

The Alpha's Bride

#Chapter 971 Reinforcements (2) –

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One after another group of people teleported, revealing determined expressions of Cristian, Maddox, Tatiana, Pierce, Darla, Caleb, Mindy, Gideon, Varya, Grady, and several other high-ranking warriors from four allied packs.

Talia turned to look at Damon, and she squeezed his hand excitedly. The feeling of camaraderie filled her heart to the brim. 'Our friends are here,' Talia said to Damon through their mind link. Tatiana, Kalina, Lidia, Daria, and Varya quickly gathered and formed a circle. Tatiana started singing, and her sisters joined her. It started low, but then their vocals picked up to twinkle and swirl, creating an ethereal tune that resonated with nature. Talia's eyes widened when she realized that energies were revolving around five Wilkow sisters and then spreading to their allies. Talia could feel it like a breeze that carried vitality. It was fantastic! "It is something that runs in their family," Tony said from the side for everyone to hear.

Talia knew that the Wilkow family lived among humans, as loners, without a pack, yet their wolves didn't turn feral. That made them special, and this magical tune added to it. Talia took a mental note to talk to Kalina and Tanya about it later.

Whatever boost they were getting, Talia was welcoming it. "Where are my daughter and grandkids I?" An angry voice was heard, and Talia turned that way to see the latest batch of newcomers.

Evanora was walking toward Damon and Talia with her two helpers from the Silver Flame Coven, Serena and Freya.

"Are these the bastards who dared to touch my bloodline?" Evanora was fuming.

"Yes," Talia responded. "But take it easy. We still don't know where Yasmin and the kids are, so we can't kill them."

Evanora's face was arranged in a deep frown. "We can cause them pain."

"We all want that," Talia said, and she wished that Evanora had a mind link so they could exchange information without the Guardians overhearing them. "Now that you are

here, I have no fear they will be unpunished. Let's take our time to find out as much as we can, and we can punish them based on the severity of their crimes." Talia pointed at Declyn. "That one claims neutrality, but we shouldn't turn our backs to him."

Evanora regarded Talia for a long moment, and then she responded with a nod. Talia took that as Evanora's agreement to subdue her thirst for blood.

More allies were a good thing, but it would be troublesome if people acted on their impulses.

Evanora noticed that Serena and Freya were curiously observing the Wilkow sisters and their ritual, and she did the same.

Talia was happy that Evanora didn't go nuclear. She wondered how the old witch would react once she found out that the Guardians were probably involved in gruesome experiments that included people with abilities.

Axel arrived with the next group. 'Sorry we are late, Axel spoke to Talia through their mind link. 'We would come earlier, but three witches found their mates as we reached the Dark Howlers pack, and it caused slight delays. Evanora brought fifty-seven witches from the Silver Flame Coven. Other than the three newly mated witches, James distributed most of them to help with teleportation and as reinforcements to our warriors and allies. Evanora insisted on coming here.'

'You are not late,' Talia responded, happy that three witches had found their mates. There was love no matter the hardships.

Talia glanced at five Guardians, who now got closer to Gregory, obviously confused by this development.

Talia turned to address the newcomers "Thank you for coming!" She gestured toward Gregory and his five helpers. "Creatures that call themselves Guardians captured my mate with the intention of breaking us apart. In order to lure me here, they also kidnapped Yasmin and her two babies. They are using other Alphas and rogues to attack our packs and cause disruption. I believe that Yasmin is there.. Talia gestured toward the castle that was peeking above tree canopies behind Gregory. "But until we confirm their location, we shouldn't kill them. Each of them has abilities. Those five are standing in our way, and there might be more. I ask you to help us defeat them so we can rescue hostages and ensure that women don't need to fear they will be kidnapped and used for the greed of the Guardians!"

The Guardians were furious to hear Talia talk about them like they were not there. But they didn't miss the oddity of the Wilkow sisters, and there was something in Evanora that made them cautious. Also, in addition to Talia and Damon, there were nearly thirty more people, most of them werewolves. "Those are some big words," Gregory sneered. "Do you think you can deliver on them?" "It's the shitface!" Keith exclaimed as he

recognized Gregory from the incident at the Blue River pack. So far, Keith was focused on Talia and Arya, and only now he took a better look at their opponents. Gregory felt like he was about to faint from anger. "How did you call me? "Shitface!" Keith doubled down. "You heal well, old man. I need to rearrange your features again!" Gregory's expression stiffened as he remembered Keith overpowering him with ease. Arya looked at Keith apprehensively. He was energetic and full of fighting spirit, and she felt neglected. "Arya," Keith called. "Let's teach this old man a lesson together. He dared to covet our Luna." Arya liked that Keith included her. This was her chance to show that she could be useful and loyal to Talia. Maddox walked to Damon and Talia.

"I hear you got kidnapped," Maddox said and glanced at Gregory and five other Guardians. "If I knew it's just this much, I wouldn't come. Even my pregnant mate insisted on coming because we thought you were dying."

"Thank you for coming to my rescue," Damon responded dryly. He knew that Maddox would harp about this for years to come.

"Anytime you are ready, we can take care of them and then go home," Cristian said from the side.

Damon made a face. "Don't get too cocky. They are the Guardians. Remember the ones that can suppress Alpha aura? Last time your aura didn't work, you got beat by a Lieutenant." Cristian's face stiffened. Talia couldn't believe this. Was this the time for petty quarrels? Men and their egos. Everything was a competition! Talia spoke to Gregory. "What you did is inexcusable. However, if you release Yasmin and her kids unharmed, we will consider leaving you with your lives."

Gregory didn't think that these thirty-something people were dangerous. Even without his ability, Gregory's physique put him above an average werewolf.

The only one that worried him was Damon. However, Gregory suspected something was off with Damon. Why was he not attacking? Was that troublesome ability a one-time thing? That was a possibility. Without his ability, Damon was not an obstacle, and neither was any other person from the people gathered.

The only thing Gregory wanted to avoid was harming Talia. But then he noticed several other females that caught his attention. There were Wilkow sisters and some other females that were not she-wolves, but he could feel they were not humans.. Now that he thought about it, why not capture all of them?

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Chapter 972: Fighting the Guardians (1)

Gregory raised his chin confidently. "You want me to release your friend and children? Sure. I will do it if you are willing to trade."

Talia was confused. What trade? She wanted to shut him down, but this was a good chance to confirm where Yasmin was. "It seems you have something on your mind."

Gregory pointed in the direction where the Wilkow sisters were still singing. "Those five females seem interesting."

"What did you say!?" Maddox exploded. He came here to help Damon and Talia, but now it has become personal.

Tony, Grady, Jordan, and Pierce glared at Gregory, ready to punch some sense into him.

Gregory ignored Maddox and pointed at Evanora. "And the blonde gal there."

Evanora's eyebrows shot up. "Me?"

"I heard you say that those three are your bloodline. Is that your sister?"

Evanora's temper flared. "That's my daughter and grandkids!"

