, Yasmin."

"You should talk to your soulmate about this. Give him a choice. It's not healthy that you are carrying this weight on your own and it's not fair that you make a decision without him. If you are too shy to talk to James, I can do it in your place."

"Don't you dare!", Cornelia exclaimed and stomped toward the door. This conversation was over.

Cornelia walked out without any particular goal in mind. She felt like the walls were too close and she needed space.

"Cora?", James called after Cornelia who passed by him in the hallway, like he was not there.

"Shit!", he cursed under his breath and rushed after her. He knew that it was a bad idea to leave Cornelia and Yasmin on their own.

"Cora!", James exclaimed, and he caught up with her just before she reached the stairs. He grabbed her wrist. "Talk to me. I am here."

Cornelia turned toward James in slow motion. She looked into his blue eyes that were full of anxiety and genuine concern and her chin trembled.

She knew that this was not fair. It was not James' fault that she came here, and they met, and she can't blame him for not feeling the bond either. The only thing she could do was to control her actions and decide what was best, but how can she leave him when her heart was aching if they were apart? And the way he looked at her, told her that he felt the same.

It was a difficult decision, one that will impact the rest of their lives, but... did she need to decide anything today?

James observed subtle changes in Cornelia's expression, and he reached to wipe the tears from her cheeks.

The moment his fingers touched her skin, Cornelia jolted, and her eyes widened with something James couldn't decipher the next thing he knew, Cornelia slammed herself against him and her lips covered his fervently.

James was quick to wrap his arms around Cornelia and respond to her frantic kisses.

Cornelia was not sure what she was doing, but she knew that she didn't want to think about anything that was weighing on her mind. She allowed her heart to take over which pulled her toward James in a desperate need for his presence that made her feel whole.

Cornelia soaked in James' touch, his scent, his flavors... and she didn't notice at what point he lifted her and carried her into their room, all without breaking the kiss.

James put Cornelia on the bed and got on top of her, their kisses becoming longer and deeper as they melded into each other.

James loved the fact that Cornelia kissed him while clinging onto him, and she even spread her legs and her hips moved to grind herself against his erection. It was heavenly.

The scent of Cornelia's arousal filled the room and James was confident that her love nectar will taste like the sweetest wild berries!

He got lower, to press on her harder as their hips rocked in sync and he nearly lost his mind when Cornelia moaned into his mouth.

Cornelia's hands moved on their own, tugging on his t-shirt, and she frowned when he held her hands, preventing her from undressing him.

"What?", she asked breathily. "Don't you want...?" She couldn't finish, but James understood her.

James took a deep breath to compose himself before responding, "I want. You have no idea how much I want you, but not like this."

His lips were throbbing from the intense kissing session, and he really wanted to kiss her more, to kiss her everywhere, and to undress her and go all the way, but he knew that it wouldn't be right.

Cornelia looked away in embarrassment when she realized that she made move on James and got rejected. What was she thinking? What would happen if he didn't stop her?

Chapter 637 Back in the Midnight Guardians pack (8) [Bonus chapter]

"Cora", James called and placed a gentle kiss at the curve where her neck met her shoulder, right where his mark should come. "I want to make love to you. I want to mark you as mine. But not when you are upset. I don't want you to regret it as something that was done in the spur of the moment."

Cornelia wanted to deny the upset part, but she didn't want to lie to him.

"So, now what?", Cornelia asked.

James moved to lay next to Cornelia and he pulled her in an embrace before responding, "Now we talk. Tell me, what happened in that room after I left? What got you upset?" She didn't respond, so he continued guessing. "Was it about us? Was it about me?" Cornelia and Yasmin were on their own for no more than two minutes, so they probably continued talking about James.

Cornelia shot him a quick glance, and that confirmed it.

"It's about me.", he said dejectedly while tightening his hold on her, fearing that she will escape him.

"Did Yasmin tell you to leave me?"

"No.", Cornelia responded right away.

