

The Alpha's Bride

#Chapter 961: A traitor –

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Talia ran until she reached the shore of the lake that was South of Darkbourne.

Normally, the sandy beach would have people, even during winter, but now it was silent because the whole territory was on alert, and people stayed in their homes and shelters.

Talia paused when she saw a female sitting on the sand and staring at the lake. It was Stephanie. Or was it?

'Lis?'

'That's a she-wolf,' Liseli responded.

Well, at least it was not a Guardian, Talia thought. But it didn't make it better. Talia hoped that it was a Guardian in disguise, or that Stephanie was brainwashed or blackmailed, or something... anything other than Damon's mother figure being responsible for his disappearance.

Talia waved at Liam, Keith, and Arya to stay behind. She was aware those three were following her, and she didn't mind as long as they didn't try to stop her.

"Is something wrong with your mind link?" Talia asked when she approached Stephanie.

"No," Stephanie responded without looking back. "I just felt like some alone time. Is anything the matter?"

Talia's brows came together. Stephanie was too relaxed for someone who did a bad thing and was caught.

"Do you know that the whole pack is on alert?" Talia asked.

Stephanie turned to look at Talia. "That would explain the absence of people."

"Steph?" Talia called. "You can talk to me. Tell me what's going on."

"What do you think is going on?"

Talia decided to stop beating around the bush. "Damon is missing, and I think you had something to do with it."

Stephanie blinked. "I had everything to do with it."

Talia's stomach dropped. "What did you do?"

"Just a medicine to knock him out."

"Why? Don't you love Damon?"

Stephanie shook her head. "They won't harm him."

"They? You mean the Guardians?"

"Yes," Stephanie confirmed.

"I thought you loved this pack."

"I do. I did it for the pack."

Talia couldn't believe this. "You betrayed Damon for the pack?"

"I didn't betray him. I did what was best for the pack. He will agree with me when this is over."

"What?"

"They don't want Damon. They want you."

Well, Talia knew that, but how could Stephanie know unless she was colluding with the Guardians? "Do you think Damon will forgive you?"

"It doesn't matter if he forgives me. Once you settle your emotions, you will also do what's best for the pack."

"And what is that?"

"Go to them."

Talia wondered if her ears malfunctioned. "Why should I do that?"

"Because you are our Luna, and a Luna does what's best for the pack. With every passing minute, the number of casualties will increase. They won't hesitate to kill many to get what they want. If you are too stubborn, they might harm Damon, but that will be on you."

Talia shook her head in disbelief. "You seem to know a lot about them."

"Maybe I do."

Talia felt her hair rising at one possibility... "Are you the one who betrayed Damon's parents?"

"Not betrayed. The Guardians wanted only Violet. She was thinking about it, going to them, so they don't decimate the pack. However, when it came to it, she hesitated. The Luna of the Dark Howlers pack said she couldn't leave Jacob and Damon, and she would rather kill herself than go to the Guardians willingly, and that's NOT how a Luna acts. If she was willing to throw her life away, she might as well do it for the benefit of the pack. Don't you think so?"

Talia needed a moment to process this information. "Luna Violet decided to stay away from the Guardians, and you betrayed her?"

Stephanie made a face. "Here you go again with that word, betrayal. I always put the needs of the pack first. I gave my everything for this pack. My conscience is clear."

"Is it?"

Stephanie confirmed. "We all live for the pack and die for the pack, yet Violet thought she was more important than the lives of many. At that time, I spoke with Gil, and he disagreed with working against his Luna, saying that Jacob would never agree to it. I asked him, what if he needed to pick between his Alpha and Luna? What if he needed to pick between his pack and his Luna? Only then he understood where I was going with this. It was reasonable for Violet to do this for the pack, but she refused. I told the Guardians which way they would go, that Gil would be driving, and that he would help them take Violet with the condition for Jacob to be unharmed."

Stephanie paused and shook her head. "Jacob was stupid to fight them. You can't win against the Guardians. I felt the moment Gil died, and he told me that Jacob had killed him. They were surrounded by the Guardians, and instead of letting Violet go, Jacob killed Gil. I heard that Jacob and Violet fought, and it only caused for all three of them to perish."

With every next word from Stephanie, Talia's brows came closer together. "Wasn't Violet your friend?"

Stephanie sneered. "She was selfish. If she cooperated, Gil would be alive, and so would Jacob, and Damon wouldn't grow up without his parents."

Stephanie gave Talia a meaningful look. "It was a complete failure, but the Guardians left us alone. As soon as they get their hands on you, the attacks will stop."

Talia's body turned numb. Was this the sweet and caring Stephanie who welcomed her to the packhouse a few months ago? Stephanie gave Talia Lisa's old clothes, helped her settle in the new environment, taught her how to cook, and packed food and money for Talia to have during the Summer Solstice festival.

"Don't blame me, Talia. It's the Guardians who want you, and they won't stop until they get you. You have the power to prevent unnecessary deaths of our people. Do you think warriors will keep fighting when they find out that this is all because of you? Even if they don't turn against Damon, the survivors will carry resentment that will fester over time. Do you think your life is worth more than hundreds of warriors who are now fighting at the border? If you don't want to go to the Guardians, the only choice is death, but you should kill yourself in front of them so they know it's over..."

Talia's shoulders fell. Surely, Stephanie's betrayal of Damon was heavy, but somehow... her words made sense.

Stephanie's words jarred Talia's heart to open a flood of insecurities.

The small and timid girl who was hiding in the attic wasn't worthy of anyone sacrificing themselves for her, and making that girl into a Luna didn't change that fact. Wasn't every life equal? She was the Luna, her duty was to protect the pack, yet now they were dying for her.

Keith's blood boiled. There was some distance between Stephanie, Talia, and Talia's three guards, but they could hear each other well.

Images of Gregory trying to get his hands on Talia flashed in Keith's mind, and he saw red.

"You bitch!" Keith shouted while rushing toward Stephanie.

Arya was right after Keith, and Liam's eyes were out of focus as he was telling Caden, Maya, and James what was going on here.

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Chapter 962: A traitor (cont.) [Bonus chapter]

Keith grabbed Stephanie by her neck and lifted her off the ground. "Your existence is wasting oxygen."

"Keith!" Talia exclaimed. Stephanie's words put her in a daze, and she was startled when Keith appeared.

"Let me kill her!" Keith said angrily to Talia without removing his glare from Stephanie.

Talia's mind was a mess. She couldn't think straight. Should she kill Stephanie? What would Damon do?

Damon will be devastated to find out what Stephanie did to his parents. He had been looking for a traitor for a long time, suspecting everyone from Elders to Generals and even the Shaman. Damon never suspected that traitor was much closer, his mother's best friend, a woman who raised him after his parents died.

Stephanie gripped Keith's wrist while wiggling her legs in an attempt to break free. "Kill me? For what? For telling the truth?"

"You just wished for your Luna to die. That warrants a death penalty."

Stephanie sneered. "My death won't change anything. Talia's will."

Stephanie's eyes moved to Talia. "You can save this pack. Keith and a few more might idolize you, but they are youngsters without families to worry about. They dream about an impossible future where everyone gets their happy ending. As a Luna, you should know better. You know who you truly are. Only a few months back, you were a poor girl who couldn't stand straight. You didn't have any possessions, and you were all bruised and hungry. Everything you have is thanks to Damon and this pack. Damon brought you here and gave you a home, protection, and care. The pack accepted you, and you got to enjoy the princess treatment. Isn't it fair to pay back?"

Talia whimpered, and Keith's head snapped her way to see traces of dark slithering in Talia's silvery eyes. He recognized it as dark magic that would invade Talia when her emotions were unstable. That can't be good. Normally, Damon would be there to ease Talia's demons and force them back, but now Damon was not here.