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Chapter 973 Fighting the Guardians (2)

Damon and Talia moved to the center of the area where Evanora's spell would be the strongest. "You want us to be caught in the spell with the Guardians?" Talia asked apprehensively. The idea of being stuck and unable to move was unsettling. Damon confirmed. "To use our abilities, we don't need to move." Talia looked around. Humanoid and wolf shapes moved so quickly that they formed blurs. Kicks, punches, and growls were gruesome.

It was strange that there was so much noise and commotion around them, yet when she locked eyes with Damon, everything faded, leaving just the two of them.

They were faintly aware of the fight surrounding them, but they felt like spectators in a virtual reality that couldn't harm them.

"Damon?" "Hmm?" "How are we going to resonate?" By now, Talia guessed they wouldn't be getting frisky. "Open your bond, kitten. Let me feel you and feel me in return." "Will that work?" Damon caressed her cheek with the back of his fingers, enjoying the sensation of the sparks that prickled his skin.

"Sapa told me that we resonate when we want the same thing. Everything I have is yours, kitten. My body, mind, and emotions included. I have no secrets in front of you. If you peel all my layers and look into my heart, you will see your name etched on it. Don't you feel the same?"

Talia's breath hitched as she could feel his sincerity. There was a time when she would sneak glances at Damon and think he was out of her league, but now she knew they were mates, and he accepted her unconditionally as his equal. More than equals, Damon worshiped her just as she worshiped him.

"I do," Talia responded.

Damon smiled and looked at her with an intensity that made her hairs stand on ends. The air around them changed as the energies became thicker as if the universe was pulling them to get closer to each other.

"That's it, kitten. Feel how much I adore you. There will never be any other woman in my life. Only you. I am yours. Completely. If we are separated, I will not stop searching for you. If anyone dares to come between us, I won't hesitate to kill. I will do anything to be with you and treat you well, as my other half, as my everything."

Talia stared at Damon's icy blue eyes that were turning darker by the second as his sweet words and promises mixed with horrific threats, and she had never heard anything so beautiful in her life. His hands tightened around her, and she could feel his heat seeping into her system. By the time he finished talking, Damon's eyes were completely black, like bottomless voids that didn't reflect the silvery glow that pulsed from Talia.

He held her hands into his and their fingers interlaced. 'That's it, kitten. We are doing it,' he spoke through their mind link

Silvery light glowed with Talia at its center, being abruptly cut where it met Damon's darkness as they formed a perfect sphere that was half silver and half black.

Talia became aware of the bodies around them, and she was not sure if they slowed down their movements or if she imagined it. She identified six Guardians with ease. Gregory was struggling under Keith and Arya, and there were Ezra, Arthur, and three others. 'What should I do with them?' Talia asked Damon, who now completely disappeared in the cloud of his darkness, but their bond told her he was right there. 'Do your worst. I've got your back,' Damon said with amusement in his voice.

He remembered that Cassandra had a prophecy of Talia being a bringer of calamity, and he was glad to contribute to it. As long as it was with Talia, Damon was game. Sophia and Isaac were idiots to discard Talia over some vague prophecy, and Damon was determined to punish everyone who ever harmed Talia.

Evanora and the witches had difficulty focusing on their spell when Damon and Talia were doing their black-and-white spectacle in the middle, which caused energies to spark everywhere.

"Keith!" Maddox shouted as soon as he shifted into his human form. "NOW!"

They felt that they were at a disadvantage with the fight dragging and were happy to hear Damon and the witches came up with a plan on the spot. Now only to confirm if it will work.

Keith grabbed Gregory by his collar and flung him into the area where witches' magic was pulsating in an unstable rhythm.

Gregory fell hard and groaned. His vision was blurry, his ears were buzzing, and he wondered if that was due to the pain that wrecked his insides. It shouldn't be like this. The Guardians were at the top of all creatures for a reason. Their origins could be traced from the beginning of time. They had abilities and centuries of wisdom and experience. How could a handful of fledglings beat them for this degree?

A sense of crisis gripped Gregory's heart when he realized that his five Guardians were also nearby, all moving in slow motion.

Gregory wanted to get up, but the gravity increased several folds. It took him a moment to notice the unusual ball of two energies that emitted a faint buzzing sound.

Witches and werewolves formed a circle around the area that was affected by the slowing spell, and they stared at the spectacle that Damon and Talia caused. No one saw anything like it.

The light and dark energy seeped into each other without mixing, like they were trying to overpower the other, and the whole ball started spinning so quickly that it created a grayish blur.

The snow melted at a speed visible to the eye, and then leaves and branches started rising off the ground.

"Ah... ah!" Gregory cried when he realized that his energy was leaving him and moving toward the energy ball and other Guardians groaned.

"No, no!" Ezra shouted while trying to grasp a purple wisp that emerged from his chest, but his hands just went through it.

The ball of energy buzzed and pulsated, and then it just faded into nothing to reveal Talia and Damon holding each other while locked in a kiss. Talia's hair was silvery, just like her eyes, and Damon's eyes were the definition of darkness. "Good job, kitten," Damon spoke into her lips. "How did you know it would work?" "Sapa told me." 'I did not!' Sapa protested in Damon's head. 'Shush, old guy! It's more reliable if she thinks it was your idea.' If he told Talia that he was playing by the hunch, she might be upset for taking the risk Sapa snorted. 'As long as you know.' Damon and Talia were both high on energy and drunk on the love they had for each other. Damon thought of asking, "How is our pup?" "I think she just grew a bit." Damon cocked an eyebrow. "She?" "It's not confirmed, but I thought of calling her she." Damon clicked his tongue. "Just when I

accepted the idea of having a boy." Talia was smiling so widely that her cheeks were hurting. "No matter what it is, we will have more. A few boys and a few girls. What do you say?" Damon pressed her harder against him. "You won't hear any complaints from me.."

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Chapter 974: The dungeon (1)

Damon stared into Talia's silvery eyes while enjoying the tender emotions mixed with the passion that flooded his senses through their mate bond. By embracing Talia, his whole world was in his arms, and it was wonderful.

"You are expecting a child?" Gregory asked in disbelief.

Damon's expression stiffened, and he turned to glare at Gregory. How dares that nobody interrupt their lovey-dovey time? And why was he eavesdropping?

With a flick of Damon's finger, a ray of darkness hit Gregory in his arm.

As their abilities resonated, Damon and Talia got a better understanding of their powers and how to use them. It was right there but hidden at the back of their minds.

Damon now understood the nature of his ability. It was a manifestation of his numerous fights and desire to be left alone. The darkness he carried could cancel other people's energies to the point of stopping time and accelerating aging.

Talia was pure and full of light, while Damon was dirty and shrouded in darkness. Her ability could heal, and his would cause rotting.

They were opposites that coexisted in perfect harmony.

"Don't you dare talk casually to my mate!" Damon squeezed through his teeth.

Gregory's eyes were full of horror as he stared at his arm, which was turning gray as the flesh was drying out. His nose was broken, he was covered in bruises, and his face was swollen like a swarm of bees attacked him, but this was terrifying.

"What is this?" Gregory asked in disbelief. "Make it stop!"