"Then?", he asked, and it took him a moment to realize it was the opposite. Yasmin told Cornelia to embrace the bond no matter how weak it is, and Cornelia was against it. OK, not completely against it because she was right here, on the bed, in his arms, but she was not willing to relax and enjoy it either.

"Cora, I'm sorry for not feeling the bond. I don't feel it, but I know you are my other half. If I could, I would fast forward the time. Maybe we could both go to a two year-long sleep, or at least I would, and when I open my eyes, my wolf will confirm without any doubt that you are my mate, you will be confident in me, I will claim you, and our future can begin."

"But what about..."

James quickly kissed her, to prevent her from finishing that question. He didn't know if she would say that his ideas were stupid, or if she would talk about his father, or about his age, or about witches used for breeding, or about where they would live... because none of those mattered.

"We are mates, and we belong together", James spoke against her lips. "Whoever stands in our way, we will deal with it because that's what mates do. The Moon Goddess wouldn't let me meet you if there was no way for us to be together. I am not an expert but I know that my kind meets mate when we are ready."

Cornelia felt guilt washing over her. He was so much younger compared to her, but why did she end up being the immature one? Why did she run? Was it so difficult to open up? Why couldn't she give him a chance?

How could he talk with such conviction when he didn't feel the bond? And she even considered using magic to increase his perception of energies; she wanted to change him, yet he was already perfect, and she was the faulty one. And he knew that, and he still looked at her like she couldn't do any wrong.

Cornelia hugged him tightly and nestled her head under his chin.

"Hold me, James.", she asked softly. "Right now, I need you to hold me, and we will talk later. I promise, I won't run anymore."

Cornelia felt James' lips pressing at the top of her head and then his arms tightened around her in a solid hold. She relaxed in acknowledgment that James had the power to calm down her unsettling thoughts and he made her feel at home.

Now if only she could stop worrying about what the future might bring, everything would be great.

...

In the main hallway...

"Why are we here this early?", Liam grumbled while checking the time. It was just the three of them, and they were standing there for ten minutes already!

"This is our first time here and we shouldn't be late.", Sandy gave a lame excuse as to why she nagged Keith and Liam to get ready and come down before others.

Liam made a face at Sandy. "Really? Since when are you worried about what others think? Aren't you just eager to go to the cafeteria and see unmated guys?"

"Lower your voice." Sandy hissed while looking around nervously.

"Are you worried that someone will find out about your lecherous nature?", Liam said mockingly and turned to Keith. "Tell her."

"Tell me, what?", Sandy asked.

Keith didn't want to meddle in this useless chatter, but he didn't want them to embarrass him either. "Sandy, did you forget that members of the Midnight Guardians pack are waiting for their mates? No matter how many single guys are there, no one will spare you a glance if you are not his mate."

"Why are you making it sound like I'm a molester?", Sandy asked while her eyes darted between Keith and Liam.

Liam gestured toward Sandy's outfit. It was a bright red tight minidress with a generous cleavage. She had high-heeled shoes and makeup on.

"Are you telling me that you are not going there to attract attention? Do you think you have a chance to catch a guy's eye if you are not his mate?"

Sandy puffed her cheeks in anger at Liam. "Listen, you..."

"What's going on?", Talia asked while coming down the stairs. Damon was right behind her.

Sandy made a pitiful face. "Keith and Liam are bullying me."

Keith was alarmed. Why did she call him out?

Liam didn't want Talia to know about their petty bickering, but Sandy made them look like bad guys and he had to speak up.

"We were just pointing out that Sandy shouldn't be so excited about going to the cafeteria."

Keith groaned while cursing his luck. Why did Liam say 'WE'? Both Liam and Sandy were dragging him into this!

"Why are you making it sound like I'm exaggerating? Didn't you make some nasty accusations?", Sandy shot back.