"Don't let her get into your head, Talia!" Keith shouted desperately. "You are worthy. You saved this pack, and you saved Alpha Damon more than once! You saved my mate and me! That's why you are our Luna. Believe in the Moon Goddess. You have so much more to offer. Don't give up! Damon needs you! We need you, and we will stand to protect you as long as there is strength in us!"

Arya didn't know what was going on with Talia, but she felt Keith's panic, and she knew it was serious.

"A pack needs their Alpha and Luna!" Arya said. "Only like that, a pack will prosper. Think about your mate! Don't let this traitor make you think you are not important. If not for you, I would be dead now. Remember what other Alphas said. If we give in, the Guardians win, and we will always live in fear of when the next time will come."

"Give me one word, just one word, and I will kill her on the spot," Keith said.

"We need her alive!" Liam shouted from the back as he transferred James' message.
"We still don't know what happened to Damon!"

Keith looked at Talia, who gestured to Keith to let Stephanie go.

Keith growled lowly, and Stephanie plopped to the ground.

Stephanie rubbed her aching neck. "You will see that I'm right."

Keith was livid. "How dare you talk about right and wrong? The previous Alpha and Luna are dead because of you, and you want to do it again!"

"I did what's best for everyone."

Keith's face contorted in disgust. "A pack prospers only while following an Alpha. If you have a problem with that, you should go rogue! Alpha Damon and Luna Talia have their positions for a reason, the Moon Goddess saw them as worthy, and your options are to obey them or leave! You put our Alpha in danger, and you want our Luna to sacrifice herself. How can that be good for everyone? The only one you are thinking about it yourself!"

Stephanie narrowed her eyes at Keith. "If it's me they wanted, I would go to them willingly, but my death won't change anything. If you take a moment to cool off and think about it, you will realize that Talia would do the same."

"That's not your call to make!" Arya shouted. "You are a traitor! Did you think about what will happen to our Alpha if he loses his fated mate? At best, he will be weakened, creating an opening for other packs to attack, and at worst, his wolf will go feral, and he will start attacking his own people."

"Not Damon," Stephanie said. "I watched that boy grow up. He is strong. He will suffer, but he will snap out of it and choose another Luna. There are so many other willing..."

'SLAP!'

A harsh slap interrupted Stephanie's next words, and she tasted blood in her mouth while staring at Talia, who was standing in front of her with an expression that sent chills down Stephanie's spine.

Talia was fuming. This was Stephanie, a woman Damon considered his second mother. He trusted her, he loved her, and she treated him like he was a machine without feelings.

The idea of Damon forgetting about Talia and moving on with another female was unbearable. Talia wanted to beat the life out of Stephanie for that alone, and Liseli

agreed. Liseli didn't wait for centuries to reunite with Sapa, only to be separated again.

Talia raised her hand to deliver another hit.

'SLAP!'

Stephanie fell to the side.

"You think that my mate will abandon me and our child?"

Stephanie stared at Talia. "A child?" How come she didn't know about this? Was it recent? She shook her head. "It doesn't change anything. Damon is young. He can have other children."

Talia grabbed her collar to lift Stephanie.

Stephanie tried to resist, but Talia used just enough aura to prevent Stephanie from moving.

'SLAP!'

"It's ALPHA Damon to you!" Talia shouted as her eyes were a whirlwind of silver and black.

'SLAP!'

Talia's heart ached at the thought of Damon's parents dying because of Stephanie.

Alpha Jacob had Sapa at that time, and Luna Violet was strong enough to make Guardians interested in her. Would Alpha Jacob and Luna Violet be able to resist the Guardians? They never had a chance to find out because their own Betas betrayed them.

'SLAP!'

Keith, Arya, and Liam stood and watched as Talia hit Stephanie, and none had an intention to stop her.

Talia gripped Stephanie's shirt and lifted her to stand. "What did you do to Damon?"

Stephanie gave an ugly smile to reveal her bloodied teeth.

"It doesn't matter. You should just follow the instructions." Stephanie's eyes moved to the lake. "You should go to the bottom. There is a thing there that if you touch, it will take you to them."

"A portal?" Keith blurted out while eyeing the lake nervously. Will the Guardians pop out of there?

Talia was not surprised. They suspected something like a portal at the bottom of the lake, but they were confident it was not working properly. Did the Guardians fix it? If they did, why they didn't just come out? Or was it a one-way thing?

Was that how Damon was taken away from here? But the video showed only Stephanie leaving and not Damon. Was there a secret passage?

Talia's hair turned silver as she urged her energies to envelop Stephanie's mind. Talia needed to know what Stephanie knew, and she had no intention of playing around.

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Chapter 963: Stephanie's secrets (1)

Talia released Stephanie, who fell to the ground listlessly. If not for breathing, she would appear dead.

Talia turned robotically to see Keith, Arya, Liam, and Caden looking at her.

"Take her to the dungeon," Talia said. "Treat her as a dangerous individual. Give her medical care only if her life is in danger."

"Are you OK?" Liam asked with concern obvious in his voice.

Talia blinked. "Who is keeping an eye on Cassandra?"

Liam froze. Talia told him to watch over the Oracle and to kill her if he noticed anything suspicious, but when Talia left the study, he just went after her without thinking.

"Uhm... Cornelia and James are there," Liam responded and quickly mind-linked James, so Cassandra was not left unattended.

Talia released a long breath. She didn't want more surprises.

Talia needed a moment to sort out everything that she found out in Stephanie's mind. There was so much information, and Talia couldn't wrap her head around the fact that they all looked up to Stephanie, yet her betrayal ran deep.

Damon should be able to pick up the negative emotions of a person who is so close, but the thing was that Stephanie believed she was doing the right thing for the pack, and she totally fooled not only Damon but everyone else.

"Caden," Talia called. "You need to capture Richard also."

Caden frowned. Why did Talia bring up Richard? "Is he involved in Damon's disappearance?"

"That's not easy to answer, but... he was sending information to the Guardians. Richard and Stephanie are not mates. They faked it, so he gets access to the packhouse and snoops around when we were not there while Stephanie kept Omegas busy in the kitchen."

Caden, Arya, and Liam gaped at Talia.

Keith knew that Talia could look into people's minds, so he was not surprised that Talia had this information, but he was scared by the information she provided. If Stephanie and Richard were spies, everyone else was a suspect also!

Caden was unaware that Talia could read minds, but he already saw so many unbelievable things from Talia that he didn't question her.

"Anyone else we should take to the dungeon?" Caden asked.

"Stephanie didn't know about more, but Richard might."

Caden nodded stiffly. "I will arrange for him to be captured low-key and interrogated."

Two warriors came to them in full sprint and grabbed Stephanie's arms to drag her away.

Talia turned to look at the lake.

From Stephanie's memories, Talia was confident that Stephanie didn't meet Gregory in person. After Violet's death, Stephanie and the Guardians didn't communicate... until the Council of the Alphas. At that time, Talia revealed herself as a powerful Alpha and that she was close to Damon, Maddox, and Cristian.

Guardians contacted Stephanie to be alert and keep an eye out if Alpha Natalia visits Damon. Talia could guess that the Guardians activated their sleeper spies in other allied packs as well.

Eventually, the Guardians confirmed that Alpha Natalia and Luna Talia were the same person. Was that why they kidnapped Yasmin and the babies, to distract Talia? What if they find out that Yasmin was part Guardian? Talia tried not to think about it.

Richard was known as a friendly blacksmith who kept to himself. People from Darkbourne would come to order things like daggers, candlesticks, fireplace fittings, chains, decorative items, and keychains, and while placing orders, they would chat about anything and everything. That was how Richard knew what was going on in the Dark Howlers pack, even though he rarely left his home.

Since Richard was taking online orders, no one suspected that mail and packages from the human city carried instructions from the Guardians. Richard would send them information hidden in shipments of his custom-made products. He had been doing it for a long time. That's how Stephanie found out that the bottom of the lake has a secret that can transport Talia to the Guardians.

Talia wondered, why didn't they contact her so far? Were the Guardians counting on Talia to feel overwhelmed and helpless so that she would go to them on her own?