"Where is Yasmin?" Talia asked.

"In there..." Gregory cried while pointing at the castle. "Third floor. Make it stop!"

"Who else are you keeping there?" Talia continued probing.

Gregory shook his head frantically. "It's Yasmin and two kids. We only held them inside. There are three more Guardians, maybe four, and people in the dungeon."

Talia waved her hand, and a ray of silvery light shot into Gregory's arm.

Gregory stared at his arm, which became blissfully numb as the flesh was regrowing. He lifted his head in slow motion toward Talia.

"How are you related to Astraea?" Gregory rasped.

Talia paused. "How do you know her?"

"Ha... ha... ha..." Gregory laughed in slow motion. "No wonder you are so powerful. Why did it take me so much time to figure it out?" He looked at her crazily. "You belong with us."

Damon growled. "No one tells my mate where she belongs!"

Talia leaned on Damon. He was possessive, protective, and sexy.

"Don't allow a nobody to upset you," Talia said and turned to look at Gregory. "Without his powers, he is like a human. I wonder at what rate he will age."

Gregory's eyes widened. "What?"

Gregory tried sensing his energies, but there was nothing. Only then he became aware of the excruciating pain that wrecked his body.

"What did you do? Give it back!" Gregory shouted at Talia.

Talia ignored him. She spoke to Axel. "You heard the man. Yasmin is in there, on the third floor. Focus on your bond and find her. Take a few people with you in case you bump into more guardians."

"I will go with him," Evanora volunteered. She was curious about Talia's and Damon's abilities and the Wilkow sisters, but it was more important to find Yasmin and confirm that they were unharmed.

Serena, Feya, Sandy, Tyler, Varya, Grady, and a few more people volunteered to go with Axel and Evanora in search of Yasmin.

"Can you not kill them? I will have a few questions for them." Evanora said while gesturing toward six Guardians lying on the ground helplessly. They were all drained of energy after Talia and Damon took away their powers.

Talia confirmed that they wouldn't kill them. But what should they do with them?

"Others won't cause problems," Declyn said while approaching the crowd. "Whoever was loyal to Gregory answered his summons to come to his aid and face you."

"That doesn't mean they won't be dangerous," Caden said.

Declyn shook his head. "None of us is disturbed by everyday matters. I believe that today's overwhelming win was mostly because these six people didn't expect that anyone could endanger them."

"That's close enough!" Damon growled at Declyn.

Declyn stopped advancing, and he raised his hands. "I mean no harm."

Maddox snorted. "For someone who doesn't mean no harm, you took the role of a spectator when one side wanted to take females of the other. If you have a shred of decency, you would see that your comrades were out of line, and you would act on it."

"Fair enough," Declyn said. "Now what?"

Talia responded. "I want you to tell your people that we won't pursue them if they leave us alone. If we hear that you are meddling in our affairs, you should expect to end up like those six. I won't think twice before removing your abilities and turning you into mortals."

Declyn nodded in agreement. Some of his acquaintances would probably welcome that as they wished for death that was not coming. "How are you related to Astraea? We didn't see her in a very long time."

"She was my mother."

Declyn's eyebrows shot up. "Was? Why are you talking about her in the past tense?"

Talia's breath hitched. "Are you saying she is alive?"

"Our kind can't die. We will move across different planes, but our spirits are too strong to dissipate, and we maintain our consciousness. You can find more information in the library on the second floor of the castle."

Talia wondered if Declyn was talking about the spirit moving on after the body was damaged. Various religions and cultures called it in different ways, but they all agreed it was a one-way transition unless one believed in reincarnation.

No one knew what to do with the six guardians. Tony suggested they put them in the dungeon until they figured out their next steps, and Damon supported the idea.

Damon and Talia were leading the group toward the dungeon.

The stench of rotten flesh and bodily fluids hit them hard from afar.

"You can wait outside," Damon told Talia.

"No, I am fine," Talia responded. It didn't seem fair for her to skip this. If she stayed out of it, Damon would accompany her, and they were the only ones fully equipped to deal with the Guardians.

Most of the cells were empty, and they found one for each newly imprisoned Guardian. Gregory and his five supporters had no strength to resist when thrown inside.

"Astraea's daughter..." Gregory breathed. "Our female is alive and expecting a child. It's a glorious day."

Talia's insides churned, and she wished for an off button so she doesn't hear him anymore.

Other than Gregory's crazed babbling, the dungeon was silent. Didn't Declyn say there were people inside?

Talia moved from one cell to another to peer inside through heavy bars invaded by rust, and she saw traces that someone was there, but it was a long time ago.

Eventually, she found someone. It was a male. His clothes were in tatters, and his emaciated body was dirty, but he was alive.

'Lis?'

'He is a Guardian,' Liseli responded.

Talia held onto the door and was surprised to see it was not locked.

"They didn't bother locking it because no one could escape from here," Damon shared his thoughts.

"Hello?" Talia called while stepping inside.

The male lifted his head and blinked at her. "Who are you?"

"My name is Talia. What's your name?"

He licked his dried lips. "They call me Ed."

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Chapter 975: The dungeon (2) [Bonus chapter]

"Why are you here, Ed?" Talia asked while standing at the door of the cell.

His brows came together. "I forgot."

"Whatever he did, it was a grave offense considering that the Guardians locked up one of their own," Damon said. He was right behind Talia.

Ed nodded. "Gregory was not known for tolerance."

Talia relaxed at Ed's words. At least he was not friendly with Gregory, and that should be a good thing. But can she just release him? What if he is a mass murderer? The fact that Ed crossed Gregory, who was a bad guy, didn't mean that Ed was a good person.

Ed's leg was shackled to the wall, and she guessed it must be something special to prevent him from escaping.

"Did I hear that right? Astraea's daughter is here?" Ed asked. He couldn't see outside, but he heard everything.

"Did you know her?" Talia asked.

He smiled a little. "Who didn't know her?" He gestured to the right wall. "Even that poor bastard talks about her, and he is not one of us."

Talia turned to the right. It was the direction she didn't visit yet. "Are there more people here?"

"Who knows? It's been many years since we ran out of things to say. Other than Gregory, no one else visits us. I think they forgot we are here, yet the barriers are still keeping us trapped. Humans and other weak creatures died of hunger and old age. I don't even know if Val is alive."

Talia's eyes widened. "What did you say? The man there is called Val?"

She told herself not to get excited, but she couldn't help it.

Before Ed responded, Talia went to the right and anxiously observed the next cell. It was empty.

But there was one more door, and she moved there.

Talia's heart dropped to her stomach when she saw a skeleton on the floor. She pushed the door open and stepped inside.

"You don't know who that was," Damon said. Based on Talia's grief, he guessed that she was mourning her father. Again.

Damon cursed that Ed person for giving Talia hope only to be crushed like that.

"Who else could it be?" Talia asked. "We know Valerian was facing big opponents, and those could only be the Guardians. They captured him and held him here, and... he died." Talia went down to her knees, and she reluctantly touched the skeleton. She shook her head. Why did she think that something would happen? It was just a pile of bones.