"First of all, we are your superiors, and you shouldn't talk like that.", Liam said matter-of-factly. "Member of this pack are just like us and you are acting like a sex-deprived woman who never saw a man. As a warrior, you saw plenty of naked dudes, why are these special? And if you think I'm exaggerating, look at your getup! It's more appropriate for the Shifters than for dinner."

Sandy's eyes were flickering with anger. "Superiors? Keith, yes. But you, we are the same rank! The fact that you have a few extra points means nothing. I will catch up by end of the year. Wait until I get promoted and I make you plank until the pain is the only thing you know."

Sandy put her arms akimbo and narrowed her eyes at Liam. "You won't understand why I dressed up, even if I draw a map for you. How can guys at home be compared to these? You are all second-hand items anyone can afford. Going to the cafeteria of the Midnight Guardians pack is like going to Tiffany's." She gestured toward her dress. "I need to look fancy so I can look at all that high-class merchandise in style."

Liam and Keith both gaped at Sandy. How many times did she insult them in those few seconds? They were both good-looking guys, capable warriors, and why did she talk about them like they were faulty?

Sandy was huffing with anger and then she froze like someone pushed the pause button on a remote.

"Sandy?", Talia called with concern obvious in her voice. Did Sandy have a stroke?

Slowly, very slowly, Sandy turned to look behind her, up the stairs, and Talia followed to see what got Sandy's attention.

Tyler was coming down with Kai and Meg behind him. They all had bright smiles on their faces and then Tyler's steps halted suddenly.

"What the...?", Kai ended with a curse under his breath when he bumped into Tyler's back unexpectedly.

"Tyler? Why did you stop?", Meg asked while craning her neck to see her friend who was standing there like a rock and staring at the people below.

One second, two, three... Talia raised her hands to cover her half-open mouth, but she couldn't suppress the squeal that erupted from her.

"Ahhh!"

Mates!

Chapter 638 Zesty maple syrup

Tyler was excited that Alpha Talia came back, this time with Alpha Damon and a few more people, and he was upset that he was stuck on a guard duty next to the portal and due to that, he couldn't greet the newcomers when they arrived. They didn't have guests often.

He was looking forward to the upcoming feast which indicated that Alpha Talia will stick around for a while. Or did she come here to stay forever?

Like any other member of the Midnight Guardians pack, Tyler was excited to witness the changes Talia's presence brought. The most important change Talia brought was the wind of hope that everyone could feel. No one knew exactly what they were hoping for, but it was there, nearly tangible, and it filled them with tingling anticipation.

Ever since the announcement of the upcoming feast that Alpha Talia will attend with her mate and a few other guests, Tyler could feel the excitement crackling in the air. It was fantastic.

Yasmin couldn't stop mind-linking him about the feast, and she wanted Axel, Kai, and Meg to keep Damon and Talia busy so that Tyler and Yasmin can sneakily prepare something special for the guests (Damon and Talia in particular).

Luna Yasmin always went above and beyond to make others happy. She was like a fresh breeze sweeping through the Midnight Guards pack, an additional confirmation (after Meg), that mates are out there. The news of Yasmin's pregnancy was like a tide of positivity everyone wanted to soak in. And it's twins!

The whole Midnight Guardians pack was happy for Axel and Kai, two high-ranking members who found their mates, and Axel was even starting his own family, but the unmated pack members also stirred with longing to find their mates, and Tyler was not an exception.

Tyler is the Gamma of the Midnight Guardians pack, with access to confidential information, so he knew that Talia's next destination was the realm of witches, and Tyler hoped he can tag along. Who knows, maybe his mate was there?

Tyler dressed up for the dinner. Black trousers and a crisp light gray shirt that matched the color of his eyes. He polished his black formal shoes until he could see his reflection in them. He wanted to leave a good impression on Talia, and increase his chances of going.

Tyler was sick of listening to Axel and Kai boasting how good it is to sleep with a woman. Tyler was the only high-ranking member in the Midnight Guardians pack who was spending his nights alone, indulging in pleasures his right hand can provide.