"Talia?" Keith called cautiously. "Don't do anything stupid. We will get Damon."

Talia turned to him and smiled a little. "I know."

Keith was relieved to see that the black from Talia's eyes was gone. Her eyes were back to their honeyed color, but they were full of worry and sadness.

Talia released a long breath and turned to walk toward the packhouse. She needed a breather to think, but how could she calm down to think in this situation?

"What's going on?" Arya asked the guys in a whisper.

Keith responded through their mind link, 'The woman in question is Stephanie. Her mate was the previous Beta, and she was very close to Alpha Damon's mother, Luna Violet. After previous Alpha and Luna died, she took over the packhouse management and was something like a second mother to Alpha Damon. No one saw this coming.'

Talia walked through the forest, too distracted to notice the glorious golden hues that were painted by the sunset.

Damon had been missing for several hours already, and her every heartbeat was painful.

Instead of going to the packhouse, Talia went to the garden and sat on the bench. It was a bench where she would sit with Damon often. It was a compromise between Talia's need to be outside in the forest and Damon's plead for her to stay in sight so he knew she was safe. He always wanted her to be safe.

Talia knew this was not the time to idle, but her mind was a mess.

Caden had other matters to handle. Liam went to the study to watch over Cassandra with the hope she didn't make a big offense. Arya and Keith kept their eyes on Talia from a distance.

Talia leaned on the bench and closed her eyes. The familiar scents helped her to calm down a bit, but the fading of Damon's scent was agonizing.

Talia struggled to focus.

Stephanie betrayed Alpha Jacob and Luna Violet, and Stephanie's mate, Beta Gil, was in that as well.

Stephanie didn't care about Talia at first, thinking it was just one Omega that everyone pitied and that she won't play a big role. Stephanie was happy to hear that Damon had found his mate. However, the more Talia grew in power, the more wary Stephanie became, suspecting that the Guardians would set their eyes on Talia, and they did.

Talia's insides tightened at the thought of Damon. His heart will break when he finds out what Stephanie did.

Damon told her that no one could be trusted, and Talia told him that was not true. She believed that people loved him, respected him, and followed him willingly and that no one will betray him. Oh, how wrong she was.

And the worst thing was that Stephanie had no remorse. She believed she was doing the right thing. It was all so messed up.

"You OK?"

A voice pulled Talia out of her thoughts, and she turned to see James.

"No, I am not," Talia responded.

James sat on the bench next to Talia.

"Talk to me, Luna," James said. "I can't do my job as a Gamma if I don't know what's going on."

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Chapter 964: Stephanie's secrets (2)

Talia told James that Stephanie was responsible for the death of Damon's parents. "Stephanie was convinced that Luna should sacrifice herself so others can live."

"And what do you think?" James asked.

"I think... that's not wrong. I am a Luna, but my life is not more worthy than others."

"Yet, here you are."

"From the first day I came here, Damon never asked for much, but he insisted that my safety was a priority. If something happens to me, Damon won't forgive me. He will not

forgive himself. I don't care about what happens to me, but I don't want to be another person who will disappoint him."

Talia waited for James to say something, but the silence was pressing on her ears.

"What do you think?" She asked.

"I'm still waiting to hear the rest," James said. "Stephanie put something in Damon's food. What happened after that?"

Talia's face fell. "When I called to tell him I was going to the Midnight Guardians pack, Stephanie picked up the call. Damon was right there, unconscious. I should have known."

"Don't dwell on things you can't change."

Talia knew James had a point, but it was easier said than done.

"After she talked to me, Stephanie got an artifact that looked like a gemstone. It glowed, and then Damon disappeared, together with the gem. I believe it's an item for teleportation," Talia said.

James nodded. "That explains why no one saw him leaving. And I can bet that's the same thing that made Yasmin and her kids disappear also."

"That means the person working for the Guardians is still in the Midnight Guardians pack."

"Or that person teleported together with Yasmin and the kids," James said. "It was probably someone Yasmin trusted."

"Could Sophia and Isaac be the culprits?"

James shrugged. It was a possibility. "Let's not waste time guessing and focus on what we know. How did Stephanie get in touch with the Guardians? I thought that Caden and Maya were keeping an eye on her."

"Richard," Talia said. "He used his blacksmithing business to communicate with outsiders, and the Guardians disguised themselves as his customers. From the Council of the Alphas, the Guardians were keeping their eyes on me and collecting information. When Damon announced to everyone I was his Luna, there was a pack run. From that evening, Richard and Stephanie pretended to be mates."

Talia frowned as she remembered, "Damon was talking to Stephanie, asking her to stay in the packhouse, but she was adamant about leaving. At that time, we thought she was

bitter because of Lisa, but that was not true. She was set on going with Richard even before the pack run."

"Lisa?"

"Stephanie's daughter. She used to date Tony before he met Kalina."

James remembered stories about Tony's ex-girlfriend, who had difficulty accepting that Tony had found his mate.

"Where is Lisa now?"

"With rogues. She found her mate during that pack run and..." Talia's face fell as a few more scenes resurfaced from the jumble of what she saw in Stephanie's mind. "We all thought Lisa was with rogues and that Stephanie didn't know, but she did. Lisa was the one who tipped off rogues that I was in the Blue River pack for Tanya's Luna ceremony. After that, Stephanie wanted Lisa to convey more information to the rogues, but Lisa refused to cooperate. Lisa was too weak to contact Damon, so she demanded that Stephanie gets her out of there. Stephanie cut her off."

"Is Lisa important?" James asked.

Talia was not sure how to respond to this. "Lisa is a brat who goes on everyone's nerves. She refused to accept I was Damon's mate and was causing issues."

"Well, being stuck with rogues against her will might teach her a lesson or two. She won't turn rogue if she has the pack link, but her wolf will suffer."

Talia didn't have the capacity to worry about Lisa. "Let's not talk about her. What should we do regarding the Guardians?"

"The Guardians knew that Stephanie betrayed Luna Violet, and they guessed she would do the same to you. You are my Luna, and I should tell you to stay here and let us handle it."

Talia felt there was more to it. "But?"

"You are Damon's mate, a powerful Alpha, and I think you should go to him."

"What happened to waiting until the Guardians contacted me? Don't we want to find out what they are up to?"

"That was before you told me that one of Damon's closest people betrayed him. It's reasonable to believe that Tony, Maddox, and Cristian have spies in their packs. Probably someone close to them. Without knowing who it is, they are in danger as the Guardians will harm them to put pressure on you."

"You think that Damon is in danger?"

"Yes," James said. "Based on the information we have, the Guardians look down on others, seeing them as not worthy. Alpha Damon is just a lure to get you there. Damon will quickly figure out where he is and why, and he won't sit there obediently. He will do whatever he can to escape, and they will do whatever they can to keep him. You see where I'm going with this?"

"You don't think it's crazy for me to go there?"

"Crazy? No. Risky? Yes. However, if we sit and wait, we will only be doing what Guardians want. They are playing mind games. They want you to see your people suffering. Every next report about casualties will come with an additional pressure for you to compromise. That's what they are counting on. They will want you to reach out to them and ask them what you need to do so they stop. They are probably hoping you are unaware of their involvement. In that way, they can twist this into a story about how rogues are attacking, and if you go to them, they will help you subdue rogues."

Talia thought about how James' words made sense.

"What should I do?" She asked.

"I can't tell you what to do. But I know that if that's Cora, I wouldn't stay on the side no matter what others say and no matter what the risks are." James turned to look into Talia's eyes seriously. "Alpha Damon is the strongest Alpha, and he is wearing your mark on his neck. I believe the two of you can figure this out and come out victoriously." If they can't, no one can. "I don't recommend fighting head-on against the Guardians. They are unaware of your abilities, and they think you are ignorant. Use that against them."

"Thank you, James," Talia said while standing up. "I will leave things here in your care."

