

Alphas Bride 761

Chapter 761 Dangers in the darkness (8)

"I want to know how you are concealing your presence," Talia demanded from rogues that were pressed on the ground in front of her. Those bastards sneaked on her more than once now. Even Liseli couldn't pick them up.

Seeing that no one was willing to talk, Talia stared down at the closest one.

"Speak!" She shouted, and the guy groaned as the light around Talia increased.

'Let me get into his mind,' Liseli said.

'Fine,' Talia agreed. 'Make it quick.'

With Liseli taking charge of interrogating enemies, the silvery glow around Talia subsided, leaving only her eyes to pulsate in silver light.

Talia could see images flashing in her mind, memories that were not hers. There was some rubbish, guy-talk about women and drinking, and found out that the rogue in question was planning to head to the human city tomorrow and visit a nightclub there.

Out of the important stuff, Talia picked up that the rogues had orders to come to a specific location and to wait for a signal. She saw him sneaking between the patrols of the Blue River pack, and it was obvious that the guy knew where he was going. There was a scene of a tall, dark-haired guy telling them that they will wait for the Luna of the Dark Howlers pack while showing them Talia's photo, and they needed to draw on their skin with specific paste...

The man's body spasmed as he started foaming at his mouth, and Liseli quickly got out of his mind with, 'He was weaker than I thought.'

Talia blinked at the man who was lying on the ground, and she couldn't believe that he was dead.

She killed a person, just like that.

Before Talia could process that she had committed murder, the guy's painted clothes caught on fire. It was like when a synthetic fabric touches the flame; it all disappeared within two seconds, leaving a slightly scorched naked body behind.

"What the...?" Lulu said under her breath.

Talia was equally puzzled, but she knew more than Lulu now. "Due to those painted clothes, as long as they are still, their presence will be concealed." But that didn't explain the lack of their scent or why the guy caught on fire.

"Oh," Lulu said, and then she cocked an eyebrow at Talia. "How do you know that?"

Talia was not in the mood to explain. "Can you mind-link Pierce?"

Lulu's eyes lost focus for a moment. "No." A second later, she added, "Keith, Caleb, and others are unreachable as well."

Talia pressed her lips into a line. This confirmed that these rogues had a way to interrupt not only her mind-link with Damon but to mess up the senses of an Alpha and block the pack's mind-link.

With rogues nearly undetectable, who knew how many of them were still hiding? And if they could mess with all that, even if Pierce and others found out that Talia and Lulu were facing rogues, there was a chance that reinforcements won't be able to find them. What a mess.

Rogues stared at Talia whose eyes stood out like flashlights on her body. No one told them about anything like this, and they had no idea what it was, but they knew they were in trouble.

'We need more information,' Liseli urged Talia. 'Pick another one.'

'We can just ask.'

Liseli refused. 'This is faster, and we are ensuring that they are not lying.'

Talia puffed her cheeks, 'Fine. But try not to kill him.'

'You have compassion for people who wouldn't blink while killing,' Liseli said mockingly.

'How I treat others reflects who I am, not who they are.'

Liseli didn't respond. She knew that Talia was a kind soul. The only time Talia was ready to harm others was when she was protecting someone dear to her, like Damon.

Talia saw another set of images. The same tall, dark-haired guy was telling them to drink a scent-concealing potion before heading to the Blue River pack. There was a map behind him with some dots on it, and the humid hot air filled with scents of sweat and moss was suffocating.

"Leader," one guy asked, and the scene shifted for Talia to see more than a dozen guys standing in a room that had walls covered in wooden panels. It looked like a cottage. "How do we know that Luna Talia will be here?"

The tall, dark-haired guy smirked. "I have my sources. We won't make a move until we confirm that they left together."

"Is it true that we will collaborate with Jason's and Malik's groups?" Another voice asked.

"There will be more than the two of them. You don't need to worry about it. Do your task well, and we will all get to move up from this dump."

People cheered, and the scene became hazy.

Talia blinked to see the guy in front of her spasming on the ground. Just like the previous one, the moment he breathed his last, his clothes burst into flame.

'Do you think that clothes painted on his skin can sense he died?', Liseli asked curiously.

'I told you not to kill him.'

'No. You said TRY not to kill him. I tried and failed. It's not my fault he resisted, and I had to apply more force than necessary.'

Talia couldn't believe this. 'I would twist your ear if only you had one.'

Liseli snickered. 'We can shift into wolf for you to get my ears, but then you lose thumbs, so there won't be any twisting.'

Talia didn't want to argue. They were in a dangerous situation, without a way to contact Damon, facing rogues, and she needed information.

"Who is your leader?" Talia asked, and the rogues turned to look around. Some of them looked at the guy who was talking to Talia before.

"Not that one," Talia said. "I meant the tall, dark-haired guy who was giving you instructions to come here. He was wearing a black leather jacket. Tell me, or I will make you. You know that I can suppress you with ease. Do you think that's all I can do?"

"Ah! Ah!" One rogue cried, and his painted clothes burst in flames. "Oh... Save me!... Aaaa!" A few more rogues cried in unison as they burst into flames.

Talia panicked. What was going on?

'Maybe clothes detect betrayal also,' Liseli's voice sounded in Talia's mind.

Talia raised her arms and started waving. "Stop! Stop! Stop thinking about your leader. I don't care about him!"

The cries stopped, and Talia realized that only four rogues were still unharmed.

The ones that caught on fire were dead.

'What the heck is going on here?' Talia asked Liseli.

'In the face of this information, I think that the first two rogues burst into flames because we peeked into their memories,' Liseli shared her thoughts. 'Painted clothes make them appear not naked, conceal their presence, and prevent betrayal. This explains why we got only fragments from each of them.'

Talia rubbed her forehead. How can she get information if asking or forcing mind-reading makes them dead?

"You have no use of us," the leader of rogues spoke. "Let us go. Unless you want to kill us."

It was evident that Talia was shaken up by seeing people dying in front of her, even if it was not her fault. Everyone knew that Lunas have nurturing nature. They won't kill, not on purpose, and not unless they are defending their loved ones and their pack.

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"You want us to let you go?" Lulu asked the rogue incredulously. "What's to say you won't come tomorrow in another attempt to kidnap my Luna?"

He smirked. "You are right. We will probably return. In order to prevent that, Luna Talia should join us now." He spoke to Talia. "Our task is only to bring you back, to talk. This is not kidnapping; it's a friendly invitation."

Lulu crossed her arms over her chest, giving her two peaks a push up. She was not bothered by her nakedness.

"Do you think my Luna is stupid to go with you?" Lulu asked.

He shrugged. "What do you suggest? Should we sit here until breakfast? What will that achieve? You know we won't talk. We can't. If you hand us over to Alpha Maddox, he will interrogate us and that will end up with him letting us go, assuming we survive. And we know that Luna Talia won't kill us."

Talia didn't hear what the guy said. She was visually inspecting the bodies and four rogues that were still breathing.

"Why is your leader not here? Did he send you on a suicide mission? Or are you another diversion so that he can do something else?"

Talia shook her head at this last question. She heard that Luna Talia was the target. However, that didn't mean it was the full truth. That was only what these guys received as instructions. There was a possibility that the leader had a different plan, one that he didn't disclose to others.

Talia really wished for Damon to be here. She tried mind-linking him again but to no avail.

"What are you guys using to prevent mind-link from working?" Talia asked. "There is no way that rogues would know such a thing. With whom are you working? There must be something you can tell us otherwise you can only dream about leaving this place."

The guy just shook his head.

