

Alphas Bride 91

Chapter 91 - Private Talk With Axel

Talia came down the stairs, her legs filled with piercing aches with her every move.

Talia wished to stay in bed, but she had to come down because she needed to help with breakfast and there was no way she would allow this to prevent her from seeing the festival.

"Miss Talia...", a deep voice called the moment Talia reached the hallway on the main floor and Talia saw Axel looking at her.

"I saw you last night, and I took the liberty of asking for your name from Beta Maya even though I didn't get a chance to introduce myself. My name is Axel, and I am visiting from the Midnight Guardians pack. May I have a word with you?"

Talia blinked. This was Axel, the future Alpha of the mysterious Midnight Guardians pack. Talia knew that because Dawn couldn't stop talking about him and Dawn said that he barely spared her a glance no matter how much she tried to get close to him while setting the dishes on the table last night, yet here he was, asking Talia for a chat, and he called her 'Miss Talia', like she is someone important. Talia liked that.

Talia glanced left and right to confirm if there is anyone else in sight, but there was none.. Just the two of them. "How can I help you?"

"In private, please."

Talia blinked. Private? Other than her room (or his), Talia didn't know about any other private place, and being alone in the room with a stranger didn't seem appropriate. "How about the garden?"

Axel nodded in agreement, and he smiled a little. "Lead the way, Miss Talia."

There it was, the 'Miss Talia' again.

"Are you alright?", Axel asked when they stepped into the garden.

She looked at him questionably and he explained, "The way you move, it's different compared to last night. Did you get hurt?"

Talia was embarrassed to disclose that her body feels like she is about to fall apart after half an hour of exercising. "It's nothing. Don't worry about it."

She stopped walking and glanced around. "I believe this is private enough." They were not really far from the packhouse, but she didn't want to go too far away because she had no idea why would someone like Axel want privacy with her.

Axel saw that Talia was uncomfortable and he gestured to the nearby bench. "How about we sit?"

Talia welcomed the sitting offer because her legs were killing her. If Axel didn't stop her in the hallway, by now she would be in the kitchen, preferably seated and helping with breakfast preparations.

They sat on the bench, facing each other and the silence stretched between them.

After some time, Talia cleared her throat. "I don't want to appear rude, but I need to head to the kitchen in order to prepare breakfast so..."

Axel understood her point. He knew what he wanted to say, but he was trying to find the right words so that he doesn't appear like a creep.

Eventually, he spoke, "Miss Talia, what can you tell me about yourself?"

Talia paused. "What?"

"Are you born in the Dark Howlers pack? What about your parents?"

Talia swallowed hard. Why was he asking about her background? Is Axel asking on behalf of Marcy and Alpha Edward? Was she in trouble? Did she bring trouble for Alpha Damon?

She told herself to calm down. Maya prepared the coverup story and if Talia just blurts out the truth, she will probably mess it up big time.

"I don't know who my parents are. I grew up with my grandparents up in the North, and after they passed I headed South with the hope to find a pack to settle. I have no idea how long I was wandering but I bumped into Beta Maya and Beta Caden, and they offered me to come here."

"How old were you at that time?"

"That happened about two weeks ago.", Talia admitted. Ten days ago, to be precise.

"Your grandparents didn't speak about your parents?"

Talia's mind worked a million thoughts a second. "My parents were killed by rogues when I was a baby. They were together for less than a year before they perished, so there was not much to tell."

Axel could see that Talia was not comfortable. "I apologize for asking personal questions."

"It's not a problem. It happened a long time ago." This part was the truth. A long time ago Talia accepted that she doesn't have parents or a loving family. She was anxious about another thing... "Why are you curious about my background?"

"When I saw you last night, you reminded me of someone.", Axel responded right away. "Let me ask you one more question. Are you happy here?"

Talia opened her mouth to respond, but a low voice came from behind her, "Are you trying to poach my people, Axel?"

Talia whipped her head in the direction of the newcomer, and she saw Damon walking toward them while his glare didn't leave Axel. It was obvious that Damon was angry.

Damon ended his talk with Alpha Maddox and then Maddox stood by the window and said, "It seems that your girl is attracting attention..." And that's how Damon saw Axel and Talia sitting on the bench in the garden, and Damon hurried to see what the heck was going on.

Damon reached in time to hear Axel's cheesy line how Talia reminds him of someone and asking Talia if she is happy. What was that supposed to mean? Was he trying to pick her up? Isn't Axel supposed to live as a celibate until he finds his mate? And Talia was obviously NOT Axel's mate because each person can have only one mate and even if Talia can't feel who her mate is, her mate is Damon! What was Axel trying to do?

Axel smirked. "I was only asking the lady if she is happy here."

Talia sucked in a sharp breath. First, 'Miss Talia', and now, 'lady'.

Why would Axel, the future Alpha, treat her with such respect? Maybe that was normal for him, but for Talia it was new, and she liked it. After a second of soaking in this new way of addressing her, Talia became cautious. What if Axel is nice because he wants to trick her?

By now, Damon was standing next to Talia.

"Is she happy? Of course, she is happy.", Damon grumbled while pulling Talia to stand up from the bench and pushing her roughly to stand behind him.

"She doesn't look happy to me.", Axel said.

Damon's frown deepened. "What does that mean?"

"She is obviously hurt."

Damon turned to look at Talia. "You are hurt?"

Talia was quick to deny it. "No, no. I'm not." Why was Axel getting her in trouble with this Devil?

"Talia is so scared of you that she won't say it openly.", Axel said. "Last night she was fine, yet today she is barely walking."

Damon's face fell. How he saw it, there was only one reason why she would be hurt so bad that she can't walk properly.

"I'm sorry Talia. I didn't mean to spank you that hard."

Talia's eyes nearly bulged out of their sockets from shock. Did she hear him right?

"I know it's none of my business what you do in the bedroom, but you can't be so rough with your women.", Axel said, and his grimace showed how disgusted he was with Damon's behavior.

"I'm not his woman!", Talia squeaked. If Miss Mindy or someone else heard this, Talia was sure that her head would be detached from the rest of her body, soon.

Damon glared at Axel. "It's not what you think."

"And what am I thinking?"

Damon wanted to say how it was none of Axel's business, and even if Axel's insinuation was correct, it wouldn't be a big deal because werewolves talk about sex openly. But Axel was different and he was making it sound like Damon was using Talia for some twisted activities, so Damon had to explain. "I was carrying Talia, and she was moving too much. I spanked her so that she stops squirming."

"Why didn't you keep her down or ask her to stop moving?"

"I was in a hurry.", Damon said.

"And when you are in a hurry, you hit women?"

Damon's irritation swelled. "Don't twist my words. That's not what I said."

"That's exactly what you said..."

Talia listened to this bickering with her mouth half-open. How come she doesn't remember any of it? Was Damon making this up? Or did he spank her... Wait! That would explain her butt-ache.

Talia inhaled forcibly. "Please, can you stop talking about it?"

Both Damon and Axel turned to look at her and she continued, "I am fine. Can you just forget about this? I need to go and prepare breakfast."

Talia took a step back and in a moment, Axel was next to her, holding her hand in his.

"Miss Talia, please, don't make life-changing decisions rashly. I want you to know that you have options. You can always find a refuge in the Midnight Guardians pack." Axel paused and reached for the pocket of his pants before handing her a business card. "Here is my personal number."

Damon saw red. He shoved Axel away from Talia before standing between the duo with Talia behind him.

"Axel, you are here as a guest. How dare you suggest that Talia leaves me when I'm right here?"

"Would you rather I do it behind your back?", Axel asked without flinching under Damon's pressure. "How I see it, Miss Talia is not having an easy time here. Unlike you, I'm not trying to force her into

anything. I don't think that a lady like her should settle with belief that this is as good as it gets. If you want her to stay with you, you should treat her well."

Talia's mind was spinning. She didn't understand what was going on, but she had an urgency to leave. "I'm going to the kitchen."

"Miss Talia!", Axel called after her. "Call me anytime. We can stay in touch even if you are happy here..."

Talia gritted her teeth to suppress the ache in her legs while speeding up toward the kitchen. What the hell was going on?

Chapter 92 - Obstacles Before The Festival [Bonus ]

Talia reached the kitchen that was already bustling with activity. Stephanie, Zina, and Dawn were working in full swing, and based on the mess, Talia could see that they started a while ago. Talia felt guilty for coming late.

To her surprise, no one scolded her.

"Oho! I was not sure if you will make it!", Dawn exclaimed excitedly, and Talia frowned at the loudness of Dawn's voice.

"Looks like hangover...", Zina said and pushed a small packet with pills in Talia's hand. "This will help. Take two right away and in fifteen minutes the headache will subside."

Without a word, Talia opened the packet and Dawn was already handing her a glass of water with advice, "It's important to stay hydrated."

Talia gulped the pills and then thanked Zina and Dawn while Stephanie was ushering them to continue with their breakfast-preparing activities..

Zina was chopping vegetables that will become ingredients for quiche, and Dawn was working on molds made out of pastry for the same dish.

Talia got the task to prepare the mixture for waffles.

"We are expecting eleven people for breakfast.", Stephanie said to Talia so that she can make enough waffles for everyone. "Including the four of us, make that fifteen, and count that each will eat at least two pieces."

Talia confirmed. "Got it. There will be no less than thirty waffles."