James' eyes widened. "You are going now?" He was giving her a pep talk to raise her spirits, and he thought they would come up with a plan. Why did she look like she was heading out already?

Talia took her phone and quickly sent a text message before responding, "Axel will be in touch with you when he finds something. Everyone knows what to do, and in case something happens, I trust you will navigate the situation." Talia stuffed the phone in the back pocket of her jeans. "I have my phone with me, so you will be able to check my location."

James stared at Talia as she walked away. Did he mess up by encouraging her to face the Guardians?

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Chapter 965: The snowy forest [Bonus chapter]

Talia put some distance between her and James, confirmed that no one else was nearby, and she closed her eyes.

'Lis, we need to do this together,' Talia spoke to the ancient spirit.

Liseli knew what Talia was up to. 'It will drain your energy.'

'Not completely,' Talia said. 'Those instructions were given by the Guardians, who had less power than we do.'

Talia was the most powerful Alpha, and she was fairly confident that she was among the strongest Guardians. Damon's mark gave her an additional boost, and Talia was determined to test her limits.

Talia prayed silently that she was not too late and that this won't make things worse.

She was pregnant and didn't want to take unnecessary risks, but Damon was in danger, and if she didn't do whatever was in her power to fix the situation, she would regret it forever.

In a way, Stephanie was right. Talia owed everything to Damon. He was the one who took her from the attic, gave her a home, and showed her what love and unconditional support are. It was time for Talia to pay up. However, Talia had no intention of going as a sacrifice. She will go there as a bringer of calamity.

Talia paused at this last thought. Wasn't she discarded by Sophia and Isaac because Cassandra's prophecy said that Talia would bring calamity? Well, it was time for that prophecy to come true.

Talia put her hand over her abdomen.

'As long as it doesn't endanger my child, we are doing this. The energies of the Guardians are in sync with nature, and if there is any impact on my pregnancy, it will be positive.' Talia looked up to see the Moon peeking above tree canopies. 'The Moon is rising. It seems that Selena will help us as well.'

'Alright. Focus on mate, think about him as where you want to go...'

The information Talia's mother left in the necklace spoke about channeling energies so that a person can travel instantly across realms and without limitations in terms of distance.

James' brows came together when he felt the winds picking up by the second. They gathered around Talia to create a vortex of dust, leaves, and debris that obstructed Talia's glowing form.

Arya and Keith realized that something was not right. They rushed toward Talia, and they were only a few steps away when the silvery light flashed in blue, and then it all stopped like someone pressed a pause button.

Everything stilled for a moment, Keith and Arya included. The branches and pebbles fell on the ground first, followed by the drifting of leaves and the dust settling.

"What was that?" Cornelia asked breathily while rushing toward James. She felt an immense surge in energy.

Cassandra was running after Cornelia. How could she miss a commotion?

Liam was right behind them, determined not to lose Cassandra out of his sight.

James was staring at the spot where Talia was standing only a few seconds ago.

"It was... Talia," James said robotically.

"What did you say to her!?" Keith was livid. It was his duty to protect Talia, and she had just vanished! That was it. Damon will skin him alive, this time for real!

James shook his head. "We just talked, and she told me to take care of things here, and that's it."

Keith cursed loudly while walking toward the spot where Talia was, hoping she would reappear in the same mysterious way she disappeared. Arya joined him in searching for clues that were not there.

Cornelia turned to see that the ground glowed in pulses of light blue circular marks that looked like someone had scratched it.

Cornelia's eyes widened when she realized what she was looking at. "Did Talia teleport?"

"I think so," James said. He saw teleportation by witches many times. It required a diagram and energy crystals and chants, and there were no winds or other commotion. This was different, but the results were the same. Talia disappeared.

Cornelia couldn't believe this. "Where did she go? How are we going to explain this to others?"

James was not sure. But he knew one thing. "Talia is an Alpha, and her mate is in danger. I wouldn't just sit if someone was holding you captive. She did what she needed to do, and as their Gammas, it's our duty to help. Let's go inside. It's time to contact others and go offensive."

Cornelia was a nervous bundle of nerves, but James' confidence was like a comforting blanket that made everything better. She leaned on him as they walked into the packhouse together.

"We sorted out almost all the items Cassandra brought," Cornelia said. "There are quite a few that can be used on the battlefield."

James smiled at his chocolate-colored mate. "Good girl."

Cornelia grinned foolishly. Why did those two words make her all mushy on the inside?

...

Talia stared at her surroundings.

She was in the forest, illuminated by the moonlight that was not obstructed by leafless branches and evergreen trees.

Chills from below got her attention, and Talia realized she was ankle-deep in snow.

Talia's heart was thumping wildly as she remembered Cassandra's prophecy. It spoke about a forest covered in snow. And here she was.

Where was Damon? Didn't she teleport to his location?

Cassandra mentioned that Damon was blind, his senses not working, and in danger. Talia hoped that was something open to interpretation. If the Guardians dared to take Damon's eyesight, she would kill them all!

Talia tried sensing her surroundings, and her insides tightened when she realized she couldn't feel a thing. Trees and bushes all around her were undetectable by her senses, like they were an illusion, but she could touch them.

'Lis?'

'Something is messing with our perception,' Liseli responded.

Talia cursed under her breath. Now what?

'Is it possible that we are in the wrong place?' Talia asked.

'I'm not sure,' Liseli said. 'We did everything right. Damon should be close, but maybe these disturbances messed up with our destination as well.'

Talia exhaled helplessly. She got her cell phone and was bummed to see that there was no signal.

'How are they going to find us?' Assuming that anyone searches for them. Tyler might be able to hack into satellites, but Tyler was in the Midnight Guardians pack.

'Do you think anyone can help us? They would just become hostages or get in the way. This is better.'

Talia agreed with this, but... 'We have no idea where we are. Standing here makes no sense, and picking a random direction will be even less productive. How come your wolf senses are not working?'

'Don't blame me!' Liseli exclaimed. 'You are the one who decided to teleport without any research or planning.'

'We have a plan.'

'We do?'

'Rescue Damon and kill anyone who tries to stop us.'

Liseli snickered. 'I like it. But how are we going to find him?'

'There is one option I can think of.'

'Go for it.'

"HELLOOOOOO!!!" Talia shouted from the top of her lungs. "ANYONE OUT THERE!?"

Liseli couldn't believe this. Shouldn't they be sneaky? 'That was stupid.'

'You don't seem to have a better idea,' Talia responded irritably.

They waited and waited, and minutes passed. Nothing happened.

Talia's patience was running thin. 'Should I just summon my energies and emit light like a beacon?'

'How about you climb a tree?' Liseli asked.

'Why would I do that?'

'To get an aerial view. It's a cold night. Maybe we can see the light or smoke.'

Talia had to admit that this made sense. 'OK. Let's pick a tree...'

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Chapter 966: Tea with a Guardian

Talia got down from the tree dejectedly. She climbed all the way to the top and looked in every direction, but there was nothing she could see other than trees and rocks and mountains in the distance.

'This confirms we are in the area where Guardians are,' Liseli said. 'Their territory is North of the Dark Howlers pack, and there are no towns for miles from where they are.'

'That's not helping,' Talia said dejectedly.

If her senses were messed up, there was a possibility that a bustling town was right there, yet she couldn't see it.

Talia released a long breath and leaned against a tree. She was tired, mostly mentally.

Now what? She regretted coming here on a whim. She didn't know where she was, or how to get out of there, or where Damon was. It was hopeless. Should she just start walking randomly and hope it was in the right direction?

Talia's ears perked up when she heard crunching sounds. An animal?

"I thought you would come to us through the portal," a familiar male voice reached Talia, and she squinted at the shadow until a ray of moonlight hit him.

Talia's heart rate shot through the roof. It was Declyn.

He stopped when he was only a few steps away from her and regarded her with curiosity. "It's good that I came to investigate the energy surge; otherwise, you would be lost for a long time. How did you get here?"

