

Alphas Bride 101

Chapter 101 - The Summer Solstice Festival (8)

Talia moved to the center of the playing field gingerly while trying to ignore the fact that there are hundreds (or maybe thousands!) of people staring at her.

Her heart was pounding so hard that she pressed her lips into a line firmly, out of fear that her heart might escape through that cavity if she speaks.

"We don't have much time between kicks, so we need you nearby.", Keith explained when Talia reached them. "The referee said that it's fine."

Talia jolted when Pierce held her hand and she couldn't believe that he was getting on his knees.

Pierce was the first in the queue to kick the ball from the penalty mark.

"Do we need to do this here?", Talia asked Keith in an urgent whisper.

"You will be fine.. I'm counting on you.", Keith said while patting her shoulder and then he jogged out of the field.

Talia looked at Keith's retreating back and she felt like crying.

On the bench was one thing, but this was in the middle of the field, and all non-participating players left, leaving Talia with five other guys. Actually, ten guys, because five players from the Midnight Guardians team were standing nearby, observing her with curiosity.

Talia glanced to the side and saw numerous eyes watching the scene of Talia standing and Pierce kneeling in front of Talia and kissing the back of her furry palm. It looked like he was proposing marriage.

So much for keeping a low profile. Talia was not sure about Pierce's relationship status, but based on his looks, Talia was sure that at least a few girls are interested in him, and she was even more sure that those girls hate her.

Talia decided that if there is next time, she will demand a mask to fully cover her face because this was beyond embarrassing.

Pierce leaned his forehead on Talia's hand, and said, "I will dedicate this goal to Talia, our team spirit."

He looked up at Talia and grinned. "Wish me luck."

"Good luck.", Talia squeaked.

Pierce kissed her hand again and stood up, and just as he stepped on the side, Mark was kneeling in front of Talia and holding her hand. He was the second to kick from the penalty mark.

Talia exhaled helplessly and looked to the side where Liam was sitting on the bench. If she knew that allowing Liam to warm her hands that morning would lead to all this crazy ritual, she would stop it before it happened.

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Up in the VIP booth...

Everyone was on their feet (just like the rest of the audience) and observing the preparations for penalty kicks in silence.

Other than a few indistinct whispers that were hushed in the bleachers, no one was talking.

Damon was torn between his reasoning and emotions that raged within him as he watched Talia standing in the middle of the field and holding hands with some random guys (how he saw it).

'Doesn't she look like a Luna?', Caden's voice sounded in Damon's head.

Damon didn't get it. 'What?'

'Maya found out that they believe how holding Talia's hand and kissing it is good luck. Every player dedicates his goals to Talia. She is motivating them to do better. Isn't that what Luna does for her pack? Those are some of our best warriors, and they are kneeling in front of her willingly, no one is forcing them. Can you believe that they met only a few hours ago? That should tell you that Talia's strength goes beyond physical. People want to be with her and to please her.'

Damon had to agree that Caden was right, but Damon wanted to do the pleasing, damn it!

Damon knew that he should be happy for Talia, however... 'I have maddening desire to go down there and chase away all those guys.'

'That's the bond.', Caden responded. 'The more time you spend together, the stronger the pull will be.'

'But she doesn't feel it.', Damon said dejectedly.

'I don't think that's true.'

Damon whipped his head to look at Caden. 'What?'

'Talia is not a lusty power-hungry she-wolf who is interested in your looks or in your status. Considering your nasty personality, she should run for the hills, yet she is still around. Think about, why is that?'

Damon frowned when Caden said how he has a nasty personality, but he was focusing on something else, 'Are you saying that she can feel the bond?'

'Probably not like you, but to some extent, yes. Whenever we asked her to decide on something, her sight gravitated toward you. She wants your approval. When the two of you are together, she looks happy, and that, my friend, is the effect of the mate bond.'

Talia is happy when she is with Damon. Damon repeated those words in his mind a few times because he liked the sound of them.

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The penalty kicks ended with 4:5 for the home team, and the audience erupted in cheers and shouts, notifying the rest of the Darkbourne that it's time to celebrate the win of the Dark Howlers team.

Everyone dashed to change and quickly freshen up and then the players lined up to get their awards that were set for the top three ranked teams.

The winner was the Dark Howlers team, the second placed was the Midnight Guardians team, and the third placed was the team from the Blue River pack.

The starting crew of eleven players from each of the top three teams was in the middle of the field, accompanied by their coaches, and they were surrounded by other teams.

Damon walked to the field with Alpha Maddox and Axel.

Four ladies in tight-fitting outfits followed the handsome trio, three ladies were carrying trays with shiny pins that will be given to the players, and the fourth one held onto a trophy for the winner.

The trophy looked like a massive golden cup with two handles, one on each side.

Talia stood with Lulu on the side and clapped as Damon put pins on the jerseys of the Dark Howlers team.

Talia told herself not to think about Damon, but he was right there, standing tall and handsome, and she couldn't stop staring at his back.

Alpha Maddox and Axel were putting pins on teams that were representing their packs.

It was all very official, and no one spoke until Alphas finished putting all the pins.

Then, Damon shook hands with Keith and gave him the big trophy. With the audience cheering, Keith passed down the trophy to other players until it reached Mark who had a role of a team captain.

The photographer took photos of teams with their awards and Damon took the microphone for a closing speech.

"Alpha, will you allow me to say a word?", Keith asked Damon and Damon handed him the microphone.

Keith stood in front of his starting eleven players and spoke to the audience. "We are honored to receive these awards, and we hope that you will share with us the joy and pride of winning the tournament. As it's our custom, I will call out our MVP of the game, the person who contributed the most to our win today."

Keith paused and walked toward the field line. The crowd parted, opening a path that led straight to Talia.

Keith reached for the pin that was on his jersey and removed it while speaking into the microphone, "Talia, we wouldn't win today if not for you. You went above and beyond for the team, and you showed us what it truly means to be selfless. I hope you will accept this as a sign of me acknowledging your contributions."

Talia stood frozen while Keith put the pin on her jersey.

She was not sure what to say. Should she even say anything?

And then Liam approached Talia. "I agree. Without you, I would be sent to the hospital during the first game." And he put his pin on her jersey.

Talia looked at two shiny pins and when she looked up, there was Pierce, grinning at her and removing his pin.

And just like that, all players of the Dark Howlers team approached Talia and after a minute, she had twelve pins on her jersey.

Mark was standing in front of Talia last, handing her the trophy.

"You guys...", Talia said in a small voice. "You shouldn't do this. You worked hard for this win."

Keith patted her shoulder. "As I said, you are selfless. You didn't realize how much you did for the morale of our team. These pins are yours; you deserve them. I hope you will continue to be our team spirit. And this is yours also..." Keith waved at Mark and Mark pushed the trophy in Talia's hands.

The audience exploded in cheers and claps, and Talia felt the heat creeping on her cheeks.

Talia held onto the shiny trophy and smiled as her heart swelled. No one ever acknowledged her like that openly. And this was in front of a lot of people.

Talia was not sure what she did, other than holding hands. It was not a lot, and she didn't understand why they would give her tokens of their win. But everyone was watching, and Talia decided to ask Keith for clarification later. She can also give him pins to distribute back to the players.

Damon watched this from the distance, and he smiled a little.

Talia getting those tokens means that they truly acknowledged her. He was proud of her.

They were all excitedly talking to Talia, and he could see under all that shyness that she was happy. Damon really wished to go there and give Talia a hug, to engulf her so that no one else can look at her because she is his, but he forced his legs to stay put.

If he does that, it would attract a lot of unwanted attention and it will spoil Talia's moment. This was her moment and he needed to stay away, no matter how hard it was.

She was there, in his line of sight, happy and safe, and that should be enough. It has to be.

Chapter 102 - The Summer Solstice Festival (9)

When Damon's tournament-closing speech was over, people started leaving the sports fields and making way toward the town square where the next festivities will be held. Some people went into stores and restaurants that were still open and accepting customers.

Talia was happy that she got a bag to keep her pins and the jersey. She also removed the fluffy gloves and the headband. Keith told her that those are hers to keep, and she can return them when she gives up on being the team spirit. Unfortunately, the trophy was too big to fit in the bag, but the insulated lunchbox that Stephanie prepared for Talia fit perfectly.