After reading the instructions on the box with powdered waffle mixture, Talia went to fetch the milk, and she asked Zina, "How did you know I will need hangover medicine?"

"Beta Maya told us that was your first time getting wasted, so I guessed that you won't be prepared.", Zina responded.

"She told you that?" Talia was not sure how she felt about Maya advertising Talia's lack of experience.

Dawn responded. "Don't blame her. We insisted to confirm you are fine. After we lost you in the mess in the nightclub, we were worried."

Talia was confused. She still didn't process the information she received in the garden, but it seems there was more. "You lost me in the mess? What mess?"

Dawn and Zina took turns narrating the massive fight that happened in the Shifters nightclub. Of course, per Maya's instructions, they omitted the part that they stepped away with Pierce and Liam when Maya mind-linked them, and because of that neither Dawn nor Zina saw Damon approaching Talia (and starting the fight).

"You really don't remember?", Zina asked suspiciously.



Talia shrugged. "I really don't. I remember dancing with Keith and then you guys showed up, and the next thing I know, it was morning. Other than the headache, my every muscle hurts, but I have no regrets. It was fun and the pain is the proof that last night happened."

Dawn grinned. "Dancing with Keith. No wonder you are in pain."

Talia didn't get it. "What?"

Zina leaned over the kitchen island like she is about to tell a secret to Talia, but she didn't lower her voice, "Everyone knows that Keith is our expert trainer. He can move and stretch your every muscle. And I mean EVERY muscle, even the ones you never knew you had."

Dawn giggled. "That explains why Talia is achy all over. After a night with Keith, that's normal."

Talia understood that Zina and Dawn implied how she slept with Keith, and her face exploded in fierce blush. "I didn't spend the night with Keith. My ache is because yesterday he put me on a machine for running and I strained myself."

Dawn and Zina wiggled their eyebrows and Talia realized that her words came out wrong. Actually, they were not wrong, but Dawn and Zina definitely interpreted it differently.

"Look at that flustered expression. Isn't it cute?", Dawn teased.

"Whatever you say, Talia, we will believe you.", Zina chimed in with a stifled laugh.

Talia was exasperated. No matter what she said, those two were twisting it.

"Girls, really, nothing happened between me and...", her words trailed when she saw Damon standing at the door, his grim appearance was like an omen that death is approaching.

Unfortunately, Zina and Dawn were facing Talia and they didn't see Damon behind them.

"Sure, sure...", Dawn said teasingly. "I believe you, Talia, when you say that nothing happened between you and one of the most desirable bachelors."

"Don't deny it, girl.", Zina said matter-of-factly. "There is no shame in having a healthy sexual life!"

The temperature in the kitchen fell down significantly, giving Talia shivers and she felt an urge to flee but her legs refused to budge.

What the hell were those two blabbermouths saying? And why did Damon's expression turn even worse?

"Talia...", Damon's low voice made everyone freeze. "I want you in my office. Now."

Talia felt like crying. Is he going to kick her out of the packhouse? She was planning to move out, but not today. Well, maybe that's for the best. But he was definitely angry, and she didn't think that going to his office will bring anything good.

Talia looked at the waffle maker like it's her lifeline. "But I am..."

"Now!", Damon cut her off.

Stephanie let out a long breath. Damon was not in a good mood and Dawn and Zina were practically non-responsive under his Alpha pressure. Actually, even Stephanie had to exert quite some willpower not to bow her head in submission which told her that it's serious.

"Go and see what Alpha wants.", Stephanie told Talia. "He doesn't like to be kept waiting. I will continue with waffles."

Talia cursed her bad luck. The day started with hangover and aches, and then it turned confusing with Axel, and talk about spanking, and now this. Talia only wanted to grab some food and go to the festival, but she needed first to cross the obstacle called grumpy Alpha Damon.

Will he spank her again? Or maybe it's not 'again' because she doesn't remember the first time.

Reluctantly, Talia moved toward the door and walked to the study with Damon one step behind her.

The only good thing in this situation was that the hangover medicine Zina gave Talia started working, so her body stopped aching.

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Talia entered the study and she jolted when the door closed behind her with a bang.

All air left her lungs when Damon hugged her from behind. She didn't dare to move while his nose moved over the skin of her neck.

Damon heard Dawn and Zina in the kitchen insinuating that Talia was rolling in the sheets with someone, and as much as he hated what he heard, Damon knew that it's just girls gossiping because she was spending her nights with him, and Damon was actually upset because of what happened in the garden.

"Talia...", he murmured. "You promised you won't leave me."

Talia felt the heat of Damon's body warming her back and her urge to lean on him caught her by surprise. Why are her self-destructive tendencies resurfacing whenever Damon gets close?

"I did. As long as you need me, I won't leave.", Talia reminded him of that clause. Words were not enough, and his actions were pointing to the possibility that he doesn't need her anymore because he has Miss Mindy.

"Ah!", Talia cried when Damon scooped her in his arms and carried her like she weighs nothing.

Damon sat on the sofa and placed Talia in his lap, his arms holding her against him firmly and he buried his face in her neck.

"I need you, Talia. You can't leave me."

Talia's insides jolted and she had goosebumps all over when his lips moved over her skin.

"Don't go with Axel.", he murmured. "I promise to make you happy, so you will never think of leaving me."

Ah, the clingy Damon is here. Talia put her arms around him and gently patted his back to comfort him.

She really had no intention of heading to a mysterious pack with an unknown guy. Ten days ago, Talia took a gamble of leaving with a stranger and she was still not sure if accepting Damon's offer to come to the Dark Howlers pack was a good or a bad move, but she knew that she couldn't go through another round of stress.

"I won't go with Axel."

Damon lifted his head to look into Talia's face and he smiled a little, obviously pleased with her response. "What did Axel want?"

"He asked about my background."

Damon was alerted. "What did you say?"

"Don't worry.", Talia said immediately. "Maya told me what to say if anyone asks those questions. I won't put you or your pack in trouble."

Damon's heart cracked at her choice of words. "OUR pack, Talia. Don't treat me like a stranger."

Talia realized that she spoke without thinking. "I'm sorry. I guess I need more time to..."

"Shh...", Damon shushed her. "It's OK. I won't rush you into anything."

He cradled her cheek with his palm. "I look forward to the time when you treat this place as your home."

Somehow, Talia suspected he was talking about more than just the pack.

Damon looked into Talia's inviting lips, and he really wanted to kiss her there, but he knew that this was not the time, and it will be counterproductive.

He leaned his forehead on Talia's and took a deep breath while Maddox's warning echoed in his mind.

Damon wondered how to spend the day away from the girl in his arms while keeping his cool. Was that even possible?

Chapter 93 - On The Way To The Festival

Damon cradled in his arms Talia who was sitting in his lap, and for the first time in his life, he had no idea how to deal with the day that was ahead of him.

The guests were in the packhouse, and more were on their way, and he had responsibilities and many eyes were on him, yet the only thing he wanted was to curl up with Talia and not leave the study. Or

maybe they could get into his car and drive away, somewhere far, where no one will recognize them. That will work also.

Leaving or not showing up would be irresponsible. His pack members are expecting him to be there, after all, this is one of the biggest celebrations his pack is hosting. And his allies will want to see him, and his enemies are watching also. Damn it!

He had an option to take Talia with him, but it wouldn't be fair to put her on a spot like that without an explanation and he feared that if he tells her what it means to stay by his side in public, she will run away.

'What am I supposed to do?', Damon asked his wolf.

'No matter what you decide on, there will be a price to pay..'

Damon looked into Talia's honeyed eyes that were unspoiled and he decided. No matter what, he was not willing to gamble with Talia's safety.

"Talia, just how you need time, I want you to be patient with me."

She didn't understand. It was totally out of context. "Patient?"

"There are things I need to tell you. Important things. It's a long story, and I regret that I can't spend this day with you, but I hope you will be able to have fun. What I'm trying to say is, don't leave with Axel or with anyone else until you hear me out, but the timing is not right so..." He licked his lips nervously. "Give me time, OK?"

Talia had no idea what he wanted to talk about, and she told herself not to overthink it because Damon suffered from severe mood swings and there was a high probability that the timing will never be right. By noon (if not sooner), he will forget that they had this conversation.

"OK. When you want to talk, you know where to find me."

Damon hummed in approval and buried his face into Talia's neck, inhaling her sweet citrusy scent of freesia while relishing the delightful sparks that made him feel alive.

"Thank you, Talia...", his breath caressed her skin and Talia's heart skipped a beat.

Damon really had so many things to tell her, yet when they were alone, he would fall into a daze caused by her proximity, and everything faded into a blur, leaving only him and Talia in focus like they were the only two people in the world.

Talia let Damon hold her and she exhaled helplessly.

She was with Damon for ten days, yet it felt like ten years or maybe ten eternities, and she vaguely remembered how her life was before he became part of it.

As much as Talia felt joy when Damon was giving her attention, like now, it was that much harder every next time she saw him with Marcy, or Cassie, or Mindy, or whichever woman came after. It didn't matter which woman was by his side because Talia was hurt that it was not her.

But now it was just the two of them, and Damon's heat was all around her as his delicious scent of the forest and dark chocolate coursed through her system, and she leaned on Damon and soaked in his presence like it's her last chance to feel him like this.

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Talia walked toward the Darkbourne, happy that she avoided any further drama.

After leaving the study (and Damon's embrace), Talia went straight to the kitchen, and she was dejected that Stephanie, Dawn, and Zina finished preparations. Talia really wanted to help, but unexpected things happened.