Talia was confused. He didn't seem surprised she was there, and he didn't look hostile either. She told herself to keep her guard up.

Declyn mentioned an energy surge. 'Was he talking about her teleportation?', Talia wondered. That was almost an hour ago! Or maybe this environment also messed up with her perception of time.

"Does it matter how I got here?" Talia asked.

"It doesn't. But it matters WHY you are here."

Talia didn't like his relaxed way of talking. But then she remembered James' words. The Guardians see themselves as above others, and they are not aware of Talia's abilities. He didn't see her as a threat, and she should use that.

Talia hugged herself. "I'm cold. Is there a place I could have hot cocoa?"

Declyn smiled and gestured in the direction from where he came. "I can offer you tea."

...

Talia was sitting in a small cabin. There was a square-shaped table with four chairs around it and a worn-down three-seater sofa on the side. The kitchen had only a few necessities, and everything looked old, but the fire crackling in the fireplace gave it a cozy feel. Based on the blankets and the scent of bread, Talia guessed that Declyn lived here.

A narrow staircase led up to a loft that appeared to be used as a bedroom.

Declyn placed a steaming mug on the table in front of Talia and sat on the opposite side of the table, his inquisitive gaze never leaving her face as he sipped from his mug.

"It smells funny," Talia said after taking a sniff of the tea that was brewed with some mix of herbs.

Declyn took the mug from her hands and drank from it. "It's not poisoned."

He put the mug back in front of her.

"How do I know you are not immune to the poison?"

Declyn shrugged. "If I want to harm you, I don't need to make you drink anything."

Talia thought about how that made sense.

She took a sip and frowned. It was bitter.

"Do you want sugar?" Declyn guessed.

Talia refused. "No, it's fine."

Talia thought how this was ridiculous. Rogues were attacking, Damon, Yasmin, and two babies were missing, and here was Talia, drinking tea with a Guardian.

She looked at Declyn whose expression was unreadable. Talia remembered him as a cheery guy who was overly enthusiastic about getting her to use the Sphere of Power again, but now he was serious to the point of making her uncomfortable.

Declyn cleared his throat before asking, "Will you tell me what brings you here, Alpha Natalia?"

"Some people are missing."

"And you came here to look for them?"

Talia bit her lower lip. How much should she tell him? "One of them has a tracker which pointed me in this direction."

"Must be a powerful tracker."

"It is," Talia said. "So? Will you tell me where Damon is? Do you also have Yasmin and her babies?"

"I don't have anyone."

"Are you saying that they are here on their own?"

"No. I said that I don't have them. Every Guardian has a mind of his own. Why don't you go back and save yourself from trouble?"

"Should I thank you for the advice? I have reason to believe that my mate is here, and I have no intention of leaving without him. Will you take me to him?"

Declyn tilted his head and smiled. "If that's what you want."

'Is it that easy?' Talia asked Liseli.

'He doesn't seem to be lying.'

"Yes. That's what I want," Talia responded.

"Do you want to finish your tea first?"

Talia grimaced. "Not really."

Declyn didn't comment. He gulped down tea from his mug, stood up, and led the way outside.

Talia was not sure what to think of Declyn as they walked through the forest in silence.

"You won't ask me more questions?"

"Should I?" Declyn responded with an answer.

"Can I ask you questions?"

"Go ahead."

"Where are we?"

"Canada."

Talia pressed her lips into a line. That was such a generic answer. "Is this the base of the Guardians?"

"It is one of the places where we stay."

"Am I trespassing?"

Declyn shook his head. "We are not werewolves or humans to draw borders and start wars when someone crosses that imaginary line. For us, everything is our territory."

"Dex?" Talia called the name by which she knew him. "You said that you expected me to come through the portal."

Declyn waved, indicating that he didn't want to talk about it, but he still responded with, "Gregory's idea."

Talia's insides tightened at the thought of Gregory. That was the Guardian who caused her to go into heat, and Talia heard that Gregory wanted to take her away at that time and do who-knows-what, and he would if Keith was not there to prevent it.

"Where would that portal take me?" Talia asked.

"To the main house."

Talia was getting frustrated. Why was he giving her short answers?

"Dex? Can you tell me about the situation here?"

Declyn turned to look at Talia. "I believe you are aware of the situation. If you are not, that's probably for the best." And then he continued walking. "I offered you to leave, and you refused. Now... it's too late for that."

Talia wondered, what did he mean by it?

"Is Damon with Gregory?"

"I assume so," Declyn said.

"Will he harm him?"

Declyn took his time to answer this one. "I'm not sure."

Talia pressed her lips into a line. She would feel better if Declyn said that Damon was safe, even if it was a lie.

"Dex? You mentioned the main house. Where is it?"

"Ahead," Declyn responded.

"Are you taking me there?"

"Almost."

Two steps later, some noise from the front got Talia's attention.

Her insides somersaulted when she saw Damon there. He was in a small clearing and didn't seem to be harmed.

Talia was about to call Damon's name when Declyn's hand covered her mouth.

"Wait here and observe," Declyn said. "If you promise not to make noise, I will let you go."

Talia didn't want to wait for anything. Damon was right there!

'Something is wrong with mate!' Liseli shouted in Talia's head. 'I can't reach him, and the bond is weak. I think they are blocking it.'

Talia realized that Liseli was right. She couldn't reach Damon through their mind link.

Without knowing what was happening, Talia decided to cooperate. For now.

She nodded in agreement, and Declyn removed his hand.

"He can't see you. He can't hear you. Not until the trial is done," Declyn said in a low voice.

Talia's brows came together. Damon can't see her? Can't hear her? Wasn't that like Cassandra's prophecy? Was it happening now!? And did Declyn say, trial?

A sense of crisis gripped Talia's heart when she spotted Gregory behind Damon, and there was one more person. It was a female tied to a tree, and Damon was approaching her slowly. Damon extended his hand and cupped her cheek gently.

What the hell was going on there?

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Chapter 967: Gregory's trial

Damon struggled to open his eyes, and his mind was blurry. What the hell happened? Where was he? His body weighed a ton.

The place smelled strange. That was not his study and not the packhouse.

He groaned while squinting to observe a well-lit room.

Damon was on the floor of a room that had two long sofas with small circular tables on each side, a fireplace, and a long coffee table, and Damon spotted a man sitting on a sofa chair and staring at him with an arrogant expression.

Gregory.

Damon never met the man, but he knew him because Talia shared mental images from the time she went into heat.

Damon shook his head to get out of the mental haze.

'Old guy?' Damon called to his wolf.

'There is numbing poison in your system.'

Damon was alerted. 'Poison?'

'It doesn't seem deadly, but it put you to sleep and is affecting me as well. Stay alert. I don't trust this guy.'

Damon agreed. He didn't trust Gregory either.

"Are you awake now?" Gregory asked. "Take your time, Alpha Damon, we are not in a rush. We didn't get introduced properly. My name is Gregory."

"I know who you are," Damon responded.

Gregory smiled. "Good. Then we can skip introductions."

"Why am I here?"

Gregory tilted his head. "As you probably know, I have a special interest in Natalia Moonrider."

Damon growled lowly, and Gregory lifted his hand, indicating to Damon to calm down. "Now, now. There is no need for excessive hostility. I mean you no harm, and I definitely don't mean any harm to Natalia."

"Is that why you drugged me and kidnapped me?"

"I didn't drug you. It was your housekeeper."

Damon felt like someone had stabbed him in the heart. Surely, Gregory was messing with him. Right? "Stephanie?"

"You should be more cautious about who serves you food, Alpha Damon. There are more things than wolfsbane and silver that can take out an Alpha."

Damon snorted as he pushed himself up. The room started spinning, and Damon stumbled to fall on the sofa. How undignifying. Damon gripped the edge of the sofa to maintain a seated position because everything was spinning.

"Don't rush. It will take a while for your body to recover. You are lucky your wolf is so strong, or you might be out for days. Or longer."