With all the drinks and snacks that were everywhere, Talia didn't touch the food from the lunchbox, but she was confident that it will not go to waste. She will have it later.

Talia was standing on the side with Lulu and Sandy. They were waiting for the guys to join them so that they can head for lunch together, as they previously agreed. Lulu was telling everyone how her father has a stand to sell the best ramen they ever tasted, and Talia was excited because it will be the first time for her to eat ramen.

They invited Travis also to join, but Travis said that he is exhausted and that he is going home to get some sleep.

As Talia, Lulu, and Sandy waited for the guys, many people stopped by and congratulated Lulu and Sandy on their win, and also Talia on being the MVP.

They were people Talia never met, and they were all excited and smiling and the mood was good, but Talia felt empty inside. She thought how it's funny that she always craved for people to accept her, yet now that it was happening, she was not really happy because something (or someone) was missing.

Her eyes would gravitate toward the parking lot where Damon was standing and talking to people she didn't recognize but she knew that those were guests who arrived at the packhouse that morning. Most of them were guys, but there were several females as well. Whenever one of those females spoke to Damon, Talia would divert her eyes to look elsewhere because she didn't want to risk seeing Damon getting close to another woman.

Just the fact that Damon and she were not together and that he didn't seem bothered by it was painful enough.

"Miss Talia...", a deep voice called from the side, and all three ladies turned to see Axel.

"I was wondering if you would join me for lunch today.", he said.

Talia nervously glanced at Sandy and Lulu. "I apologize, but I committed to lunch with them. We will have ramen noodles at one of the stalls on the town square."

"Can I join you?", Axel asked.

Talia glanced at Lulu who was nodding robotically.

"Sure. If you don't mind street food.", Talia said. She imagined that someone sophisticated like Axel would prefer fine dining with golden cutlery.



Axel beamed. "Excellent!"

Sandy and Lulu screamed internally like the biggest fangirls on earth. This was Axel, the future Alpha of the Midnight Guardians pack. Axel was a celebrity in the world of werewolves with a shroud of mystery that only made him more attractive. And he will have lunch with them!

"We are waiting for a few more people to join us...", Lulu said while extending her hand. "I am Lulu."

Axel shook her hand. "I don't mind waiting. I'm Axel."

Sandy was next to introduce herself.

Keith, Pierce, Liam, and Caleb were surprised to see Axel.

'He wants to have lunch with Talia, and doesn't mind extra company', Lulu spoke into the mind-link for the four newcomers who all got a renewed interest in Talia. What magic did she use to have Axel join them for lunch?

Individuals like future Alphas usually mingle with other Alphas and close family members, in their own exclusive social circle that is nearly impossible for normies to get in.

"Axel!", Maddox called when he saw that Axel has no intention to come to the parking lot. "Aren't you coming with us for lunch at the packhouse?"

"No.", Axel responded flatly. "Miss Talia was kind enough to accept me as her lunch companion. We will eat at the festival."

Talia was taken aback. Why did Axel make it sound like it will be just the two of them having lunch?

Maddox paused. "Really? Can I join?" Since Axel frowned, Maddox turned to Talia. "I hope that my presence will not inconvenience you."

"Not at all, Alpha Maddox.", Talia responded quickly. How can she say to an Alpha that he is not welcome? Besides, it's a festival. He can go wherever he wants.

Axel's frown deepened. "Didn't you say that you are looking forward to the quail soup and beef wellington?"

Maddox shrugged. "I can have it later. It's been a long time since I enjoyed the festival freely. This will be fun."

The truth was that Talia intrigued Maddox. He noticed that Talia's presence was difficult to detect, and after his chat with Damon that morning, Maddox had a feeling that there is more to Talia. If she is just a plain girl, why would Alpha Richard pay for others to get information on her? Maddox was confident that Damon didn't give him the full story and that Talia has some secret he was eager to unravel.

Maddox spoke to Talia. "Miss Talia, will you introduce me to your friends?"

Talia was not used to people addressing her as Miss Talia, but she didn't hate it.

Without delay, Talia introduced Keith, Lulu, Sandy, Pierce, Liam, and Caleb, whose eyes were sparkling. Both Axel and Maddox are impressive figures in the society of werewolves and having lunch with them is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

"Max! Max!", Mindy shouted while walking in hurried steps toward her brother. "Aren't we going to the car?"

"I'm going to have lunch at the festival. I feel like street food.", Maddox responded. "You can go ahead without me."

Mindy eyed the group and her eyes flashed when she spotted Talia. "I will join you."

Maddox hesitated for a moment before introducing his sister. "This is my sister, Mindy. Please forgive her blunt way of talking, she never had a filter."

Mindy cocked an eyebrow at her Maddox. What was with that choice of words? But she got a pass to mingle at the festival, and this time she will be part of a group, so she didn't want to complain.

Also, Mindy was curious about Talia. At first, Mindy thought that Talia is just an Omega teen, but then her brother told her that Talia was abused, and today Talia was a mascot-goddess that the whole team worshiped. Mindy really wanted to find out more about Talia who could give so many different impressions.

"Please, forgive my brother's indiscretion.", Mindy fired back. "He is the main reason why my social life is non-existent."

Sandy stifled a laugh at this. "I understand. I have an older brother also. I'm Sandy..."

"Alright.", Keith said after all of them introduced themselves. "Can we start moving? I'm starving."

"How can you be starving with all the food we had there?", Sandy asked.

Keith rolled his eyes. "I was too nervous to eat, but now that things are settled, the hunger hit me hard."

Keith glanced at the big trophy that Talia was holding, and he moved to stand next to Talia. "Let me help you carry the trophy. After lunch, we will go to the training center, and you can leave it there until it's convenient for you to take it home. I will keep it safe in my office..."

The group of ten moved down the street, unaware that Mark and several other players from the Dark Howlers soccer team were right behind them. When they saw Axel and Alpha Maddox chatting there, they decided to tag along covertly.

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A few minutes before...

Damon was on the parking lot, playing his role of a good host and ensuring that his high-profile guests know that scrumptious lunch will be served in the packhouse.

He was eager to leave.

Since he spotted Talia on the playing field, Damon was enduring various scenes of Talia with some other guys. He really hated that he is an Alpha. If he is a regular guy, he could be with Talia and tell her that they are mates, and no one would bat an eye.

Damon thought that going to the packhouse for lunch will help him focus on his guests and the tasks he has for today.

After lunch, Damon has a meeting with Alphas and that will not be productive if the only thing on his mind is breaking limbs of people who come too close to Talia.

He decided to imagine that Talia is having fun at the festival with Maya or maybe with those few women from the soccer team, and to ignore any male presence around Talia.

Damon spotted Mindy turning around like she was searching for someone, and then her eyes lit up and she walked away. He didn't really care about Mindy's whereabouts, but she made him aware of the fact that Maddox is not there.

He was looking where Mindy was headed and his face stiffened when he saw Maddox and Axel in the group with Talia.

What's going on? Why are those two chatting up Talia?

Damon remembered Axel and Talia on the bench in the garden. Axel sounded like he wanted to seduce Talia, giving her his personal number and some cheesy lines.

And in the study, Maddox mentioned how Talia should go to the Blue River pack and he didn't give up even after Damon told him how that's not going to happen.

Is that why Maddox told Damon to stay away from Talia? So that Maddox and Axel can get close to her?

Where are they going?

Uneasiness swelled within Damon.

Are Axel and Maddox conspiring to take Talia away?

Are they making their move behind Damon's back?

What the hell!?

"Where is he going?", Caden mumbled with a frown on his face while looking after Damon who was walking away from the parking lot in hurried steps.

"Let him be.", Maya said.

Caden realized that Maya knows something. "Where is he going?" This time Caden asked her for real.

"Probably to make sure no one snatches you-know-who.", Maya spoke cryptically because there were others nearby.

It took a moment for Caden to realized that you-know-who is Talia.

"Is this a time for Damon to do this? We have important guests for lunch."

Maya smiled. "This is exactly the time when he should do this. He needs to show that she is more important than anything else. As for guests, the two of us will entertain them."