"How can you be so calm after your leader set you up like this to be cannon fodder?"

He shrugged. "It is what it is. What's the point of being angry now?"

Talia was surprised by this rational response. But then... they were rogues, always scheming, and Talia was confident that under that calm demeanor the guy was plotting revenge.

But he was right. She couldn't kill them, but she had no intention of letting them go either.

Talia puffed her cheeks while thinking about what to do. If Damon was here, he would know how to handle this mess.

Talia remembered that her mind-link with Damon worked while she was in the packhouse. Mila was at the edge of the forest, mind-linking Tatiana, and Talia wondered if the rogues turned on the interference when Talia stepped into the forest, or maybe Talia entered the zone where mind-linking was jammed. In any case, she needed to fix it.

For rogues, this was not a big deal.

Rogues didn't belong to a pack, so they didn't communicate via mind-link. They had other ways to exchange information, like phones or they would carefully plan their missions, accounting for various outcomes so each could move independently without exposing others.

Unfortunately, werewolves that were part of the pack relied on their mind-link too much, and now this was a problem. How can she inform Damon, Meg, or anyone else of their location? And the bad thing

was that there could be more rogues nearby, approaching them, and Talia wouldn't know unless they stand right in front of her.

'If they are interfering with mind-link, we could be able to sense the energies and see from where it's originating,' Liseli said.

There was not much confidence behind Liseli's words, but it was the only thing they could do.

'How come you didn't discover anything before?' Talia asked.

'At that time, I didn't know that such a thing could exist.'

'Let's try this together,' Talia said and turned to Lulu. "Keep an eye on them. I need to focus on this."

Lulu nodded, unsure what Talia was up to, but Talia closed her eyes and took a deep breath, and Lulu understood that Talia shouldn't be disturbed.

Talia's body was glowing again. Pulses of silver exited her feet and spread in every direction as circles of light. Each circle reached further than the previous one, covering the foliage and trees and even the forest critters that were hiding in their burrows, making every detail visible for Talia, like it was right in front of her.

Talia's eyes snapped open when she found something. She was not sure what it was, but the energies were acting strange there, and it needed investigation.

The problem was that it was about fifty feet away. Talia was the only one who could get it because she didn't know how to explain it to Lulu, other than shouting. Leaving Lulu on her own to watch over four rogues was not a wise idea. There was only one way to deal with this situation.

"We need to move. All of us." Talia said.

Lulu glanced at rogues and then at Talia. "Go, where?"

Talia gestured. "That way. There is something and I need to check it out."

Talia led the way with four rogues behind her and Lulu at the back.

Talia was maintaining her aura on the rogues, so they walked slowly.

It didn't take long for Talia to reach the source of the disturbance. She moved the leaves with her hands carefully, unsure what to expect. There was a metallic cube-shaped device lodged between the roots of a massive oak tree.

A few tugs later, a cube-shaped thing was in Talia's hand.

There were buttons and a small display with lights flickering, and Talia found a groove at the back. Upon pressing there, the cube opened and revealed a switch and two small knobs.

"What are you doing?", Lulu asked in an urgent whisper when she saw that Talia was about to press that switch. "What if it's a bomb?"

"I don't think it's a bomb. It's a device that's preventing the mind-link from working." Talia explained.

Lulu was not so confident. "Are you sure?"

"No," Talia admitted. "But if this will blow into our faces, those rogues would be running for their lives." Or at least try to.

"What if they don't know that this is a bomb? We just saw them spontaneously combust. What's to say that this won't blow?"

Talia had to admit that Lulu had a point, but what were their options? "If you are afraid, you are welcome to step back. If this kills me, tell Damon I'm sorry. I did my best."

Lulu made a face. "If you blow up and I survive, Damon will find me and kill me five times over. I will rather stay here and have an honorable death."

"Is it honorable to die in an explosion?"

Lulu thought for a moment. "For a warrior, honorable is to die in a battle. But right now, I'm not a warrior. I'm a guard." Lulu snatched the device from Talia's hand. "Now, Luna, please step back so I can flip this switch."

Before Lulu could react, the cube was back in Talia's hand. "I'm not going anywhere. If you don't want to go, you are welcome to stay."

Lulu opened her mouth to protest, but Talia already flipped the switch.

"You can open your eyes now," Talia said to Lulu teasingly.

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With the device turned off, Talia closed her eyes to sense her surroundings. Everything in close proximity was clear, but that didn't stretch far before images in her mind became blurry again.

'Kitten! Kitten!' Damon's voice sounded in Talia's head, and she nearly teared up at the anguish that came with it.

'I'm here, Damon.'

'WHERE ARE YOU!?' There was a relief, but the anger came quickly to cover it up.

Damon, Maya, Caden, Keith, and Caleb reached the packhouse only to discover that Talia went out to investigate the disappearance of guards.

Didn't he tell her to stay put!?

Damon found Ivy, Lily, and Mila with ease. From them, Damon heard that Lulu and Talia went into the forest, and he couldn't find them in the direction Lily pointed at. Since then, Damon was running around aimlessly, hoping to find Talia and doing his best not to lose his mind while tearing into the bodies of a few rogues who were unfortunate enough to be noticed by Damon and his unit.

'Goddamit, kitten! Are you set on making me die early from anxiety? Where are you!?' Damon was still shouting, but Talia could feel that he was calmer now.

'Follow the bond,' Talia said. 'I'm with Lulu. We found a device that disrupts the mind-link. There are more of those in the area. If your mind-link is not working, you are close to one, and it seems they are also jamming our ability to sense surroundings.'

Damon remembered that his ability was acting up this evening. He thought that maybe he drank too much or someone drugged him, but it didn't cross his mind that there were devices that could interfere with the ability of an Alpha. Who could make such a thing?

Damon focused on sensing his bond with Talia, and he could feel the pull in a specific direction, telling him where Talia was. That was all he needed to run as fast as his paws carried him.

"I can reach Pierce!" Lulu said excitedly. "Their group bumped into rogues. Lidia and Daria got hurt, and Pierce and Jordan took them to get medical help. Kalina, Varya, and their Omega went to meet up with Mila, Ivy, and Lily, and I'm sure they will come here soon. Keith and the guys are also reachable!"

Talia mind-linked Meg, confirming Talia's suspicion that rogues hid these signal-jamming devices through the forest.

Talia realized that someone clever was behind this. If they cut off all communication, people would notice right away. Instead, rogues covered some specific areas, making it appear that the other person was unavailable. They crippled the defenses of the Blue River pack, and people were not aware of it.

Talia stared at the electronic device. "Who could make this?"

Lulu leaned closer to give it a sniff. "It looks human-made."

Talia's silvery eyes widened. "Humans?"

Lulu looked at four rogues with a sneer. "They work for whoever pays. Humans included."

Talia's eyes were perfect circles now. "Are you saying that humans are behind this?"

Lulu shrugged. She didn't know, but... "Anything is possible. We might be concealing our existence from humans, but that doesn't mean they don't know about us. Didn't you watch a movie or two about our kind? Sure, humans got a lot of things wrong, but they got some things right also. That's not a coincidence."

Talia didn't like this. Humans? Didn't the rogue say how they came here for Luna Talia? Why would humans want Luna of the Dark Howlers pack? If they wanted to discuss business, they would contact Damon. Or were they planning to keep Talia hostage and force Damon into something?

All this was giving her a big headache and she really missed Damon and his hug that could make everything better.

"What the...?" Lulu's question was cut short, but it alerted Talia to pay attention to their surroundings.

Small movements could be detected, and Talia figures approaching.