Dawn and Zina were excited to touch up their makeup before going to serve breakfast in the dining room, but Talia had no intention of showing her face there.

Talia swiftly ate one waffle and was about to leave when Stephanie gave her an insulated bag. "Take this, Talia. I prepared it for you."

"Thank you, Steph...", Talia said, genuinely touched.

Talia's original plan was to pack some food and take it with her to the festival, but after not being able to help with breakfast, she was embarrassed to take anything that didn't fit into her mouth.

"Do you know where you are going?", Stephanie asked.

"The games will start soon, and I don't want to miss it. I hope to see everything."

"Shouldn't you go with Maya?", Stephanie asked.

Talia shook her head. "Maya has many duties as a Beta, and I am not a child. Even if she is not busy with guests, I can imagine that she will want to spend time with Caden. I can't expect her to hold my hand, so I don't get lost."

"Oh, you are not familiar with Darkbourne...", Stephanie said. "Come here...", Stephanie called while getting a notepad and pen.

Stephanie drew a rough sketch of a few streets of Darkbourne with several interest points, including where the fair will be, where the sports fields are, and how to reach there from the packhouse.



"If you walk leisurely, it will take you about twenty minutes to get there... If you are lost, just ask anyone to direct you to the town square with the clocktower, that's the center of the fair... anyone can show you which way to take in order to return to the packhouse..."

"Will you come to the fair?", Talia asked.

"Maybe later.", Stephanie responded with a smile, but Talia noticed that Stephanie's mood dropped.

Stephanie was hoping that Lisa will come, and she made plans with her daughter, yet Lisa decided to stay in the Lightclaw pack because of her boyfriend, Anthony, and Stephanie was not in a festive mood. How can she be happy when she knows that her daughter is hurting?

Stephanie lost her husband, and she has only Lisa, and as much as she hopes that Lisa will snap out of her infatuation with Anthony, Stephanie can't force her.

Knowing that everyone will be at the fair, Stephanie decided to stay in the packhouse where she won't need to force a smile. If she changes her mind later, she can always come to the fair, but Stephanie didn't want to make any promises, and Talia didn't feel like she had the right to insist, so she dropped the topic.

Talia left swiftly, while everyone was busy with breakfast. On her way from the kitchen to the main entry (or main exit, in this case), Talia heard Miss Mindy talking and several other unknown voices and Talia rushed out, happy that no one stopped her.

Talia didn't want to risk Alpha Damon asking her to join them at the table, and she didn't want to be sad in case he doesn't come to look for her either, so she left first.

Anyway, Damon already said that he won't be able to spend the day with Talia, and that meant he will be busy with guests. Guests like Miss Mindy and other important people.

Talia was confident that among the guests there were several other females. Will any of them throw herself at Damon? Will she succeed to be Damon's Luna? Or maybe his company for tonight?

Talia pushed those thoughts away. What was the point? Even if Damon held Talia's hand and brought her to the table to sit by his side, Talia would just be uncomfortable. This was the best possible outcome for everyone.

She reminded herself to focus on things that matter. Tomorrow, she will think about moving out of the packhouse and figuring out her life, but today she will have fun at the festival, and Damon's presence (or absence) won't make a difference.

Talia had plans and determination to make the most of it.

Only when Talia was walking on the road that led to Darkbourne, and the packhouse was hidden from sight behind the tall trees, Talia peeked into the insulated bag to see what Stephanie packed for her.

There were two quiches, a bottle of juice, two apples, a granola bar... and a side-pocket had \$100, broken down in ten bills, \$10 each.

Talia felt her eyes prickling as tears threatened to fall. No one ever took care of her like that, and Talia imagined that if she had a mother, she would wish her to be just like Stephanie.

Talia took a mental note to thank Stephanie properly. Somehow.

The sound of a car coming from behind got Talia's attention and she swiftly dashed between bushes that were next to the road. She didn't bother to see who was in the car because she was determined to enjoy this sensation of freedom that touched her the moment she stepped outside of the packhouse.

She continued walking several meters away from the road, close enough not to wander, but far enough so that others don't spot her.

Talia always liked the forest and she smiled at the rays of sun that peeked through the tree canopies, darting with the breeze that moved the leaves, like a welcoming light show of nature. There were no worries or bullies or anything else that could cause her stress. As a bonus, from the forest, Talia wouldn't know with whom Damon is spending his day or night, so she wouldn't be sad.

She wondered, why was she cooped in her room all the time, when she could come here?

Talia was walking toward the distant noise of the festival, and she was making plans to return here with a book and read in peace. Tomorrow.

Chapter 94 - The Summer Solstice Festival (1)

Damon was driving toward Darkbourne while trying to spot Talia and with every passing minute, his anxiety was increasing. Why did she leave on foot without saying anything?

Earlier that morning, after Talia left the study, Damon finished some work and went to the dining room in time for breakfast. He greeted the guests, but he couldn't eat.

Last night Talia didn't join for dinner, and when he saw her the next time, she was in the Shifters nightclub with two guys sticking to her. This time, Talia didn't join for breakfast, and Damon had a bad feeling about this.

Sure, Damon knew that Talia will probably go to the festival, and he instructed Maya to accompany Talia, but Maya was at the table, munching on quiche, while Talia was unaccounted for.

'Where is Talia?', Damon asked Maya through the mind-link.

'Why should I know?', Maya responded with a question.

'I asked you to take her to the festival..'

'Are you expecting me to skip breakfast and neglect my duties because Talia needs company?'

Damon let out a low growl. 'Maya, did your bravery increase because I didn't punish you for allowing Talia to get drunk last night?'

Maya forgot about that. Damon didn't bring it up and she hoped that he won't, but the reality was different.

'I apologize, Alpha.', Maya responded with haste. 'I spoke with Talia about accompanying her to the festival, but we didn't discuss the details. I was thinking of checking on her after making sure that everything is in order with guests.'

Seeing that Maya was not helpful, Damon stood up and headed to the kitchen, guessing that Talia was there. If this is any other day, Damon would assume that she was in her room, but he already saw Talia, so he knew that she was awake and ready for the day.

In the kitchen, Damon found Stephanie sipping coffee while staring absentmindedly through the window.

"Where is Talia?", Damon asked Stephanie.

"She left for the fair."

Damon frowned. "With whom?"

"On her own."

Damon didn't like this. If she went on her own, that means she was walking. Didn't Axel point out how Talia was in so much pain that she barely walked?

"When did she leave?"

Stephanie was not sure. "A few minutes ago."

Damon rushed to his car and that's how he found himself driving and looking around, hoping to spot Talia.

He wanted to give her a ride to town and warn her to be careful and... he didn't know what else he could say because he really wanted to be with her, but he was torn between his duties and dangers and this feeling of helplessness that mixed with rage and gnawed on his insides.

Damon cursed under his breath. He thought that he was making progress with Talia, yet with every passing day, it felt like she was drifting away. Even now, she went to the kitchen and then left the packhouse, ignoring him completely.

Should he ask Talia to notify him before she leaves the packhouse? If he thought of that just a bit earlier, she would be in the car with him now, instead of who-knows-where.

Damon knew that Talia loves the forest; did she go off-road? He hoped that she will stick close to the road so that he can see her.

Unfortunately, he reached Darkbourne without spotting the girl and his chest tightened.

Damon told himself to calm down. Talia probably took the route through the forest, and he missed her, but that won't change the fact that he was unable to find her, and he feared that one day she will be out of his reach, for real.

Without any bright ideas on how to find Talia, Damon turned the car and drove back to the packhouse where he left guests having breakfast. On this day, Damon needed to play his role of an Alpha no matter how much his soul cried for Talia's proximity.

Actually, for the sake of Talia and her safety, Damon needed to pull himself together and act like everything is fine.

Alpha Maddox warned Damon that there will be many people watching, and if anyone suspects that Talia is the girl Alpha Richard is curious about, she will be in danger. Damn it!

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The sports fields were on the opposite side of Darkbourne compared to the packhouse, so Talia got to pass through the busy main street, and she saw the town square that was bustling with activity while everyone was doing final preparations for the festival.

In the center of the town square is a clock tower, decorated with colorful streamers and little triangle-shaped flags, and there is a small fountain and a lot of balloons.

Numerous mobile stalls were lined up to create several passages where one could play games or buy food and various merchandise, and Talia was curious to see what are the offerings.

Talia took a peek to see two teenage girls arranging paper fans and necklaces made out of seashells, another stall offered dreamcatchers of various colors, and the next one had palm-sized stones that had messages written on them.

A bit further away, two bulky guys were pushing a big machine in place that had nets on each side and a basketball hoop at the far end. Talia guessed that this is a game where one needs to throw the ball into the hoop a few times and not miss in order to win a prize.

Talia read about those kinds of games online while doing her research in preparation for the upcoming festival. Exciting!

One stall had plush toys hanging in three rows, and each toy had a small swaying target above it.

Talia's insides fluttered at all the positive energy around her. People were smiling and laughing and singing with the music that blasted from speakers that were attached to roofs of several stalls, and Talia was looking forward to seeing how amazing it will be when the fair actually starts in a few hours.

There were many other stalls that Talia didn't get to check, but she left them for later because she didn't want to be late for the games.

Several streams of people converged into a single street and Talia knew that's the direction of the sports fields. At this rate, she didn't need the map that Stephanie gave her. Talia only needed to follow the crowd.

