

The Alpha's Bride

#Chapter 851: Visiting a patient (1)

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After clearing the rogues in their assigned area, Damon and Talia swept the forest on their way to the main house. There, they found warriors organized by Alpha Cristian and Beta Imre to patrol areas and help with the injured.

Damon and Talia stayed there to help with the reports. They were relieved to see that no one from the Dark Howlers pack had more than a few scratches, and even though there were no fatalities among friendly units, some warriors required hospitalization.

Tony, Kalina, Pierce, Daria, Amelia, and Liam helped interrogate captured rogues.

Everyone was busy.

When things calmed down, Talia asked Damon to head to the pack hospital. She wanted to check on Arya and Keith.

Cristian also wanted to visit Arya, but then he heard that she had found her mate and was unconscious, so he gave up on going to the pack hospital. He couldn't help Arya, and there was a lot he could do there.

Cristian decided to focus on matters at hand and will visit Arya after she wakes up, preferably with Luna Michelle, assuming Arya doesn't seek solitude with her mate right away.

Damon asked Talia to rest first, but how could she rest when she knew that Arya's situation was not optimistic and she could help?

Talia pushed the door open of the room to see curtains separating three spaces. A nurse told them that General Arya was on the far right.

Other than the machines beeping, there were no other sounds in the room.

Talia peered behind the curtain to see Keith sitting on the chair next to Arya's bed, holding her hand and staring at her bandaged face with a complex expression on his handsome face.

"Hey," Talia called.

Keith's head snapped toward the sound, and he bolted to his feet.

"Talia, I didn't notice..." Keith's voice trailed as another figure appeared behind her, and Keith lowered his head. "Alpha Damon."

Talia raised her hand, indicating to Keith to sit. "How is she doing?"

Keith's gaze drifted toward Arya. "Uhm... the same."

Talia got on Arya's left and observed her. Talia remembered Arya as a beautiful and prideful she-wolf, and none of those were visible now.

"Your mate is brave," Talia said to Keith. "Her unit was attacked by rogues, and she acted as bait to increase the chances of others to survive." They saw that information in reports. "Thanks to her, no one in her unit was seriously injured. She was outnumbered, yet she fought bravely."

Keith had an odd mixture of feelings while listening to Talia praising Arya. Somehow, it was like one girlfriend praising another, and Keith felt like a cheater.

He knew it didn't make sense, but then... his feelings for Talia didn't diminish. The only thing that changed was that another female came into the picture. Arya's existence in Keith's life would be wonderful if Arya were not unconscious on the hospital bed.

It was messed up, and he didn't get it, but he remembered how Cassandra said his luck was tied to Talia's. Is this what Cassandra meant, that Talia will save his mate?

"Can you help her?" Keith asked Talia.

Talia smiled a little. "That's why I'm here."

Talia raised her hands and paused halfway. "I want to warn you not to get your hopes high. There is a limit to how much I can do."

Talia's body recuperated since she and Damon faced rogues; after all, she was an Alpha. However, her energy was returning slowly. Liseli said it was because Talia overworked herself overnight, and the best thing would be to sleep, but Talia couldn't sleep while knowing that Arya's life was hanging by a thread.

Talia was not confident that she could heal Arya completely, but even if she could help a little bit, it would be worth it.

Damon was unwilling to let Talia do this, but she promised to watch out for herself and not endanger their baby. After all the stress Talia went through in one night, Damon couldn't say no to her. He knew that if Arya didn't make it, Talia would blame herself forever. Just how she is blaming herself for Lulu's death.

Talia placed her hands above Arya's body, and her palms lit up in silvery light.

Talia was about to close her eyes and focus when she noticed something odd. There was a strand of energy going toward Keith like something was attracting it.

Talia thought of something. "Keith? Are you wearing the necklace Cassandra gave you?"

Keith was embarrassed to admit it, but he couldn't lie either. "Yes."

"Can I see it?" Talia asked.

Keith reached behind his neck to open the clasp.

Talia observed the cracked stone intently.

"Do you know what that is?" Damon asked.

"I think so," Talia responded.

When Talia accessed the second part of the message her mother left in the necklace Talia was wearing, Talia received a lot of information about the Guardians, their abilities, and how they use energies. More than half of the information was too esoteric to understand, but this necklace reminded her of a storage device for abilities.

Guardians could store their abilities in specific containers for others to use. Each Guardian took pride in what they could do, so these items were rare, normally given to lovers as a sign of sincerity, symbolizing one's commitment to a relationship. It was like giving a part of themselves.

Talia was unsure if she could do anything about the cracked necklace, but she thought it would be worth a try. Her healing could fix flesh; why not a rock? Actually, that was not a simple rock; it was a special material, able to contain energies that would normally dissipate.

She held the pendant and channeled her healing on the palm that started glowing in silvery light.

The light pulsed and intensified by the moment.

Damon was not happy about this. They came here to fix Arya so that Keith could have his mate (and leave Talia alone) and not to fix jewelry.

Damon was on the verge of snapping and telling her to stop it when...

'CRACK'

A sharp sound emanated from Talia's palm, and the silvery light abruptly got sucked into the white stone that was vibrant now.

Keith's eyes widened in wonder.

Talia grinned while inspecting the results of her work. She confirmed that her attempt was successful. She fixed the necklace!

"Here you go," Talia said to Keith while handing him the necklace. "I filled it with my energy. It will activate under the right conditions, and since this has a purpose of protecting and healing if you are close to your mate, it will speed up her healing process."

Keith took the white rock that was warm to the touch. "Thank you, Talia."

Damon groaned in displeasure. He didn't like that Keith addressed Talia without her title. But Talia told him it was fine because Keith was the head of her guards, and they met when she was a nobody, and Keith treated her well.

Maybe to others, that wouldn't be a big deal, but to Talia, who was neglected and bullied for two decades, Keith was one of the first friendly faces who welcomed her with a smile, without judging her based on appearance or lack of background.

From Talia's point of view, Keith deserved to address her casually. Besides, whenever outsiders were present, Keith would address her formally.

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Chapter 852: Visiting a patient (2)

Talia took a deep breath and assessed her state. She still had energy left.

'Lis?' Talia called her wolf.

'I am here.'

'I need your help.'

Liseli didn't respond, but Talia could sense that Liseli was present and focused. They will do this together.

Talia's palms lit up and for the next minute or so, she was focused on healing Arya.

It was not much, but the monitors attached to Arya's body became livelier, beeping in a steady rhythm, almost at the rate of the other two heart rate monitors in the room, on the other side of the privacy curtain.

"I'm sorry I can't do more," Talia said to Keith. "You should call a doctor to see the progress now. I will be back in the afternoon after I rest."

Keith looked at Talia gratefully. "I don't know how to thank you."

Talia's lips formed a tired smile. "Please, don't go there, Keith. I am your Luna. It is my duty to take care of my people."

Damon puffed his chest proudly. Talia addressed herself as his Luna, and he couldn't be happier about it. Also, Talia reminded Keith of her position.

Talia was sorry that she couldn't do more. She could see Keith's uncertainty and dejection, and she couldn't blame him. Talia knew very well what it meant to have little to no confirmation that the other person was your mate. Validating that sparks of the mate bond existed and that she was not crazy meant the world to her, and she was confident that Keith will feel the same joy when Arya wakes up and confirms that Keith is her mate.

Talia was about to leave when she remembered one thing.

"Why are you holding her hand?" Talia asked Keith.

"What should I do?"