Every day Tyler met with Axel and Kai, often in the company of Yasmin and Meg, and Tyler was sticking out like the last bachelor in the world.

He wanted a woman to feed also, damnit!

Were powers so important? He can be the Gamma without those. Tyler dreamed about going to the red district in a human city (based on movies he watched, every human city has one) and he would ravish women until he gets his fill or runs out of money. Of course, Tyler never went through it; not because he cared about his non-awakened powers, but because he didn't want to appear weak.

Axel waited, Kai waited, so many others waited for their mates and if Tyler crumbled under the pressure of his loneliness, he wouldn't be fit to serve his Alpha or to lead their people as a Gamma. As one of the few high-ranking members, it was Tyler's duty to lead by example, no matter how hard it was.

Back to the present...

Tyler was coming down the stairs with Meg and Kai chattering behind him, and his whole world collapsed into nothing, leaving only one female with short blonde hair in a red miniskirt standing there... shining brightly... her beauty left him spellbound.

Their stares collided and locked them both in a trance. Tyler was confident that he had never seen her before, yet she looked familiar, like he knew her well, like she was an important piece of him... And then he heard in his head, "Mate!"

Tyler was not aware at what point he moved, or when did she, but they stood at the bottom of the staircases, half a step between them, bathing in each other's presence and he was enveloped in her scent that was zesty with a hint of grass, reminding him of lemonade he would sip on a sunny meadow. She was bright and beautiful like the sun. It was magical.

People around them erupted into clamor, and he was sure that Kai and Axel patted his shoulder, but Tyler couldn't feel a thing.

Her blue-green eyes smiled at him, and he knew that she recognized him as her mate.

Axel and Kai found their mates, and Tyler wondered when his turn will come, a painful knot forming in his chest whenever he thought of the possibility that he won't find her (and he would stay a virgin forever!), and here she was. Gorgeous.

Sandy couldn't believe that this hunk was hiding in the Midnight Guardians pack, and something told her he was hers even before she heard that word 'mate' in her head. He was her other half. She found him. Finally.

Her eyes moved over his short dark brown hair, gray eyes, a smile that could stop the traffic, and those broad shoulders she couldn't wait to hold onto. He was perfect.

Sandy wondered if his taste will match his scent; freshly made pancakes drenched in maple syrup. As far as her memories go, Sandy loved pancakes, and she loved maple syrup, and she was head over heels for the guy who was standing in front of her, even though she had no idea what his name was.

Sandy's eyes darted to Tyler's lips, and she noticed that he did the same, confirming that he wanted to kiss her, just as much as she wanted to taste him, and her stomach flipped at the thought that she will get to kiss her mate for the first time. It should be good.

Like someone pushed them toward each other, Tyler leaned lower, and Sandy lifted her head.

"I'm Tyler", his maple-infused breath splashed on her lips.

Sandy's heart was in her throat, and it took her a moment to realize that Tyler was waiting for her name.

"Sa-sa...", she stuttered.

"Nice to meet you, Sasa", Tyler said and then he closed that last fraction of distance between them.

He finally found his mate and he had no intention of delaying his first kiss. That initial contact jolted his insides and he forgot about insecurities if he will know what to do.

Sandy wanted to correct him that her name was not Sasa, but then colors exploded everywhere when his arms wrapped around her, pulling her closer, and sparks of their bond made this the best kiss ever. She didn't care what he called her. Sasa it is!

Sandy's hands moved behind Tyler's neck, and she let him feel her teeth, sucking and nibbling, showing him all the wonderful ways they can play with their lips.

He released a small whimper when she deepened the kiss and she loved it!

His flavors invaded Sandy's system and she hummed in pleasure. Maple syrup and pancakes everywhere. She leaned into him knowing that she won't go without a dessert ever again!