At the end of the street was a big open area, and vendors offering snacks and various gadgets for cheering were lining the main path on each side.

Talia took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of popcorn that mixed with hotdogs. Mouthwatering.

She glanced at the massive hands made out of sponges, hats with logos of teams that will participate, as well as t-shirts, pom-poms, blowers, and several other things she couldn't recognize.

The bleachers were getting packed with the audience, while some guys in jerseys were running on the big grass-covered field to warm up. There was one other field on the right with a massive bouncy house where kids were screaming excitedly, and on the field behind it, several people were busying themselves on setting up the hot air balloon that will offer rides.

Talia was focused on the central field, where the games will be played. She headed to the side that had a sign 'home team', and she was happy to see a few isolated empty seats in the first few rows. Everyone came in groups, so those few seats were left for loners, like Talia. She didn't mind.

Talia thought that meeting with Keith, Liam, Pierce, Caleb, Lulu, and Sandy will be easy, but now that she saw all the crowd and the commotion where the participants were, Talia realized that there is a chance she won't see them at all other than while they are playing the game. But she didn't allow that to discourage her.

Talia took a seat in the second row and observed all the cheery faces around her.

Even with all the people crowding the seats, she spotted several vendors with trays who were snaking between seats and selling snacks.

It was very lively.

Talia's sight froze on the North side of the field. There was a covered area that towered above the bleachers and Talia didn't need to guess for whom that's reserved. Of course, it was for Alpha Damon and his guests, a VVIP lounge of some sort. The lounge was empty, so Talia guessed that they are yet to arrive.

She forced herself to look away because any thoughts about Damon will come with an unpleasant backlash she didn't want to experience, yet she knew that it's inevitable.

Chapter 95 - The Summer Solstice Festival (2)

"Talia! Talia!", a voice reached her, and Talia saw Liam waving at her from the field enthusiastically.

Just like a number of other players on the field, Liam was wearing a dark grey jersey with an outline of a wolf howling on it, and it had number 7.

If not for the low wall divider between the audience and the field, they could meet in a few steps.

Talia waved back at him in a greeting, hoping that his shout didn't attract too much attention in all the noise from the music and people talking.

Of course, Pierce was among people who heard Liam's shout and he was quick to join.

Pierce was wearing the same jersey as Liam, but his had a number 5 on it.

"Good that you made it!", Pierce said with a big smile.



"I said that I will come and cheer for you, right?", Talia responded without shouting, confident that they can hear her..

Other than Pierce, Keith also heard Liam calling Talia and he craned his neck to see where she is. He perked up when he saw that Talia was on her own.

'Ask Talia to come here...!', Keith spoke to Liam and Pierce through the mind-link.

Keith was pleased to see that Talia followed their instructions to the door that opened to the sports field.

"Hi, Keith", Talia greeted him while eyeing other guys who were around him and she smiled when she saw that Caleb, Lulu, and Sandy were there also, their familiar faces greeted Talia enthusiastically.

They were all wearing dark gray jerseys, except for Sandy whose jersey was dark green, and it had number 1 on it.

Keith was wearing dark gray joggers and a matching jacket that said 'COACH' on his back, and there was a silvery outline of a wolf's head below it.

Seeing that Talia stopped a few steps from others, Keith waved at her to come closer.

"Why did you sit there?", Keith pointed toward the audience from where Talia came. "Didn't I promise you the best seat to see the game?"

Talia was not sure if there is a better spot compared to that VVIP booth, and her previous seat was quite good also, but then she saw Keith gesturing toward the bench that is reserved for players, coaches, and other people who are important for the game. It was right there, next to the field line.

"Everyone!", Keith called. "This is Talia. Treat her well."

Players' greetings melded into indistinct murmurs that were accompanied by nods and casual waves. A few people observed Talia curiously, but most of them were trying to focus on the upcoming game and they didn't have time to focus on the newcomer.

Talia was a bit intimidated by the situation she found herself in, and she didn't dare to look at the audience, confident that some of them were looking her way.

"Is it OK for me to be here?", Talia asked Keith nervously. Standing on the field with players wearing jerseys and surrounded by thousands of people who were seated in the audience was not Talia's style. She preferred to stay invisible.

"Absolutely.", Keith assured her. "I thought you will come with Beta Maya."

"She is busy with guests and other things, so I came on my own."

Keith moved closer to Talia and he observed her while confirming that she has no injuries. "Katya told me that you left before the fight started. Are you alright?"

Talia was touched by his concern. "I woke up with a hangover, but after taking the medicine, I'm completely fine."

Keith shook his head in disapproval. "Next time, be mindful of your limits. If I knew you will drink yourself into a hangover, I would insist that you leave with me."

Leave with him? Would he take her to the packhouse, or...? Talia remembered naughty talk with Dawn and Zina when they insinuated that she spent the night with Keith, and Talia's face exploded in blush.

Of course, Keith noticed that Talia got flustered. He chuckled. "I was talking about dropping you off home before you got wasted, but it seems you have something else on your mind. I will give you a dollar for your thoughts."

Talia lowered her head in embarrassment. What was she thinking? There was NO WAY she will talk about it ever.

Keith thought that Talia was adorable, and he wanted to pinch her cheeks and tease her more, but people were watching, so he decided to tone it down. He patted her shoulder. "I was just joking. You can roam around or just sit on the bench. I need to give a few more instructions to my team before the game starts..."

Talia scurried to the bench. She didn't want to attract any more attention.

"It seems that Keith likes you.", Lulu said while taking a seat next to Talia.

"Isn't he nice to everyone?"

"You call that nice?" Lulu gestured toward a group in dark gray jerseys who were listening to Keith who was waving wildly while shouting some things Talia didn't understand.

Talia had to admit that Keith's expression was serious, and she wouldn't trade places with any of the people who were currently facing Keith.

"How come you are not with them?", Talia asked Lulu.

Lulu pointed at the number 26 on her jersey. "I'm a backup, and Keith is giving instructions on strategies for the beginning of the game. Since it can get rough, we need quite a bit of substitutes in order to maintain eleven functioning players on the field." Lulu gestured to another group of people in dark gray jerseys who were standing a few steps away, indicating that they are backups also.

"I see..." Talia said thoughtfully. "Substitute. Does that mean you will play later?"

Lulu confirmed. "When someone gets hurt. It seems that you don't know much about soccer."

"It's my first time watching the game.", Talia admitted.

She knew that it was about people chasing the ball and trying to kick it into the opponent's soccer goal, and she heard that it's more intense compared to the game that humans are playing, but that's as far as her knowledge of the game went.

Lulu started explaining, "Sandy is a goalie. That's why her jersey is a different color. She is the only one who can touch the ball with her hands... Liam is a winger. He is the fastest on our team... Pierce is playing defense, he is in the center... Caleb is also a defensive player..."

Talia understood that numbers for the first batch of players signify their position in the game, while backups are mostly random, but each of them has their stronger and weaker points.

"Aren't you the invisible girl who put us on high alert?", a tall guy with a head full of red hair asked while towering above Talia. He wore a dark gray jersey with the number 10 on it.

Talia didn't get it. "Invisible girl?"

Lulu saw that the mood was tense, so she tried to ease it up a bit. "Mark, this is Talia. The coach said that she can be here. Talia, this is Mark."

Mark didn't pay heed to Lulu's attempt at making them friends. He narrowed his eyes at Talia. "A few nights ago, we were all searching for you in the woods, and I nearly tripped on you. I never saw anyone being so good in concealing his presence. I was not expecting praise for finding you, but I definitely didn't expect Alpha to nearly rip my throat off."

Talia had no idea what he was talking about. Invisible? Someone was searching for her? Damon nearly bit his throat off?

Talia didn't know that the man in front of her was part of the patrol who found Talia when Damon panicked, thinking that Talia left the pack, and she actually fell asleep in the forest when she got tired while collecting herbs. The patrols couldn't sense her because she consumed plants that concealed her scent.

Mark was curious about Talia's strange absence of scent. Here, in the crowd, no one would notice, but that night, Mark was in the forest, and as an experienced tracker he was supposed to pick up Talia's

scent, yet there was nothing. How could he accept that? And to make things worse, Alpha bared his teeth at him like he was the enemy.

That night was unpleasant for Mark, and he blamed Talia for it.

"Chill, Mark.", Lulu said. "Are you sure you've got the right person? Why don't you focus on the game instead of scaring the new girl?"

Mark cocked an eyebrow and left but Talia couldn't shake off the unpleasant feeling. She could sense that Mark didn't like her.

Lulu tried to smoothen the situation. "Don't worry about him. Mark got to play offensive midfielder this time, and it got into his head." Seeing that Talia's brows were still furrowed, Lulu added, "Mark is not a bad guy. He is just on edge because of the game."

"Isn't this a friendly game?"

"Of course, it is. But we are hosts and most of the people here will be cheering for us. If we lose in the first round, it will be a big downer, so we need to do our best and reach the finals. The pressure is much more than when we are the guest team." Lulu proceeded to explain how teams will meet in elimination games, and the top two will reach the finals to win the trophy and a lot of bragging rights.

Chapter 96 - The Summer Solstice Festival (3)

The crowd of players in dark gray jerseys that were around Keith formed a line and started a light jog to warm up, leaving a few players to stand on the side and stretch.