Caden couldn't believe this. He had a feeling that pretending he doesn't know what's going on with Damon was better because now they can justify all his borderline crazy behavior as chasing after his mate, and Maya will say how it's romantic. Sheesh!

Chapter 103 - Ramen (1) [Bonus ]

Talia stood in front of the stand that Lulu's father (aka chef Page) opened, and she looked at the menu, grateful that it came with pictures.

From there, Talia understood that ramen is noodles that come in a broth, and it can have various toppings.

The pictures showed some options like the one called "ramen-blast 1" that was pork in a spicy broth with egg, corn, and green onion; "ramen-blast 2" was chicken in a regular broth with egg, edamame, and mushrooms.

Besides ramen-blasts (how chef Page called them), there was also an option to build your own ramen where anything goes.

There were options of regular or spicy broth, with meat, three toppings, and pickles included in the price. Additional toppings were available for an extra \$2 each.

"What goes well?", Talia asked Keith who was peering at the menu over her shoulder.

Keith was about to answer, but Lulu was faster, "Don't ask him. For Keith, anything goes well.."

Talia stifled a giggle. Keith's reputation as a crazed mixologist was well known.

"Young lady...", chef Page said. "You should start by picking broth and then meat. There is chicken, pork, and beef. The egg goes good with all those, and vegetable choices depend on what you like."

Chef Page saw that Talia was looking at bok choy with curiosity, so he offered, "Do you want to taste a sample before placing an order? But let me tell you, most of the flavors are coming from my specially made broth..."

Talia was embarrassed because everyone waited for her to order, and she had no idea what to get. "How about you make me your favorite? I'm not a picky eater."

"That won't do.", Maddox interfered. "It's your meal and picking ingredients to suit your taste is part of the enjoyment. Let's start with this..." Maddox snatched the menu from Talia's hands. "Spicy or mild?... As for the meat, do you prefer chicken, beef, or pork? ... Look at these veggies and pick your favorites. Or you can go the other way and exclude the ones you don't like. Don't think about the limit of three toppings..."

With Maddox's help, Talia placed her order.

"I will have the same.", Maddox said to chef Page before turning to Talia. "Let's sit at the table and I will get your order."

Talia wanted to say how that's not necessary, but Maddox's hand was on her back, and he was pushing her toward the area with tables.

There were tables with benches on each side so that six to eight people can sit at each table, depending on how close they sit.

Mindy couldn't believe this. She was right there, and her brother ignored her! Ah, men... Mindy knew that if she wanted something done right, she would need to do it herself.

Mindy observed her brother hovering around Talia, and she perked up. Was Maddox interested in Talia?

Mindy knows that her brother has a long list of girls he bedded, but he usually engages in such activities when he is on a break, and even though this is a festival, he came to spend time with Alpha Damon and other Alphas and not to chase girls, yet here he is, without Alpha Damon and other Alphas who went to the packhouse... chasing a girl.

Axel frowned at the scene of Maddox walking away with Talia, and he told chef Page, "Make the same for me also.", and then he dashed after Talia and Maddox.

Mindy's eyebrows went up, reflecting the state of her curiosity. Is Axel going against Maddox in order to win over Talia? Interesting.

Damon stood on the side and watched as Maddox sat on Talia's left, and Axel was on her right.

Damon gritted his teeth while wondering what scheme are those two up to. They sold him nonsense about respect and staying away from Talia, and what is this? How dare they get close to Talia behind Damon's back!

"Lulu, dear...", chef Page said to his daughter. "Can you take these two ramens and then come back for the third one..." He regretted that he didn't get helpers, but he didn't expect a crowd at his stall the moment he opened it. Actually, he didn't expect a crowd at all because werewolves are into meat, and not noodles.

Seeing that the third bowl of ramen was ready, Damon got an idea. "I will take that one."

"Alpha!", chef Page exclaimed and quickly bowed his head. He didn't notice Damon because he was busy preparing food, and Damon suppressed his Alpha aura.

With Maddox and Axel lingering around his stall, many other people gathered to see what's going on. And now that Damon was here also, chef Page was sure to have plenty of business. Maybe too much business. He was not sure if he had enough ingredients to satisfy this demand.



"Here", Damon handed a hundred dollars bill to chef Page as he took the third prepared bowl of ramen (that was Axel's).

"Alpha, I can't. This is on the house."

Chef Page didn't want to take Damon's money.

It's common knowledge that Alpha is not paying for any item or service in Darkbourne because technically everything belongs to him. How can chef Page allow him to pay for the food?

Damon gestured to the group where Sandy, Keith, and the others were. "I'm paying for everyone as a treat for their win. They made me proud today." He pushed money in chef Page's hand. "Take it."

Keith was the first one to recover. "Thank you, Alpha."

"Don't mention it. Just keep up the good work.", Damon responded and walked to the table where Lulu was giving ramen to Maddox and Talia.

Talia was looking at the steaming bowl in front of her with sparkles in her eyes. It looked very tasty. She inched toward the steaming bowl and closed her eyes while taking a deep breath.

"Smells good, right?", Maddox asked, and Talia nodded.

It smelled good, but why did it smell of forest and dark chocolate? She was expecting something savory and... Talia swallowed hard when she was Damon standing in front of her.

"Damon", Maddox called. "I didn't know you will join us."

Damon's eyes flashed in irritation. How dares Maddox play stupid?

'You are the one who ditched our lunch in order to chase after MY mate!', Damon screamed in his mind.

"I had an unexpected craving for Japanese food.", Damon responded stiffly and glanced at Axel. "You should go and get your food. Don't expect my pack members to serve you."

Axel frowned, but he stood up and walked to the stall.

"And don't worry, I paid for everyone! If someone took your bowl, just order another one!", Damon shouted after Axel shamelessly.

Talia was not sure what Damon was up to and her heart skipped a beat when their eyes met.

The noise from the festival subsided, and other people faded, making Damon the only person Talia could focus on like he was the only one that matters. And he was.

She didn't breathe while Damon walked around the table without breaking eye contact, and he sat next to her, on the spot that Axel just vacated, but closer to Talia. Much closer.

Talia remembered that Damon said how they won't be able to spend time together at the festival, yet here he was. Or did he come because he followed after Miss Mindy? If he came for Miss Mindy, why did he sit next to Talia?

It didn't make sense, and Talia had difficulty focusing because Damon's scent made her dizzy. No matter how much she denied it, she missed his proximity, and she was happy that he was there.

Talia didn't want to admit that she was falling for him. Actually, she fell for him already.

Nothing good could come out of getting lost in his icy-blue eyes that looked straight into her soul, and Talia hoped that she won't get completely flustered or make the mistake of leaning on him.

She reminded herself that there were many people watching and that no matter if that was playful or cuddly or scary or any other Damon in front of her, she needed to keep her cool.

Damon inhaled Talia's sweet citrusy scent of freesia that was gentle, yet it overpowered every other scent, just how Talia's delicate presence overshadows every other. She was perfect. His.

Their legs touched under the table, and she didn't move away. Damon liked that.

Damon wanted to hold Talia's hand under the table, but they were in the open and someone would definitely see it, so he decided to skip on that.

"I didn't get a chance to congratulate you on being the MVP of the tournament.", Damon said to Talia.

"Oh...", Talia snapped out of her Damon-induced daze. "It's not necessary. I didn't do much."

"I think you did.", Damon said. "Just saying congratulations won't do. Tell me what you want, Talia, and I will make it happen. Anything."

Anything? Can she ask for Damon to be her reward? A date? That sounded far-fetched and just one date, even if it's a day-long, wouldn't be enough. Ah, she was daydreaming!

"I don't need anything.", Talia said quickly while hoping that her expression didn't betray her thoughts.

The corners of Damon's lips curved into a smile, as all kinds of ideas popped into his mind. "Just like the coach said, you are selfless. But don't worry, Talia, I will come up with a good way to reward you for helping our team win the tournament."

Mindy joined them at the table with her bowl of steaming ramen. She took a seat opposite Damon, Talia, and Maddox.

The unusual mood was impossible to miss, so Mindy didn't say anything. She observed the situation attentively because other than Maddox and Axel, it seemed that Damon was also interested in Talia. Why else would Damon sit so close to Talia when there is more space on that bench?