"Your proximity will help her get better," Talia said. "Why don't you climb into bed with her?"

Keith lowered his gaze. "I'm not sure if it's appropriate. I mean... What if she hates it?"

Talia shook her head. "You are mates. How can she hate it?" Talia turned to look at Damon. "I remember when Damon was hurt. At that time, I didn't know we were mates, and I couldn't feel the sparks of our bond, but I had a feeling that I should stay close to him. I climbed into his bed and clung to him, and... it helped. Doctor Travis said that Damon had a nearly miraculous recovery thanks to me."

Keith cocked an eyebrow at Talia. "Yeah. Because you can do... your thing."

Talia pointed at the necklace that was hanging around Keith's neck. "You can do it also, Keith. Good luck."

Keith looked into the gap of the curtain through which Talia and Damon disappeared, and then he turned to look at Arya.

His wolf urged him to get closer and hold the female, but his human half told him that she was a stranger. But then... Talia told him that it would help, so Keith steeled his resolve, and slowly, very slowly, he lowered himself onto the bed next to Arya.

He was not sure where to put his arms without hurting her, so he laid sideways with one arm under his head, and with the other hand he reached to hold Arya's.

The sparks of their bond prickled his palm, and he hoped they were stronger than before and that he was not just imagining it.

...

Talia and Damon walked back to the guest house that Cristian had arranged for them.

Talia promised to meet Ashton for breakfast and join in their morning activities of raft building, and racing, and whatever else they've got planned for kids, but Talia was not in the mood to party, and she feared it would show.

Damon asked Michelle for the food to be delivered to the guesthouse where they were staying, and he said that they wouldn't attend activities because Talia needed rest.

Of course, Michelle accommodated that request, and she said that she would explain it to Ashton.

The walk was no more than a few minutes long, and Talia enjoyed the silence. She observed the forest around them and marveled how everything seemed peaceful like last night didn't happen. There were no signs of rogues, no scent of blood, no sounds of fighting.

"What's on your mind, kitten?"

"How life continues, no matter what happens."

Damon hummed ambiguously.

"Damon?"

"Yes, kitten?"

"Do you have an idea who the traitor is?"

Damon puffed his cheeks. "It could be anyone. Probably more than one."

"More than one?"

"Just how Zina talked to Steph, and it reached rogues, not everyone is a traitor. Some are just excited to share the good news." Damon could see it happening. "Omegas could be gushing how their Alpha prince will have a fantastic party, and then someone asks if it's safe, and they say something like..." Damon changed his voice to make it higher, like a female was talking, "Of course, it's safe. Alpha ordered infrared sensors to be set up everywhere." He changed to his normal voice, "And someone overheard it."

Talia nodded in agreement. It was a possible scenario.

"So then, what do we do? How can we prevent people from talking? Do we keep everything to ourselves?"

Damon didn't have the right answers.

"The fewer people know about it, the safer we will be," he said.

"Should we live secretive lives as recluses?"

Damon loved that idea... just Talia and him, and no one else... but he knew it was impossible.

"There is another side to it," he said. "Secrets have the power to backfire only while you keep them as secrets. If you announce them to the world, for everyone to know, the secrets become less dangerous."

Talia thought of something. "If we announce the existence of Guardians to everyone and what they can do, can that benefit us?"

"Absolutely," Damon said without missing a beat. "People will be aware of them and develop strategies to resist Guardians' powers. However, there is also a chance that some will panic, and some will seek Guardians in a desire to work for them."

Talia liked when Damon would share his wisdom. His voice would be deep and soothing, and she had a feeling that he knew everything.

"Tell me more," Talia demanded.

"About?"

"About anything. I love to hear your voice."

Damon paused and his smile reflected in his eyes. "How about I tell you how much I love you?"

"I'm all ears," Talia said dreamily.

"Ah!" She exclaimed when he scooped her into his arms without warning and started running.

"What are you doing?" She thought he will express his love, and not... this. Whatever it was.

"You said you want to hear how much I love you," Damon said in a steady tone, even though he was running. "For that, I will let my body talk." He shot her a devilish smile that stirred something funny in her stomach.

Talia gasped as graphic images of the two of them flashed in her mind. Naked on the sofa, on the bed, on the floor, against the wall...

"Damon..." She tried to sound angry, but she was already aroused, so her protest sounded more like meowl.

Damon laughed and increased his pace. They were seconds away from the guesthouse. His kitten wanted confirmation of how much he loved her, and he was eager to show her by guiding her to heaven with the movements of his hips.

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Chapter 853: Crude awakening (1)

Alpha Cristian and Luna Michelle went that evening to visit the injured in the pack hospital. They wanted to thank them for their service and to wish them a speedy recovery.

With many warriors in a non-critical state being sent home early, the hospital seemed peaceful. However, the rooms were packed, and some had double or triple patients than they were designed for. Luckily, most patients were kept for twenty-four hours observation and will be discharged during the night or in the morning. Their enhanced werewolf healing was a good thing.

Alpha Cristian and Luna Michelle wanted to check on the injured now, as tomorrow they will be dispersed everywhere through the territory of the Spring Leaf pack, and it would be more time consuming to see every warrior who suffered for their pack.

Nurses were fussing about their Alpha and Luna being present. It was an official visit, and it was a big deal. They took turns explaining who was in each room and their conditions before Alpha and Luna entered.

It was nurse Betty's turn to talk about the room where Arya was.

"General Arya is stable, and she should wake up soon," Betty said.

Cristian was surprised to hear this. "The reports said she was seriously injured. Are you sure about her waking up soon, or are you just trying to spare us the bad news?"

Betty bobbed her head. "General Arya arrived in a bad state, but her mate stayed with her all the time. He barely ate anything. The commitment between mates impacts how much the bond will boost each other's healing, and I can tell you that the young man from the Dark Howlers pack is one of the most committed mates I've seen. Her healing rate is miraculous. If we were not reluctant to wake her up, we would remove most of the bandages hours ago."

Cristian and Michelle exchanged glances and smiled. It was good news to hear that Arya was doing well, and the second good thing was that Keith was taking care of her well.

"Will we bother them if we visit?" Cristian asked.

It's common for newly mated couples to seek privacy, which applies to more than carnal pleasures. It's a sensitive time as they are getting to know each other. Their souls and bodies get synchronized as the bond strengthens and allows them to exchange emotions, to become as one in more than just merging physically.

"We can take a peek," Michelle said. "If they are sleeping, we won't disturb them."

Now that Arya had found her mate, Michelle was hoping that Arya would give up on whatever attachment she had to Cristian. Michelle wanted to see Arya and Keith holding each other and being lovey-dovey, and she wanted Cristian to see them like that so that he would stop treating Arya like she was his responsibility.

Michelle knew Cristian loved her; she could feel his sincerity through their bond, so she didn't think he would cheat on her, no matter how pretty or clingy Arya was. But she could also feel his concern for the girl, and Michelle didn't like it. After all, Michelle was Cristian's mate, and she noticed that Cristian was giving Arya more of him than he did to other pack members.

Sure, Cristian had his reasons. He saw Arya as a child, Arya didn't have anyone else, but none of those appeased Michelle's discomfort with the situation.

Betty waited in the hallway as her Alpha and Luna went in.

Michelle was the first one to peek through the gap of the curtain.

"Aww... look at them," Michelle said softly.

Keith was curled around Arya with his face stuck in her hair. They were both sleeping. Arya had a lot of bandages covering her, but they couldn't cover that she looked peaceful.