Keith used this breather to join Talia and Lulu on the bench, but before Keith could reach the bench, a teenage girl approached him with haste. "Coach!"

Keith looked behind her like he was expecting someone, and then he asked the girl, "Where is Rosie?"

"I'm sorry, coach, but my sister found her mate last night."

Keith's face fell. "Does that mean she won't make it?"

The girl looked at Keith and shook her head guiltily. She pushed some things into his hands, mumbled an apology, and left.

Keith dragged his feet to the bench and plopped on it. "I hope this is not a sign of how the rest of the day will go."

.

"Who is Rosie?", Talia asked Lulu in a whisper.

"She is our team spirit.", Lulu responded and pointed at things in Keith's hand. "Those are parts of her costume."

Talia didn't get it. A team spirit with a costume?

Keith rubbed his face irritably before adding to Lulu's explanation, "Rosie was practicing our cheering dance. If I knew this would happen, I would get a few more girls to practice as a backup."

He was frustrated to make this rookie mistake. But this was his first year to be the main coach. So far, Keith was assisting the previous coach who decided four months ago that he wants to travel the world, leaving Keith to manage all these sport-ish activities in the pack.

Keith was knowledgeable about the game, strategies, and training players, and he focused on those aspects which made it easy to miss the miscellaneous things that are part of the whole experience. He really needed a team manager.

Seeing that Talia was looking at him blankly, Keith pointed to the other side of the field, where another team was warming up. "Do you see that girl in the blue skirt?" Talia nodded, and Keith continued, "She is the team spirit for their team. Every team has one, and now we don't."

Keith hid his face in his palms and let out a string of unintelligible sounds that was a mix of groans and curses.

Talia wanted to comfort him, but she didn't know what to say, so she kept quiet.

"Aren't you giving up too early?", Lulu asked Keith.

"Game starts in ten minutes. Where will I find a cute girl that doesn't have other plans, and can learn the routine?", Keith grumbled.

"Is routine necessary? As for a cute girl who is available, we have one right here..."

Talia's face fell when she realized that Lulu was talking about her.

Before Talia could object, Keith was looking at her with sparkles in his eyes. "Talia, you need to do this, for the team. For the pack."

"Do, what, exactly?", Talia asked robotically.

Without a word, Keith placed a headband on her head. It had black wolf ears.

"Give me your hands. These are your paws..." he put fingerless gloves on Talia, and while she was looking at her now furry hands, Keith reached into the sports bag that was on the ground, next to the bench.

Talia didn't move a muscle when Keith pulled over her head a dark gray jersey with number 0 on it which was big enough to fit over Talia's clothes and have additional space.

Keith adjusted the headband that was on Talia's head and hummed in approval. "Now you are the spirit of Dark Howlers team. Perfect."

And just like that, Talia became the team spirit.

'Everyone!', Keith mind-linked team members. 'Rosie is out, but Talia agreed to be our team spirit. Let's show her our support and she will give us hers.'

"Awooooo!" Howls erupted from the field, and even Lulu and Keith were part of the sudden noise and Talia shrunk.

What the heck was going on? She came to check out the festival and watch the game. How did she end up in a costume? If she knew it will come to this, Talia would stick to her seat in the audience and not come to the field.

Keith put his hand on Talia's back. "They are happy to have you here as our team spirit. We all are."

"I don't know how to be a team spirit.", Talia said weakly while brainstorming exit strategies.

"Cheer for us to win. Think of it as moral support. Other than that, you need to be cute, and you have that covered." Keith ended with a wink, and Talia felt her cheeks warming.

Keith said that she is cute. That was a first. No one ever called her cute and Talia was not sure how to respond.

Should she thank him for the compliment? What if he didn't mean it and she makes a fool of herself when she thanks him?

Before she could think of something to say, Keith was on his feet, and he was shouting instructions at two people in dark gray jerseys who just came to the field. The game still didn't start, but they were late for warmup.



Talia was totally out of her comfort zone with this whole team spirit thing, but Keith was her personal trainer, and he was nice to her, and if she could help him out by wearing this costume, she was determined to go through it. Well, at least she will try.

"Congratulations on becoming the team spirit.", a man said while plopping on the bench next to Talia and she jolted in fright.

"Doctor Travis!", Talia exclaimed when she recognized the newcomer.

Talia was happy to see another familiar friendly face!

Travis rubbed his eyes and looked at the field. He was holding onto a disposable cup and Talia picked up the scent of coffee.

"Is the hospital busy?", Lulu asked.

Travis nodded. "It's crazy since last night. Luckily, it was just a bunch of cuts and bruises with a few broken bones and no casualties other than my sleep. Cathy was supposed to come with me, but she is sleeping in the staff room, and I couldn't wake her up. We all had a sleepless night."

Travis threw a side-glance at Talia who was looking at him with sparkles in her eyes. "Why are you looking at me like that? Do I have something on my face?"

"Uhm... no... it's just...", Talia stumbled over her words. Waah! If she tells him that she is happy to see him, he might misunderstand. "I didn't know you will be here."

Travis smiled at Talia who was completely flustered, but he didn't want to tease her. He gestured toward the group of players that formed a semi-circle in front of Keith. "Someone needs to fix them up." He looked at Talia with amusement. "How did you become the team spirit?"

Talia looked at her fuzzy hands helplessly. "The original team spirit found her mate and couldn't come, and they needed someone, and I was here so..."

Travis stifled a laugh. Talia was obviously uncomfortable but pushing herself to do it.

"You will do great. Don't worry about it. It's just about shouting 'GO HOWLERS' and doing a few cartwheels when we score a goal.", Travis said to Talia and then he yawned.

Talia thought that she is going to pass out. "What?"

Lulu giggled. "He is messing with you. You don't need to do cartwheels, but shouting is encouraged."

Talia shrunk between Travis and Lulu while wishing for an invisibility spell.

Several more people got onto the field, each wearing completely black outfits and Lulu told Talia that those are referees. "Coaches take turns being referees with the rule that one can't be a referee when his team is playing..."

Talia was grateful for the explanations that Lulu provided. It helped her understand what's going on.

...

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...

Up in the VIP area, Damon took seats with his guests, and he glared at Maya with displeasure which Maya caught, but she pretended that she didn't notice.

She knew that Damon wanted her to go and find Talia, but Talia is not a child, and Maya was confident that Talia will manage.

However, Maya felt guilty because she would go and find Talia if not for Damon's stubborn insistence without any explanation.

If Damon said that he cares about Talia, that he was worried about her, or anything... it would be different, but Damon was in his dictator-mode where he would boss people around and Maya didn't like it because matters of the heart can't be forced, and his behavior was contradicting everything a mate should do. If Maya didn't witness Damon cuddling with sleeping Talia in the back seat of the car on the day when they left the Red Moon pack, Maya would never guess that Talia is Damon's mate.

It took Maya a few deep breaths to push aside the negativity that Damon caused and to focus on Talia and check where she was.

Considering that Keith was one of the few people Talia knew, Maya guessed that Talia will be with him and a few players she met in the training center. After all, they talked about watching games and Keith mentioned securing seats for them.

Maya stood up and looked at the field, where the home team was. Thanks to her werewolf-enhanced vision, it took Maya only a few seconds to spot Talia sitting on the bench between Travis and Lulu and she smiled when she saw a pair of fuzzy black ears on top of Talia's head.

Since Travis was one of the few people who were familiar with Talia's circumstances, Maya mind-linked him, 'Let me know when Talia wants to leave the field. She is new and I want to keep an eye on her.'

'Of course, Beta Maya', Travis responded right away.

Satisfied with this, Maya went to sit next to Caden while ignoring Damon's glare.

Chapter 97 - The Summer Solstice Festival (4)

In the VIP area...

The unease in Damon's chest was increasing by the minute and the only thing that prevented him from flipping the table with all the drinks and snacks was that he was surrounded by Alphas and other high-ranking individuals from neighboring packs, and if he makes a spectacle, they will definitely have many questions Damon was not willing to answer.

'What's the status with Talia?', Damon asked Maya through the mind-link when he couldn't take it anymore.

'What about her?', Maya asked nonchalantly.

Damon's hands balled into fists. 'You should find her and make sure she is fine.'

'Why are you so concerned about her?', Maya asked. 'Talia is a big girl. I'm sure she is fine.'

Damon couldn't believe this.. 'Are you disobeying me?'

Maya felt Damon releasing his aura and she realized that she was close to crossing the line.

Maya is a brave and stubborn woman, but she wouldn't dare disobey Damon, mostly because that would draw a wedge between Damon and Caden. Maya was confident that if she defied Damon, it would mean she can't be Beta anymore and that would impact Caden as well. She didn't want to make Caden choose between his duty (and best friend), and her (aka his mate). It wouldn't be fair because Maya knew that they are all important to Caden.

But Maya didn't want to tell Damon Talia's whereabouts. Why would she make it easy for him?

If Damon is a man he thinks he is, he would go and take care of his mate, and not leave her alone while concealing the fact that they are mates.

Maya didn't get it. Are all men so dense? How does Damon think this will end up? Sure, he believes that he is protecting Talia, but the truth is that he is alienating the poor girl.

Mates are about security and unconditional acceptance, and Damon was not doing any of that. Actually, by concealing her importance, he was sending a message that Talia was not good enough and even though Talia didn't understand it, she could feel it. It was obvious that Talia was avoiding him because his behavior was confusing at best, and he was probably scaring her as well.