"We should bury him," Talia said and raised her head to meet Damon's concerned gaze. "Valerian Moonrider should be buried in the Midnight Guardians pack."

"I'm not dead yet," a raspy voice grumbled in the cell.

Talia's eyes sprung open wide to form perfect circles, and she jumped on Damon, who was quick to catch her.

Talia clung to Damon like a koala while staring at the skeleton. Did it talk? That was NOT normal! Should they call an exorciser?

"Hello?" Talia called.

"I'm over here..."

Talia turned to see a shadow curled up in the corner. Even with her enhanced sight, the only thing she could see was an outline. Was that due to the restrictions the Guardians placed here? It didn't matter. The point was that there was another person in the cell, and Talia completely missed his presence. Or was that a ghost?

"You... you..." Talia stuttered as her heart started beating in her ears. "Who are you?"

"Those are not my bones."

'Lis?' Talia called.

Liseli realized what Talia wanted to know. She wanted to know if the shadow in the corner was her father, but Liseli didn't have a definite answer. 'I can tell you that's a werewolf. Considering that he is alive despite his poor state, he is an Alpha.'

"Are you Valerian Moonrider from the Midnight Guardians pack?" Damon asked, unable to wait anymore.

"And you are...?"

Damon wondered if the guy had just confirmed it. It seemed like it. "I guess... I'm your son-in-law."

The shadow groaned as the man tried to push himself up, and Talia rushed there to help him.

He paused to stare at Talia with his honeyed-colored eyes that were still full of life despite his haggard appearance.

"Natalia? Is that you?"

Talia's eyes filled with tears when she recognized the voice. It was a bit raspy, but she had heard it before, in the message recorded in the necklace.

She noticed that his leg was chained.

"Help him, Damon."

Damon got there and observed an iron fetter that circled a skinny ankle. It was just skin over bones. How was this man alive?

Damon dispersed any unnecessary thoughts, and he focused on Talia's whirlwind of emotions.

"Calm down, kitten. We will get him out of here."

Damon's fingers slipped inside the fetter, and he used his dark energy to corrode it before it snapped open like it was a children's toy.

...

On the third floor of the castle...

Axel and Evanora entered a room to find Yasmin breastfeeding Valeria while maintaining a small flame with her magic to heat them up. Edgar was sleeping soundly by her side.

The room was nicely furnished, but it had no heating, and it was cold. Yasmin used curtains to wrap herself and the kids to stay warm.

Serena, Feya, Sandy, Tyler, Grady, and Varya also entered the room.

They were all happy that Yasmin and the twins were safe.

After one minute of happiness, Evanora chid Yasmin in a hushed voice so she doesn't wake up Edgar, "Why did you allow yourself to be captured? Didn't I teach you to

escape? My daughter is not a victim of these scoundrels. You could at least notify someone you are here..."

Yasmin waited for Evanora to pause to catch her breath, so she could say, "I love you too, mom. Thank you for worrying about me. They knocked me out, and when I came to it, I was here with Ed and Val. I checked outside and saw that things were covered in snow. My magic was restricted, and I didn't see how I could escape with two babies." She squeezed Axel's hand. "Besides, I was confident that my mate would come for me, so I focused on taking care of our babies."

"You did good," Axel said while pressing his lips on her forehead.

"How did you find me?" Yasmin asked.

"Talia," Axel responded. "I called her when I realized you were missing, and then we found out that Damon was also gone. We were confident that the Guardians got both of you. She followed the mate bond to come here."

Yasmin listened as Axel told her who all came, witches and werewolves, that rogues were attacking, and it was a mess.

"We should leave," Yasmin said. It didn't feel right to sit in this room when so many others were fighting.

Serena and Feya took one baby each to carry, and the group moved down. They didn't meet any Guardians.

When they reached the main level, Evanora paused.

"Mom?" Yasmin called.

Evanora put her hand over her chest. What was this familiar feeling which tugged on her heartstrings?

Evanora sensed it since she came here via a teleportation spell, but she thought it was due to anxiousness, or maybe the energies were leading her to Yasmin and her grandbabies, but now she realized this was different.

"I need to check something..." Evanora said, and she moved down the hallway with urgency.

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Chapter 976: The dungeon (3)

Talia imagined many times how it would be if she met her parents. The scene would be full of laughter and hugs, and this was different. Very different.

Valerian was her father, but technically, he was a stranger. Would he accept her hug? Would he hug her back?

Even if that worked out, he was so fragile-looking that she feared the slightest touch might crush him. That was far from the image of a powerful Alpha.

'Lis? What's wrong with him?' Talia asked.

'I don't sense any diseases. He is malnourished, and his muscles are atrophied severely. His wolf is weak also.'

Talia's heart cracked. 'Will he be alright?' It would be cruel to finally meet her father only for him to die or to be a cripple. Or maybe she should be grateful for this reunion and not nitpick.

'I'm not a doctor, but I believe he will recover with proper care,' Liseli responded. 'The fact that his wolf is not gone completely should be a good sign, but we shouldn't delay the treatment.'

This made Talia a bit happier, but her heart was still tight at the sight of Valerian's sunken cheeks.

"How are you feeling?" Talia asked Valerian. "Are you in pain?"

He smiled a little. "You look just like your mother."

Talia blinked. "Really?"

"Even your expressions are the same." He looked at the door of his cell apprehensively. "How did you get here?"

Damon cleared his throat. "We should leave. You can catch up later."

"A bath and food and I will be in heaven," Valerian said.

"And some fresh air, too," Damon grumbled. Talia was pregnant, and Damon didn't want her inhaling the foul stench from the dungeon.

Valerian tried getting up, but he was too weak, so Damon scooped him into his arms.

Valerian lowered his head in embarrassment. He was a prideful Alpha, yet this youngster was carrying him like he was a child.

Damon was awkward about the whole situation as well, but there was no other way to take Valerian out, and Damon had no intention of letting Talia carry him.

They paused at the sight of Evanora moving toward them as possessed.

She stopped in front of a cell and stared inside.

Talia covered her mouth with her fingers at the sight of Evanora's dazed expression. Why did this look like when mates recognized each other?

"Edgar?" Evanora called in a shaky voice, unsure if she imagined it. His body was drained like he had suffered for a long time, but that was definitely the man who disappeared from her life a few centuries ago.

Evanora didn't know that Edgar was a Guardian. She knew that he had a special constitution and that he was not a werewolf. Actually, even if he told her he was a Guardian, it wouldn't mean anything at that time. Evanora heard about the Guardians only after Yasmin and Axel met.

He looked up, and his eyes widened. "Eva? How did you...? What...?" He couldn't finish any of his questions. He released a long breath and smiled a little. "It's good to see you, Eva." He wondered if he had finally lost his mind, but even if this was an illusion, it was a good one.

Evanora's vision blurred with tears as she walked into the cell. That was it, the pull of the bond that soulmates are sharing. She didn't imagine it. The purity of the bond, combined with the strength of his emotions, told her that Edgar didn't betray it.

"I thought you abandoned me," Evanora said.

"I would never abandon you, Eva."