Damon was alerted. "How long am I here?"

Gregory shrugged. "A few hours?"

Damon could see it was dark outside. Oh, no. Talia! She will be worried sick. Damon tried mind-linking her, but it didn't work. He put his hand over his chest. Why did it feel like their mate bond was weak?

'Sapa?' Damon called. 'What's going on with our mate bond? Is Talia in danger?'

'I'm not sure,' Sapa responded. 'The bond is there, but I believe something is obstructing it.'

Damon narrowed his eyes at Gregory. "Why am I here?" He thought that the Guardians might imprison him or maybe even kill him, but he was not restrained in any way, and Damon could feel his energy returning by the minute as the poison was cleared from his body.

"As I said, I have a special interest in Natalia Moonrider," Gregory said.

Damon's jaw tightened. "You showed that in the Blue River pack."

Gregory shook his head. "That was unfortunate. I meant no harm. At that time, I was surprised to find out how special she was. In the end, didn't you benefit from your mate going into heat? Is she pregnant now?"

Damon had no intention of answering any of those. "Is that why you brought me here? To discuss my mating ritual?"

"Of course, not."

"Why am I here?"

"Alpha Natalia is a special existence, and she deserves the best. Don't you agree?" Gregory asked and continued without waiting for Damon's response, "I want to make sure you are the right man for her."

Damon was sure that his ears malfunctioned. "Talia is my mate. Our bond is proof that I am the ONLY man for her!"

Gregory was not phased by Damon's rising hostility. "That's just a bond that a Moon Goddess decided on before you were even born. Think of it like an arranged marriage. Sure, it can work, but it can also be a horrible match if let's say..." Gregory narrowed his eyes at Damon. "One of the two is sleeping around."

Damon paused. "What?"

"Are you going to deny your debauchery, Alpha Damon? Everyone knows about your endless conquests. The only thing people don't know is the exact number of women who you had sex with. Is it two hundred? Three hundred? More?"

Damon thought how this was ridiculous. "Since I've met Talia, she is the only one for me."

Gregory smirked. "Are you sure about it?"

Damon found himself unable to lie as he remembered... "That was one time. I didn't understand the bond and how important..."

"Don't you think you are too old for excuses?" Gregory interrupted Damon. "No one will deny all the good things you did, but you can't ignore how much you hurt Natalia. Over and over again. You say it's one time, but I'm not sure if that includes only you sleeping with the daughter of Beta from the Red Moon pack. Will you deny that you had Cassie and Marcy in your packhouse together with Natalia? I can't imagine what the poor girl

went through. You organized a pack run to announce your Luna, but it seems that until the last moment, you were not sure if that would be Marcy or Natalia."

"I was under the effect of..."

"Yes, yes," Gregory interrupted him. "I'm sure you have excuses ready but none that could erase the fact you hurt Natalia. You can slip once and say it was an accident, maybe twice. However, your behavior is showing a pattern where you are acting on your own selfish impulses without regard for your mate."

Damon's nostrils flared, and he wanted to punch Gregory's smirk away, but there was the point of Damon's strength recovering, and Gregory was technically not wrong, and... how did he know that much?

Gregory cocked an eyebrow at Damon. "Did I miss any?"

"It is not on you to decide if I am the right man for Talia or not," Damon said grimly.

"Let's agree to disagree on that one. You can think of me like a concerned parent."

"Why don't you cut the bullshit and tell me what you really want?"

Gregory nodded in approval. "I heard you are a man who prefers acting compared to talking. Prove that you will do whatever you can to cherish Natalia, and I will step aside."

"That easy?"

"That easy."

Damon was not in the mood to play games, but did he have a choice? "Alright. Tell me what your test is."

...

Damon followed Gregory outside into the forest.

The crunching of the undisturbed snow under their feet made Damon unsettled as he realized he was far from home.

"Where are we going?" Damon asked.

"You will see," Gregory responded mysteriously. "I'm sure you noticed that your senses are off."

Damon thought it was due to the poison, but now that he checked again, his body was feeling fine, yet everything else was off. It was like he was in a drunken stupor, with everything feeling distant and dull, even though it was right within his reach.

Damon turned to see the building they had just left, but the only thing he could see were trees and darkness. Did they conceal it with enchantment?

"The environment provides us with a natural defense against intruders," Gregory said. "Your task will be to save Natalia and take her out of her safely."

Damon was alerted. "What did you say? Talia is here?"

Gregory turned to Damon and gave him a meaningful look before gesturing toward the clearing ahead.

Damon blinked a few times to verify if his eyes were playing tricks on him.

Without waiting for Gregory to say anything, Damon moved toward the female who was tied to the tree.

Damon would run to Talia and untie her, but his instincts told him something was off.

Damon couldn't feel the bond pulling him toward her, but his bond was not pulling anywhere.

She didn't carry the scent of citrusy sweet freesia. He didn't pick up any scent at all.

Things didn't seem right, but that was Talia looking at him pitifully.

"Kitten?" Damon called when he was only one step away from her. How did she get here? Did the Guardians kidnap her? Bastards tied her to a tree!

Damon extended his hand and put it on her cheek. "It's OK. I'm here now."

She leaned into his touch. "Save me, Damon. Let's get out of here."

Damon's insides tightened. That was Talia's voice.

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Chapter 968: The power of darkness [Bonus chapter]

Damon's hand slid slowly down her cheek, and he wondered if his messed up senses caused him not to feel the sparks of their bond.

His fingers paused above the mark on the left side of her neck.

That was his mark right there. He spent countless hours awake, staring at it while Talia was sleeping.

She looked like Talia, sounded like Talia, and wore his mark, but something seemed off. What was it?

Damon raised his hand, and she flinched.

"You want me to take you home?"

"Yes," she confirmed.

"Where is that?"

The female paused. "To the Dark Howlers pack."

In the next moment, Damon grabbed her neck as his expression frosted.

She wanted to squirm out of his hold or defend herself somehow, but she was tied to the tree, and the only thing she could do was talk.

"No, no," she squeaked. "I meant... home to... the Midnight Guardians pack..."

Damon continued squeezing until he felt the vibrations of bones snapping under his palm.

Her eyes widened in horror, and then her head bobbed as she breathed her last.

"Now, now," Gregory drawled from the back. "I heard that Alpha of the Dark Howlers pack is a cruel man, but I didn't know that you would kill indiscriminately. Only a savage would kill his mate."

"Everyone who goes against my mate and me deserves death," Damon said while turning to Gregory. "I thought my task was to leave with Talia. I didn't realize you would play dirty and use an impersonator."

"How can you be so confident she was not Natalia?"

Damon smirked. "Your disguising technique is good, but you can't fake a person."

Gregory narrowed his eyes at Damon. "What if that was someone you care about?"

"The only one I care about is Talia. Others that are close to me would know that impersonating my mate means death."

Talia watched this from the side, and her heart expanded with warm and fuzzy emotions. Damon was overprotective and overbearing, but the truth was that he knew her well. She would never allow being used as his weakness, and she wouldn't ask him to take her home because her home was Damon.

Declyn looked at Talia suspiciously. "How can you smile when your mate killed you?"

"You won't understand."

"Explain."

Talia had no intention of engaging in chatter. She wanted to go to her mate. "Is the trial over?"

Declyn was not sure what Gregory had prepared for Damon, but he knew that if he let Talia interfere, Gregory would change his plans. This game was for Gregory's entertainment, and once his patience ran out, Gregory would expose himself as a male willing to go to any lengths to get what he wanted. And he wanted Talia.

"You will know once it's over," Declyn responded cryptically.

Even the spectators from the side could see that Damon's temper was about to flare. He was done playing.

Damon's expression hardened. "I gave you the benefit of the doubt, but I'm done. You lied to me about the rules of this charade. Did you also lie about Talia being here? Where is she!?"

"Will it make a difference if she is here?" Gregory asked.