At this rate, they will crash and burn, and it will be Damon's doing and that's why Maya didn't care about Damon, but she was determined to help Talia see that there is a world outside Damon's presence and Maya hoped that will help Talia stand on her own two feet.

Maya was aware that Caden shared her opinion on how Damon should disclose Talia is his mate, but Maya also knew that Caden is taking Damon's side in this whole thing. After all, the two of them are buddies for a long time and Caden always had Damon's back.

'Calm down, Alpha, you don't want your guests to suspect something is wrong.', Maya said in an official tone. 'Talia is safe. I'm keeping an eye on her.'

...

Eleven players from two teams that are playing in the first match stood in the middle of the field and listened to the referee who was telling them the rules.

When that was over, they all turned to look at the VIP lounge where Damon stood up and spoke into a microphone, "I want to thank everyone for coming here to celebrate Summer Solstice with us..."

Talia was standing next to the bench with other substitute players, Travis, and Keith. They all stood up when Damon started talking, as a sign of respect.

Talia couldn't focus on what Damon was saying because the sound of his voice coming from the speaker was distorted into an indistinct buzzing under the influence of Talia's rampant thoughts which clashed with her emotions.

Damon was there with Maya, Caden, Alpha Maddox, Mindy, Axel, and other guests and Talia couldn't believe that was the same man who was holding her in his embrace less than an hour ago.

That was not Damon she knew.

That was Alpha Damon, the scary Alpha, a stranger. He was standing above all, serious and overbearing. With just one glance it was obvious that he was reigning over everyone.

Talia lowered her head because she didn't want to look at him anymore.

She didn't want to be reminded how she doesn't belong there. Not now. Not ever.

Did she want to be part of such a circle?

The mental image of Damon's face when she was accused of stealing food was suffocating. He just stood there and watched it happen. Talia will never forget that. And she will never forget that after she lowered her guard, she saw him getting cozy with Cassie... and how could she forget the first time she saw him, with princess Marcy between his legs? Of course, she didn't belong there.

That was not how she wanted to live her life.

For Talia, it was crystal clear that Damon and his party are like creatures from a different dimension, and the only thing she didn't understand was why he would occasionally show her a side of him that made her like him.

Talia shook her head. She was such a fool to allow herself to have these feelings that came without any warning, and now they turned bitter, and she was tired of suffering because of something that lived only in her mind.

She was like a child who had an invisible friend no one else can see.

In her mind, Talia created a version of Damon who was clingy and gentle and sometimes funny, a Damon who made her feel safe and needed, a Damon who was cheeky and couldn't wait to hold her hand, a Damon who saw her as more than a temporary entertainment, more than a pet, more than a charity project, and he called her Mrs. Blake.

It was hard to let go of that Damon, but Talia knew it had to be done because he was not real.

Talia felt a hand gently squeezing her shoulder.

"Are you OK?", Keith asked in a low voice. "If this team spirit is not your cup of tea, you don't need to do it."

Talia was glad that he is not a mind-reader.

She blinked her tears away and looked at Keith. "The game is about to start. Where are you going to find another cute girl to cheer for you?"

Keith paused for a moment and then chuckled when he realized that she repeated his words. "You will do just fine, Talia."

...

The game started and the audience became lively, shouting cheers and curses when the ball would switch from one team to another, and the volume increased as the ball approached either of the soccer goals.

Talia observed the action on the field with her eyes open wide and her heart thundered in her chest from excitement.

Liam was the fastest player in the Dark Howlers team and Talia thought how the tattoo of the cheetah on his arm suits him.

Talia stood on her feet when Liam got the ball and he rushed toward the opponent's goal.

The whole audience erupted in screams when two players in blue jerseys closed in on Liam and a moment later, Liam tumbled while clutching his leg.

The referee pulled a yellow ticket as a warning to players in blue jerseys and waved at medics to bring in the stretchers for Liam who was not moving.

It all happened quickly.

Talia pressed her hand against her mouth, and she didn't blink as they brought Liam toward their bench with Travis meeting them halfway and running with them out of the field line while asking Liam questions to assess his condition.

Keith was quick to send the substitute player in, and Travis was checking on Liam's leg as soon as medics kept the stretcher on the ground.

"How is he?", Keith asked with concern obvious in his voice.

"I don't think it's broken, but a nasty bruise is forming... Damn it! It's swelling already!" Travis looked up at Keith. "I want to send him for an x-ray..."

Keith cursed under his breath. The game just started, and he lost his fastest runner. But no matter how fast Liam was, those two were waiting to intercept him. It was obvious that the other team was aware of Liam's importance as the fastest player, and they were aiming to take him out of the game as soon as possible.

"No.", Liam objected. "I want to play. Put some ice on it and give me painkillers. My wolf will heal it in no time. I've had worse."

Keith and Travis exchanged glances, but Liam was determined to go back into the game.

"If in ten minutes there is no improvement, you are going to the hospital.", Travis said and waved at Talia. "Come and help to hold the ice..."

Talia was happy that she can be useful.



Travis sprayed an anesthetic on Liam's bruised leg and explained, "This will numb you up, and ice will prevent the swelling... take these also..." He gave two capsules to Liam. "Stay still and I will check on you in ten minutes."

"Flip the ice on every minute or so...", Travis instructed Talia and then he went to scribble something in his notepad.

Lulu and a few substitute players who were standing around Liam to hear about his condition also turned to watch the game.

Chapter 98 - The Summer Solstice Festival (5)

Talia observed that both Keith and Travis were serious and focused on their tasks and she glanced at Liam who was sitting on the stretcher and watching the game with a frown on his face.

It seemed that everyone had a task they were passionate about, and Talia hoped that one day she will also have something that sets her spirit ablaze. At this point, Talia's focus was on surviving and gaining independence, and she believed that once she takes care of the basics, she will find her passion as well.

Talia flipped the ice and looked at Liam who was now smiling at her.

"There is no need to be so gentle.", he said. "The doctor numbed me up good and I don't feel a thing."

"But the numbing will go away and if I hurt you now, you will feel it later.", Talia responded.

Liam shook his head while thinking how Talia is a kind girl..

By the time anesthesia wears off, his werewolf healing will take care of the injury. As long as it's not a torn muscle or a broken bone, he will be good as new in a few hours even without any treatment. As a werewolf herself, Talia should know that. But then... Liam didn't hate how Talia treated him with care.

Liam perked up when he realized that everyone was focused on the game, and this was his opportunity for some one-on-one time with Talia.

"I didn't get a chance to ask, where did you disappear last night? We were dancing and Dawn pulled me to the side and then an epic fight erupted. I was trying to find you, but you were nowhere to be found. We were worried that you got swept away in the scuffle, but you were not among injured so...", his voice trailed, obviously waiting for Talia to explain what happened.

"I'm not sure.", Talia responded honestly. "I drank too much. I remember dancing, and the next scene is me waking up in the morning with a nasty hangover."

She heard Damon mentioning carrying and spanking, but that didn't make sense, so Talia dismissed it. In any case, Talia didn't want to think about Damon.

"That bad, eh?", Liam asked with a chuckle. If he knew that Talia was wasted so badly, he would stick to her closely, and maybe she would wake up in his bed. Ah, the possibilities!

Talia switched hands because other than cooling Liam's injury, her hand was also getting cold to the point of being uncomfortable. Talia didn't have a metabolism of a werewolf that would keep her warm, and even with furry gloves, her fingers were exposed and cold.

Liam noticed Talia balling her free hand into a fist repeatedly and he took her hand between his and blew softly. "Let me warm you up."

Talia looked at Liam who was treating her hand like a precious treasure and her breath hitched. She was not used to such a gentle treatment.

They were on the playing field, with hundreds of people in visual range, yet at that moment, the atmosphere between Talia and Liam became very intimate, like it's just the two of them.

The heat in Talia's cheeks told her that she was blushing profusely. "There is no need."

"I insist...", Liam said while increasing his hold on Talia's hand so that she can't pull it out. "You are tending to my injury. The least I can do is to make sure you don't freeze..." And then he blew into her hand again.

Talia was not sure where to look so she decided to stare at his tattoos.

At a certain point, Travis checked on Liam's injury and after pressing some areas on Liam's leg, Travis cleared him as good to return to the game.

Travis was bandaging Liam's leg and Liam held Talia's hand the whole time.

"You can let go of her hand, Liam.", Travis said with a chuckle.

"She is the team spirit. I'm feeding off her energy.", Liam said matter-of-factly.

Travis shook his head and smiled. He could see that Liam was shameless, but it was only holding hands, so he didn't want to meddle.

Liam stood up and tried stepping on his foot before confirming that he is fine.

"Good luck.", Talia told Liam and he grabbed her hand. Before she could react, Liam twisted her wrist and kissed the back of her palm (over the furry glove).

"Thank you for supporting me. My next goal will be for you.", Liam said to Talia with a grin, and he winked before going to stand next to Keith at the field line and wait for the referee to call him to enter the game.

"Thank you for your help.", Travis said to Talia while keeping things back into his medical suitcase.

"I'm glad I could help." And she was glad it was over. The hand holding was awkward.

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The crowd erupted in screams when Liam scored a goal for the Dark Howlers team, and shortly after that, the first halftime was over with the result being a tie.

A game consisted of two halftimes, each thirty minutes long, and there was a ten minutes-long break between halftimes.

Two bulky guys brought a massive cooler that was filled with ice and various beverages.