If she didn't see it with her own eyes, Mindy wouldn't believe that Damon tricked Axel in order to get Axel's seat next to Talia. Poor guy (aka Axel) is at the back of the line, waiting for his ramen to be ready.

Other than watching the guys, Mindy noticed that Talia was not intimidated. Uncomfortable, yes. Intimidated, no. An Omega would bow her head and be submissive in the presence of an Alpha, but Talia was fine while sitting between Damon and Maddox.

Another interesting point was that Talia looked Damon in the eyes. Normally, that's a sign of disrespect and challenge to Alpha's authority, yet Talia dared to do it and Damon was totally fine with it.

Something fishy was going on, and Mindy was eager to find out what.

Chapter 104 - Ramen (2)

Damon saw that Maddox was leaning toward Talia and he didn't like it.

Damon decided to put him in his place.

"Talia...", Damon called. "Based on the coach's speech, I understood that you played a significant role in showing others how they are not a match for us. Especially the Blue River pack who didn't even reach the semifinals."

Maddox's expression darkened. Was there a need to call out his team? There were several other teams who failed to reach the semifinals!

Damon's hand snaked around Talia's waist, and he pulled her closer to him (and away from Maddox).

Talia's insides were a mess. What was Damon doing? Any closer and she will end up sitting in his lap!

When their hips connected and her bottom stopped gliding over the bench, Damon released Talia and she nervously looked up at Damon only to see him glaring at Maddox..

"Maybe losers should focus on training their team until the next tournament instead of scheming to poach my people."

Maddox was not sure why Damon turned unpleasant. Did he need to rub it in that they lost? Did he just call him a loser? And what was that nonsense about poaching people? It took him a moment to understand that Damon was talking about Talia.

'Ah, so this is about Talia!' Maddox smirked.

Earlier that morning, Damon talked about Talia like it's not a big deal, but Maddox remembered that Damon refused to allow Talia to move to Maddox's pack, even though she might be safer there.

Is it possible that Damon is interested in Talia for more than one night of rolling in the sheets? Well, she is staying in the packhouse, and they could do it without others noticing.

Maddox didn't care about Damon's private life, but he disliked Damon lying, so Maddox decided to poke around a bit and see what will happen.

"Don't you have something else to do?", Maddox asked Damon.

"What should I do during lunchtime other than having lunch?"

"How can you be here so leisurely? Shouldn't you have lunch with your guests at the packhouse? Many women will be disappointed that you are not there."

Damon was fuming. What women? There was only one woman worth mentioning, and she was right next to Damon, about to think who-knows-what about him.

Damon's outrage was well concealed under a cool facade as he responded.

"Why would it matter if they are men or women? Regardless of gender, if they want to talk business, they should schedule an appointment. And if they want something else, I'm not available. There is lunch at the packhouse, but everyone is free to eat where they want. Take yourself as an example. Besides, I felt like noodles, so I came here, and when I saw Talia I thought that this is a great opportunity to get to know my team spirit who was the MVP of the tournament. Did I explain my presence?"

Damon lifted his chin provocatively, "Why are you here? If you have free time, why are you not chasing after your team spirit and leave mine alone?"

"You are in my spot.", Axel grumbled at Damon when he approached the table with a bowl of steaming ramen in his hand.

When Axel reached the ramen stall, he realized that Damon took his serving, but everyone else placed their orders, so Axel had to wait or others would accuse him of skipping the line based on his status, and as a guest, that was not a polite thing to do.

On top of taking Axel's food, Damon took his spot next to Talia.

Axel was outraged at the thought of how Damon was shamelessly shouting that he paid for all the food, making himself sound magnanimous while backstabbing Axel.

"Your spot? I didn't see your name anywhere.", Damon responded matter-of-factly and waved toward Mindy. "If you want to sit at our table, I won't stop you. There are still spots that no one claimed."

Axel was visibly displeased, but he didn't want to cause a scene, so he sat on Mindy's left.

While Damon talked to Axel, Talia scooted away from Damon. She didn't want to risk people talking about how she was chummy with Alpha (any of the three). After all, this was in the town square and there were many people walking around even though not all stalls were open yet.

"Do you need help cutting that?", Damon asked while pointing at the pork in Talia's bowl. She still didn't touch her food.

Talia paused while wondering if Damon will cut her food here, in front of everyone (if she says that she needs help). But she didn't want to risk it. "I can manage. Thank you."

Talia hoped that someone will come to her rescue, but then she saw that Keith, Sandy, Lulu, Liam, Pierce, and Caleb were sitting at the neighboring table and observing the squabble between Damon and Maddox with Talia in the middle. They thought that Talia is very brave to still be sitting there.

And on the table next to them were Mark and several other soccer players, all of them were munching on ramen that Damon paid for.

The truth was that Talia was not concerned about Damon and Maddox bickering, or Axel's grumpy mood.

Talia was anxious because Miss Mindy was looking at her with an unreadable expression.

Was Mindy upset because she wanted Talia's spot so that she can sit next to Damon?

But Damon was sitting next to Talia, so close that their legs were touching, and it was not Talia's fault that Damon didn't give attention to Mindy.

"Miss Talia...", Axel called. "Why don't you tell us about the unusual ritual where players would hold your hand. What exactly is that?"

Damon gritted his teeth. Why was Axel reminding him of horrid scenes where Talia was worshiped by a bunch of sweaty guys? Was that on purpose?

"It was an accident.", Talia said quickly. "Liam, the player with number seven was hurt, and Doctor Travis asked me to help by holding the icepack. It was cold so I switched hands and then Liam offered to warm up my free hand. After that, he scored a goal and he told other players that it must be because of the handholding and that's how it started."

Axel was interested in one detail. "Your hand was cold? Is your wolf not warming you enough?"

All werewolves have increased metabolism and temperature (compared to humans), and unless they are suffering from blood loss or are enduring icy conditions for a long time, they don't get cold.

Talia was not sure how to respond to this and after a second of silence, Damon spoke, "Talia was hurt and her wolf suffered as well."

Axel's brows furrowed and he looked at Talia with concern obvious on his face. "How bad is it?"

Damon was irritated. This was something between him and Doctor Travis, and Talia was unaware of the possibility that her wolf might recuperate, yet this blabbermouth can't shut up.

"Is it normal for you to pry into personal matters of others?", Damon grumbled.

"I apologize.", Axel spoke to Talia. "I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable."

"It's OK.", Talia responded while wondering why Damon came to her rescue. Was her wolf-less state part of the secret that can endanger the pack? Probably.

After that, the conversation turned more casual as they chatted about the ramen, festival, weather... and just like that, they finished their meals.

"Talia, can I have a word with you in private?", Damon called Talia to step to the side.

This was quite unusual because normally werewolves would have private talks via mind-link without the need to physically distance themselves from others, but since Talia was not part of the Dark Howlers pack, a chat through the mind-link was not an option.

Talia followed Damon away from the tables until they reached the clocktower that was in the middle of the town square.



Damon stuffed his hands in the pockets of his pants as a reminder not to hold Talia. He really wanted to hug her, or at least to hold her hand, but that will need to wait.

"I need to go to the packhouse and attend meetings.", Damon said. "It will probably take a big chunk of the afternoon."

Talia was confused. "Why are you telling me that?"

Why was he telling her that? Damon was not sure. He never shared his schedule with people other than Maya and Caden (who were his Betas). Part of Damon feared that Talia will disappear during his absence, or maybe one of those numerous guys that are buzzing around her manages to win her over.

Instead of answering her question, Damon said, "I should be back in time for the parade, and I would like to check out the festival together with you in the evening. Wait for me, alright?"

There was something in his expression that moved her heart, but she told herself not to get carried away.

"You said that you won't have time for me today.", Talia reminded him.

Damon hummed in confirmation and leaned closer before speaking in a whisper, only for Talia to hear, "I did, yet here I am. It seems that I can't stay away from you, Talia."

A million butterflies exploded in Talia's stomach, making her feel like she was floating. Why did this sound like a confession? Or did her ears malfunction?

Damon inched away and chuckled when he saw her completely red face.

He really wanted to kiss her all over.

"I will take that as a, yes.", Damon said to Talia who was nonresponsive because his words, 'I can't stay away from you', echoed in her mind, blocking anything else.