"Seven of them," Talia said under her breath, hoping there were not more that she couldn't pick up.

"Is that Alpha Damon?"

Talia's body tensed when she realized that her senses were messed up again, and the range of how much she could feel clearly on her left was reducing. "It seems they have on them one of those jamming devices."

"Oh, shit..." Lulu mumbled when she confirmed that her mind-link was not working again. "How many of those interfering gadgets are there?"

Talia didn't want to find out.

Four rogues still suppressed by Talia's aura were visibly cheerful now, and one of them said, "Give up, Luna Talia. It will be easier for everyone. Our orders are to not harm you, but we will resort to force if necessary."

Talia ignored them.

"Damon and guys are on their way," Talia said to Lulu, loudly for others to hear, hoping that they would give up and run before they got caught.

Lulu understood the meaning behind Talia's words, but the rogues didn't show an intention of retreating, so there was only one option. "Let's keep them busy until Alpha Damon comes. Maybe he finds a way to interrogate them successfully."

The leader of the rogues shouted at their reinforcements, "Alpha Damon is coming! We need to hurry! Watch out for Luna Talia's..."

He stopped talking when Lulu punched him in the face.

Talia realized that with more rogues coming, the ones they captured were becoming bolder and she worried that they will distract them if the fight erupts.

Talia waved at Lulu to step to the side, and then the crunching of bones was heard as four rogues cried and collapsed.

'We got just their legs, right?' Talia asked Liseli.

'Can you stop worrying about the people who don't have good intentions?' Liseli snorted when she felt that Talia felt guilty about it. 'Just do you, girl, and let me handle bad stuff. Focus on our guests who are approaching steadily.'

At Liseli's words, another wave of anxiety hit Talia. These rogues had no intention of talking as they were already in their wolf forms.

Should she use her powers? Didn't she already expose herself? Talia thought that it didn't matter, not anymore.

Talia could feel the adrenaline rush coming from Liseli, and she gave in.

With a flash of light, Talia became a light gray wolf enveloped in silvery light which made her glow in the dark forest.

The first wolves had reached them already, and growls shook the area as Lulu was entangled in a fight.

Talia kept Lulu on her left, and she exerted her aura in other directions, effectively suppressing the rogues coming from her right.

One rogue from the front jumped at Talia, and she avoided him clumsily, regretting that she didn't get any training to fight in her wolf form.

Sure, Liseli was deadly and charged with instincts to avoid danger and strike enemies. They also had powers, but when everyone was moving swiftly, and there were friendly units around, it was difficult to use those powers.

Talia didn't have time to count, but there were more than ten newcomers.

Talia glanced at Lulu to see that she was facing three wolves, jumping, biting, and kicking, each looking for a chance to get closer to the neck and deliver an incapacitating injury.

Everything around Talia was horrid, but she didn't allow herself to freeze in fear.

Chapter 764 A dark morning (1)

Talia's insides jolted at the sight of a dark gray wolf coming from behind Lulu, and Talia rushed to intercept that one, hoping to lessen Lulu's burden.

The moment Talia's wolf collided with the dark gray wolf, her control of aura slipped, and the five wolves she was holding down moved to jump into the fray.

Talia gave Liseli control and focused on suppressing rogues that were mobile.

Talia tried not to think when Liseli twisted her body and got her fangs into the neck of the dark gray wolf. The sensation of ripping the flesh of a live creature was nauseating, but Talia managed to keep it together and not disturb her wolf. This was not a game.

Once the dark gray wolf stopped moving, Liseli released him and turned to find her next target.

A yelp escaped Liseli's maw when two light brown wolves jumped on her from behind, making her lose her balance.

Talia could feel Liseli's rage mixing with adrenaline as she got back to her feet, and then the whole world slowed down.

Lulu pounced on one of the two light brown wolves that attacked Liseli, pushing him to the side. In the next moment, Lulu was back in the air, about to jump on the second light brown wolf, when two other wolves came from behind Lulu and slammed into her, effectively changing her trajectory.

Lulu's wolf rolled, and before she could stabilize herself, those two wolves were on top of her.

'No! NO!' Talia screamed mentally at the sight of two wolves tearing with their fangs into Lulu's body at the same time.

Talia yanked control from Liseli and dashed toward Lulu as the surge of silvery light exploded in all directions, sending the nearby rogues flying.

...

Damon was on the verge of losing his mind. Where the hell were Talia and Lulu?

He followed the pull of the mate bond, but then it was gone.

The whole forest was eerily quiet, which was never a good sign.

To make things worse, his mind-link was broken, and he was not sure if it was because of those devices Talia mentioned or because Talia and Lulu were engaged in fighting, and they shut down the mind-link so they wouldn't be disturbed.

Damon's anxiety was amplified whenever they bumped into rogues. He could barely sense them, and when spotted, instead of fighting, they would run. What the hell was that?

Damon would chase them if not for the priority of finding Talia. He hoped that patrols of the Blue River pack would discover those loose rogue units.

'Don't!' Damon mind-linked Maya, who started chasing two rogues who were running away. They discovered that even with their mind-linking obstructed, it still worked when they were close by.

'They might have answers,' Maya said to Damon.

'And they might run for reinforcements,' Damon grumbled. 'Our priority is to find Talia. Let's not separate.'

Maya didn't like that they were running in circles without knowing what was going on, but she knew that Damon was right.

A blinding flash of light exploded through the trees, and Damon rushed that way like crazy. There was only one person capable of doing something like that.

'It's my Liseli!' Sapa shouted in Damon's mind. 'She is amazing! And she is angry.'

Damon didn't like it. Talia used her ability, flashing for everyone to see. Didn't he tell her to stay inside and not reveal her powers? But he knew that Talia wouldn't do that unless necessary, which meant she was facing a crisis.

'Faster, Sapa!'

'Any faster, and my paws will come off.'

Keith was right behind Damon, regretting that he didn't have some super-boost or teleporting ability like those witches. He would be there already and see the situation and help Talia and...

'I told you, Keith...' Lulu's voice sounded in Keith's mind through their mind-link. Why did she sound so weak?

'What's going on, Lulu?' Keith asked.

'I told you that I don't need the oath to prove my loyalty,' Lulu said, ignoring Keith's question. 'I always proved my loyalty with actions. Like now...'

'Lulu?' Keith called. 'Lulu!?'

Another silvery flash was seen, this one even stronger than the previous one, and Keith wondered if it was because they were closer or because Talia had increased her power output.

Damon and Keith nearly tripped on a rogue sprawled on the ground. Maya, Caden, and Caleb were right behind them.

"Waaah!" A scream reached them, and they all dashed toward the sound.

Damon's heart tightened at the sight of crying Talia. She was enveloped in silvery light that extended to Lulu's body. Talia was holding Lulu's head in her lap, there was a lot of blood, and he couldn't pick up Lulu's heartbeat.

Damon's urge was to comfort Talia, but his reason told him to first ensure there were no dangers.

Several rogues were unmoving on the ground, most of them were in their wolf forms. Damon guessed that Talia knocked them out somehow, and he frowned when he realized that they were dead.

Damon killed many, and he wouldn't think much about it, but he knew that was not Talia's style, and he was concerned about her mental state.

The pulsating silvery light from Talia's body was dimming, and she sobbed, unaware that Damon hugged her from behind or that Maya, Caden, Keith, and Caleb were also there, on their knees, looking at Lulu's lifeless body. Maya cried silently in Caden's arms, and Keith and Caleb stared at Lulu, having difficulty accepting that she was gone.