All players dashed for the cooler to get a drink, and Talia observed them from the bench, happy that she survived the first halftime without the need to do cartwheels or anything excessive. But she noticed that the girl in the blue dress cheered for the opposite team enthusiastically and Talia thought that maybe she needs to up her game. Somehow.

Pierce patted Liam's back with more force than necessary. "When you got injured and the blue bastards scored a goal, we all thought we are done, but then you came back and evened the score. Impressive!"

Liam lifted his chin smugly. "Yeah. They messed me up quite badly, but the team spirit helped me."

Pierce turned to look at Talia curiously. "Talia? What did she do?"

"Eh...", Liam chuckled mysteriously. "Our team spirit was holding my hand while meds kicked in and I'm sure that the kiss brought me good luck. The moment my lips touched her, I could feel the positive energy surging through me."

"A kiss?", Pierce asked under his breath, and a few more players turned to look at Talia who stood up from the bench as an urge to flee swelled within her.

The tall man with a head full of blonde hair and a number 3 on his jersey walked toward Talia while eyeing her. "You gave Liam a kiss for good luck?"

"Hand! Liam kissed my hand!", Talia said with urgency, and she stepped backward over the bench in an attempt to increase the distance between her and the guy who was obviously thinking about kissing her.

Talia panicked. They are not thinking about forcing kisses on her, are they? She didn't have a proper kiss in her life, and now this?

Talia's hair stood on ends. Why are two more guys approaching her?

She glanced nervously at Liam. "Explain this properly!"

Talia didn't believe in kiss for good luck nonsense, but the sparkles in eyes of players told her that they are superstitious.

Liam stifled a laugh before admitting, "Yes, it was on the hand."

"Just a hand. He kissed my hand.", Talia repeated in a calmer voice, but she was still moving backward.

Talia froze when her back hit something solid. It was Keith.

"As a team spirit, you should do this for the team...", Keith murmured close to Talia's ear, and she felt like crying. "I will make it up to you. I promise."

Talia didn't care about making up anything. She wanted to escape, but there was no visible exit.

And just like that, all players from the Dark Howlers team lined up to hold and kiss Talia's hand. Even Mark who gave Talia bad vibes before the game, now stood in line obediently.

...

In the VIP lounge...

"What is your team doing? What kind of a ritual is that?", Mindy asked while munching on freshly roasted peanuts.

After asking her questions, Mindy narrowed her eyes while wondering if that's the same girl who was serving them on the previous day... the girl who Mindy mistook for an underage girl.

Most of them in the VIP lounge were watching the game (with a few exceptions who were fiddling with their phones), but during the break, everyone was chatting while enjoying refreshments that were brought in.

After Mindy's comments, they all looked down to see what got Mindy's attention.

Alpha Maddox and Axel had matching expressions of confusion and there was some amusement as well.

Caden craned his neck to satisfy his curiosity, and his eyes nearly bulged out at the sight on the field.

Talia was sitting on the bench with her arm extended in front of her, and all players from the Dark Howlers team were taking turns in holding and kissing her hand, substitute players included, males and females. Some even kneeled in front of Talia, in a ceremony that looked like they were pledging allegiance to their queen.

Caden glanced at Damon, and he could almost see the murderous stormy cloud forming above Damon's head as the latter watched the scene on the field.

Damon couldn't believe this. Why was Talia wearing a headband with fuzzy black ears that increased her cuteness level? And why was she on the field, surrounded by a bunch of sweaty guys? And what's with all that touching and kissing? Unacceptable!

What's up with the guy with number 5 on his jersey? Why is he chatting and smiling while kneeling in front of Talia? How dares he!? That kiss on Talia's hand lasted much longer than necessary!

Chapter 99 - The Summer Solstice Festival (6)

In the VIP lounge...

Damon watched the scene on the field.

Talia was with a bunch of guys around her, they were taking turns in kneeling and kissing her hand, and Damon felt like someone was wrenching the heart out of his chest. It was the most painful thing Damon experienced in his life and he thought that he is going to lose his mind.

'I told you that Talia is fine.', Maya's voice sounded in Damon's head, and Damon's insides tied into knots as he was suppressing his impulse to go on a rampage.

'You call that fine!?', Damon snapped at Maya through the mind-link. 'What's going on there!?'

'I know as much as you do.', Maya responded honestly.

Damon's wolf was non-responsive, and Damon never felt this lonely. With Talia by his side, Damon was at peace and the fact that Talia was enjoying with someone other than him was infuriating and numbing at the same time, making him feel dead inside. He didn't want to lose her.

Damon's jaw tightened as he chanted internally that it's NOT a good idea to jump there and snatch Talia away in front of all that audience.

'Go there and tell them to stop!', Damon told Maya through the mind-link.

Maya rolled her eyes. 'You are kidding, right? How can I do that without causing a scene? Besides, you told me to make sure Talia has fun at the festival. It seems to me that she is having a blast.'

'A BLAST!?', Damon fumed.

How the hell can his mate enjoy without him around? And Talia was surrounded by a bunch of scarcely dressed sweaty men!

That's his mate, damn it!

'BAM!'

Damon punched the table with refreshments, snapping it in two.

Plates and glasses shattered, covering the ground with a mess of glass, beverages, and snacks.

"Alpha, can we talk?", Caden waved at Damon to step outside the lounge.

"I apologize, it was an accident...", Maya was quick to do damage control while mind-linking Omegas to clean up and bring another batch of refreshments to people who looked at Damon in confusion.

Most of the Alphas have unpredictable tempers, and Damon has a bad reputation, so no one dared to comment on Damon's outburst. Not for him to hear, at least.

...

"What was that?", Caden asked Damon when they stepped out of the earshot of guests.



Damon shoved his hand into his hair angrily. "I snapped."

"I can see that. But I don't understand why."

Of course, Caden knew why Damon blew a fuse, but he wanted Damon to admit it.

Seeing that Damon was not responding, Caden tried a different approach. "I know you for a long time and I can see that something is weighing on you. I would like to help, but unless you open up, I will probably do more damage."

Damon shook his head, refusing to share his thoughts. "It's nothing."

"Fine. Don't tell me.", Caden said dryly. "But if you keep breaking furniture in front of all those guests, other than rogues, spies, and Elders pushing women to be your brides, you will need to deal with others proclaiming you as mentally unstable."

Damon frowned. Since when was his mental stability in question? "They wouldn't dare."

Caden shrugged. "A few years ago, you said that they wouldn't dare to force marriage on you, yet look at you now. As much as you don't want to admit, they are wining and it's only a matter of time before they force you to pick a Luna. Maybe you should accept Marcy."

"NO!", Damon roared. "What the hell are you saying?"

The idea of being with Marcy gave him goosebumps. Any woman other than Talia was out of the question.

Caden lifted his hands defensively. "Let's not talk about Marcy now. Alpha Maddox came with Mindy. What about her?"

"What's wrong with you? Why are you talking about random women?"

Caden shrugged. "I'm just reminding you of your options. There is also Cassie, Jade, Leah, Stella, Betty, and if you give me a minute, I can get you a much longer list of willing candidates. They are all decent-looking with some good and some bad sides. As long as you focus on the positives, any of them will work. Maybe you should prioritize them based on their skills in bed. There are so many of them willing to serve you. Just pick one. That shouldn't be difficult..."

"STOP!", Damon angrily interrupted Caden's chatter. "Why are you talking like I want to get married?"

"Sorry, were we supposed to talk about something else?", Caden asked innocently. "Oh, right. You broke the table and made a mess. What was that about?"

Damon didn't want to say that his temper flared because some guys are buzzing around Talia. He really didn't want to say that. But the scene from the field was still flashing in front of his eyes and it was driving him mad, and he was not sure if he can go through this without making serious damage. He needed help.

Caden is his best friend, his Beta. Caden always had his back so... Damon inhaled forcibly and inched closer to Caden.

"It's Talia...", Damon said in a small voice, and he glanced around to ensure no one can overhear him before adding, "She is... my mate."

Damon's voice was barely audible, but Caden heard him clearly.

Damon looked at Caden apprehensively. Why was there no reaction?

"Did you hear what I said?"

"Yes. Good hearing is one of my strong sides.", Caden responded matter-of-factly.

"And you are not surprised?"

Caden shook his head. "The only thing I'm surprised about is why it took you so long to come clean."

"You knew?"

"Only a fool wouldn't figure it out.", Caden said proudly. "I remember that we were all rubbing it off on the Playboy magazine, and you bedded dozens of girls by then. I hated you because you never cared for girls, yet they were still swarming around you and..."

"How is that important?", Damon interrupted Caden.

"I'm getting to the point.", Caden responded.

"Get to it faster."

"I had to give it to you, you were consistent and predictable, and that changed when we went to the Red Moon pack. You changed. You smuggled a random girl in the trunk, held her in the back seat of the car while she was sleeping, gave her your old bedroom, you are coming up with random excuses to ditch work and accompany her, you are even cutting food for her like her hands are not working for anything other than holding your hand under the table. Should I keep going?"

Damon realized that he was not sneaky enough. And if Caden figured it out that means, "Maya also knows?"

Caden's lips lifted into a smile.

Damon let out a long breath. That explains Maya's strange behavior when something is related to Talia.

Since this was out of the way, Damon wanted to mention one more thing. "Max told me that Alpha Richard is willing to pay for any information related to Talia."

"Does he know that Talia is...?"