Cristian pulled the curtain to see, and the 'krrrr' sound was louder than anyone expected.

Arya stirred from her sleep, and after one drowsy blink, her eyes snapped open.

"Alpha..." Arya called while trying to get up.

Cristian was quick to get by Arya's side. "No, no... don't get up."

Arya was disoriented, and the pain medications numbed any aches that should be there.

Keith groaned. He felt someone move next to him, and then he heard a female's voice.

Keith was half-asleep, but he realized that a male was getting close to his mate.

With a ferocious growl, Keith pushed Cristian back. "Stay away from her!"

Arya was alerted. She didn't realize that someone was there, on her bed, so close. And it was a man.

Keith didn't remove his glare from Cristian as he got off the bed, his muscles rippling as he was ready to attack.

"You... you..." Arya needed a moment to collect herself. Keith was tense like he was about to jump on Cristian and start a fight.

"How dare you act against my Alpha?" Arya asked.

Keith's head snapped to look at her. "What did you say?" The idea that she would side with a man other than him was breaking his heart into pieces.

"That's my Alpha," Arya said to Keith. Anguish swelled within her, and she didn't know from where it came, but it overpowered the medications she was under. "You attacked him. That's unacceptable."

Keith didn't know how to deal with Arya's accusing glare.

The air was thinning, and he felt like walls were closing in on him, threatening to crush him, and whatever was left of his heart.

That was his mate, right there. He could feel the bond. It was supposed to be wonderful. Everyone told him that finding a mate is magical, yet since last night he was uncertain, and now... he was nearly certain that his mate didn't want him.

Keith jabbed his hand into his hair. "Fuck this!" He cursed loudly and stormed out of the room.

Cristian felt guilty for this misunderstanding. He didn't mean to appear like he was trying to get his hands on Arya, but it happened, and Keith saw him as a threat, and Arya only added oil to the fire.

Cristian glanced at Michelle. "I will go after him."

Arya was blinking in confusion while looking at the door she could see clearly because Keith pushed the curtain all the way when he left.

"Who is that man?" Arya asked with disapproval in her voice.

Michelle folded her arms over her chest. "Who do you think he is?"

"How does he dare attack Alpha?"

"Maybe because he was defending you."

"Defending me? Why would I need defending from my Alpha?"

"That's not how your mate saw it."

Arya froze. "Mate? How can he be my mate?"

Michelle shook her head. "Do you remember how you found yourself in the hospital? Of course, you don't. If Alpha Damon and Luna Talia didn't save your ass in the forest, you would be torn into pieces by rogues. And if your mate didn't bring you to the pack hospital, you would bleed out there. He got you here and didn't leave your side. Not even for a minute. He cared for you. He abandoned his position as Luna Talia's guard and is risking severe punishment so that he could be with you. And what did you do? The first thing you did was siding against him for a man who is mated!"

"That's not what..."

"Bullshit!" Michelle exclaimed. "Only blind people don't see how you are looking at Cristian! That's MY mate, and I will be damned if I let you put your hands on him. I am

not a warrior, but that doesn't mean I can't keep my mate away from shameless women like you."

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Chapter 854: Crude awakening (2)

Arya was gaping at Michelle. Michelle was always calm and composed, a perfect Luna, and this was a woman with a belly full of anger who was baring her fangs to defend what was hers. And the worst thing was that Michelle's Alpha aura was pressing on Arya to the point of numbing her reasoning.

Arya lowered her head. "I apologize, Luna Michelle. I admire Alpha Cristian, but I know you are his mate and that he adores you. I would never..."

"Good that you know," Michelle interrupted her. "Now, act like it. The Moon Goddess gave you your mate, and instead of embracing him, you blew it. If he has half of the pride as a warrior, you will have a tough time getting him to forget what you did."

Arya felt wronged. She had no idea who Keith was, nor did she feel the bond. Sure, he was handsome, but why would she side with a stranger over a man who practically raised her?

Cristian was not an Alpha of the Spring Leaf pack when Arya was a child, and he kept an eye on her as she was growing up. But she couldn't see him as a father figure. Cristian was not much older than Arya when thinking in terms of werewolf aging. Fourteen years. When she is thirty, he will be forty-four, but... that will never happen. Arya knew that much.

No matter how much out of reach Alpha Cristian was, Arya couldn't just accept a guy she had just met as her forever-mate. And they didn't even meet! She opened her eyes to see him attack her Alpha, and then he stormed out, and that was it.

"How do I know he is my mate?" Arya asked Michelle. "What if he is with me because of my looks?"

Michelle snorted, and she reached into her purse to fish out a hand mirror. "Your looks? Maybe you should see yourself."

Arya opened the mirror, and her eyes widened in shock. She was mostly bandaged, and parts of her skin that were visible were bruised. She was a mess.

"As for feeling the bond," Michelle said. "Close your eyes, Arya. Feel the emotions that are flowing into you. The man spent a day by your side. I'm confident your bond is strong enough to sense each other."

Arya released a long breath and closed her eyes. She could feel the anger and confusion and... "He is hurt. He thinks I betrayed him."

Michelle wanted to say that he was not wrong, but then she saw Arya getting up.

"You should stay in bed."

"No. I can't stay here. Not when my mate thinks I was siding with another man over him."

"That's exactly what you did, Arya," Michelle said sternly. "You need to learn that actions have consequences. If you are going to keep your appearance of a prideful ice princess, you should stay in bed and let that man move on."

Move on!? The idea of never seeing Keith again was making her stomach twist into painful knots. "What do you mean?"

"Bond works both ways, Arya. You can feel his emotions, and he can feel yours. If you are not sincere, he will know. Don't insult the man who saved your life by telling him you care when you don't."

...

Outside...

Keith stormed out of the pack hospital, and he stared at the dark sky while taking deep breaths.

His wolf protested, urging him to return and be with mate, but Keith couldn't. He didn't want to go there and see his mate caring for another man.

Keith looked at the Moon and wondered if this was the Moon Goddess' idea of a joke. Or was she set on torturing him?

"Keith!" Alpha Cristian called while running toward him.

"Stay away from me!" Keith growled.

"Listen, let me explain."

Keith snapped to look at Cristian. "Explain, what exactly? How are you going to explain that my mate prefers you than me? Are you sleeping with her?"

"What? No!"

"I never saw a she-wolf stand up for a man like that unless he is family or lover. Your scent doesn't match, so you can't be family. If you are not sleeping with her, how do you explain her behavior?"

Cristian puffed his cheeks. "It's not like that. Arya is like a daughter..."

Keith's ears were buzzing. There it was... the name... Arya. Keith told nurses not to tell him because he wanted to hear it from his mate, and this guy ruined it. Or maybe it was not important anymore.

Keith knew that the man in front of him was Alpha Cristian, but he didn't care because, at that moment, that was not an Alpha of a pack but a man who had taken his mate away. And why was he still talking? Why was his face so gentle while talking about Arya?

Keith saw red as anger and dejection swelled into violence.

"You fucker!"

Keith shouted and jumped on Alpha Cristian.

Cristian dodged Keith's punch at the last moment, but the next one landed in Cristian's stomach, blowing the wind out of his lungs.

Cristian staggered backward. "I don't want to fight you, Keith."

"Too bad because I will fight you," Keith squeezed through his teeth and attacked again.

Cristian started dodging, and when Keith punched his shoulder, he realized this won't end well.