Damon couldn't stop himself from pinching her nose. "Are you alright?"

Talia blinked herself to reality. Why was Damon looking at her expectantly? Did he say something? What was it? Whatever it was, the answer was, "Yes."

"Alright. I look forward to tonight." He didn't lie. No matter what the next few hours of meetings will bring, Damon knew that he will be thinking about spending his evening with Talia at the festival.

Damon remembered one thing he observed while stalking behind Talia and her group, Keith was carrying the bulky trophy for Talia.

"Do you want me to take that trophy to the packhouse? I can leave it in your room, so you don't drag it around. Unless you are coming to the packhouse now. I can give you a ride."

"I have plans for this afternoon. If you can take the trophy, that will be great and..." Talia paused. "I will see you tonight."

Damon's smile reflected in his eyes. "Definitely."

Chapter 105 - A Friend?

Damon left with Maddox and Axel in order to attend meetings with other Alphas in the packhouse.

Neither of the three men was willing to leave.

Damon wanted to stick close to Talia, and Maddox and Axel wanted the same, for different reasons.

Both Maddox and Axel had their agenda why they wanted to get close to Talia, yet Damon showed up and hogged Talia's attention during the whole lunch.

Maddox and Axel understood that if they want to get close to Talia, they need to remove Damon as a variable.

Mindy was not eligible to attend the meeting because she is not an Alpha (or a future Alpha). She didn't want to linger in the boring packhouse when there was a festival going on, so she stayed behind.

When Damon took the trophy, Talia also gave him the bag with the jersey and pins. The only thing she kept for herself was the insulated bag that Stephanie prepared for her.. Talia was confident that she will get to eat that food, eventually.

Talia wanted to join the table where Keith and others were, but she felt awkward about leaving Mindy behind, so she offered, "Do you want to walk around the festival with us?"

Instead of answering, Mindy asked, "Can I have a minute with you?"

"Sure.", Talia said and gestured to Keith to wait. He was on his feet, about to approach Talia.

Keith, Lulu, Sandy, Pierce, Liam, and Caleb were full of questions for Talia related to her previous situation of having lunch with three Alphas at the table. Yes, Mindy is also famous, but she is more like a celebrity princess, while Damon, Maddox, and Axel are rulers worthy of everyone's awe and respect.

As soon as Talia sat at the table, Mindy asked bluntly. "What's up with you and Alpha?"

"Which one?", Talia had to ask.

Mindy stifled a laugh. "Exactly. Why are three Alphas fighting for your attention?"

Well, it was not unusual for Alphas to pick up female companions, but there are plenty of attractive females willing to entertain them; Mindy counted at least a dozen women stealing glances at their table at any given moment.

The lower ranking she-wolves won't dare to approach an Alpha openly without permission, but looking from afar is enough to let the Alpha know that the woman is willing. For any Alpha, the pool of bedmate candidates is always versatile, and Alphas don't fight over one woman. That's beneath them.

Sure, Talia is cute and everything, but she is not a pheromone-releasing bombshell that would make guys go crazy.

The only time an Alpha would be set on a female is if she is his mate, or it could be a matter of pride, and considering that Axel and Maddox just met Talia and didn't interact with her previously, while neither of the three Alphas acted smitten like Talia was his mate... Mindy was confused.

Mindy leaned closer and continued in a whisper, "What's going on? Don't tell me that three Alphas ended up at the same table, trying to impress you, accidentally."

Talia thought that Mindy was exaggerating. She had no idea why Axel and Maddox followed her for lunch, and she didn't know why Damon appeared unexpectedly either, but Mindy was obviously determined to get some answers, so Talia responded, "It's not a secret that I came to this pack recently. Alpha Damon is kind enough to make sure I'm adapting well, as for Alpha Maddox and Axel, I really don't know. Maybe they wanted to gather information related to the team spirit so that their teams can do something similar."

Mindy looked at Talia while wondering if Talia is an idiot or if she thinks that Mindy is an idiot. She could describe Damon with many words, but kind is not one of them. And why would Maddox and Axel want to make their soccer players go through a ridiculous hand-kissing ritual before a game?

Talia squirmed under Mindy's penetrating gaze, and she regretted offering Mindy to join them for the afternoon. Maybe Mindy will reject Talia's offer, but before that, Talia wanted to clarify, "Don't worry, I know my place. I'm not deluded to think that any of them would be romantically interested in me."

Mindy's eyebrows shoot up in surprise. "Is that what you are thinking?"

"No. That's what I'm NOT thinking.", Talia clarified. "If you want to pursue Alpha Damon or anyone else, you are free to do so."

Mindy made a face like she smelled something bad. "Who would pursue that arrogant guy?"

Talia didn't like that Mindy called Damon arrogant. Sure, he has a temper, but he is also kind and righteous. Talia never saw Damon flaunting his status or power. OK. Maybe he did that when they were in the human hospital, but he did it because Talia was mistreated right in front of him. Any Alpha would see that as indirect disrespect to him, so Damon's actions were justified.

Why did Mindy talk like Damon was not a good person?

"Alpha Damon is the unmated Alpha of the largest pack in North America.", Talia stated facts. "Don't all women want to be his Luna?"

"You are contradicting yourself, Talia. You said that you are not interested, but now you said that all women want to be his Luna. Which one is it?", Mindy asked with a victorious smirk, and she continued before Talia could respond, "Besides, I have no desire to be his Luna. I have nothing specifically against Alpha Damon, my dislike is about Alphas in general."

Talia was confused. "Isn't your bother an Alpha?"

"Yeeeeeaaah...", Mindy said dramatically. "And no matter how awesome my future sister-in-law will be, she will be reduced to be the Luna of the Blue River pack, the wife of Alpha Maddox. Do you see where I'm going with this?"

"No.", Talia admitted.

Mindy thought for a moment before explaining, "I am Mindy River, whoever read the WW magazine knows that I'm behind many charities that help werewolves who are in a difficult situation. But other than that, I'm close to getting my college degree, I love playing video games, I want to travel the world, and I have many other aspirations, yet if I become a Luna, everything I did, and all my future plans will be wiped away the moment I take on my new role that is completely defined by my husband-to-be. I find that... unsettling."

Talia nodded in understanding. "So, you don't want to be a Luna?"

Mindy shrugged. "When I imagine my future, I see a guy who will worship me without trying to fit me into a mold he created for me. That's why I will marry only one guy, and that will be my fated mate, regardless of what his standing is. I'm not an innocent girl who saves herself for marriage, but I know that playing with Alphas doesn't bring anything good, because they are the ones playing, while females are treated as playthings."

Mindy saw that Talia was frowning, so she clarified, "I'm not talking randomly. Just like any other unmated Alpha, my brother left a long trail of broken hearts behind him, and I refuse to be a notch on the bedpost no matter how expensive or flashy that bedpost is."

Talia gaped at Mindy while processing her words. She said so many things! But Talia understood that Mindy is a confident woman who knows what she wants.

In a stark contrast compared to Talia, Mindy was born as part of an Alpha family, and she grew up with all the riches one could wish for, yet Mindy was just like Talia, wanting independence and to be in charge of her destiny.

Talia respected that.

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Talia looked at Mindy and thought how this was silly. Yesterday, Talia couldn't wait to put distance between her and Mindy, yet here are they now, at the same table, just the two of them, having a casual talk, like equals. Friends, maybe.

"You are a crafty one, aren't you?"

Mindy's question confused Talia.

"What?"

"I was asking you about your relationships, yet you managed to turn it around and I ended up talking about myself."

"That was not my intention.", Talia said. Why was it her fault that Mindy was chatty?

"But that's what you did.", Mindy said. "It's only fair that you return the favor and tell me something about yourself."

It's not that Talia was not willing, but talking about the Red Moon pack and her time in the attic was prohibited. She didn't want to get Alpha Damon in trouble.

"There is nothing much to say."

"There must be something.", Mindy persisted.

Talia gave up. She had a story ready anyway. "I grew up with my grandparents, isolated. When they passed, I went to find somewhere to live because it was hard to survive on my own, and Alpha Damon was kind enough to offer me a place in his pack."