"No.", Damon interrupted Caden before he could say the 'mate' word. "I didn't tell anyone, until now."

"No one knows? What about Talia?"

Damon's face fell. "Without her wolf, she doesn't feel the bond."

"Why didn't you tell her?"

"Don't you see her? She is scared of everything. If I tell her, she will freak out."

Maya had a theory that Damon is concealing the fact that Talia is his mate because he believes Talia is weak. Damon's words confirmed that Maya was right. Caden smiled. Maya is always right.

"I see her, Damon. Talia is down there, having our whole soccer team on their knees."

Damon growled. Did Caden need to bring that up?

Before Damon snapped at him, Caden asked, "So, how long will you keep this from Talia?"

Damon didn't have a plan. "I don't know."

"I think that Talia is stronger than you think.", Caden said. "She needs to know, Damon. You don't like that she is close to other guys, but you didn't give her a reason to stay away from them. You know how Talia lived before coming here. She will want to try everything. Watching a game, eating, drinking, dancing, dating. Do you want her to go out with someone else?"

Damon's insides twisted. Talia with someone else? Over his dead body! But... "Max said that I should stay away from her because many people are watching. I don't know if I can do that. I feel like ripping the head off from any guy who dares to get close to her."

"I agree with Alpha Maddox.", Caden said. "You should stay away from Talia and watch how much she has grown since she came here. Actually, I think that this is who she was all along, but now she is coming out of her shell."

Damon was confused. "Should I stay away from her or stick close so that she doesn't go out with someone else?"

"Are you ready to announce that she is our Luna?"

Damon's brows furrowed and that was the answer to Caden's question.

"Until you are ready for everyone to know, you should stay away from her. But don't take too long. If she doesn't feel the bond, she might pick someone else."

Damon knew that Caden was right. He didn't want to put Talia in danger, but what if he waits too long and loses her?

His mind was in turmoil. What should he do?

Chapter 100 - The Summer Solstice Festival (7) [Bonus ]

Damon and Caden returned to the VIP lounge and saw that the mess was cleaned up and a new table was in place with snacks and drinks like nothing happened.

Their talk didn't solve anything, but the fact that Damon shared his (not) secret with Caden (and in extension with Maya also) that Talia is his mate, made Damon feel more at ease.

Damon walked to the edge of the lounge and looked at the scene below that was still unfolding.

Talia was chatting and laughing, and she was beautiful and enchanting, like a fairy. His fairy.

Damon enjoyed the sight of Talia's smile, but he was irked that her smile was not directed at him. Yes, they were touching only her hand, but that was more than what he was touching, damn it!

Those rascals from the soccer team are warriors, and Damon was determined to punish them for getting so close to Talia. Extra drills will do the trick. Maybe he can send them on a survival training in the mountains for a month.

.

'Don't worry', Caden's voice sounded in Damon's head through the mind-link. 'Travis is there. With the good doctor nearby, nothing bad will happen to Talia.'

Only then Damon realized that Travis was sitting on the bench next to Talia.

Damon was not sure if that was a good thing or not.

Why didn't Travis stop that madness? Travis knows that Talia is new in the pack and that she was abused. Why did he allow a bunch of guys to swarm around Talia? Or is Travis part of that circus? Is Travis the reason why Talia was down there?

The more Damon thought about it, the less he liked Travis.

Damon wanted to be with Talia, and this... just what was this? Why was he stuck in this lounge with a bunch of people he didn't want to be with?

The only girl he wanted by his side was down there, surrounded by guys who were worshipping her!

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The Dark Howlers team won their first game, and they had a break until their next one.

During breaks, teams went into the building that was next to the sports fields. It had one massive room with long tables and benches, and every team had space reserved for them.

Snacks and drinks were provided, and there were restrooms and dressing rooms with showers.

Travis huddled in the corner and within seconds he was sleeping. Talia admired his ability to sleep with all the chaos around him.

Talia was sitting at one table among the players of the Dark Howlers team, and she helplessly let them hold her hands.

Well, at least they were not kissing her hand. That was reserved for before the game starts.

"Are they bullying you?", Maya's voice sounded from behind Talia, and Talia's face lit up.

"Do you think I would let anyone bully our team spirit?", Keith asked before Talia could respond.

Maya waved at Talia to join her. "Let's take a walk." Maya glanced at players who were frowning. "Don't worry, I will return your team spirit in a bit."

Talia stood up and scurried after Maya out of the building.

As soon as Caden returned after his chat with Damon, Caden told Maya through the mind-link that Damon caved in and spilled the secret. Now there were three people who knew that Talia was Damon's mate. However, for Maya, that didn't change anything.

Until Damon comes clean with Talia, Maya will treat him the same.

"You look cute with those."

It took Talia a moment to realize that Maya was talking about black wolf ears on her head.

Talia raised her hands, to show fuzzy fingerless gloves to Maya. "It's all part of the costume. Go Howlers!" She did a fist bump in the air.

Maya stifled a laugh. "It seems you are having fun."

"I had no idea that this is how things will turn out when I came here this morning."

The truth was that Talia was uncomfortable with all the attention players were giving her, but at the same time, they spoke with her jokingly, and the mood was good. It made her feel like she is one of them, accepted, useful, definitely part of the team. It was a good feeling.

"Maya...", Talia paused and glanced around to make sure no one is nearby to overhear her. "Do players believe in things like good luck rituals?"

"Is that why they are kissing your hand before they go out in the field?"

Maya was laughing at Talia's explanation, "Liam told them that he scored a goal after holding my hand, and now they think it brings good luck."

"They will believe in anything. It's mental stuff. Every werewolf has speed and reflexes, and sometimes it's just about the right mindset.", Maya said. "If it's bothering you, tell them to stop. Or do you want me to do it for you?"



"No, no. It's not a problem. I'm glad I can help.", Talia admitted.

Even with all the skinship, everyone was polite, and they were kissing the fluffy glove anyway, so she didn't hate it.

If she ignored the awkwardness of holding hands with people she barely knew, Talia was having a good time. It was the first time for Talia to be surrounded by so many people and no one was looking down on her.

Talia knew that Maya is busy, and she felt guilty that Maya came to see her.

"Thank you for coming to check on me. I am doing fine. The players are treating me well and Keith and Travis are like big brothers who are making sure no one is disrespectful.", Talia said. "You should spend your free time with Caden."

Maya understood that Talia doesn't want to be a burden. "You are very considerate, Talia. I hope you put yourself first when it counts, or people will take advantage of you. Do what you want without caring about others."

Talia thought how that's easy to do for someone with power. Maya is a Beta and other than the Alpha, no one else can stand against her. As for Talia, one careless word or action could lead to a punishment.

Sure, since she arrived at the Dark Howlers pack, people were friendly, and other than her conflict with Cassie, no one raised a hand on Talia, but Talia believes that she was not bullied because she made sure to stay out of everyone's way and not attract attention.

Seeing that Maya was leaving, Talia wanted to ask how are things in the VIP lounge, but she swallowed those words before they could form in her mouth.

If Maya mentioned that Damon was enjoying with one of the women who are up there, Talia would be sad.

Just by thinking about that possibility, there was an inexplicable longing that created a gaping hole in Talia's chest, and she wished for a time machine so that she can return to earlier that morning, in Damon's office, when she was sitting in his lap and leaning into his embrace, basking in his warmth and the scent of the forest and dark chocolate... and she would use that same time machine to stop the time and never come out of that office.

Talia let out a long breath and admonished herself. Why the heck was she thinking about Damon?

Talia decided to go back inside. She welcomed the distraction that was provided by rowdy players who were squabbling about who will hold her hand next.

...

Game after game passed with breaks in between and the Dark Howlers team found themselves in the finals.

Talia learned the rules, and other than the hand-holding-and-kissing ritual before each game (and at halftime), she was in charge of holding hands of injured players. Talia was quite busy because the number of injuries increased with every next game.

It was silly, but Talia never felt so useful, like her presence was really making a difference, and players looked at her like she was important.

Talia even got to watch up close as Doctor Travis stitched a busted shin of one player, and Travis was explaining what he was doing while examining and treating players who came off the field with injuries, so she learned quite a bit.

Keith was always in Talia's visual range, and during few breaks when Keith was a referee, Liam and Pierce made sure to stick close to Talia (because Travis was sleeping). Lulu and Sandy were also always close.

The final game was between the Dark Howlers and the Midnight Guardians.

The game was an exciting nail-biting affair that ended with a tied score. 3:3.

Instead of returning to their rest areas, each team huddled around their coach on the field.

Talia and Lulu were standing on the field line and Talia had no idea what to expect.

Lulu was flustered from excitement, and Talia could feel it. The win was almost at their grasp, but then the game was over.

"What's going on?", Talia asked Lulu.

"Coaches are choosing five players to take penalty kicks. A coin toss will decide who goes first, and teams will take turns in kicking the ball from the penalty mark into the goal. The team that scores the most goals is the winner. Every kick counts."

"What if it's a tie after everyone takes turns?"

Lulu paused. "That never happened before, but in theory, they will continue kicking until one makes a mistake. Uhm... coach wants you there."

Talia understood that Keith mind-linked Lulu.

"Me?"

"Yes, you.", Lulu said and gestured toward Keith who was waving at Talia to come.

Talia swallowed a mouthful of air. Why on earth was Keith calling her to go to the middle of the soccer field? She had a bad feeling about this.