Damon held Talia and rocked her gently, letting her hold Lulu and cry it out.

He stared at the tree canopies above them that released some of the early morning light to illuminate the world that was darker compared to yesterday.

After an unknown measure of time, Talia became aware of her surroundings.

Somehow, she was wearing a t-shirt. There was no memory of her putting clothes on, but she was in Damon's embrace, and he was wearing a similar t-shirt also, and she guessed that Damon dressed her up while she was out of it.

Talia didn't register when Caden fetched t-shirts and sweatpants for everyone from the nearby stash of clothes.

Damon's presence enveloped Talia, and she knew he was there, yet she couldn't calm down. Lulu's mutilated body was covered with a dark green t-shirt, and her hands were resting on her chest.

Talia looked at her bloodied hands.

"I tried to save her," Talia said, her voice barely above a whisper. "I couldn't."

"Shhh," Damon shushed her. "It's OK. You did what you could."

"It's not OK," Talia said. How can this be OK? "Lulu died because she protected me. Rogues attacked me, and she jumped to save me and... ah... waaaah!" Talia was crying again. Gory images of rogues tearing into Lulu's body replayed in Talia's mind.

"Lulu's name will be etched in the wall of warriors who made sacrifices for their pack," Damon said, his voice solemn.

"Lulu died with honor," Keith said while struggling to keep his voice from breaking. "She had no regrets." He hoped this was the truth.

Keith knew that Lulu was aware everyone doubted her, yet she still came here and performed her duty like things were fine.

'You did it, Lulu,' Keith spoke into the mind-link, even though he knew Lulu couldn't hear him anymore. 'You proved your loyalty. Luna and Alpha acknowledged you and are mourning your loss. Did you hear you've got a spot on the wall of fallen warriors? That's the highest honor a warrior could have. Your father will be proud.'

Chapter 765 A dark morning (2)

Damon's heart was breaking for Talia. It was her first time seeing something like that, and not just seeing but being in the middle of it. He knew that Talia was drowning in guilt that will plague her for years to come.

He was there about a decade ago when people died around him, for him, and there was nothing he could do about it. People told him it was not his fault, and it was their duty, and that didn't lessen the burden he felt. Actually, it made it worse because he thought of himself as a weak link that was causing everyone near him to die. Those were dark times in Damon's life, and he didn't have time to mourn one death before the next one came, and he wondered if people would be better off without him.

But then he had Caden and Stephanie, and they convinced him that pack without him will suffer, and the only way to prevent unnecessary carnage was for Damon to get stronger. And he did.

Over the years, he trained in much more than fighting. Damon hardened his heart and steeled his mind and managed to push through crisis after crisis... but this was Talia, his delicate kitten. She was breaking apart in his arms, and he hated it.

If he had one wish, that would be the power to erase this evening from her memory.

Damon got an idea. What if he uses the memory-erasing potion?

'You shouldn't think that way,' Sapa said. 'Mate is strong. She is kind, which is wonderful, but in our world, that could lead to her death.'

Damon knew all that. Of course, he did. How many times did he tell Talia that people are malicious and that she should be cautious? But he loved that about her. Her nurturing nature allowed her to see the best in people.

Damon wished to be stronger, strong enough for both of them so that he could protect Talia from all the bad in this world. He would face the ugly stuff and let her stay pure and innocent with her untainted heart that was always ready to forgive.

Suddenly, Talia stopped crying, and her head whipped to the right. She narrowed her silvery eyes in that direction as if she could see through the trees and dense foliage.

"What is it?" Damon asked.

Without answering, Talia stood up slowly and started walking in that direction. She stepped over bodies of dead rogues like they were nothing and then continued moving straight. Damon was right behind her, and so were Maya and Caden.

Keith and Caleb stayed next to Lulu's body, per Caden's command.

Talia circled one bush and stopped in front of a body. His presence was so vague that one would think he was not there or was dead, but he was staring at Talia, Damon, Maya, and Caden.

"A live one," Maya said. "Good, we can interrogate him."

"We can't," Talia said dryly. "The moment he tries to divulge anything about this operation, he will burst into flames."

Maya, Caden, and Damon frowned at Talia's words. They had never heard of such a thing as people bursting into flames for snitching.

"Are you sure?" Maya asked.

Talia confirmed with a stiff nod and pointed at the guy who didn't move a muscle. "My guess is that painted outfit on him has some enchantment to conceal their presence and to prevent him from talking. Even when I used my aura to force them into talking, they burst into flames." It was close to the truth, as she couldn't say in front of Maya and Caden that Liseli was forcing her way into their minds.

"So, what do we do?" Caden asked. "We can't interrogate him, and we can't let him go."

"Kill him," Talia said.

"No, wait!" Damon shouted. "Don't dirty your hands, kitten. Let me do it."

Talia looked at Damon, and her eyes stopped flickering in silvery light in a silent agreement. Right, her Damon was here, with his power to make everything better.

The scene of Lulu dying left a gaping hole in Talia's heart, and she wondered if Damon will be able to mend it somehow, or at least make it less painful. Talia wondered if she was too greedy. Should she expect Damon to fix all her problems?

"Let's us take care of this guy," Maya said, indicating that she and Caden will kill the rogue. "We need to take Lulu and get out of here."

The daylight didn't make this forest any less gloomy, and it fully revealed that they were all covered in cuts and bruises, but the biggest drain was on their mind. They all wanted to head back, wash off remnants of this night and maybe wake up to find that it was just a bad dream.

Caden gestured to Maya to step back. "I will do it." He turned to look at the rogue. "You are lucky. I will make this quick."

The rogue couldn't believe this! Why were they casually talking about who will kill him? And what was that nonsense about luck for making it quick? Lucky was being alive, and that was what he wanted!

He cursed his non-existent luck.

He grew up in a human city with his mother, who was a she-wolf. His mother passed last year, and since then, he has been wandering, trying to find out more about his kind because his mother never spoke about werewolves.

Only two months ago, he joined Tristan's group of rogues, and until now, he made a few trips to human town to collect some packages. He was a messenger. For tonight, they told him that he only needed to come here and act as a scout, to navigate people in various directions if anyone stumbles upon him and avoid fighting. It should be an easy thing as he was always a quick runner and good at hiding. After all, he spent his teenage years among humans and they didn't discover that he was different.

After experiencing how werewolves live, he realized it was not so glorious as he hoped it would be. He was planning to head South after getting his reward money. He dreamed of sunny beaches and half-naked babes, and not this who-will-kill-him crap!

They all seemed eager to end him, and he didn't dare cry for mercy. How can he get out of this?

Caden reached for the rogue, who was pushing himself away from Caden, using his arms and legs, and resembling an inverted spider.

"I didn't do anything," he said. "I was told..."

"Do I look like I care?" Caden interrupted him.

"Let him talk," Talia said. "The more he talks, the higher is the probability he will burst into flames and save you the trouble."

The rogue shut his mouth with so much force that his teeth clattered.

After two more attempts for Caden to grab the rogue's neck, Caden lost his patience and grabbed the guy's ankle. He would tackle the rogue, but the guy was naked, and Caden didn't want to engage in more skinship than necessary.

"Stay still, will ya?" Caden said irritably.

The scene would be comical if not for everyone's wretched states and for the fact that they were set on killing the guy.

Damon rolled his eyes. Why was this taking so long? "Move to the side, Caden."

The rogue thought they will spare him, but then Damon released Talia from his hold and moved to stand above him.

"It will be your honor to experience death from Alpha Damon, the Alpha of the Dark Howlers pack. Any last words? You have three seconds. Talia, look away."