Cristian released his Alpha aura, intending to suppress Keith and stop this madness, but it didn't work. Keith didn't slow down, actually, it looked like his movements were getting faster.

It was a long time since Cristian was pushed into a corner like that, and only defending would cause him to suffer a loss. How can he allow himself to be defeated in his own territory?

With a deep growl, Cristian released his aura and turned to face Keith.

...

Arya stepped out of the hospital, unsure where to go. It took her a moment to notice a commotion on the right, and her eyes widened at the sight of Keith and Cristian going at each other.

Arya held her breath, and her stomach tightened every time either of the guys landed a punch.

What was this scene? How was it possible that Keith was not backing down?

Even from that distance, Arya could feel that Alpha Cristian was using his aura, yet Keith seemed unaffected. Was he an Alpha also? No, there was no pressure other than Cristian's. It didn't make sense.

Arya wanted to go there and ask them to stop fighting, but she knew that if she got closer, Alpha Cristian's aura would affect her. At best, she won't be able to move, and at worst, she might get hurt.

This time, Arya could feel Keith's emotions, and she knew that he was confused, maybe even more than she was.

She bit her lower lip while wondering what she should do.

Shouldn't the mate bond be unconditional acceptance and love? Many guys who were (obviously) not her mate were swearing love and loyalty, yet her own mate was full of doubts.

"Your mate is fighting for you. Because of you."

Arya turned to see Luna Michelle talking.

"What will you do, Arya? Do you have what it takes to be worthy of a man who showed commitment by saving your life, staying by your side, and fighting for you?"

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Chapter 855: Following instincts (1)

Keith was consumed in rage and dejection, and he saw Cristian as a target to vent his anger.

Cristian was an Alpha, and Keith knew a lot about them. They had high libidos and insatiable appetites, and for most of them, their mates were not enough. But no matter how much Cristian's debauchery stretched, did he need to seduce Keith's mate to the point where she will turn her back on him?

Keith waited and endured forever, only to find her nearly dead and then to turn her back on him!?

Keith put his anger behind every punch, kick, and twist of his body, boiling in his desire to punish Cristian for ruining everything!

Keith growled, and his limbs moved faster than ever before.

Mates are one of a kind!

'POW!' Into Cristian's stomach.

Not everyone finds one!

'POW!' Into Cristian's shoulder.

It was Keith's chance for happiness, and it was gone!

'POW!' Into Cristian's jaw, propelling him backward by several steps.

Cristian spat a mouthful of blood, which was the final straw that made him snap. Keith was not an Alpha, and the fact that Cristian was on the losing end was infuriating. He is no one's punching bag!

To make things worse, several people gathered to see their Alpha being pushed back by a warrior from another pack. At this rate, Cristian will lose the trust of his people.

Cristian lunged at Keith with a ferocious growl.

Keith readied himself to intercept Cristian and deliver another blow when a figure appeared in front of him.

He couldn't see her face, but the scent of the cantaloupe told him who was now clinging to him.

Keith's eyes snapped to see enraged Cristian going at him, and the only thing Keith could do was wrap his arms around her frame and turn to shield her with his body.

"Ugh..." Keith groaned as Cristian's punch landed on the left side of his lower back, and he fell to his knees.

"Stop it!" Arya shouted.

Cristian paused at the sound of Arya's voice. He saw her coming between them, and he knew that his punch might hit her, but his momentum was formidable, and he couldn't

stop. If Keith didn't turn, Cristian would punch Arya, which would be another mistake. How did he end up tangled in this mess?

Keith looked at the bandaged woman, who returned his gaze full of concern.

"Are you OK?" Keith asked.

Arya's heart tightened. He was fighting an Alpha. No matter how that ended, Keith would need to face the consequences, yet he was worried about her.

She saw bruises forming on his handsome face, and she searched his eyes for something, unsure what it was.

When Michelle challenged her to step up or let Keith go, the only thing Arya could think of was to get in there and stop the fight, determined to salvage whatever possible.

Arya gritted her teeth and went against Cristian's pressure, throwing herself at Keith in her desire to protect him. Now that Keith was holding her, Alpha Cristian's pressure diminished; she could still feel it, but it was not suffocating, and Arya wondered if Keith had some power that worked against Alphas.

Her heart was tormented at the thought that Keith got hit in her place.

"I am fine," she said before asking, "What about you?"

His face hardened. How was he supposed to answer that question? He was NOT fine!

Seeing that he didn't answer, Arya asked her next question, "Can you stand?"

Keith gave a small nod and got up to his feet, pulling Arya to stand with him.

Arya had so many things to say and questions to ask, but she couldn't say a word, not to Keith, at least.

Arya stepped away from Keith and turned to face Cristian.

She bowed her head. "Alpha Cristian, I hope that this fight can end here."

Keith gritted his teeth. Why was Arya submissive to that guy? And why was she asking Cristian to end the fight, like Keith was at a disadvantage?

Cristian's body was buzzing with adrenaline, and his wolf was itching to jump on Keith, but he knew that it would only deepen the rift between Keith and Arya, so he forced himself to calm down.

"If he backs off, I will as well," Cristian said. "But I need him to explain why he attacked me."

"Thank you, Alpha," Arya responded without consulting Keith. "I have a request."

"Speak."

"I wish to be dismissed from my position."

Cristian's brows came together.

Arya broke the rules. The warriors of the Spring Leaf pack had a rule that a unit fights together, lives together, and dies together. Arya leaving her unit in order to lure rogues away might be valiant, but it was also suicidal and stupid. If she stayed with her unit, maybe more of them would be injured, but their chances of survival would be higher.

Cristian was about to lecture Arya about it and to punish her somehow, but not dismiss her. She was young and talented, and she had a heart of a warrior. Her loyalty was unprecedented, and losing her as a general would be a loss to the army of the Spring Leaf pack.

"Let's not rush with this, Arya," Cristian said.

Arya shook her head. "I ask to be dismissed from my position, and I hope you won't take it against me when I leave the Spring Leaf pack."

Cristian was now frowning fully. "Think about what you are saying, Arya."

"I don't need to think, Alpha. You always told me to follow my instincts, and now that I found my mate..." She turned to Keith, who was staring at her with his eyes wide to the point of hurting. "My instincts are telling me to be with him. I heard he is from the Dark Howlers pack, and I wish to follow him there. If he wants me."

Cristian released a sharp breath. He was about to tell her to stop exaggerating. She would be foolish to quit as a General, and leaving the pack was just plain stupid. If she wanted to attract attention, there were many other ways to do it, but hearing that her reason was her mate, Cristian couldn't find a single reason to ask her to stay.

"I will grant it if he..."

"No ifs, Alpha," Arya interrupted him. She was not asking for permission. She was informing him, but she wanted to be nice because just leaving felt wrong. "I am not doing this because I want to force anything on anyone. I am doing it because my wolf is telling me that my other half is right here and that if my mate can't handle my temper, my pride, and accept me for who I am, no one else will."

Arya got closer to Keith and reached to hold his hand. A soft whimper escaped her lips when electric sparks flared on her palm.

Now that they stood only inches apart, Arya realized how tall Keith was, and muscular, and handsome... and it was all enhanced by his scent of cotton candy. It was light and sweet, and it made her feel all fluffy on the inside she wondered if he would melt into sweetness on her tongue, just like the cotton candy she had loved since she could remember. It was her favorite treat.

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Chapter 856: Following instincts (2)

Everything about Keith confirmed he was Arya's other half. But why was he reluctant to embrace her? Didn't she express her willingness to be with him?