She looked at his emaciated appearance and swallowed the pinch at the back of her throat. "What did they do to you?"

He stared at her blankly. He couldn't remember how he got in there. The only thing on replay was Gregory shouting at him and the beatings.

"Don't force it," Evanora said as she squatted next to him. "Let me help."

She chanted in low murmurs, and the air around Edgar twirled with the freshness of a morning dew he had forgotten a long time ago. He took a deep breath of air filled with energies that had a rejuvenating effect.

Edgar's eyes flashed as his memories resurfaced. "I'm so sorry, Eva. I knew it was a matter of time before they reached your Coven. I destroyed the portal with the intention of returning when it was safe. I didn't think they would go this far. I underestimated Gregory's anger. Did you miss me? I missed you like crazy. Thinking about our moments together helped me stay sane through this hell, and here you are..."

Damon and Talia stared at the scene.

'Can you free him?' Talia asked, and Damon knew what she meant.

He moved closer to Edgar and pointed at the shackles that creaked under Damon's darkness, and the iron crumbled like someone blew at the ashes.

"I suggest you continue catching up upstairs," Damon said.

Gregory watched from his cell Damon carrying Valerian and Talia walking behind them, and then he saw Edgar leaning on Evanora.

Edgar was in much better shape than Valerian, thanks to his physique as a Guardian.

"Ed!" Gregory called. "Let me out."

Edgar stopped to look at Gregory. The blood was drying on his face, his eyes were swollen, and his nose was twisted at an awkward angle, but that was Gregory.

Somehow, seeing Gregory's wretched state made Edgar feel a bit better. "To think that mighty Gregory will end up here. I will let you out once you endure the hell you put me through."

Evanora snorted. "There is no chance of that happening. He is just a human now. I give him no more than a year, assuming we feed him."

"An appropriate punishment," Edgar said. "You always knew how to deal with people."

Gregory didn't miss that Evanora and Edgar were too familiar with each other.

"Who is she to you?" Gregory asked.

Evanora sneered. "Wouldn't you want to know?"

Edgar wanted to rub it in. "Eva is the reason why I collapsed the portals. I didn't want you to get your hands on her. She is mine and mine only."

Gregory's eyes flashed in understanding. "I would never take your soulmate."

"But you would go for her sisters, and that would make Eva hate me." Edgar looked at Evanora, and his expression softened. "I could endure centuries separated from Eva, but I couldn't last a day if she hated me."

Evanora was not in the mood to flirt. Gregory made her skin crawl, and she wanted to leave. "Why are you talking to this vile man? He kidnapped our daughter and grandkids."

Edgar's eyes widened as the whole world spun rapidly. "Daughter? Grandkids?"

Evanora smiled. "They are upstairs. Come, let me introduce you. Yasmin always wanted to know more about you..."

Gregory laughed manically. "You have a daughter, and she has kids? If I knew they were yours, I would take better care of them. Our kind is not doomed for failure!"

Evanora flicked her finger, and a wisp of white light shot straight into Gregory's mouth.

Gregory's mouth was still opening, but he couldn't form a sound. He was mute!

Evanora looked at Edgar. "That's better. Now, let's go while I can still control my temper."

"Yes, my dear. We have a lot of catching up to do," Edgar said and pulled her closer to him.

He chuckled when he saw her blushing.

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Chapter 977: Family reunion

Talia walked by Damon's side as he carried Valerian toward the receiving room on the first floor of the castle from where the noise was coming.

"Alpha!" Grady and Varya called in unison, and Valerian didn't miss that they were addressing Talia.

"We checked the perimeter and secured the castle," Grady said. "People are wondering if someone should stay here or if we can return to help our allies repel rogue attacks."

Talia was glad to see Grady and Varya. Since joining the Midnight Guardians pack, the mated couple was not idle.

Grady already had the skills of a top-tier scout, and he quickly climbed to the rank of a Lieutenant in the Midnight Guardians pack. Varya was also a capable warrior, and people wondered how she could go toe-to-toe with other warriors when she didn't have abilities. After witnessing the spectacle the Wilkow sisters caused with their song, Talia confirmed that Varya was not a regular she-wolf.

"Thank you, Grady," Talia responded officially. "We should get reports from our allies to understand the situation before heading back."

Sandy was next to approach Talia. "Alpha, our pack is secure, and no disturbances are reported. Caden and Maya are on call with James and several other Alphas, and we will get their status within a few minutes. As for the situation here, Tyler is operating drones to scout the surroundings."

"Thank you, Sandy."

Sandy grinned and bowed.

"Luna!" Keith and Arya called in unison when they spotted Talia, and they came to her while fussing about how she had ditched them again.

"You are an Alpha and a Luna?" Valerian asked Talia.

Talia paused, realizing that they didn't do proper introductions.

"I am Alpha of the Midnight Guardians pack, and this is my mate, Damon Blake. He is the Alpha of the Dark Howlers pack, and I am his Luna."

Valerian looked up at Damon, and he saw Talia's mark on his neck. A moment later, Valerian quickly lowered his head as he realized he was carried like a child, but there was nothing he could do about it.

"If you don't mind, we can greet each other properly later," Valerian mumbled.

They stepped into the receiving room, where they found Yasmin, Axel, and their babies close to the fireplace where the fire was dancing.

Also in the room were Serena, Freya, Maya, Caden, Cristian, Mindy, Gideon, Maddox, Tatiana, Tony, Kalina, Jordan, Lidia, Pierce, Daria, and many other familiar faces. The room was huge, but with so many people, it was cramped. A small group formed a circle around Tyler who was demonstrating how to use drones.

When they noticed Damon and Talia at the door, the clamor quieted down.

"Lia!" Yasmin shouted. "Thank you for coming to my rescue." Her eyes moved to the man Damon was holding as she silently asked who he was.

Talia smiled a little. "This is my father, Valerian Moonrider."

Valerian looked at Talia helplessly. If he knew that there would be so many people to see him in this state, he would ask them to leave him in the dungeon. He was weak and dirty, and carried around. How embarrassing!

"Can you keep me down?" Valerian asked Damon.

Damon's eyes moved to the nearby sofa, and Jordan, Lidia, Pierce, and Daria quickly stood up to make space.

Damon put Valerian on the sofa to sit, and Axel approached them with an unreadable expression. "Uncle Valerian?"

Valerian looked at Axel. "I'm sorry. You are...?"

"Axel Moonrider. My parents are Sophia and Isaac," Axel introduced himself.

"I see," Valerian responded. His memories took him many years back, and he forgot about his embarrassing appearance. "How are they doing? Do you have more siblings? Sophia always wanted a big family. Is she helping Natalia...?" His voice trailed when he realized that Axel's expression was not good.

"Let's talk about that later," Talia said. "We should get you some food first."

"There is no food here," Mindy grumbled. "We checked everywhere. The Guardians seem to be running on air." She was pregnant and hormonal, and she wanted a snack, but there was nothing edible there!

"We don't need food to sustain ourselves," a voice came from the side. It was Declyn. He was standing there quietly, and people didn't notice him. "The Guardians eat only for the pleasure of stimulating taste buds."