The rogue felt like crying. First luck, now honor? This was more like horror!

Chapter 766 Things were not all bad (1)

'Will you let that rogue die just like that?' Liseli's voice sounded in Talia's head.

Talia didn't get it. 'What?'

'We can get into his mind and get some information before he self-combusts.'

Talia thought how that made sense.

"Damon, wait! Let me do it."

The rogue's eyes were wide as saucers. Now she wanted to kill him? Were they tagging each other? At this rate, he will die from stress.

"No, kitten..."

"Please. I know what I'm doing."

The rogue hoped they would bicker more, and he would use that chance to escape.

At the sight of Damon yielding to Talia, the rogue swallowed hard. Even the big bad Alpha was listening to her, which told the rogue that Talia was probably the most dangerous out of the four.

An unfamiliar Alpha aura reached them, and they saw two figures approaching. Kalina and Varya.

'I will tell them what happened,' Maya said to Damon through the pack mind-link, to which he nodded, and Maya moved to intercept the newcomers.

"What's going on?" Kalina asked Maya while craning her neck to see where Damon and Talia were looking. Was there something on the ground?

Maya waved like it was not important. "Just a rogue. They will end him in a moment. You might want to look away."

"No..." Varya said under her breath and rushed that way.

Varya's sight was obstructed by bushes, but there was a distinct scent of oranges that didn't belong there, and her wolf was going crazy, which could mean only one thing.

The rogue scrambled to his feet and looked at Talia nervously.

"Wait. Wait," he pleaded. He had no idea what Talia was up to, but he knew it was nothing good. "Can we talk about this?"

Talia had no intention of chatting. She was about to force her way into the rogue's mind when...

"NO!" Varya shouted and threw herself at the male who was quick to catch her.

"Move aside, woman," Damon grumbled at Varya. He knew that was Kalina's sister, but he forgot her name.

Seeing that Varya had no intention of moving, Damon's temper flared. Why did it take so long to kill this bug?

"The thing you are protecting is a rogue, and he is..."

"Varya's mate," Talia ended Damon's sentence, and Damon gaped at Talia.

"What did you say?" Caden asked, wondering if his ears malfunctioned.

It was rare for rogues to be mated, but it was not unheard of. Unfortunately, due to their wild nature, rogues were not known as the most loyal mates. Needless to say that those couples don't find their happy ending as the rogue usually ends up exploiting his (or her) mate.

Caden didn't know much about Varya besides her name and that she was one of five Wilkow sisters, but he already felt sorry for the female. Kalina and Tatiana were mated to Alphas, and Daria and Lidia to established warriors, and what all four had in common were that their mates adored them. As for Varya and this rogue, Caden had a bad feeling.

"They are mates," Talia repeated.

Damon needed a moment to process this information. How he saw this, Kalina's sister and the rogue being mates didn't change a thing. "I'm sorry for your unfortunate destiny, but the sooner you step away from each other, the less painful it will be."

Damon looked at Kalina, who was only a few steps away now with Maya by her side. "How about you get your sister out of here?"

"We can't kill him," Talia said.

Damon couldn't believe this. "What?"

"Look at them," Talia said.

Varya was holding onto the rogue, and he was trying to push her to stand behind him. When that didn't work, he turned his back to Talia and Damon, blocking Varya from their view.

"He is a rogue!" Damon said, believing that this explained how that guy shouldn't be left alive. "Do you know how much trouble they are causing? Do you know how many people they harmed? Just tonight, at least a dozen warriors perished! Lulu is dead!"

Varya's eyes filled with tears. Her heart ached, it really did, but how could she choose between what's right and her other half? Her wolf howled and scratched to come out at the thought of Varya abandoning this orange-infused man.

"Then kill me with him," Varya said.

"Don't harm her! I never killed a person," the rogue said. "I am a messenger, a scout. I'm..."

"Stop talking," Talia said. "If you say too much, if you even think about betraying your leader, you might burst into flames."

The rogue wondered if he heard this right. Were they giving up on killing him, or was the leader-lady with silvery eyes saying that only so his mate doesn't get hurt? He tightened his hold on Varya, just in case.

"Don't try to separate us. If he goes to the dungeon, I will go with him." Varya said in a shaky voice.

Kalina couldn't believe this. She heard plenty of stories about rogues to know that they were trouble.

"Let go of my sister, you... you... animal!"

"I'm holding onto him as well," Varya protested.

"Do you know him from before?" Kalina asked.

Varya looked into the rogue's eyes. "My soul knows him. That's enough."

The scene of Varya defending him fiercely made him forget that just a few seconds ago, four people were set on killing him. She was his mate, and she smelled of peanut butter, the one he had loved to eat since he was a child. His favorite part was licking the jar clean, and he knew that he loved her already.

Caden raised his hands toward Varya, palms up, to get her attention. "Varya, I know things in Europe are different, and you didn't grow up in a pack. But rogues are dangerous. They will steal and kill without blinking."

"I can tell he is not dangerous," Varya said stubbornly. How could he be dangerous? He was her other half, and his eyes were full of wonder and affection even though he didn't know her name. "I am Varya."

"Varya." He repeated. "I am Grady."

"Grady," she said dreamily while tracing with her finger his jaw that was covered in a few days old stubble. "It suits you."

Kalina was unsure what to think of the scene in front of her, and she was not the only one.

Varya and Grady stared at each other, they were mates who found their other half, which should be a good thing, but this was different.

"No kissing!" Kalina exclaimed, making Varya and Grady look her way. "If you truly care about my sister, you will control your urge to kiss her, mark her, or mate her until we clarify your status."

Grady nodded right away, and only then Kalina realized that his so-called tight clothes were just bodypaint. He was naked!

"Put some clothes on! And stop clinging to my sister! Scoundrel!" Kalina hissed, releasing some of her Alpha aura that made both Varya and Grady take a step back from Kalina.

Talia smiled sadly at the scene because even when faced with Kalina's Alpha pressure, Grady was quick to stand in front of Varya protectively. Somehow, it told Talia that things were not all bad as there was some good in the world.

Chapter 767 Things were not all bad (2)

Damon looked at Talia and asked through their mind-link, 'What do you want to do with the rogue? What if he killed our people? Do you want me to handle him?'

Talia was not sure what was the right thing to do. She was aware that her emotions were unstable. So many things happened, and until Varya jumped on Grady, Talia actually wanted to kill him. What was wrong with her? Did the darkness creep into her heart again, or was it the harsh reality?

Whichever it was, Talia knew that if she made a rash decision, she would regret it.

'Let's think about this,' Talia said. 'We can't kill him without evidence, not with Varya being his mate. If he is not one of the bad guys, he will help us out.'

'What if he backstabs us?'

'Then, we will kill him.'

Damon cocked an eyebrow at Talia. He sensed that her hostility was fizzling down, and he was not sure if that was a good thing or not.

Adrenaline helped Talia move after what happened to Lulu, but now that Talia was calming down, Damon was watching her and wondering if she will collapse due to heartache.

Kalina's rant at Varya and her newly-found mate broke the grim atmosphere filled with death that suffocated them, and Talia could breathe easier.

Damon spoke to his Betas, "Caden, can you get some clothes for him? The two of you will escort them to the packhouse and keep an eye on him until Alpha Maddox decides how to handle him."

"What about the self-combusting thing?" Maya asked. She had no problems escorting a rogue, but she was uncomfortable with the idea of him becoming a man-torch and possibly harming people around him.