Arya thought how it was ironic. Since guys started flocking around her, she always wondered if there would be one worthy of her. All the attention she received made her feel she was above others. Yet here she was, standing in front of a complete stranger, looking like a mess, and wondering if she was good enough for him.

She would call his name, but she realized that she didn't know it. It didn't matter. Adam, John, or Klark, it wouldn't change how important he was.

"What do you say? Will you give me a chance to show you that I could be a mate worthy of you?" Arya asked Keith.

Keith swallowed hard. His mouth suddenly ran dry. Was Arya serious? He could feel her doubts and reluctance, but there was also determination and attraction, and... she wanted to be with him.

Since Talia came to the Dark Howlers pack, Keith's emotions were confusing, and in the last day, he lived through a lifetime of ups and downs.

He didn't know what the right choice was, and he was not sure if he even had one, but something told him that if he pushed Arya away, he would regret it for the rest of his life. The only way was forward.

Slowly, very slowly, Keith leaned closer to Arya, measuring the distance between them and giving her a chance to pull back.

Seeing that Arya didn't move away, Keith pecked her lips, and they both jolted upon contact.

Arya smiled a little. It was a kiss from her mate.

She licked her lips to confirm that he tasted as good as he smelled. Cotton candy.

And then she leaned toward Keith to close that tiny gap between them because she wanted a kiss that was longer and deeper, and she could feel that he wanted the same.

Keith was not the one to disappoint a lady, especially not his mate.

His arms wrapped around Arya, and he held her as their lips glided against each other in sensual movements, and no other female ever fit so good against him. She was made for him.

His fingers curled at the back of her head to fist her hair, and he swallowed her whimper when he deepened the kiss.

Keith kissed many girls, but this was his first cantaloupe-flavored kiss, and he knew he will never get enough of this. And the best part? She was hugging him back while returning his kisses with equal fervor.

Talia and Damon walked toward the pack hospital, noticing several people gathered on the left.

Keith's and Cristian's fight attracted attention, and no one left so far, waiting to see how Cristian will deal with this situation because that didn't look like a friendly sparring match. Who would spar in front of a hospital?

Talia's eyes lit up at the sight of Keith and Arya locked in a kiss. She squeezed Damon's hand excitedly while talking through their private mind-link, 'I was worried because we came late, but it seems we were not needed at all.'

They were supposed to come in the afternoon, but after their lovemaking, Talia fell asleep, and she crashed for the rest of the day. Once she woke up, Damon demanded that she eats first, and they hurried to the pack hospital. Talia feared that Arya's condition might have worsened, but now it seemed that everything was great. Better than great.

Damon was happy as well. Finally, that measly coach found his mate, which meant he will stop ogling at Talia.

Damon's eyes moved to Cristian to see the latter's disheveled appearance. Michelle was with him, fixing his hair while inspecting his face, which was bruised, and there was some blood there.

'Why does Cristian look like he came out of a fight?' Damon asked.

Talia thought that it was weird. And there was one more point. 'Why are they outside? Arya seems better, but she doesn't look like someone discharged from the hospital.'

Damon agreed that things don't seem normal. Why would people gather to watch a mated couple kiss? Damon tugged Talia to head to Cristian and Michelle and find out what was happening.

"Rough day?"

Cristian made a face. "You have no idea." After the attack of rogues, Cristian was busy organizing patrols, assessing damage, reading reports from interrogations, assuring his people that things were under control, and pretending that everything was fine in front of Ashton and guests. This visit to the pack hospital ended up in a fight that bruised his reputation. It was a horrible day!

Michelle frowned at the people who were watching the show. She waved at them, gesturing toward the pack hospital. "If you have time to idle and gossip, maybe we should give you more responsibilities," Michelle said, and people quickly dispersed.

As for the newly mated couple...

Keith wanted to kiss Arya more and to do more than kissing, but Arya was wearing a hospital gown, and wherever he touched her, he felt bandages. That reminded him that she was hurt, and she needed to get inside, and that anything beyond kissing was out of the question. For now.

Keith leaned his forehead on Arya's, and they both took a moment to compose themselves before inching away.

"I am Keith," he said.

"I am Arya. Your mate."

"My mate." Keith liked the sound of that, and his expression hardened. "Mine only. I don't care what you did before this moment, but if you want this to work, you need to understand that I am not a man who will share."

Arya blinked at him. His bossiness turned her on. "Same goes for me, except for the man part. I am a woman who won't share. You are mine, Keith of the Dark Howlers pack. If you can handle that, everything else is negotiable."

Keith's lips lifted into a smug smile. "We will see if you can handle me."

Arya wanted to respond something snarkily, but she was distracted by a dimple that formed on his left cheek as he smiled, making him even more handsome, if that was even possible.

Keith licked his lips, wanting to taste more of Arya, but he knew he shouldn't. "Let's get you back into the room and call a doctor to check your condition."

At the mention of doctors, Arya remembered, "Thank you for saving my life and taking care of me."

"Don't mention it."

"I want to. You see... I am an orphan, and no one ever stayed like that with me, for me." Only for her. Will he see that as a negative?

"An orphan? I hope you are ready to meet my family. They can be noisy, but they are good people."

Arya was nervous. "Will they like me?"

"They will love you."

"How can you be certain?"

"Because they love me, and you are my other half, so... They might think you are a pain in the ass, but that comes with my family, so don't take it personally."

"They sound like nice people," she said.

"They are the best." Now that he thought about his family, Keith remembered that he was using one room in a house that belonged to Katya and her mate. That might be a problem.

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Chapter 857: Clearing the air (K&A) (1)

Keith glanced behind Arya to see four people looking at them.

"Come," Keith said to Arya while giving her hand a squeeze. "Before we go to your room, let me introduce you to my Alpha and Luna. Soon to be yours."

Arya looked at their connected hands and smiled. It was like Keith's hand could wrap around hers in a promise that he will take care of her.

Arya liked that Keith wanted to introduce her as his mate, and she could feel his nerves. This was important to him. It made her feel welcome.

Arya didn't dare to look at Alpha Cristian, fearing what his expression might be. She kissed a guy in public, in front of Alpha. What if he disapproves?

Insecurities swelled in her heart.

Will Alpha Cristian be angry that she was leaving with her mate? Will he ask her to stay? Will that make her change her mind? Will he be indifferent? Or will he be glad that she was leaving? Each of those was gutwrenching in its own way.

Keith struggled with his own emotional turmoil and didn't notice Arya's.

The last twenty-four hours were turbulent. He found his mate, nearly lost her, and he was on the path to accepting her, but then she stood up for another man, he ended up fighting an Alpha, and then she threw herself at him, saying how she wanted to be with him. It was a mess of ups and downs, and he needed a moment to organize his thoughts and emotions, a moment he didn't have.

Keith hoped his wolf was right and that the cantaloupe-infused girl was the right path to happiness.

Keith bowed to Damon and Talia. He wanted to talk about Arya, but Cristian's glare reminded him there was a more pressing matter.

"Alpha Damon, I caused an issue by starting a fight with an Alpha of another pack. It was not a challenge for his position. I was just..." Keith released a long breath. "There are no excuses. I only hope that you won't implicate my mate in this. It was all my doing."

Damon's eyebrows shot up when he realized Keith was in a bad state. Keith and Cristian were fighting!

At first, Damon thought it was because Keith faced rogues last night and his wounds didn't heal, but then Damon remembered that they saw Keith in the morning, and Keith looked better than this.