"Not really. Today will be your last day either way."

Gregory's eyes darted to his right to see Talia and Declyn there. Damon also looked in that direction, but he couldn't see anything out of place.

"You think you can kill me? What if I told you that you can't put a scratch on me?" Gregory asked mockingly.

Damon was about to respond, but he found himself unable to move. It was like his every muscle froze and started prickling painfully.

"You mortals should learn your place," Gregory said in a low voice while walking unhurriedly toward Damon. "You are overconfident because you are the strongest fish in your little pond."

Gregory grinned, exposing his teeth. "Welcome to the ocean."

Damon groaned as his face contorted in pain. This hurt more than being stabbed with a wolfsbane-laced knife. His body bent, but he refused to fall to his knees.

"That's it," Gregory said, and he leaned closer to Damon, his voice just above a whisper because he didn't want Talia to hear this part. "Resist. Resist with all your might. If you just give up, you will spoil my fun. I won't kill you. I will let you live so you can see Natalia standing by my side as my woman."

Damon's eyes flashed in anger. What did the bastard say? He wanted to take Talia away? That's not happening.

'Old guy!' Damon shouted at his wolf. 'If you have any tricks up your sleeve, now is a good time to come out clean!'

'I'm giving you everything I can!' Sapa shouted back. 'Whatever this guy is doing, it's suppressing me to the power of a pup!'

Damon's mind exploded. A pup!

If anything happened to him, who would take care of Talia? Who will take care of his pup? He would love it to be a girl, cute as Talia, but he wouldn't hate it if it were a boy either.

Will he fall here so that Talia needs to raise their child alone? There were rogues and so many other issues, and he couldn't leave Talia to deal with managing two packs without him. And then there was this old creep and his lust for Talia. Unacceptable!

Ever since his parents died, Damon was lost in a routine of work and empty pleasures, and then Talia came and filled up all the holes he was unaware he had. Yes, he helped her leave the attic and train and learn, but he did it for himself because seeing Talia happy made him happy also. He lived for the moments when her honeyed eyes full of wonder would smile at him, and he would give anything to see that again.

The thought of this asshole forcing himself on Talia was driving Damon to the brink of insanity.

Anger, dejection, and helplessness mixed to form something new, and blazing heat formed in the pit of Damon's stomach, rapidly expanding to burn him alive. Unknown energies swelled and condensed, threatening to wreck his body.

"You... fucker...." Damon squeezed through his teeth and raised his head.

Gregory's expression flashed with surprise when he realized that Damon's eyes had turned pitch black. And it was not just eyes. There was a layer of darkness concentrating around Damon; combined with Damon's fierce expression, it made him look like the Devil himself.

"AAAAA!"

Damon shouted as the darkness from him exploded in all directions, causing a gust of wind that canceled everything.

Damon heaved as he straightened his posture and his hands balled into fists, crackling with the energy he had never felt before. It was like being reborn, and it came with a sense of complete dominance over all living creatures.

Talia stared at the scene with excitement that overtook her senses, and she didn't notice that Declyn fell to his knees.

For Talia, this was more than Damon breaking from Gregory's influence. Talia could pick up all scents in the area and feel the trees and bushes, and there was their mate bond that filled her to the brim with admiration and love, and she just knew that her Damon was back.

Did he finally awaken his ability? It looked like it.

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Chapter 969: The power of darkness (cont.)

'POW!'

A solid punch landed on Gregory's face, who was too stunned to react.

Gregory stumbled backward, and the snow didn't do much to soften his fall. He held his throbbing cheek.

Gregory had never felt so vulnerable before, and if not for his extraordinary physique, he was confident that Damon's punch would cripple him. What the hell was going on?

"HAHAHAHA!"

Damon laughed crazily, drunk on the energies that coursed through this system.

"You said I can't put a scratch on you. Did I prove you wrong, or should I punch you again?"

Talia wanted to go to Damon, but Declyn was quick to block her path.

"If you go there, you will be hurt," he said.

Talia raised his gaze to meet Declyn's eyes. "Keep standing between my mate and me, and I will make sure you regret it."

Declyn swallowed hard as he stared into Talia's silvery eyes, whose sharpness told him she meant business. He gave a small nod before moving to the side.

Gregory couldn't believe what was happening. The surge of dark energy took away all his strength, and he felt the moment when it seeped into Damon. What the hell was that? Was it possible that Damon had the ability to cancel the Guardians' powers? "How...?"

Damon sneered. He was about to punch Gregory again when he felt a familiar presence approaching him rapidly from his left.

Damon turned just in time to catch Talia as she jumped on him. Her arms wrapped around his neck, and her legs dangled in the air.

"I was so worried," Talia whined while clinging onto Damon, and she took a deep breath to fill her lungs with the scent of the forest and the dark chocolate. Her favorites.

Damon held Talia tightly on him. "So was I. Did they hurt you?"

Talia shook her head. "I just got here. Dex was kind enough to bring me to you. What about you?"

"I'm fine," Damon said.

"How did you know that was not me?"

"She flinched. My kitten was never afraid of me."

Talia stifled a laugh as her tense nerves loosened. Everything was better when she was with Damon.

Talia moved to look at Damon, and she paused at the sight of his usually icy blue eyes that were completely black now.

"Are you OK?" She asked.

Damon smiled. "I am now."

'Is that your ability?' Talia asked through their mind link.

'I think so.'

'What is it?'

'Ass-whooping Guardians.'

Talia stifled a giggle. Damon was cheeky, and she loved it. She loved him.

The scent, the sparks of their bond, the connection. It was all there. It didn't matter where they were. As long as they were together, they were happy.

"I missed you," Damon spoke into her lips.

"I missed you more," Talia responded and closed the minuscule distance between them to savor the touch of his lips on hers. She really missed him, and she needed to feel him everywhere so that her body knew things were back how they should be.

"Ugh," Gregory groaned while getting up, and Talia and Damon turned to look at him.

Talia stood next to Damon, and they held hands with their fingers interlaced.

She raised her chin while talking to Gregory, "You were testing my mate by making him think some other female was me? What were you trying to accomplish?"

Gregory's eyes moved from Talia to Damon. She was surrounded by silvery light, and Damon had a layer of darkness around him. Her eyes glowed in silvery light, and his were completely black. They were opposites, and Gregory would admire the sight or maybe fear them if not for the fact that his plan failed.

"He killed the female without hesitation. Didn't you see that?" Gregory spoke to Talia. "Are you not bothered by it?"

"He killed her after confirming that was not me. Tricking an Alpha is treason and is punishable by death."

Gregory frowned at Talia. "How can you be OK with him killing like that? She was tied to the tree, unable to defend herself!"

"Even if she were armed and free to move, it wouldn't change the outcome," Talia responded.

"As a Luna, you should be compassionate. Will you be so indifferent when you find out that the female in question was Yasmin from the Midnight Guardians pack?"

Talia frowned. What game was he playing? "There is no way Yasmin would die so easily."

Damon turned to look at Talia. "They have Yasmin?"

Talia confirmed. "Yasmin and the twins. They disappeared from the Midnight Guardians pack. We have no evidence it was the Guardians, but no one else could pull it off."

Damon gave Talia's hand a squeeze. "Don't worry, kitten, we will find them."

Gregory snorted. "Do you think I will make it easy for you?"

Damon extended his hand toward Gregory, and a wisp of darkness shot at the unsuspecting Guardian.

Gregory groaned and clutched his chest, where the darkness disappeared. It hurt like hell. Gregory had no idea what Damon did or how he did it, but he realized that fighting against Damon would be a mistake.

"Declyn!" Gregory shouted. "Help! Call others!" Seeing that Declyn didn't move, Gregory's eyes flashed in outrage. "Declyn! Are you rebelling?"

"This is not my fight," Declyn said. "From the beginning, I told you that I don't approve and that it will backfire."

"You are one of us! It's your duty to work for the benefit of our kind!"