Talia was thinking about it since she realized that the body paint on rogues was enchanted. "Call Cornelia to check on him. She might be able to remove it. Also, if I'm right that it's due to the paint, a shower might wash it away."

Maya thought about how it made sense, but... wasn't that a too simple solution? Can evil spells be washed away with water?

"Keith and Caleb will take care of Lulu," Damon said to Talia. "We should also go to the packhouse."

Talia really wanted to go to the packhouse, but... "We can't go. We need to help Max and his men find jamming devices. Until Max's warriors can communicate properly, we are all in danger."

Damon agreed with this, but he had a condition, "We are doing it together. No separating."

He was still angry because Talia didn't listen. Why couldn't she stay put in the packhouse?

Sure, she is powerful, and she found these jamming devices, and thanks to a strange twist in events, even Varya found her mate, a rogue that might be a significant asset if he agrees to cooperate. But none of those would be worth a squat if Talia was hurt... or worse. And he knew that the scar of Lulu's death will take forever to heal. His kitten had her brave face on, but Damon could feel she was on the verge of cracking.

"You can't comb this forest on your own," Kalina said. "Tony is with Max. Tell me what you need, and I will send them a message."

"First, inform him about these devices.", Talia said. "They are obstructing the mind-link and Alpha's aura. We found one hidden among the roots of..." Talia's breath hitched at the mental image of her and Lulu

bickering about who will flip the switch. It felt like just a minute ago, Lulu was right there, closing her eyes in panic while bracing herself for an explosion that never came.

"It will be alright," Damon spoke softly while pulling Talia into his embrace, guessing that Talia was breaking down again because of Lulu.

She buried her face into his chest. "Does the pain go away?"

"No," he said. "But you learn to accept it as your new normal. Think of your memories as a way of honoring the ones who died."

Damon's heart ached as Talia sobbed into his chest. He told himself that it was all part of the process she had to go through. Bad things happen to good people, and there was nothing they could do about it.

After an unknown measure of time, Talia peeled herself from Damon. She glanced embarrassingly to see that Maya, Caden, Kalina, Varya, and Grady were there, all pretending to not notice her meltdown.

Talia wiped her cheeks with the back of her palm.

She frowned at the wet patch of tears and snot on Damon's t-shirt, and somehow... it reminded her of an evening next to the lake, where she ruined his designer's shirt, and he forced her to touch his chest, and then they watched fireworks. That memory felt like it was from ages ago as so many things have happened since then.

At that time, Talia was shy around Damon, reluctant to get closer, yet now she needed him more than air. He was her home.

"You need another t-shirt," she said.

"I will keep this one. Like this, parts of you will always be with me."

"How about you get another t-shirt, and I stay with you?"

Caden was already passing a t-shirt to Damon, but Damon didn't take it.

Damon was focused on Talia. "Do you promise to not leave my side?"

"Don't make it sound like this separation was my fault," Talia grumbled. "You were the one running out to fight rogues, and you told me to stay inside."

Damon knew that he was at fault here, but... "I did it for your safety."

This reminded Talia of one thing she didn't tell Damon. She was not sure how others will react, so she spoke through their mind-link. 'They were here for me, Damon.'

Damon felt his hair rising. 'What?'

'They didn't know me as Alpha Natalia. They addressed me as your Luna. Someone from the Dark Howlers pack told them that you left for this event with your Luna, and that's how they knew I will be here.'

Damon needed a moment to calm down. 'Kitten. This is important. Why didn't you tell me this right away?'

Talia didn't want to argue. 'If you are like this, next time, I won't tell you.'

Damon couldn't believe this. 'Next time?' But he also knew she was right. 'I'm sorry, kitten. It's just... I am worried about your safety. Next time, we won't separate. If I go hunting rogues, you are coming with me.'

'Alright,' Talia said and continued speaking normally for everyone to hear. "Take the t-shirt Caden is giving you, and we can start searching for those devices. If my hunch is correct, most of them will be close to the packhouse."

Damon frowned in disapproval. "You want us to go through this forest randomly?"

Talia paused. She knew that was not feasible. "We don't need to. We can circle the packhouse and fish out a few devices to show them to Max's warriors. Once they see what those devices look like, they can spread out to search for them. If their mind-link doesn't work, that will mean they are nearby..."

Chapter 768 A pregnant Luna

In the packhouse...

Tatiana had her hands full with sorting through reports about damage and casualties.

The pack hospital was getting filled quickly. In order to handle an unprecedented number of injured, the doctors set up a tent outside to triage patients and do first-aid before deciding if they could be sent home or if they needed to stay in the pack hospital. Cornelia went there with Ivy and Lily to help with patients, and Meg stayed by Tatiana's side to help her with administrative work.

It was busy, and the hardest part was when they needed to take a note of another life lost. The number of fatalities reached seventeen.

Tatiana was exhausted and overwhelmed. She took a sip of now cold coffee and waved to a nearby Omega to bring her another.

"Should you be drinking coffee?" Meg asked Tatiana.

Tatiana puffed her cheeks in frustration. She loved coffee. But now she was pregnant, and she needed to eat (and drink) healthy things.

"Make it herbal tea. Something refreshing.", Tatiana said to the Omega, and then she turned to Meg. "Happy?"

"I will be when you mind-link that woman to make two of those."

Tatiana did as Meg asked, and then she looked around the living room. People were coming in and out, talking in hushed voices. The solemn atmosphere and grim expressions were obvious signs of how serious their situation was.

Tatiana's eyes moved to the papers scattered on the low table in front of her. How did things fall apart so quickly?

They were planning her wedding. It was supposed to be elegant and glamorous, something that future generations will talk about, and they will, but for the wrong reasons.

No one will remember the previous night as the one where Alpha Maddox and Luna Tatiana had a fantastic ceremony. This will be the day of mourning, the day when many perished. Seventeen good people were gone, and Tatiana feared that every next report might increase that number.

The unexpectedly large number of rogues they found within their territory was evidence that someone leaked not only the latest information about their patrols but also helped rogues pick the right spots to hide. That could be done only by someone from the Blue River pack. A traitor.

Tatiana could sense Maddox's anger and anguish mixing, and she was unsure how to help him. He was out there with warriors, ensuring that no rogues were left lingering, but no matter how much they combed the forest, there were always spots left unchecked. Damn it!

Maya and Kalina entered the living room that was filled with people, and Tatiana was in the middle of it all.

"We need a place to store Lulu's body until we can take her home," Maya said to Tatiana right away. "Somewhere cold. With water would be best, so that we can wash her. We don't want her father to see her like that."

Tatiana's heart ached. How much bad news one night can produce?

Tatiana had difficulty believing how that same night, Lulu was in this living room, munching on grapes and enthusiastically escorting Talia, yet now Tatiana needed to find a place for her body.

"I am sorry for your loss," Tatiana said, and Maya nodded in acknowledgment.

"Take her to the basement. An Omega will show you which room you can use."

"Thank you, Tanya," Maya responded, and the fact that she didn't move meant there was more.

"Anything else?" Tatiana asked Maya.

"I don't see Cornelia here."

"She is at the pack hospital, helping."

"Can you send a message that she should come here? There is a situation that only she can handle," Maya said cryptically.

Tatiana's eyes lost focus for a moment, and then she said, "Someone will tell her to come as soon as she can."

Maya thanked Tatiana and left.

"Tanya?" Kalina called.

Before Kalina could say anything, Tatiana was talking.

"You can help me with these." Tatiana gestured at one stack of papers that one Omega had brought in. "Count injured, see if any are dead, take note if repairs or supplies are needed, and let me know if anything stands out."