Damon knew that Keith was a skilled warrior. As an instructor, Keith was an expert in close combat, but still... fighting an Alpha and living to tell about it was formidable.

How could he avoid being suppressed by Cristian's Alpha aura? It didn't make sense, just as it didn't make sense that Keith broke from Guardian's restrictions... That's it! The necklace! Damon remembered that Talia said it had the purpose of healing and protection, which was the only explanation for why Keith was still standing. The necklace protected him.

His kitten was awesome, but he couldn't announce her unique abilities to the world.

Damon decided to leave that for later and to focus on the matter at hand. Keith was fighting Alpha Cristian and was waiting on a verdict. Based on Keith's behavior, Keith started it. Why did they fight? It didn't matter.

"Did you win?"

Keith's head snapped to look at Damon. Did he hear that right? "What?"

"Did you win?" Damon repeated.

"I don't think there was a winner," Keith said honestly.

"So, it was a tie?" Damon kept on pushing.

Keith nodded, and Damon turned to Cristian.

"Hahahaha!" Damon burst into a hearty laughter. "Oh, Cristian, did you get rusty, or were you always weak? If my Lieutenant can go toe to toe with you, you are in trouble."

Keith wished that Damon stops teasing Cristian. It will just make his punishment worse! Or was Damon doing that on purpose?

Cristian's nostrils flared in anger at Damon's provocation, but he didn't say anything. He had no excuses.

Sure, he was caught by surprise because he didn't expect that Keith will attack, and he definitely didn't expect that Keith will not be impacted by his Alpha aura, but those were just excuses. The facts were that a plain warrior fought him, and Cristian struggled.

"I won't punish you, Keith," Damon said. "You don't get punished by making your pack proud. However, I'm not sure if Alpha Cristian will throw you into a dungeon. We are allies on a friendly visit, and you caused a ruckus. I leave your punishment to him."

"I understand, Alpha," Keith said and turned to Cristian, waiting to hear what was coming.

Before Cristian could say anything, Damon spoke again.

"Cristian, I don't know what happened here, but considering that Keith is alive, I will assume that his offense was not inexcusable. I hope you will keep in mind that Keith is my Luna's head guard. As such, he is indispensable. No matter how you punish Keith, I expect him to be able to perform his duty."

With that, Damon stepped aside and pulled Talia to lean on him.

Talia was grateful that Damon stood up for Keith. Damon always took care of his people. If there were any issues, Damon would deal with Keith in private, while in front of others, they would be united. She admired Damon for that.

Arya's eyes darted from Keith to Cristian, and she couldn't stand the silence.

"Alpha," she called to Cristian pleadingly. "My mate didn't mean harm. Can you forgive him? For me?"

Cristian snorted. "For you? Who are you? My ex-general?"

Everyone stared at Arya. Damon and Talia were shocked by the 'ex' part, and Keith didn't know that his cantaloupe-infused mate was a general.

"Just a minute ago, you asked me to leave not only my army but my pack as well, and now you want favors?" He was irritated that she was talking about leaving like it was not a big deal.

Michelle put her hand on Cristian's shoulder. "Isn't that what children do when they grow up? I know it's hard on you as you watched her grow, but she is not a child anymore, and it's time for Arya to spread her wings and find her own path."

Michelle could sense Cristian's emotions, so she knew what he was going through. He was genuinely worried about Arya. Arya was energetic, with a spunk and bravery of a thousand warriors. Arya would act like she was invincible, which caused Cristian to take over the role of her guardian, and even though there were no romantic feelings behind it, Michelle didn't like it. It was her possessiveness of a werewolf, and it probably wouldn't be so extreme if Arya didn't look at Cristian with sparkles in her eyes.

However, as a Luna, Michelle needed to soften Cristian's edginess and create non-violent solutions when there were none.

"I believe we all agree that this was a misunderstanding," Michelle said, knowing that people were eavesdropping from the pack hospital. Yes, they left, but their werewolf-enhanced hearing allowed them to hear things over great distances.

Michelle told Keith, "Cristian knows that your emotions toward your mate are fresh, and that is why he didn't go all out on you."

Cristian put his hand over Michelle's that was resting on his shoulder. She said he didn't go all out as a good excuse to save his reputation.

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Chapter 858: Clearing the air (K&A) (2)

Cristian hoped Michelle knew he would never betray her, but just the fact that he needed to worry about it was a problem.

Cristian was an Alpha, in charge of a pack, but he also had a duty to take care of his mate. After more than a decade together, Cristian wondered if he was taking Michelle for granted. When did that start?

Did his thoughtless actions cause more harm than a misunderstanding between Keith and Arya?

He needed to step up big time.

Cristian took Michelle's hand and lifted it to kiss the back of her palm.

He looked at the woman by his side who was always calm and gentle, enduring the storms with him and helping in any way she could. Michelle never complained, not when they were facing rogues, or shortage of money, or when they were dangerously close to appearing like he was favoring another female.

Cristian hoped Michelle will give him a chance to prove that his loyalty to her was unshaken, but first, he needed to deal with one thing.

"You want me to allow your mate to get scot-free?" Cristian asked Arya. "That's not how things work."

Cristian narrowed his eyes at Keith and moved his aching jaw left-right. "You attacked an Alpha. That can't go unpunished."

Keith lowered his head. He messed up, he knew he did, but thanks to that, Arya jumped into the fray, and things ended the way they did, and... he had no regrets.

"I will accept whatever punishment you think it's appropriate, Alpha Cristian," Keith said.

"I want you to train my warriors."

Keith looked at Cristian in confusion. "Is that it?"

"I can also throw you into a dungeon if you prefer, but if I do that, you will just eat my food. By training my warriors, I get something in return."

Keith blinked while wondering if it was that easy. "This should be discussed with my Alpha and Luna. I am my Luna's head guard, and I can't just leave."

"I'm sure we can agree on dates when my safety is not in danger," Talia said. "Alpha Cristian said that you need to train his warriors. There was no mention of a location or duration." She glanced at Damon. "What do you think?"

Damon rubbed his chin, pretending to be conflicted. "They could come to the Dark Howlers pack for lessons. The Spring Leaf pack won't suffer a loss if they send us units to train with our warriors under Keith's supervision. Our warriors could always use moving punching bags."

Cristian's eyes flashed in outrage. "Don't come crying when punching bags give your warriors a beating."

Damon stifled a laugh. "When hit hard enough, a bag will sway. It's not difficult to dodge that."

Cristian glared at Damon, and they got locked in an unreasonable staring contest.

Keith was not willing to stand there forever. He cleared his throat to get everyone's attention.

"Thank you for your generosity, Alpha Cristian. I accept your punishment."

Cristian lifted his chin. "Generosity? If I hear you are slacking, I will throw you into the dungeon."

Keith bit the inside of his cheek to prevent himself from smiling. That was not a punishment. It was an acknowledgment of his ability as a warrior. Keith was happy it happened for Arya to see.

With the punishment formalities out of the way, Keith and Arya returned to her room.

Betty came with a doctor and one more nurse, and Keith stood on the side while they got busy around Arya.

They checked her vitals and removed bandages, putting fresh ones on a few spots that still didn't heal completely. She also got an ultrasound and an x-ray to confirm things on the inside were healing well.

Arya wanted to shower and tidy up, but the doctor told her to wait at least one more day.