"We can always hunt," Maddox said.

"There are no animals for miles," Gideon chimed in. "Something here disturbs the balance of nature. We will need to investigate what the Guardians did, so we can pick the best course of action to revert things to how they should be."

"Well said," Evanora said from the door. She noticed the same thing. Also, her magic was not as potent as it should be.

"Mom!" Yasmin exclaimed, and she froze at the sight of a man leaning on Evanora. His hand was around Evanora's shoulders, but the way he held her was intimate. Evanora was many things, but she was not touchy-feely with people.

"Yasmin," Evanora said. "This is Edgar, your father. You had so many questions about him. I guess he can answer them now."

Yasmin's jaw fell wide open.

"Father-in-law!" Axel exclaimed in surprise; his high-pitched voice was not manly at all.

Talia looked at Valerian and then spoke to Damon. "I know that we should check on other packs and handle the situation here, but my father needs food and to see a doctor."

Damon agreed. "We should take him to the Dark Howlers pack as soon as possible."

"I can set up a teleportation diagram in half an hour," Amelia volunteered.

Talia smiled. "Thank you, but... no need."

Damon understood what Talia wanted to do. "Let's step out."

"You are leaving?" Maddox asked.

Damon exhaled in frustration. Why was Maddox acting like an abandoned girlfriend?

But Damon knew that they couldn't leave things like this. Everyone was looking at Alpha Damon and Alpha Natalia for guidance.

"Amelia," Damon called. "Organize witches to teleport people to their respective packs. Even if they don't go now, we will need the ability to move around quickly."

Amelia nodded in agreement, and Damon called, "Pierce!"

"Yes?"

"You and Daria stay here and ensure things are stable. We don't want any other surprises from the Guardians."

"Varya and Grady can stay also," Talia said. "If a few people from every pack can stay behind, that would be the best."

Cristian, Maddox, and Tony quickly picked a few warriors that came with them.

Damon approved. "We will send you food. Let us know if any other supplies are needed short term. By the end of the day, James will come up with an optimal solution."

"Will the Guardians be involved?" Declyn asked.

Talia confirmed. "As long as you are reasonable. You told me that only Gregory stayed here. Since Gregory is out, it would be a pity to leave this castle unused. I'm sure we can come to an agreement where we can coexist."

Declyn didn't object.

They quickly got organized, and then Damon brought up one point. "We will need someone to be in charge." He didn't trust Declyn and the other Guardians. Everyone who stayed behind was capable, but they couldn't resist the Guardians if they decided to take over.

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Chapter 978: Alpha and Luna are back

"I will do it," Evanora volunteered.

"Are you sure?" Talia asked.

Evanora looked at Edgar. "I reunited with my soulmate after a long time. This is Edgar's home, and we will watch over this place while catching up on what we missed. That one..." Evanora pointed at Declyn. "Can either help us or bugger off. That will apply to all Guardians."

"This is far from home," Feya said in a small voice, and Serena nodded in agreement to Feya's words.

"It won't be for long," Evanora responded. "How much I've heard, Amelia and Cornelia are close to opening a portal. We can open one here that connects to our Coven."

Serena and Feya relaxed at Evanora's words, and she continued, "We can treat this as our second home. The castle is big enough to accommodate many sisters, the place is isolated, and we will need many hands to help with restoring the natural balance in this area. I believe that Alphas present will appreciate our assistance in watching over this area."

Damon didn't trust the old witch. He was aware that Evanora was trying to hook up Talia into a mate-for-mate deal when he was under the influence of dark magic, and he didn't like it.

Seeing that Damon hesitated to approve of Evanora's idea, Gideon spoke, "If witches are here, they will speed up the healing of nature, and we can engage in a collaboration that will be beneficial for everyone." And he could also work closely with them and learn things. It was Shaman's dream come true.

Damon turned to Talia. "What do you think?"

"I will support witches of the Silver Flame Coven staying here, but let's not make it permanent," Talia said and turned to Evanora. "Treat this as a probation period. You will be required to maintain a low profile and not expose your existence to humans. We expect regular communication and insight into what you are doing. We won't impose our rules on you, but we want you to maintain an open-door policy. As long as you agree with these terms and abide by them, we won't ask you to leave."

Evanora agreed to this with, "We will need assistance from you to make this livable. Can we meet in three days?" She looked at Cristian, Maddox, and Tony in particular. "It would be good if other Alphas joined so we can discuss pressing matters. I'm sure my Coven can offer something in exchange for provisions and support. We are not warriors, and if you can assure our safety and prevent intruders, we can focus on doing our part."

Talia didn't see problems with this. She turned to Tyler. "I will leave it to you to connect this place with other packs. We want phone and video calls without interruptions..."

Axel and Yasmin agreed to stick around with Evanora so they could talk more with Edgar and introduce the babies.

Damon and Talia assured everyone was on the same page, and Valerian watched the couple with a small smile. He didn't miss that several people in the room were Alphas, yet they all spoke to Damon and Talia with respect.

After they were done talking, Damon picked up Valerian with "pardon my intrusion," and he followed Talia outside the castle.

The morning sun was up, and the forest around them was eerily quiet.

"Where are you going?" Keith asked as he and Arya ran toward the three people.

"To the Dark Howlers pack," Talia responded. "As soon as Amelia finishes the teleportation diagram, you can join us. We will go to the pack hospital first."

"How are you going?" Keith asked.

"Do you need to ask after witnessing how we dealt with the Guardians?" Talia responded with a smile.

Keith and Arya had matching frowns on their faces. They didn't like that Talia could just leave whenever she wanted and leave them behind.

"Watch over our Luna," Keith said to Damon.

Damon made a face, and if not for Keith's concern for Talia, Damon would punish him for disrespect. "She is my mate. Of course, I will watch over her."

Once they were in a clearing, Damon stopped and turned to Talia. "You can do this. Use my energy."

Damon's hands were under Valerian, and Talia put her hands over Damon's reluctantly. She was not sure if this would work.

Resonating with Damon included a deep mental connection, and she wondered if she would be able to do it with Valerian between them.

Talia realized her worries were for nothing from the moment her eyes locked with Damon's, and the world faded.

Valerian looked at Damon, whose eyes turned black, and then at Talia whose eyes turned silver. His expression stiffened when Talia's hair turned silver. She was the spitting image of her mother.

The winds picked up around Damon and Talia (and Valerian) in the center, and Talia focused mightily on the pack hospital of the Dark Howlers pack.

The sounds changed as if they passed through a mile-long tunnel within a millisecond, and the winds stopped abruptly to reveal a completely new scenery.

For the outsiders in the vicinity of the pack hospital of the Dark Howlers pack, they witnessed an unexpected gust of wind that looked like a precisely concentrated electric storm, and then three figures appeared. It happened so fast that many wondered if they imagined it as they went about their usual business.

"Are you alright?" Talia asked Damon. She was worried that she had overused his energy. Damon felt like a bottomless pit of darkness, but there had to be a limit somewhere.

"I'm fine," he assured her. "How about you?"