Chapter 639 Back in the Midnight Guardians pack (9)

Liam watched the scene of Sandy and Tyler locked in a kiss, and his expression turned sour. He just bickered with Sandy and told her that she won't catch a man by dressing like that, and there was Sandy, with a man who was also overdressed for a casual dinner.

Was this the Moon Goddess' idea of pranking him?

Liam's mood worsened when he remembered that he called out his rank on Sandy. Wasn't that Tyler, the Gamma of the Midnight Guardians pack? As Gamma's mate, Sandy outranked him in a second. High-ranked pack members go above warriors, even Generals get to obey Gammas. Damn it!

Liam wanted to ask someone for a shovel so that he can dig a deep (very deep) hole to hide. This won't end well. Sandy was now smitten with her newly found mate, but once she snaps out of it, she will be out for revenge. Sandy was not a girl who will forgive and forget, and Liam provoked her. Damn it! If he knew that she will be mated to the Gamma (becoming Gamma herself), he would keep his mouth shut about her slutty outfit! Was it too late to tell her that she looks great?

Axel and Yasmin stopped at the top of the stairs, and Yasmin bounced from excitement at the sight of Sandy and Tyler kissing. Another female to join her and Meg! Things will definitely be livelier!

And Yasmin hoped that with Sandy as his mate, Tyler will finally agree to move to the main house.

Before Talia became the Alpha of the Midnight Guardians pack, Beta and Gamma didn't reside in the main house that was reserved for the Alpha family.

Talia suggested that high-ranking members stay close. It will help them with work and overall socializing; it was a practical thing to do.

After Alpha Isaac and Alpha Sophia were officially stripped of their Alpha positions, Kai and Meg moved to a suite on the second floor, but Tyler refused. He stayed in his one-bedroom apartment because he didn't want to risk over-hearing the nightly activities of two couples. But now he was part of the couple-group also, and Yasmin was looking forward to adding one more female to their group.

Talia leaned on Damon and smiled, happy for the newly mated couple. She looked like a proud mother in front of her children who achieved something monumental.

Damon had mixed feelings. Sandy and Tyler being mates was another connection between the packs, pulling them closer to Talia's dream of uniting the packs, which was a good thing. However, did this

mean that Talia lost her guard? There was also a sour feeling that resurfaced from the back of Damon's mind every time Talia was by his side, witnessing mates recognize each other.

It was a sacred moment, one they will remember forever, yet Damon ruined it for Talia. And that was something he will never be able to fix no matter how well he treats her going forward.

"Damon?", Talia called softly. She didn't know what he was thinking about, but she could feel his flickering emotions that stung painfully.

"I'm so sorry, kitten", he said.

Talia's eyebrows shot up. "What...?"

Damon put his index finger on her lips to stop her from finishing that question.

"I..." He didn't want to voice his thoughts and spoil the mood. Sandy and Tyler were mates, and everyone was happy for them. "I love you." And then he kissed her like he meant it.

Talia was not sure what to make out of it. Was he overthinking something? She rejected that possibility because Damon was not known as someone who would think much. Damon was a guy who would do whatever he wanted and deal with the consequences (or ignore them) later.

No matter what was on Damon's mind, he was hugging her and kissing her tenderly and she allowed herself to be lost in his kiss that came with flavors of dark chocolate. Her favorite.

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After a round of congratulations, Tyler and Sandy were not sure what to do because they were hungry and on their way for dinner, but they were also hungry for something else.

Tyler's arm coiled firmly around Sandy's waist. It felt good to have her close, the sparks of their bond prickled his skin even over their clothes, but the feeling was new and foreign, and he wondered if it was

OK to hold her like that or if that was too intimate. But he was certain that he didn't want to let go of her. His hand on her hip tightened together with concern if she will see him as a lecher.