Seeing that Kalina didn't move, Tatiana looked at her impatiently.

"Did you come to look at me or to help?"

"Neither."

Tatiana couldn't believe this. The correct answer would be to help! "Why are you here then?"

Kalina was trying to figure out how to say this, but there was no point in sugarcoating it, so she decided to say it outright.

"Varya found her mate," Kalina said, and she pressed her lips into a line while bracing for impact.

Tatiana's eyes widened in surprise. That's fantastic news! But why did Kalina's mood seem off? And why did she say it softly so that others don't hear? Tatiana thought of one possibility, "Is he injured?"

"No."

"Then? Is there something wrong with him?"

"You could say that," Kalina said. "He is not affiliated with any pack."

Tatiana was stressed and exhausted, and she hated that Kalina spoke in riddles. What was that supposed to mean? Was he one of their kind? Their parents always said how only special werewolves could live like them: as individuals, without a pack link, and without their wolves going feral. The Wilkow parents spoke about it like it was a big deal, and Kalina should be happy if Varya's mate was one of them. Or was he human?

"Can you stop beating around the bush?" Tatiana asked impatiently. "Just tell me what's the deal with him."

"A rogue."

Tatiana's mouth hung open. "Sorry. It's been a long night. For a moment, I thought you said how he is a rogue."

"That's what I said."

"Is he alive?"

Kalina confirmed. "He was captured by the group from the Dark Howlers pack. Varya said that if we kill him, we need to kill her as well."

Tatiana was sure that the room was spinning. "Where is she? I want to talk to her!"

"Caden is watching them outside on the driveway. We are still not sure where to take them."

"Them? THEM?" Tatiana's temper was rising. "Who is THEM!?"

All Omegas in the room covered under the wave of Tatiana's aura. It was obvious that their Luna was angry.

Kalina raised her hands, palms up, indicating to Tatiana to calm down. "Them. Them. Didn't I tell you that Varya found her mate? They are together. His name is Grady."

Kalina wanted to say how he seemed to be a good guy, but the truth was that Kalina didn't believe in that herself. And how can she vouch for a man who came with the same group which caused all this mess?

Kalina saw fights and injuries, but this was different. People died. Until a few minutes ago, she was escorting Lulu's body. That was Lulu, a female she knew, a warrior with a promising future, Talia's personal guard, about the same age as Kalina... but it was all gone now. A life was gone.

Kalina had no idea how Tatiana was holding on, but she knew that if this happened in the Lightclaw pack, she would feel responsible for every injury and death. That was a weight too heavy for anyone to carry. And Kalina could guess that Tatiana hated rogues specifically.

"Grady," Tatiana said with disgust. "Now they have names, do they?"

Tatiana stood up abruptly and walked out in large strides.

Kalina was quick to follow after her sister.

What will Tatiana do? Kalina was unsure, but Tatiana always had a temper, and now she was also under the influence of pregnancy hormones. Kalina had a good guess that Grady should brace for impact and Varya should get ready to defend her bond.

Chapter 769 Venting anger

Grady and Varya were sitting on the elevated edge that was separating the driveway from the lawn. They held hands and stared at each other.

Varya had so many questions, but she didn't feel like asking because Caden was right there, behind them.

Grady's eyes were darting all over Varya's petite face, lingering on her inviting lips he wanted to claim, but he held back. Not because of Caden, but because of Varya.

From everyone's attitude, Grady understood that people were looking down on him. He grew up with his mother, away from this world of werewolves, and when he bumped into Tristan and his group, no one told him that being a rogue was a bad thing.

They said they were free spirits, able to make their decisions and live on their own terms, and Grady thought how that sounded nice. As a bonus, for the first time in his life, he didn't need to hide when shifting into his wolf form, and there were many others just like him.

For the first time, he felt like he belonged somewhere.

But even with that, there were confinements he didn't like. The primary issues were that amenities in their small settlement were lacking and they had to be extra careful when venturing outside.

Tristan personally taught him to conceal his presence, and he had to be more vigilant than when he lived among humans.

When Grady asked why they were hiding like thieves if they did nothing wrong, Tristan told him that some of their kind live in packs and that unaffiliated werewolves like them were jeopardizing that

hierarchy because youngsters from packs looked up to them. At that time, Grady believed Tristan, and now that he saw everyone looking at him like he was dirty, Grady's belief in that firmed.

If not for Varya, Grady would find a way to leave this wretched place.

But she was there, holding his hand, and the electrifying sparks told him that this was his home. With Varya.

Both Grady and Varya jolted when a fierce aura reached them.

"Sister!" Varya called Tatiana first. "Let me introduce you to..."

A low growl escaped Tatiana's lips, and Varya moved to stand in front of Grady.

"He is my mate. You can't..."

"This is my territory," Tatiana cut off Varya. "No one will tell me what I can and can't do here."

Caden swiftly moved to stand between the couple and angry Luna. "Calm down, Luna Tatiana. My Alpha and Luna sent him here. He can be of help."

Tatiana frowned. "What can a scum like him help?"

"He has information. But he can't disclose it now because of something they did..." Caden explained about body paint and bursting into flames and that Cornelia might be able to help.

"Stay away from him!" Tatiana hissed at Varya and then turned to Caden. "If body paint is the problem, why don't we wash it off? I'm sure we have a pressure washer nearby. Or how about we peel his skin off?"

"Tanya!" Varya called pleadingly.

"What!?" Tatiana snapped. "I heard you. He is your mate. But that doesn't change the fact he is a rogue. Do you know how many people we lost last night? We have casualties among guests, people in shelters, and our people. Warriors who were born and raised here, our people. I felt them, Varya. I felt when their lives were extinguished. It was like a part of me died, and it was all his fault!"

"He didn't kill anyone!" Varya shouted at Tatiana.

"His hands have no blood on them, and that makes it OK? Would his hands still be clean if he was caught later? If he meant no harm, why did he come here? Do you think that only by killing he could harm us? That rogue you call mate came here with people who killed MY people. My schedule is filled with joyful activities to entertain high-ranking members of other packs, but instead, I need to visit a dozen families and tell them that their sons and daughters died. Do you think that anyone will feel better because they died honorably, protecting this pack? There wouldn't be any need to protect the pack if they didn't come here! Gods! I would kill him myself if that would bring any of those innocent souls back. I would kill him right now if that would soothe wounds my pack suffered."

Tatiana jolted when Kalina's hand landed on her shoulder.

"Are you done venting your anger?" Kalina asked.

Tatiana glared at Kalina. "You tell me."

"We are all tired. Max and Tony are on their way back, and I suggest we take a quick break, shower, and eat. Let Omegas work on reports while you get a breather. You are pregnant now, and you need to take care of that baby."

...

When James returned, he saw Cornelia in front of the packhouse. She was squatting and collecting with cotton swabs samples of Grady's body paint.

James didn't like that Cornelia was so close to another guy, and he was on the verge of shifting and tearing that guy into pieces, but then he realized that other people were present. Maya, Caden, and Kalina were watching what Cornelia was doing, and a few warriors were standing nearby in attention, obviously keeping an eye on Grady.

James scrunched his nose. Why did he smell a rogue?

"After you wash up, we will see what's next," Cornelia said to Grady.

Before James reached her, Cornelia whipped her head in his direction, and her eyes scanned his exhausted form anxiously.

Dropping the samples in Maya's hands, Cornelia dashed toward James, and he welcomed her eagerly into his embrace.

"I was worried," she spoke into his shoulder.