She smiled in response and then turned to the pack hospital that was buzzing with activity. People were rushing in, and the scent of blood permeated the air.

This reminded Damon and Talia that their pack was under attack from rogues.

'George, James!' Damon called through the mind-link while walking into the pack hospital. 'Talia and I are back. I need a status report!'

The waiting room was full of injured, and nurses were moving among them.

"Alpha! Luna!" One nurse cried when she recognized them.

Talia waved at the nurse to come over, as Damon was non-responsive with his eyes out of focus.

"What's the situation?" Talia asked.

"We are triaging patients and taking care of smaller injuries here. The ones who are more serious are sent upstairs for Doctor Travis to treat." She looked at Valerian. "We should get a wheelchair for him. Give me just a minute."

"Don't worry about me," Valerian said to Talia. "I've been like this for a long time, and a few hours or days won't make a difference."

Talia pressed her lips into a line. She didn't want her father to suffer a minute longer than necessary, but it was not right to leave all these injured people to wait.

She got an idea. "Damon, can you help me one more time?"

Damon blinked. "Sure. Tell me what to do."

Talia was touched that he agreed right away. His unconditional acceptance and trust warmed her heart.

The nurse got a wheelchair, and Damon put Valerian in it. Talia asked the nurse to wait for a moment, and then she held Damon's hand.

The clamor in the waiting room stopped when they saw Damon and Talia lighting up to form a two-colored sphere that pulsed as the silvery light overtook the darkness. The sphere then expanded rapidly to burst and form little specks of silver like someone threw glitter everywhere.

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Chapter 979: The hard truth (1)

"Ah!" A nurse cried when she noticed that the injury she was bandaging was healing at a speed visible to the naked eye from the moment magical glitter touched the warrior's flesh.

"Oh... Ah... Eh..." Sounded everywhere from nurses and patients. The wounds were closing, the bruises faded, the pain was diminishing, and everyone felt more energetic.

Talia's light dimmed rapidly, and her hair changed into copper-colored in one swift wave. She slumped on Damon, who was quick to catch her.

"Don't overwork yourself, kitten," Damon said with concern in his voice.

Talia smiled. "I don't feel bad doing this for our people. I will be fine after a bit of rest."

Damon shook his head in disapproval, but he couldn't scold her more. She was a wonderful Luna, doing what she thought was best for their people.

The only thing Damon could do was to support Talia and treat her well. Damon reached to carry her princess style.

Travis rushed toward them as soon as he heard Damon's summon through the mind link.

Seeing that Damon was carrying Talia, Travis went to check on her, but Talia raised her hand to stop him.

"Don't worry about me. I was hoping you could take a look at my father."

Travis' eyes widened. Talia's father? It took him a few long seconds to recover and wave at the nurse to take Valerian upstairs.

Valerian lowered his head in shame. There were injured warriors everywhere, and he was being treated as a priority. He wanted to protest, but he knew it would be in vain, and he decided to keep quiet.

Valerian was wheeled into a private room, and two nurses started working on him. They took basic vitals, blood samples, and gave him fluids via IV.

During this time, Damon was mind-linking with pack members to understand the situation and issue orders. Talia was on the phone with Kai and Meg to touch base on happenings in the Midnight Guardians pack.

"Shouldn't they help the wounded ones?" Valerian asked Travis while gesturing toward nurses.

Travis shook his head. "Thanks to our Luna, our workload is cut in half. I am the main doctor, but I am not the only one." Travis' brows came together as the first blood test results arrived on his tablet. "Can you tell me how you ended up in this state?"

"I was imprisoned for a long time."

"About two decades," Talia said from the side. She was on the phone with Kai and Meg, mind-linking Trisha and Rose to prepare a room for Valerian in the packhouse, but she was also paying attention to what was going on around her.

"I need to go," Damon said, and Talia quickly ended her phone call.

"Where?" She asked.

"George is swamped on our Eastern border, and we need reinforcements on the South."

Their opponents were not strong, but they were many, and they used guerrilla attacks of starting skirmishes and retreating quickly, which caused warriors of the Dark Howlers pack to thin out their defenses. Also, it's been ongoing for hours now, and allied forces were getting fatigued even with the witches' help.

Talia didn't want to leave her father, but the idea of Damon fighting on his own was unacceptable. "I'm coming with you."

"No," Damon responded with finality. "Stay here and take care of your father." Seeing that Talia was about to protest, Damon cupped her cheeks and kissed her on the lips. "I want Travis to check your condition also. After that teleporting and healing you did, you are weakened, and I don't want to risk anything happening to our pup. You did a lot already. Rest, kitten, and let your man take care of the trash. I will be back before you know it."

Talia's chin shook. "What will I do if you disappear again?"

"I promise not to leave the territory of the Dark Howlers pack. I am only going to ease the load of our warriors. However, if I disappear, I know you will find me," Damon said with a smile and kissed the tip of her nose.

Talia stared at Damon, and only when he looked down did she realize that she was fisting his shirt.

She released a long breath while loosening her hold on him. "Take care and come back soon."

Damon hummed in agreement. "Travis! I will leave Talia in your care."

"Yes, Alpha!" Travis responded right away.

Talia pressed her lips into a line while the door closed after Damon. 'Keep the mind link open!' Talia told Damon.

'Yes, my Luna,' he responded obediently. 'You do the same. Let me know what Travis says. Try to rest until I return.'

Talia turned to Travis. "What can you tell me about his condition?"

"Nothing is conclusive," Travis said cautiously. "The patient is underweight and dehydrated. Beyond that, I will need to do more tests. We will take him to do a full CT scan and start from there."

"But you can heal him, right, just how you did me."

Travis gave her an encouraging nod and responded politically, "I will know more in about one hour once all results are in. I heard from Alpha you are exhausted. Do you feel any discomfort?"

"No. I just need rest."

Travis gestured toward the sofa. "Then, please rest while we are in radiology. It shouldn't be more than ten minutes. Make sure you drink plenty of water, and I will get a nurse to bring you some food and vitamins..."

...

In radiology...

"Doctor?" Valerian called to get Travis' attention.

"Yes?"

"What did Natalia mean when she said you can heal me just like you healed her?"

Travis was not sure if it was his to say, but he had already heard that the man in front of him was Valerian Moonrider, Talia's father, and he thought that as long as he didn't disclose confidential information, it would be fine.

Travis was one of the few people who knew the full story about Talia because he worked with Damon on getting her better.

Travis dismissed two nurses, and when it was just him and Valerian in the room, he said, "Alpha Damon found Luna Talia in the Red Moon pack. When she came here, she was severely malnourished, bruised all over, she had some old fractures and scars, and her wolf was barely holding on."

Valerian looked at Travis with confusion obvious on his face. "How could the Red Moon pack do such a thing to the Alpha of the Midnight Guardians pack? Was there no retaliation?"

"Uhm... at that time, Luna Talia looked more like a wolfless she-wolf than an Alpha. No one knew that she was from the Midnight Guardians pack. Alpha Damon worked on tracing her history to find out from where she came, but the Red Moon pack didn't have

documents related to her. I'm not sure how they connected that she belongs to the Moonrider family, but I guess it has something to do with her cousin, Axel."