Sandy could see how flustered Tyler was, and she thought that he was adorable. She couldn't wait for some privacy so she can eat him up, starting with those maple-infused lips that were still a bit swollen from their kissing session; their first kissing session, the first of many. She really wanted to kiss him again and do much more, but they were on their way to dinner, and she didn't want him to think that she was a lustful she-wolf. Liam's previous words still echoed in her mind and she hoped that Tyler didn't think of her as a harlot.

Yasmin broke the standstill with, "Don't worry about dinner. We will get you something edible and leave it at your door. Tyler, your room is ready. Use it."

Tyler gave Sandy a questionable look, silently asking her if she was still set on going to the cafeteria.

"I hear you have a room.", Sandy said, her voice trembling in anticipation of what was coming. "I would love to see it."

Tyler swallowed hard and took Sandy's hand in his. He walked up the stairs, forgetting about anything else other than the girl whose hand he was holding and the pulsing need that was rising in his crotch area.

Axel and Kai shook their heads helplessly, knowing that their friend was eager to experience carnal pleasures, and they couldn't blame him.

Axel looked at Yasmin and he put his hand in his pant pocket to not-so-covertly adjust his hard-on. At the thought of what Tyler and Sandy were about to do, he wanted to do it with Yasmin. Who knows... maybe he could add a pup or two to the existing pregnancy?

"Where are Alpha Sophia and Alpha Isaac?"

Talia's question pulled Axel to the reality that was not so risqué.

"It's Sophia and Isaac now. There is no need to use their previous titles.", he responded. "I told them that you are here and invited them to join us for dinner, but they decided to stay in their quarters." There was one two-bedroom house close to the main house, used for exclusive guests a long time ago, and they cleaned it up so that ex-Alphas can reside there. "I hope you don't mind."

Talia didn't expect a warm welcome. She dethroned them and took their abilities.

"I don't expect them to join us for meals.", Talia responded. "I want them available in the morning. I need to talk to them."

Axel nodded stiffly. "I will let them know."

Talia was grateful that Axel was handling things with his parents. She didn't want to think about them, and if she didn't need answers about Guardians and about her past, she wouldn't want to see them at all.

Chapter 640 Back in the Midnight Guardians pack (10)

"Do you have any plans for tonight?", Axel asked Talia as they walked toward the cafeteria.

Talia glanced at Damon whose arm was around her shoulders. He was super-clingy. Damon didn't say anything, but she knew he didn't approve of her leaving him behind when she talked to Axel. Talia didn't want to hide things from Damon, but she didn't want to worry him either, and things like leaving the Alpha position were worrisome. If she knew he would feel so neglected, she would do it differently.

"We don't have any firm plans.", Talia responded to Axel. "Tomorrow morning, we can talk about the schedule, but I will warn you in advance that we don't want to do much. Damon and I are determined to treat this like a vacation. It was a long time since we relaxed." They planned many relaxing moments, but those either didn't happen, or they ended with some emergency (like Damon being unconscious and then falling under the influence of dark magic).

"You are at the right place for relaxing.", Meg said. "There are no rogues, no spies, and the time difference will give you an excuse to step away from all problems you left behind."

Talia smiled at Meg gratefully. That was exactly what she had on her mind. Talia wanted to ask Meg if she visited her family in the Lightclaw pack yet, but somehow Talia guessed that Meg didn't.

"How about we go to the lake after dinner?", Yasmin asked.

Meg disagreed. "We can go in the morning when people can enjoy the scenery."

"Lake is nice during the night as well."

"Sure, it is. If you go with your mate seeking privacy", Meg said with a knowing smile. "How about we go to the North clearing? There are many fireflies at this time of the year."

Yasmin rolled her eyes. "Now THAT is a place where you should go with your mate."

"You are not helping..."

Yasmin and Meg bickered and giggled, their chatter didn't stop as Talia and Damon walked in front with Axel and Yasmin next, Meg, Kai and Keith, Liam, James, and Cornelia following after them, silently showing the hierarchy of the pack with outsiders at the back.