"Your healing rate is close to miraculous," the doctor said. "Consider yourself lucky that you found your mate when you did, and that he was willing to spend time here so you can heal faster. However, considering the state you were brought in, we want to keep you here until we are sure there won't be any complications. At this rate, you can leave tomorrow if you promise to take it easy."

Arya didn't give up on the showering idea. She tugged Betty's arm to get closer and whispered, "My mate is right there. He will think I'm a stinker."

Betty stifled a laugh. "Let me see what I can do."

Keith ended up waiting in the hallway while Betty gave Arya a sponge bath.

Keith was glad that Damon, Talia, Cristian, and Michelle didn't come with them to the pack hospital, because their presence would make things uncomfortable. However, after the doctor and nurses left, Keith was alone in the room with Arya (and two other patients on the other side of the privacy curtain), unsure of what to do.

He observed her lying there, her skin covered in bruises that were fading, and his heart ached while thinking about how she got those.

Arya scooted to the edge and patted the bed on her right. "Will you join me?"

"Is that OK?"

She rolled her eyes. "Didn't you sleep beside me while I was out?"

Keith raised his hands defensively. "I did it only because nurses told me it will help with your healing." He was not a creep who sneaks into beds of unconscious women, alright?

Arya pointed at the bandage on her left forearm. "I am still hurt, and I need healing. Your proximity will speed up the process, so..." Arya's voice trailed, and her eyes darted to the space she freed for him.

Keith felt awkward about this, but he still moved to the bed and settled by her side.

He stared into her eyes while thinking how all this was sudden, contradictory, and he wondered if all mated couples go through this. Actually, mated couples just go with the flow and start copulating right away, which leads to marking, but considering their situation, that was not an option.

Could he just jump on her and go at it? It's not that Keith didn't have one-night stands, and he slept more than once with women he barely knew, but this was his mate. No matter how attracted he was to Arya, she was still a stranger, and Keith needed an icebreaker.

"Tell me about you."

"What do you want to know?"

Keith shrugged. "I heard you are a general."

"WAS a general," she corrected him.

"Tell me about it."

Arya told him how she started as a warrior and that thanks to Alpha Cristian backing her, people took her seriously. She spoke about the high-risk mission she completed without casualties that gave her the first chance to rise through the ranks and how she knew that people were looking down on her as a general because she was so young and a female. "If Alpha Cristian didn't stand up for me, it wouldn't happen, no matter how hard I worked or how good my results were..."

Keith felt a pang of jealousy whenever she mentioned Cristian's name, but the fact that she used his title made things a bit better. He could see that she was proud of her achievements, and she had every reason to be.

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Chapter 859: Clearing the air (K&A) (3)

"Your turn," Arya said to Keith.

"For?"

"Tell me something about yourself, Keith of the Dark Howlers pack."

Keith told Arya about his work as Talia's guard, his protein-shake business, that he is a coach, a personal trainer, a Lieutenant, and that he helps his sister with the Shifters nightclub, and Arya's eyes widened with every next occupation.

"There are only twenty-four hours in a day, and only one you. How do you manage all that?" She asked.

Keith smirked proudly. "With a bit of planning and prioritizing, anything is possible."

"I should ask you to prioritize my work. I was just a general, yet my schedule was packed."

"How can you say, JUST a General?" Keith asked sternly. "That's a lot of work. You need to know military tactics, strategies, latest reports, and movements of enemies, make decisions on the fly, be responsible for your subordinates, and all that while training your mind and body to stay in top shape. Don't look down on yourself." Keith genuinely admired Arya's accomplishments. He had never heard that a person as young as Arya could be a general.

Arya loved how supportive he was. But she also feared that the only thing she had was her status as a General, yet she was leaving that behind to start from scratch. Literally. The only thing she got was a mate, but her budding love life aside, everything else was blank.

"What's spoiling your mood?" Keith asked, reminding her that he could sense her emotions.

"I just fear that once I leave, I won't have anything. I won't be a general anymore. And you didn't say that you would take me with you. Is it because I'm a nobody now?"

Keith couldn't believe this. "How can you think such things? We are mates. I will take you with me and take care of you. A job doesn't define you, Arya, but if you need one, I'm sure we can figure out something."

"Like, what? The only thing I know is how to fight."

"Alpha Damon is always looking for capable warriors. As a newbie, you will start from the bottom. With your abilities, I'm sure you will climb the ranks quickly." Keith thought of something else. "Why don't you consider being Luna Talia's personal guard?"

At the mention of Talia, Arya's mood dropped.

"I don't think she will take me."

"Nonsense. Talia is a wonderful person."

Arya frowned. How could he call another woman wonderful, and she also felt his admiration, and there was something else she didn't want to think about.

"You don't understand. I met your Luna Talia, and I fucked up."

Keith thought she was joking. Or could it be one of those female-only overthinking qualities? "Really? What did you do?"

Arya was not sure where to start. "We chatted a bit, and she asked me to be friends." Arya licked her lips and grimaced. "And... I kind of thought she was hitting on me."

Keith needed more information. "Hitting on you?" With Damon around? Not possible. "Why would you think that?"

Now that she thought about it, it was stupid, but at that time... "No one ever approached me without an agenda. I don't have a background or status. People who spoke to me outside army-related business would come and hit on me, so I assumed... I know it's bad. But I made it worse."

How could that possibly get worse?, Keith thought. "Go on."

"I said how I worked hard to reach where I was while she got everything on a silver plate because Alpha Damon marked her."

Keith stared at Arya in disbelief, and it took him a few long moments to speak. "That... that's not Talia, Arya. You have no idea what she went through."

Arya's temper flared when she sensed all the warm and fuzzy feelings Keith had for Talia. She couldn't stand the idea of Keith talking so gently about another female.

"Yeah? What did your precious Luna go through?" Arya snapped at Keith.

Keith didn't like Arya's rising hostility, but he kept his cool and answered.

"When Talia arrived at the Dark Howlers pack, she was so small and skinny that a gust of wind would topple her. She is an orphan who grew up in a hostile environment, yet she still carried a bright smile and worked hard while worrying about others. I ended up as her personal trainer, and I saw how much she struggled, but she didn't give up. She reminded me that kindness is important. She reminded me that I need to do my best if I don't want to have regrets."

"How does that translate into her earning the position of Alpha Damon's Luna?"

"It doesn't. It just speaks of her character. You see... Luna Talia doesn't need Alpha Damon to stand at the top because..." He leaned closer and spoke softly, only for Arya to hear. "Luna Talia of the Dark Howlers pack is Alpha Natalia of the Midnight Guardians pack."

Arya gaped at Keith. "You are kidding."

"Why would I joke about that? And before you think that she inherited that position, she didn't. Talia defeated previous Alphas and snatched it from them. I don't pity her. I admire her. You say you offended her, but she still saved you when you were in a pinch, and she came to visit you in the hospital. That is the real strength right there." Keith patted his chest, over his heart. "Talia has it."

Arya was not sure what to think about it. She was jealous because Keith had all those gentle emotions toward Talia, and she was remorseful for offending Talia in the first place, and she felt like shit for both of those because Keith was right. Even after all she's been through, Talia was kind and didn't lose herself to hatred or power. Talia had enough compassion to come to the rescue of Arya, who offended her only a few hours prior. Shame swelled within Arya, feeling she was not worthy of being compared to Talia.

"How can you address her casually?" Arya asked with bitterness in her voice.