"Are you saying Natalia didn't know about her origins?"

Travis shook his head. "She was in the Red Moon pack since she was a toddler."

Valerian wanted to ask more, but Travis interrupted him with, "Please. I fear that I have already said more than I should. To be honest, I don't know more than that."

Valerian nodded in understanding. "I will talk to Natalia."

"About that... she was physically and mentally abused for many years. You are her father, and I'm not saying you shouldn't talk about it, but maybe allow her to bring it up first."

Valerian's head was spinning. She was abused? How was that possible?

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Chapter 980: The hard truth (2)

When Damon returned to the pack hospital, he found Keith and Arya standing guard in front of Valerian's room.

It was late afternoon, and Damon wanted to come earlier, but he needed to deal with rogues. Rogues didn't expect that Damon could attack from a distance, so they were sitting ducks while Damon practiced controlling his darkness.

After handling those pests, Damon assured that things were stable before he left matters to Maya, Caden, George, and James, who worked closely with Erik, Petra, and Zack. Mindy, Gideon, Owen, Zina, and Dawn were not idle, as they each had their tasks.

Damon quickly showered to wash away dirt and blood, got clean clothes, and rushed to the pack hospital. He knew that Talia was still there.

"You are dismissed," Damon said to Keith and Arya. "Report to duty tomorrow morning at nine o'clock."

Keith and Arya didn't object. They knew that Damon wouldn't leave Talia's side, and the couple was looking forward to relaxing, just the two of them.

Damon entered the room to find Valerian on the hospital bed.

He was wearing a hospital gown, and the nurses gave him a good sponge bath, so the stale odor he had carried previously was gone. His copper-colored hair was neatly combed back, and the messy, overgrown beard was gone to reveal a sharp jaw.

A side table on Valerian's left had two bowls smudged with creamy chicken soup from the packhouse and several empty containers of jello and pudding that the hospital provided. Valerian was still hungry, but Travis told him to take it easy. Valerian was getting the necessary nutrients through the IV drip.

Talia was on the sofa, covered with a dark blue blanket, sleeping like a log. She didn't admit how tired she was, but she was asleep by the time Valerian returned from radiology. A nurse covered her up, and Talia didn't move a muscle since then.

Damon and Valerian exchanged nods, and Damon stalked to the sofa. Carefully, very carefully, he lifted Talia's upper half and sat so she could lean on him.

Talia stirred to make herself more comfortable, and she scooted higher to sit on his lap.

Damon smiled when he felt her fisting his shirt and nuzzling his neck while inhaling his scent. Even in her sleep, she recognized him, and then she released a long sigh before relaxing against him completely.

Damon adjusted the blanket around Talia and cradled her in his arms. It was good to feel her against him. He was home.

'Your name is Damon Blake. Jacob's son, right?' A strange voice sounded in Damon's head, and he lifted his gaze to see Valerian looking at him.

'I know you can hear me.'

"How?" Damon asked.

'I can communicate mentally without the pack link,' Valerian said. 'You can talk to me in the same way as long as I keep the connection open.'

'I see,' Damon responded. 'I assume there is a reason why you disclosed this to me.'

Valerian nodded faintly. 'Natalia. I want to know about her.'

'What do you want to know?'

'Everything. Is it true that she grew up in the Red Moon pack?'

Damon didn't want to lie. 'Yes.'

'Do you know why?'

'Yes, but...' Damon hesitated.

'But?'

Damon was not sure if Talia would hate him if he told Valerian about her past. Knowing her, she wouldn't want to burden her father. 'That's a matter of the Moonrider family. I suggest you talk to Axel.'

'As Natalia's mate, you are family, and I'm talking to you. Speak.'

Damon liked that he was called family, and he had a feeling that it would be a bad move to refuse. 'One condition,' Damon said. 'You will keep it to yourself until Talia or Axel tell you about it.'

'I can't make those promises.'

'I am asking this for Talia. It is not a secret what happened, but it left deep scars on her. Talia suffered for a long time and is still struggling with acceptance.'

'I understand.'

Damon took that as Valerian's agreement, and he started talking.

'It all started with a prophecy...' Damon told Valerian about Cassandra's prophecy and that Sophia and Isaac gave Talia away, and she ended up in the hands of Alpha Howard. He didn't know much about her time in the Red Moon pack, but he said whatever he knew. Next, Damon told him how Sophia and Isaac were Alphas of the Midnight Guardians pack, and the plan was for Axel to be the next Alpha until Talia appeared. Sophia and Isaac used dark magic on Damon, and Talia took Alpha's position from them forcibly. Axel didn't object to Talia taking what was rightfully hers, but Sophia and Isaac were not happy about it.

Valerian listened to everything with an unreadable expression, and he didn't say a word when Damon finished.

Valerian just laid on the bed and closed his eyes. The silence was heavy.

Damon understood that the guy was processing the information, and he didn't want to disturb him.

Damon decided to focus on the little woman who was sleeping peacefully in his arms.

He scooted lower on the sofa and pressed his lips at the top of Talia's head. She was in his arms, safe with their pup in her belly. Talia's breath slipping into his shirt to fan his chest was soothing, and his eyelids became heavy as the fatigue took over.

Valerian couldn't sleep as the gravity of Talia's childhood pressed on him.

It's not that he didn't believe Damon, but he couldn't believe that Sophia and Isaac would do that. Didn't he ask them to watch over his daughter? How was that watching over her? Talia was the rightful heir of the Midnight Guardians pack, and instead of raising her as the next Alpha, they sent her away and didn't check on her for two decades!

Talia was precious, not only as the female Alpha from the Midnight Guardians pack, but because she was Astraea's daughter. Talia was the only thing left from his mate in this world of mortals, and Sophia and Isaac nearly took it away!

...

Talia took a deep breath of her favorite scent.

The warmth of Damon's body made her lips lift into a smile, and the rhythmical rise and fall of his chest told her he was sleeping.

Her eyes fluttered open to see that it was dark outside.

The low beeping of the heart rate monitor reminded her where she was, and she turned to see Valerian lying on the bed.

"How are you doing?" She asked.

"Better."

"Do you need something? I can call the doctor or nurses."

Valerian refused. "No need." His eyes darted toward Damon. "Your mate treats you well."

Talia smiled dreamily. "He does."

"I am glad. Can I ask you something?"

Talia's ears perked up. It sounded important. "Sure."

"Can I stay here until I recover?"

Talia blinked. "Of course! You can stay here as long as you want."

"Another thing," he said. "Can you keep my existence a secret for now?"

"It might be late for that." So many people had seen him already, and they knew he was Talia's father.

"I understand, but... can you try to keep this as low-key as possible?" Seeing Talia's confused expression, he explained. "I was gone for a long time, and many think I'm dead. If our people hear I'm back, some will want to visit. I don't want others to see me in this sorry state."

Talia couldn't make any promises, but she couldn't refuse this request either. "I will tell Axel."

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