"It's all fine now, Cora," he responded.

She nodded. It was not fine, but it was much better because they were together.

Two seconds later, Cornelia's body stiffened as she remembered, "What if your father is watching?"

James had no intention of letting her go. He needed her presence more than air, but he also needed a justification for their public display of affection. It took him a second to come up with something.

"My father knows we spent the night together. I left a great impression by satisfying you repeatedly, and it's normal that you are concerned about me."

Cornelia couldn't believe that he was using this as a chance to boost his ego, but she didn't want to bicker. "Is kiss acceptable?"

"Cora, Cora. Kiss is a necessity."

Their lips met in an urgent kiss that lasted much shorter than they wanted.

"You should shower," Cornelia said. He was wearing clothes that didn't fit him well, there were traces of mud and dried blood on him, but Cornelia craved privacy with her mate.

While James was away, Cornelia was worried sick. That's why she went to the pack hospital to help. She wanted to keep busy and ensure that if James was injured, she would be there to tend to him.

The time in the pack hospital felt like forever, every new patient made her stomach tighten at the thought that it might be James, and then she felt guilty because of the happiness when she realized how that bloodied warrior was not James. The whole night was an emotional rollercoaster, and she wanted just to snuggle with James behind closed doors and never come out.

"I will shower," James said to Cornelia before adding, "But only if you are coming."

"I wouldn't miss it for the world."

"Breakfast starts in five minutes!" Kalina shouted after them. "Food will be waiting for the next two hours! You have an option to ask for food in your room!"

Chapter 770 A gloomy breakfast

Nora spent the night in one of the side houses, and she had no idea why the whole packhouse was busy so early in the morning. She thought about sneaking in before breakfast or at least making it low-key, but she underestimated how early these people woke up.

"Did something happen?" Nora asked one Omega.

"We had a minor incident, but nothing that should concern you," Omega responded as Luna Tatiana instructed.

They still didn't know the extent of damage and casualties, and until they prepared an official statement, the story for guests was that nothing major happened.

The Blue River pack returned to their regular routine as people were emerging from shelters. On the outside, things looked normal, and only the warriors who were in the middle of it knew how bad it was.

There was one soul that suffered a heavy blow. Jane couldn't stop sobbing, no matter how much Mindy comforted her. Only after Gideon fired up the calming incense did Jane fall asleep.

Beta Oliver returned, and he immediately relieved Maya and Caden from the burden of watching over Grady.

Warriors escorted Grady to the shared bathroom that soldiers used. It was a big space with dozens of showerheads, so Grady could clean up while being watched. Of course, Varya followed Grady. She didn't want to leave him out of sight, fearing someone might attack him just because he was a rogue.

Varya didn't get it. She was also a wolf without a pack. Would they look down on her also if her sister was not the Luna here?

Varya grew up in a diverse environment, with more humans than werewolves, and she learned to judge everyone by how they treated her. Based on that criteria, Grady was definitely a good guy. Why can't they leave them alone?

Damon and Talia worked with a few smaller units of warriors to identify the cube-shaped devices. After finding a few, Damon suggested they return to the packhouse, but Talia wanted to keep going.

"You won't achieve anything if you work yourself into collapsing, kitten," Damon said. He knew that she was staying busy so that she didn't think about Lulu's death. "You didn't sleep the whole night."

"You didn't sleep either," Talia retorted. "And neither did these warriors. I'm just doing what I can."

"You should listen to me when I say that doing this is only postponing the inevitable. We have a lot to do and some things only we can do, and this is not one of them."

Talia gave in grudgingly. Staying distracted was not working anyway. Whenever she saw a cube-shaped device, Lulu's face resurfaced in Talia's memory, and Talia's heart ached. It wouldn't hurt that badly if Lulu didn't die while protecting Talia, and it would hurt even less if Talia didn't suspect Lulu of being a traitor. Talia believed she wronged Lulu, and it was too late to say sorry and fix things.

Breakfast was gloomy.

People who knew what happened last night didn't want to talk about it. There was a danger that casualties from last night could be labeled as Maddox's and Tatiana's incompetence, so no relevant information left their inner circle, especially because they had press members in attendance.

Talia was unsure if she wanted to reveal that she was marked, but she had no intention of applying makeup, so she tied a silk scarf around her neck.

Damon was wearing a polo t-shirt, and he lifted the collar. It made him look cool, and it also concealed Talia's mark there.

They were all sitting in the same positions as they did for dinner on the previous night, with the difference that about one-half of the seats were empty.

Even with that, there were more than a hundred people present, and guests were coming to Beta Oliver to inquire about Maddox and Tatiana. Everyone hoped to hear from Alpha and Luna of the Blue River pack about last night's disturbance.

After the third group came to Beta Oliver, he went to the stage and took the microphone.

"I would ask for your attention, please," Beta Oliver said. "Last night, we had an intrusion of rogues into our territory that caused everyone inconvenience. Reports are still coming in, and once we know the details, we will share them with you. Until then, we can assure you that the situation is resolved. We will proceed with our schedule for today as planned, with the difference that our Alpha and Luna might be absent for some time while they catch up on their sleep. Thank you for your understanding."

Of course, Maddox and Tatiana were not resting. They were working from their room while having their meal there because they knew that people would disturb them. After last night's events, Maddox and Tatiana didn't have the capacity to smile and entertain their guests, and they had many things to handle. Guests will need to wait.

"I don't see James and Cornelia here," Talia said.

"They asked for food to be delivered to their room," Maya responded. "After they are done, Cornelia will see Grady to deal with his fiery problem."

"I want to be there also," Talia demanded.

Maya glanced nervously at Damon, who was frowning in disapproval.

"I thought you would rest," Damon said to Talia.

"Can you rest in these circumstances?"

When Damon didn't respond, Talia turned to Maya. "What happened to Lulu?"

Maya lowered her gaze. "We found her a good place for now and cleaned her."

Talia turned to Damon. "I know we said we will stay for three days, but..."

"We can return whenever you want," Damon said.

Talia was grateful for his understanding. She wanted to return to the Dark Howlers pack with Lulu and talk to her father in person, but first... "As soon as we figure out things with Grady and hear what he has to say, we can go."

...

In the room on the second floor...

James absentmindedly fed Cornelia.

"You should eat also," she said while offering him a forkful of scrambled eggs. When he opened his mouth to accept her offerings, Cornelia asked, "Will you tell me what's going on?"

He was unusually quiet and clingy. They were sitting on the sofa next to each other, connected at the hips. Any closer and she would sit on his lap.

James shook his head. "It's been a long night." His arm snaked around her shoulders, and he pulled her to lean on him. "I'm glad you are here."

Cornelia exhaled helplessly. She couldn't do anything if he was unwilling to talk.

A knock on the door disturbed the silence, and James opened the door to see Maddox.

"Alpha Maddox, what brings you here?" James asked.

"Sorry to interrupt, but I have a question," Maddox said and gestured toward the room, indicating that they should talk inside.

Maddox closed the door behind him. "This is about... you know who. Do you have instructions on how to deal with her body?"

James didn't expect that. "Do whatever you normally do."

"We normally bury them in our cemetery unless they previously expressed a desire for a different location or to be cremated, in which case we will try to fulfill their final wishes. I thought, considering her identity..."

James raised his hand, interrupting whatever Maddox was about to say next. "The Red Moon pack was never her home. If you want to ask about any special requests, I suggest you ask that female child who was crying over her."

Maddox nodded in understanding. "I apologize for interrupting and... I'm sorry for your loss."

With that, Maddox left the room.