Keith shrugged. "When we met, she was just Talia. I didn't know she was Alpha Damon's mate, and I didn't know about her Alpha bloodline. If I did, I wouldn't put her in a ridiculous outfit and ask her to be a team spirit for our soccer team for the whole pack to see." Keith chuckled. "At that time, we were just friends, and I hope we can continue

that relationship. It is my honor that she doesn't request I use her title, but I still try to do it in front of strangers."

"You are not using her title now."

"That's because you are not a stranger," Keith said dreamily. "Arya, you are my mate. I promise that I wouldn't seek other women as long as you accept me as yours. I don't want you to think there is something between me and Talia or any other woman because there isn't. I mean, I admire Talia... no, I love her spirit and kindness, but not in a romantic way."

"Are you sure about it?"

"There was a time when I was confused, but now that I've met you, I can tell the difference. Don't you feel the same about Alpha Cristian?"

Arya's eyes widened to the point of hurting, and her face exploded in a fierce blush. She wore a hospital gown, and there was a blanket on top of her, yet Arya never felt so exposed.

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Chapter 860: Clearing the air (K&A) (4)

Keith chuckled at Arya's flustered expression.

Their bond was still forming, but it was strong enough for him to feel the difference between what he felt for Talia and what Arya stirred within him.

He didn't like that Arya would think about any man other than him, but he couldn't blame her because a small part of his heart was reserved for Talia, and it will always be that way.

Keith put his palm on Arya's cheek. "Tell me, Arya... can Alpha Cristian make you feel these sparks?"

"No," Arya responded in a small voice. Other than a few times when she stumbled during training, and Alpha Cristian caught her, they never touched. And it was never so gentle and charged with sparks.

Keith leaned closer. "Can he make you feel this anticipation that stirs the butterflies in your stomach?" His breath splashed against her lips.

Arya inhaled a shaky breath, and she realized that he was picking up her emotions. "You are cheating."

"Everything is fair in love and war, Arya. As a general, you should know that."

"Ex-gen..." Keith swallowed the rest of her words in a fiery kiss, one that made her toes curl and proved that no other man could make her feel that way.

Keith's restraints were slipping. They were in bed, and her soft curves filled all his hard edges. Her left hand was firmly planted on his back while her left one was lost in his hair, and when she moaned into the kiss, his wolf scratched to come out and claim Arya as his.

Arya was lost in the flavors of cotton candy that filled her system. It was addictive and electrifying, and she had never felt anything like that. She wanted more, much more from the male that was holding her. His embrace was solid, and everywhere she touched was firm. He was beyond perfect.

Keith pulled out of the kiss abruptly, and they both panted.

Seeing Arya's confused gaze, Keith explained, "We should stop here, or we will give a good show to your roommates on the other side of that curtain."

Arya bit her lower lip and nodded. He was right. How did her hands end up under his t-shirt?

Keith pulled her into a tight embrace, and they stayed like that in silence.

"Do you think Luna Talia will forgive me?" Arya asked after some time.

"Definitely."

"And you think that I can be her guard?"

"Why not? You can do whatever you want. But wouldn't it be great for us to work together? When Talia goes to some meetings or events, we will accompany her. Whenever Alpha Damon is by her side, which is most of the time, we won't be needed, so we can treat that as a vacation. Do you like to travel? I always wanted to go to Hawaii and learn to surf."

At the mention of Alpha Damon, Arya remembered one more detail.

"Hold on with vacation planning."

"You don't like to travel?"

"I'm not sure. I never left the Spring Leaf pack." How could an orphan afford to travel? And once she started earning, Arya was busy training and with her duties.

"What is it then? Is it the money? Don't worry about it. The only things you should worry about are picking the place and duration. Your man has the money to make it happen." He didn't want to boast, but his protein shake business was doing very well, and with him staying with Katya and living a modest life, Keith could be categorized as rich.

Arya could feel his sincerity, and she thought he was sweet. "That's not it either."

Keith was confused. "What is it?"

"Maybe Luna Talia forgives me, but Alpha Damon gave me a different vibe."

"When?"

"Remember the thing about me insulting her? Well... she snapped and used her aura on me, telling me that she was the dominant one and we were in a kind-of ambiguous position when Alpha Damon appeared. He snatched Luna Talia like I was bullying her, but she was the one on top of me."

"Oh..." A silly sound escaped Keith's lips. Talia and Arya in an ambiguous position with Talia on top? He would pay big money to see that. It was probably hot as hell.

"Alpha Damon might be a problem," Keith said. "But as long as you take the blood oath, it should be fine."

"A blood oath?"

Keith confirmed. "All Talia's guards are required to take a blood oath and swear loyalty. Alpha Damon is protective of his mate, but if you take the oath and show good results as a warrior, I'm confident he won't have objections. After all, I am head of Luna Talia's guards, and he gave me the authority to appoint and dismiss people who will guard her."

"So..." Arya drawled. "You are like a big deal there?"

"I am the biggest deal there, baby," he said cockily and added in a small voice, "After Alpha and Luna, of course."

Arya looked at him dreamily. She had no idea what tomorrow will bring, but being with Keith on the bed and holding each other, made her feel like there were no problems in the world.

...

The minutes trickled away, and Keith and Arya couldn't sleep.

They were both under the influence of recent events, and their minds raced about what was yet to come.

"Tell me more about your pack and your family," Arya demanded. "I want to know what to expect when we go there. When are we going?"

"We can go as soon as you are discharged from the hospital, and you say goodbye to your friends." He remembered that Arya said she had no family, so he didn't mention that.

"Doctor said I can be discharged tomorrow. As for friends... I don't have any."

"None?"

"There are Alpha Cristian and Luna Michelle, but they already know I'm going. There are a few others, but I don't want to say goodbyes. The Dark Howlers pack is only a few hours' drive away, and with you training warriors from the Spring Leaf pack, I'm sure I will see them often." Arya pursed her lips while thinking. "However, if you have some time and are willing, I would like to introduce you to them. As my mate."

Keith felt joy swelling in him. She wanted to show him off. He approved.

"Tell me what you like to eat," Keith said. "I will ask my sister to make it when we get there."

"Your sister will cook for us? That's sweet of her. You should tell me more about your family." There were so many things she didn't know.

Keith was stuck on Arya's question about Katya cooking for them. Should he tell her that he lives in one room in a house that's owned by his big sister and her mate? Won't that make him appear weak?

Keith glanced at the time to see it was after three o'clock in the morning, and then he called through the pack link, 'Alpha? Are you awake?'

'I am now,' Damon grumbled. 'What is it?'

'Is it too much to ask that you arrange a single-family home for me and Arya? She will come with us and...'

'Fine!' Damon snapped. 'Anything else?'

'No. Thank you. Sorry for...'

Keith stopped talking when he realized that Damon closed the mind-link forcibly.

"Yes, my sister will cook for us," Keith said to Arya. "She is not much of a cook, but it's free, and I don't need to get my hands dirty, so I'm not complaining."

Arya stifled a laugh. "That sounded like a complaint. You said that your sister owns a nightclub, the Shifters. I heard about it. With you being the owner's bother, does that mean we get backstage passes?"

"Absolutely," Keith said with a smug expression. "I will make you my special cocktails, and we will dance, and I will punch the daylights out of any guy who dares to come close to you."

"Punching aside, it sounds like a great place. I guess that's where we will spend our evenings. I was mostly focused on my training and missions, and I didn't get to party much..."

Keith's brows came together at the thought of going to Shifters every night. Sure, as a single guy, he would go there often, but now that he had a mate, he would rather stay home and cuddle, damn it!

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