Talia was sad she will part with Sandy who will now stay in the Midnight Guardians pack. Talia was also curious to find out what power Sandy will get after Tyler marks her.

That reminded Talia, "Axel, did you figure out your ability?"

Axel smiled smugly. That was a 'yes'.

"What is it?", she asked. "Or is it something that you shouldn't disclose?"

"I will show you. Later.", Axel said mysteriously. He looked at Damon. "What about you?" With Talia marking him, he should have an ability.

Damon made a face and Axel understood that Damon didn't tap into his ability yet.

"Don't stress about it.", Axel encouraged him. "The Moon Goddess gives us what we need, when we need it."

"Are you OK?", Cornelia asked James. He was unusually silent.

Cornelia and James were still hugging in bed when Meg stopped by to remind them it was almost time for dinner. When they came down to join the others, they found the scene of everyone congratulating Sandy and Tyler, and other than wishing the newly-mated couple all the best, James didn't say much.

"Why wouldn't I be?", James responded with a question and tightened his hold on Cornelia.

He didn't want to expose his insecurities, with the biggest one Cornelia being a flight risk. Ah, if on the first night he jumped on her, he would seal the deal already, and not worry if his own mate will leave him. But how can he explain that he can't imagine his life without her even though he can't feel the bond?

Whenever they were not lost in each other, Cornelia was tense, like she could snap at any moment, and James needed to find a way to deal with it. It was obvious that Cornelia was bottling up a lot of things and he had no way of fixing the situation without understanding it.

James' gaze fell on a slender back that belonged to Yasmin and his eyes lit up. Yasmin, of course! How could he forget about her? Yasmin was a witch, and she knew Cornelia for a long time, so she could have some clues to how that can help him out. In addition, he already confirmed that Yasmin was supportive of him being with Cornelia.

James heard Yasmin talking about the upcoming feast, and how there was a lot to do, and James saw it as a good opportunity to offer his help and use that to sneak in some private talk with Yasmin.

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The cafeteria was deadly silent when Talia and Damon appeared at the door.

Talia's steps halted to observe that there were at least two hundred people inside, crowding the space, and the center table was free. It was obvious they were expecting them.

"Come on", Axel encouraged Talia to keep moving and act normal. "They are just excited to see you."

Well, Talia could feel their emotions, so she knew that, but how could she eat and relax in this atmosphere? Everyone was watching her!

'Relax, kitten. They are your people', Damon's voice sounded in her mind through their private mind-link.

That 'YOUR' sounded to Talia like someone was scratching the blackboard with nails. It didn't sound right. Yes, she was keeping Damon away from the business related to the Midnight Guardians pack because she was planning to step down from her Alpha role, but now that Axel convinced her otherwise, she didn't want Damon to feel like an outsider. She knew very well how it feels to be invisible and not belong, and she didn't want that for anyone... especially not for Damon.

Talia cleared her throat and turned to talk to the faces full of eager anticipation.

"It's nice to see you again after such a long time", she said. For her, it was not so long, but it was months for them. "I hear that you've been doing well, waiting for the news and I can assure you that there will be something soon. Please, be patient just a bit more as I sort out things with Axel. We don't plan to conceal things from you, but we don't want to rush with announcements until we have something solid. Until then, I want you all to meet someone important." She glanced at Damon. "This is Damon Blake, Alpha of the Dark Howlers pack, my fated mate."

Talia leaned closer into Damon, her shoulder fitting perfectly under his armpit, and she waited for a reaction.

After one second of silence, murmurs filled the space, and then people erupted in cheers.

Talia could feel they were elated by this news. Talia having an Alpha for her mate meant more power and stability to the Midnight Guardians pack, and somehow... they were admiring her even more.

And she could also feel intense emotions from her mate which confirmed his approval of the introduction she just made.

Damon smiled as his chest swelled with pride. He was pleased that she introduced him first, and she did it as Damon Blake, Alpha Damon (and not Luna Damon).