Mindy made a face. There was that word 'kind' again. Mindy is not close to Damon, but the rumors about him are consistent: Damon doesn't care about women for more than one night. Besides, when a pack accepts new members, there are channels to put them through, yet in Talia's case, Damon was involved personally.

How can Mindy not be curious?

Chapter 106 - A Friend? (cont.)

"So, now that you are at the Dark Howlers pack, what are you doing?", Mindy asked Talia.

"I'm helping in the kitchen."

Mindy cocked an eyebrow. "Alpha Damon put you to work right away?"

"No, no.", Talia quickly said. "I asked to work in the kitchen because I wanted to learn how to cook. Besides, sitting in the room the whole day is boring." Seeing that Mindy's expression showed approval, Talia had an urge to leave a good impression, so she added, "I'm also studying about medicine with the hope to work in the pack hospital, and I'm training to improve my physical condition and learn to fight."

"Really?"

Talia nodded earnestly and gestured toward the table where Keith was. "Keith is my personal trainer.. He designed an exercise routine for me. We will be going to the training center from here..."

"Oh, you will not stay at the festival?", Mindy interrupted Talia. She was looking forward to being part of a group.

Sure, there are Sandy, Lulu, Pierce, Liam, and Caden, but all of them are looking at Mindy with stars in their eyes, while Talia is treating Mindy like a normal person, so Mindy preferred Talia compared to other people.

"We will not go right away.", Talia responded. "It won't be good to exercise immediately after lunch. If you want, you can join us for training. Keith is a great coach."

Now that they broke the ice, Talia thought that Mindy is a nice person.



Mindy pursed her lips. "No, thanks. I will skip on sweating." She stood up abruptly. "Alright, since you won't be here long, we should start checking out this fair. Your friends seem to be eager to move..."

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Talia and Keith headed to the training center for their session in the gym, and Talia was in a daze.

After finishing lunch, for more than an hour, they were checking out various booths and she even got to throw balls on empty cans. Talia's aim was horrible even after Mindy showed her several throwing techniques, but Talia had a lot of fun.

The best part was that maybe, just maybe, Talia made a new friend. Mindy.

The two of them spoke a lot and the mood was good, and before Talia left, Mindy gave Talia her personal phone number with, "We will be here until tomorrow, but things can get crazy, and I want to make sure we can stay in touch no matter how things develop..."

Mindy was not pleased that Talia doesn't have an email address or a phone, but Talia promised that she will contact Mindy as soon as she gets one of those two.

With this, Talia had Axel's and Mindy's phone numbers, and that made it two!

Talia kept Mindy's number safe, determined to contact Mindy as soon as she gets a phone.

Mindy also said that she hopes to spend more time with Talia before they leave the Dark Howlers pack, and Talia was looking forward to it.

Talia couldn't help but compare Mindy and Marcy. Both of them are princesses in their respective packs, but Marcy is a white lotus who would ruthlessly punish Talia without evidence, while Mindy is kind and approachable, and most importantly, Mindy treated Talia as equal. Talia liked that. She liked it a lot.

It was all surreal.

"Are you alright?", Keith asked Talia.

"Yes. Why?"

"You are limping."

"Oh..." Talia was so excited, that she didn't notice. "It seems that the medication wore off."

Keith frowned. "What medication?"

"Hangover medication."

Keith was confused. "You are limping because of a hangover?" It didn't make sense.

Talia stifled a laugh when she realized how silly that sounded. "No, no. My legs are aching due to sore muscles after yesterday's exercise, and hangover medicine was for the aches, so..." Talia paused because Keith was laughing so hard that he was holding onto his belly. "What's funny?"

"Ah... ah..." Keith struggled to catch his breath. "You said that warmup from yesterday gave you sore muscles."

Talia pouted. "Warmup for you. Strenuous exercise for me." She really was useless.

"It's not what you said, it's more how you said it...", Keith said. Talia was talking about her yesterday's brisk walking with importance like it was a monumental activity.

"I apologize. I won't laugh at you."

"You better not, or I will get a different personal trainer."

Keith smirked smugly. "You are out of luck, girl. I'm the only one in Darkbourne, so you are stuck with me."

"That doesn't make you indispensable.", Talia fired back. "I can always find someone online."

Keith hummed in agreement, and they continued walking in silence.

Keith was thinking if it's appropriate to ask a question that was bugging him since lunch. Eventually, his curiosity won.

"Talia?"

"Hmm?"

"Is there something going on between you and Alpha?"

This time, Talia didn't ask, 'which one', because she knew that Keith was asking about Damon.

Talia shook her head, dispelling any fleeting thoughts that were forming. "There is nothing."

"Are you sure? The two of you looked close." Very close. Especially when they went on the side, after lunch. Keith saw that Damon leaned closer to whisper something to Talia, and Damon pinched her nose, and Keith also saw the way Talia smiled at Damon. That was definitely something.

"Of course, we are close.", Talia said right away. "I don't know where I would be if not for him." Maybe still in that attic, or somewhere much worse. "Alpha Damon is making sure I go to my doctor's appointments and sometimes he scolds me when I miss my meals."

Keith paused. How can Damon know about Talia's meals, unless... "You are staying in the packhouse?"

Well, that would explain why Alpha Damon would take Talia's trophy and jersey with pins, but it would NOT explain why Alpha runs errands for a low-ranking girl. Alphas don't do that. They are Alphas because others serve them. Even if Alpha Damon wanted to help Talia and ease her hands of burden, he would get someone else to do it, instead of handling it personally.

A mix of emotions washed over Talia at the thought of her living arrangements, and her smile faded. "I'm at the packhouse until Doctor Travis says that I recuperated enough to move in with Omegas. I'm underweight and..."

"It's OK.", Keith interrupted Talia. He saw that her mood dropped, and he assumed that he crossed the line. "You don't need to talk about it if it's uncomfortable. I'm sorry for making fun of you because you got sore muscles."

"Don't be sorry.", Talia said quickly. "I will eat and exercise and soon I will build my strength and stamina so no one can laugh at me. Not even famous coach Keith."

Keith liked her enthusiasm. And he liked that she labeled him as famous.

At that time, they reached the training center, and Keith said, "Change clothes and meet me on the mat. Since you are sore, today I will show you stretching exercises that will ease aches."

Talia nodded earnestly and she didn't want to tell him that the moment she enters the dressing room, she will take two pills of hangover medicine which she has in her insulated bag. It won't hurt to learn how to stretch. She wanted to learn everything that can be learned.

Talia walked into the women's dressing room and Keith stood frozen and looked at the door that closed behind Talia.

Why the hell did he ask if there is something between Talia and Alpha Damon? That's none of his business. What if Talia misunderstands and thinks that Keith wants to hit on her?

Does Keith want something to happen between him and Talia? Keith was not sure. But he knew that talking to her was easy and he craved more time with Talia.

He was thinking about Talia as his customer, a friend, but now... Keith was not sure.

During lunch, Talia was sitting at the table between Damon and Maddox, with Axel on the other side, all three Alphas were looking at Talia with interest, and Keith was suppressing his urge to go there and take Talia away.

If he went there, Keith knew that he would fail miserably.

Keith sparred a few times against Alpha Damon, and it's an established fact that Keith can't win even if Damon doesn't use his aura, because just Damon's Alpha aura is enough to make it painful to breathe.

If Keith dared to challenge Damon and two more Alphas at the same time... Keith hated that he was helpless to save Talia from there. Did she even need saving?

How Keith saw it, Talia was like an unspoiled flower, with three nasty Alpha wolves breathing down her neck, each eager to ruin her, and Keith found it difficult to stay away.

Keith didn't understand. So far, other than his sister, he never felt the urge to protect a woman.

A lot of things related to Talia were confusing, and the more time Keith spent with Talia, the less sense everything made.

'Was Katya right?', Keith wondered. 'Do I really like Talia?'

Do werewolves have crushes? Sure, Keith was attracted to many women before, but it was purely physical and this was different. Keith wanted to know everything about Talia and to protect her and she was cute and... Keith pinched the roof of his nose.

Damn it! He has a crush on Talia!

Based on the internal waves that amplified his emotions, Keith understood that his wolf approves.

Keith chided himself. During lunch he was thinking badly of three Alphas who were wanting to woo Talia, yet here was Keith, just as bad as they are.