"Says who? You? Who made you the boss of everything?" Declyn asked.

Gregory was considered a leader of the Guardians, but only because no one else bothered to fight for that title. And it didn't mean anything other than staying in the castle.

Gregory frowned at Declyn. "I know you don't approve of what I did to Vincent, but it was necessary."

Declyn's expression stiffened. "You were aware that his condition would deteriorate, yet you still went ahead to extract his memories. You expect me to listen to you? Do you think I'm stupid? Do you think that any of us is stupid? Look around. Julian, Bone, Marco, Ahmet, do you see any of them here? They all left because none wants to end up like Vin."

Gregory couldn't believe this. "You can't do this."

"I'm not doing anything," Declyn responded. "You can't treat us as pawns and expect us to follow your orders."

Gregory's face darkened. He wanted to squeeze the life out of Declyn, but he was feeling so weak that he couldn't form a fist. And why were his powers not working? He knew it was related to Damon, but he didn't know when Damon's power would wear off,

and then Gregory would show them who was in charge. He only needed to delay and recover.

'Do you believe Guardians rebelled against Gregory?' Damon asked Talia through their mind link.

'No,' Talia responded. Trusting Declyn would allow him to backstab them. Declyn didn't commit any offense that she knew about, but he didn't go out of his way to help them either. 'It would be convenient if only Gregory was the bad guy and all Guardians turned against him. It sounds too good to be true.'

Damon approved. His kitten was cautious. 'If it sounds too good, it probably is.'

'Let's see how much Dex will cooperate,' Talia suggested.

'Or lead us into a trap,' Damon said.

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Chapter 970: Reinforcements (1)

"Do you know where Yasmin is?" Talia asked Declyn.

Declyn shook his head. "Gregory divides tasks, and he is the only one who knows the whole plan."

"You must have some ideas where he could keep her," Talia said.

Declyn confirmed. "I might."

"Was your task to bring Talia here?" Damon asked Declyn.

Declyn shook his head. "I was to stay here and be a backup if anything unexpected happens. I knew he would make you be with another woman, so Alpha Natalia leaves you."

"What!?" Talia snapped. This was so sinister and ridiculous that her insides churned. If it worked, Talia would be devastated.

"Gregory knew that if we just kill Alpha Damon, you will never forgive us," Declyn explained. "That's why he was planning for your mate to be with another woman. Gregory would remove restrictions once Damon gets intimate with the other female, so you can feel the pain of betrayal, at which point you will break your mate bond, and chances of you coming to us willingly will increase."

Talia was observing Gregory, who was just glaring at Declyn. She could tell he was angry but was he angry because Damon suppressed his powers or because Declyn was ratting on him?

Damon didn't trust Declyn, but Gregory's anger was palpable, and he believed that Declyn didn't make it up. It was too farfetched to be a lie.

Damon glared at Gregory. "For someone who thinks of himself as above others, you are demonstrating weak dick energy."

Gregory was outraged. "What did you say?"

Damon glared at Gregory. "Weak. Dick. Energy."

"Only a child would use such crass insults."

"Right now, you are weak as a child, so these insults are appropriate."

Gregory growled angrily and lunged at Damon.

Damon extended his hand just in time to grab Gregory's head and push him back with so much force that Gregory flew backward and landed unceremoniously in the snow with a groan.

"Get up!" Damon commanded. "You were so eager to play with me. Come now. Don't make me wait."

Damon lifted his hand that was holding Talia's and kissed her knuckles.

"Is this the woman you want? You should know that she is taken, and coveting her guarantees you won't have an easy ending..."

Talia didn't want to listen to their bickering. Yasmin was somewhere with her kids, their friends were facing rogues, Declyn was suspiciously cooperative, and Damon was right when he said that Gregory was weak like a human.

'What did Damon's ability do to Gregory?' Talia asked Liseli.

'It looks like it suppressed it. Gregory is regaining his powers gradually, and if he were not this furious, he would notice it.'

Talia didn't like this. Gregory was a dangerous man. Should she kill him? Can one kill a Guardian?

Declyn seemed neutral, but if she tried harming Gregory, Declyn's attitude might change. She didn't trust any Guardian, but they shouldn't kill indiscriminately either.

There was a reason why most of them went to live with humans; they didn't want to act like Gods who were above others, which meant that Gregory didn't have the support of many.

Talia got an idea. 'Can we take away Gregory's abilities how we did with Sophia and Isaac?'

Liseli was not sure. 'There is only one way to find out.'

Hurried steps that came as crunches in the snow got everyone's attention.

Gregory's spirits rose, and he stumbled to his feet. "Ezra, Arthur! Help me capture these!"

Two males helped Gregory stabilize his posture and turned to face Damon and Talia.

Talia glanced at Declyn, who raised his hands defensively with, "I refuse to go against my people, but you have my word that I won't interfere."

"Your word is worth nothing," Damon said. "You might as well stand next to them, so I can take you all out in one go."

"Impudent!" Arthur shouted.

Declyn didn't respond as he took steps away from the place where the commotion was set to start at any minute.

"What happened to you?" Ezra asked Gregory.

Gregory shook his head. "He hit me with something, but I will be fine after resting."

'Damon?' Talia called through the mind link. 'Can you take those two out?'

'I'm not sure,' Damon responded honestly. 'I am still new at this power-controlling thing.' The initial burst was fantastic, but he did it in rage, and he was not sure if he could do it again. The one with the black mist shooting out of his palm was more like an experiment.

'What about you?' Damon asked.

'I used most of my energy to teleport here,' Talia admitted.

Damon looked at Talia in disbelief. 'You what?'

Talia bit her lower lip guiltily. Was he blaming her for using her energy, or was he surprised she could teleport? There was no time for explanations.

'Between the two of us, we can take them,' Talia said. 'Gregory is useless, and Declyn said he will stay neutral.'

More steps were heard, and three more figures appeared.

Talia cursed under her breath.

Gregory puffed his chest as his confidence swelled. He pointed an angry finger at Declyn. "Do you see this? Not everyone is a traitor like you are! You want to remain neutral? There is no such thing on the battlefield. I will deal with you later!" He spoke to Ezra, Arthur, and three newcomers, "Make sure not to harm Alpha Natalia too much."

'Can you teleport out of here?' Damon asked Talia.

Talia's hold on Damon's hand intensified. She was not sure if she had enough energy for one. 'Even if I could, I wouldn't leave you behind. Also, I believe that Yasmin and the twins are in that castle. We need to rescue them. Our packs are under attack from rogues. Retreating is not an option. Win or fail, we will do it together.'

Damon looked at the little woman by his side, and he let her feel his emotions through their mate bond. Pride, love, excitement, worry.

Talia turned to look at the Moon that was up in the sky.

'Lis, if Serena is up there, can she see us? Will she help us?'

'She is already helping us,' Liseli said. 'Feel the energies. They are all around us. Use them as yours.'

Talia closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

She could feel Damon next to her and Gregory standing in front, five people moving to form a big circle around Damon and her. Declyn was further on the left... and then she felt a whirlwind behind her.

Talia's eyes snapped open, and she turned to see several figures appearing there.

"Luna! Alpha!" Keith shouted as he and Arya rushed toward them. Maya, Caden, Liam, and Amelia were right behind them.

"How come you are here?" Talia asked.

"Amelia got us here as soon as we picked up your signal," Keith said with a frown. "How can you leave us behind like that?"

Talia shook her head, but she was glad to see them. "How are things in the pack?"

"George is in charge of warriors. James is on top of things and communicating with other packs. As of now, our casualties are minimal," Caden responded.

Another surge of energy was felt, and Talia saw another group appearing. It was Sandy, Tyler, Tony, Kalina, Jordan, and Lidia.

'They were in our pack,' Maya spoke to Damon and Talia through their pack link. 'Cornelia is sending people here according to James' instructions. More are on their way. Each of us has at least one artifact to help face Guardians. We didn't come here to be captured.'

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