Chapter 107 - The Summer Solstice Festival (10) [Bonus ]

"I'm ready...", Talia said when she exited the dressing room, surprised that Keith didn't move from the spot since she left. "Is something wrong?"

Keith was staring at Talia who was wearing only black shorts and a red exercise bra and he swallowed hard. He saw girls that were taller, plumper, curvier, with less clothes than what Talia was wearing, yet he found himself out of breath.

He still didn't adjust his mindset to the fact that he likes her, but here she was, adorably ignorant of the things that were brewing within him.

Considering that it was just the two of them in the training center, Keith knew that this will be difficult.

"Keith?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm fine.", Keith stumbled over his words. "Wait for me on the mat. I will just go and drink some water.." And splash cold water on my face.

Talia noticed that Keith was stiff and absentminded when he returned.

Talia assumed that he was thinking about something, or someone related to the festival because he was fine before they came to the training center.

She remembered how Keith was reluctant to accept coming here today. After all, everyone is at the festival (or preparing for it), and because of that, only Talia and Keith were present in the building.

Guilt swelled within Talia. Considering Keith's popularity, he probably had a lot of things to do and many people to mingle with, yet he left all that behind only to help her exercise because she wanted to come today.

"Should we go back to the festival?"

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

"Are you sure? We can do this tomorrow."

"Don't you want to do this?", Keith asked.

"I do, but I see that you have something else on your mind.", Talia said frankly.

Keith chided himself internally. The moment he confirmed that he likes Talia, he turned into an idiot.

But the fact was that Keith was nervous.

Keith never crushed on a girl for real and all this caught him by surprise. He was not sure how to treat Talia.

Who knows what Talia was thinking about him when he was spacing out, like a moron?

Shouldn't he tell Talia that he likes her? But considering that no one is present, if Keith does it here, he might appear like a creep who wants to do something despicable. Keith already established that Talia is pure and inexperienced, and he didn't want to freak her out.

He decided to think about it later, when they return to the festival.

Now they came to exercise, and Talia is expecting his help. If he wants to leave a good impression, he needs to focus on what he does best. Training people.

"OK. Sit on the mat and spread your legs as far as they go.", Keith instructed. "Stretch your arms above your head... bend at the waist forward until your palms are flat on the mat... try to keep your back and your legs straight..." He pushed on her upper back gently, to increase the stretch. "Hold this for ten seconds."

Keith observed Talia's tiny frame when compared to the size of his hands and he wondered, if he grasps her waist, will his fingers meet around her? Maybe. He chided himself internally for not checking that last night, while they were dancing in the Shifters nightclub.

He had a chance to feel her out discretely, pretending that it's just dancing, and he missed it.

'Focus, Keith!', he reminded himself, and mentally picked a number of yoga poses he will show her next.

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After her stretching exercises, Talia quickly freshened up before returning to the festival with Keith.



She was surprised to see how many more people were present compared to one hour ago, when they left for the Training center.

There were so many stalls, that they couldn't fit in the town square and they spilled into the neighboring streets. The whole area was very lively.

"Every stall has a line of people waiting.", Talia said while observing with awe.

"There will be more people in the evening. This place will be packed.", Keith explained. "This is a good time to play games without waiting in a line for long. Let's go there. I promised you a stuffed toy."

"Shouldn't we look for Lulu, Sandy, and the guys?" Mindy also, if she was still there with them.

Keith could mind-link them to find out where they are, but he was not willing to share his time with Talia. "We will look for them later. After the game. Here..." Keith offered his hand to Talia. "Hold my hand so that we are not separated in the crowd."

Talia didn't think much about it. They can reunite with others after the game, as for handholding... Keith was right. The crowd was increasing, and if they got separated, she had no idea how to find him.

...

"Do you want to watch the parade?", Keith asked.

"Is it that time already?"

"I'm glad you are having fun to the point of not noticing the time passing."

Talia realized that he was right. After the ring toss (where Keith won for Talia an adorable brown puppy-plushie), they went to throw basketballs into hoops, and then there was a game of hitting targets with water-filled balloons, and other than playing, Keith also gave her many turns to practice. Between games, they ate mini-donuts and funnel cake and there was a massive bag of kettle corn that they

couldn't finish (and Talia was holding onto leftovers, for later)... and now that she thought about it, more than two hours passed. She had fun.

Talia remembered one more thing. "Should we meet up with others so that we can watch the parade together?"

Reluctantly, Keith mind-linked Pierce to ask where they are.

Keith didn't want to meet up with anyone, because he enjoyed his time with Talia, but he was out of excuses.

"They are in the back where merry-go-round is. Let's go to the clock tower and they will find us."

Talia followed Keith to the clocktower, and the sight of a tall black structure reminded her of a scene from a few hours ago.

It was a flashback of Talia and Damon and him telling her that he will be back from his meetings by the time the parade starts, and then he asked her to wait for him and he said how he can't stay away from her.

Talia fought mightily against her imagination that was coming up with all kinds of romantic scenarios, but she was failing miserably. Damon's words sounded just how lovers would talk. He was sweet and a bit teasing, but she didn't dislike it because it all came with his delicious scent of the forest and the dark chocolate she loved.

"What did you do to Talia?", Lulu asked Keith teasingly, snapping Talia out of her thoughts.

"Nothing.", Keith said. "After our exercise, we checked out some stalls and..." Keith's voice trailed as he observed Talia's face that was red like a ripe tomato.

Keith perked up. Is Talia bashful because of him? Doesn't that mean that she sees him as a man? Maybe Talia has a crush on him, and Lulu's words hit the spot. Why else would Talia blush like that?

Liam frowned when he saw Keith's foolish grin directed at Talia.

"Checked some stalls? You were gone for hours.", Liam grumbled and walked to Talia. "Let me help you carry those." Liam took the half-full popcorn bag.

Pierce was quick to stand on Talia's other side and grab Talia's insulated lunch bag that Stephanie prepared for her. "We should hurry and find a good spot to watch the parade."

Before Talia could say anything, Pierce and Liam hooked their arms with Talia's and started walking away.

Caden rushed to join the trio. "Let me help you hold that plushie!"

Sandy inched close to Keith and asked in a whisper, "Did you bully Talia?"

Keith rolled his eyes. "Is that what you think of me?"

Lulu and Sandy looked at Keith suspiciously. Is Keith pretending to be a gentleman? They all know about his reputation.

Every guy werewolf who stands out will attract ladies, and Keith stands out in terms of his looks, skills, and money. Werewolves (males and females) are sexual creatures with high libidos and it's not a secret that Keith bedded many she-wolves. There is nothing wrong with it, but why was he acting innocent?

"This is not about what we think, coach.", Lulu said. "Beta Maya told us to make sure Talia is safe. Don't do something you might regret later."

Keith cleared his throat awkwardly. Why did he feel like a kid who stole a cookie and got caught? He and Talia were having fun, and the most contact they had was holding hands! Why are they looking at him like he is some molester?

"I am Talia's personal trainer. Don't get strange ideas. Now let's hurry up and join them. Or do you think that Liam, Pierce, and Caden won't take advantage of Talia if they get a chance?"

Lulu and Sandy glanced at each other and nodded in understanding. Keith was right. Those three are just like everyone else... up to no good.

Chapter 108 - The Parade Of Emotions

"Mindy is not with you?", Talia asked Liam, Caleb, and Pierce while they made their way toward the main street where the parade will pass.

Talia could see that Mindy was not with them, but she was curious where Mindy went.

"We lost her at the stand with barbequed seafood.", Caleb said.

"She didn't seem very interested in barbequed squid.", Pierce added. "I think it's a girl thing. Lulu and Sandy also skipped that stand, but they stayed nearby."

Liam noticed that Talia pressed her lips into a line. "Do you want to meet up with Mindy? She will probably be on the rooftop of the city hall. That's where all the bigshots will gather to watch the parade.."

They normally couldn't go there, but considering that Talia had lunch with three Alphas (and Mindy) at the same table, Liam thought that Talia can probably get access to that amazing vantage point and they will tag along.

"No, no. I was just curious, nothing else.", Talia responded. She had no intention of going where bigshots are (how Liam called them).

Talia knew that city hall is a three story-high building on the main street of Darkbourne.

Her heart fluttered at the thought that Damon will be there as well.

Damon said that he will be done with meetings by the time the parade starts and that in the evening he will go with Talia to the festival. He didn't specify the exact time, but it was late afternoon already, so it should be soon. Maybe after the parade, he will come down from the city hall and find her. Maybe.

They found a good spot, on the opposite side of the street from the city hall. Sandy and Lulu pushed Caleb, Pierce, and Liam away and stuck close to Talia.

Talia quickly snatched her insulated lunchbox and the brown puppy plushie that Keith gifted her. She didn't want to risk separating from the guys and losing her precious things, so she was holding onto them tightly. She let them have the popcorn. That was not important.

The parade started as kids lead the way with floats they built with the help of their parents and teachers. There were cars and coaches made out of cardboard boxes, and some kids drove tricycles that were decorated with colorful flowers, ribbons, and pinwheels. After the kids, grownups showcased their elaborate floats that had various shapes and sizes. It all looked professionally made with light effects, parts that moved, and some had fog machines for added dramatic effect. It was obvious that a lot of effort went into making them.

But no matter how lively the scene on the street was, Talia would look toward the rooftop terrace of the city hall.

She saw Mindy, Caden, Maya, and Stephanie, and there were a number of other people Talia didn't recognize. Damon was not among them.

Of course, Sandy noticed that Talia was not paying attention to the parade. "Are you looking for someone?"

Talia wanted to deny it, but she was already caught, and there would be nothing unusual if she asked... "I thought that everyone important should be up there, but I don't see Alpha Damon."

"Oh, he won't be there.", Sandy responded right away. When she saw Talia's puzzled look, Sandy added, "You are new, so you don't know."

Lulu was listening to this exchange, and she inched closer to Talia and spoke in a hushed voice, "Our Alpha doesn't attend the later part of the festival."

Sandy made a dreamy expression. "I wonder who is the lucky she-wolf that is right now enjoying the special Alpha treatment."

Talia felt like a hundred knives pierced her chest. "What?"

Lulu and Sandy exchanged confused glances.

Lulu spoke, "Don't you know how Alphas spend their time off? Why would any of them stick here and watch the festivities when they can get a personal pleasure party elsewhere? After the closing speech for the tournament, Alpha Damon finished his official duties. He probably had lunch at the festival in order to pick a woman and we won't see him or her until morning."

Lulu didn't lie. Everyone knew that's what Damon does during the festival.

"Are you OK?", Sandy asked when she noticed that Talia paled.

"I just need some air...", Talia said and moved backward into the crowd.

"What did you say to her?", Keith asked from the side angrily, and he moved after Talia before confused Lulu and Sandy could respond.

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It was difficult to move through the crowd, but luckily, Keith spotted Talia before she took a turn into one of the side streets.

"Talía! Hey, Talía...", Keith called while catching up with her.

With her head lowered and one hand clutching the insulated lunch bag, while her other hand held onto the brown puppy plushie, Talía looked like a picture of a lonely person.

"Did something happen?"

"Is it true?", she asked without stopping her steps or looking at him.

"What?"

Talía stared at her feet while talking in a choppy voice, "Is it true... that every festival... after finishing with official work... Alpha Damon picks up a woman, and no one sees them until morning?"

"Why is your question festival specific? It's normal for guys..." Keith's voice trailed when Talía lifted her head and looked at him with so much hurt in her expression that his heart ached.

Keith realized that he said too much.

From their earlier talk, Keith knew that Talía sees Damon as a good guy, a savior of some sort, and considering that she grew up alone with her grandparents (how much Keith knows), Talía's idea of a good guy is different compared to an average werewolf, yet he just said that Alpha Damon (and every other guy) is sleeping around. To make things worse, Keith generalized it, so he ended up in that despicable bunch also.

Talía noticed Keith's upset expression and she cursed herself for oversharing. Why did she voice her thoughts?

She already heard stories about how Alphas are promiscuous, and she knew that Damon fits into that group like it was made for him. After all, Talía saw Damon with princess Marcy between his legs, and she didn't want to imagine what he did with Cassie or many other girls.

But why was this so painful to hear?

Is it because Damon said that they will spend the evening together?

Talia was aware of his mood swings, and she knew that there is a big possibility it won't happen.

If she looked realistically at the situation, there were probably a million things he would want to do instead of being with her. But she made the mistake of allowing herself to hope.

What was she hoping for? To be his bedwarmer for tonight? That's stupid. Why would she wish for that?

Talia knew that Damon who made her heart race was not real. He was a product of her imagination because for some reason, whenever she looked at Alpha Damon, her mind would filter out all the unpleasant things and show her only Damon she wanted to see.

Talia needed to let go of him and face the reality. The reality where Damon she wants, doesn't exist, and to Damon who exists, she is not important.

"Talia?"

Keith's voice pulled Talia out of her thoughts.

She shook her head. "Thank you for your concern, Keith. I would like to be alone."

She took a step away and Keith grabbed her hand.

"Allow me to show you a perfect spot to be alone."

Talia had no idea where Keith was going, but other than wandering into the forest, she didn't have any other destination in mind, so she followed after him.



Four streets later, Keith stopped in front of one house.

"Give me just a minute..."

He dashed into the house and a few seconds later, he returned with a six-pack of beer.

"This will come in handy.", Keith said.

Talia looked at the beer in his hand. "Do you want to make me drunk so that I spill my grievances to you?"

Keith shrugged. "Beer and talking are optional. I will not let you be alone when you are like this. I promise to stay as far as you want, but I insist to keep an eye on you."

He extended his hand to Talia, palm up, in a silent invitation to accept his offer.

Talia looked into his eyes full of concern and then she put her hand into his.

They walked in silence down the street, away from the noise of the festival.

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In the packhouse...

Damon was sitting at the head of the conference table with six other Alphas.

Alpha Maddox and Axel were there, representing their packs.

They were discussing the latest movements among rogues, but Damon couldn't focus. He would often look at the time and his frequent forehead-rubbing was a giveaway that he was getting impatient.

"You look like you need to be somewhere else.", Alpha Christian said to Damon.

Christian is the Alpha of the Spring Leaf pack which shares a border with the Dark Howlers pack on the North.

"I was thinking that we will finish by now.", Damon said bluntly and when he saw a few frowns directed his way, he added, "I didn't expect that we have so many things on the agenda." Or that some of you will talk so much. Many of these could have been an email!

"If you have something more important than this meeting, we can reschedule it.", Maddox said to Damon in an obvious provocation. Maddox had a good hunch that the urgency Damon was feeling was somehow related to Talia.

"What do you mean, reschedule?", Axel cut off Damon's response before he could say anything.

"Why are you talking like it's easy to gather so many Alphas in the same place?", Axel asked Maddox.

Maddox agreed. "That's true. It's rare that we can all gather, so I suggest that we focus on the matters at hand and make the most of it..."

Damon couldn't object to this because everything Axel and Maddox said was true. But there were a few more topics on the agenda, and the ache in his chest was getting unbearable.

His instincts were telling him that something is wrong with Talia, or to be more precise, with her feelings toward Damon. At the same time, Damon knew that if he just leaves this meeting, he will offend a lot of people and lose allies, and that will put his pack in danger and in extension, Talia as well. Damn it!

Damon was not sure how long he sat in that meeting. It could have been minutes, but it felt like hours.

His ears were ringing, and his wolf said something but Damon couldn't hear him.

Damon was not sure what's the cause of this emotional turmoil that affected him physically, but every cell in his body screamed for Talia's proximity.

Abruptly, Damon stood up. "You will need to finish this without me."

Damon dashed out of the packhouse and went straight for his black armored Lexus SUV.

'Maya! Caden!', Damon called thorough the mind-link. 'Where is Talia!?'

Chapter 109 - Keith's Secret Spot

Talia sat on the soft grass as she took in the sight of the seemingly undisturbed nature around her. It was peaceful.

The tall rocks formed a natural shelter at the back and curved slightly on the sides, opening up fully to a majestic view of the lake in front.

The light noise from the festival that was on the other side of the lake, felt like it's miles away.

"This is where I come when I don't want anyone to disturb me.", Keith said while taking a seat next to Talia.

Keith made sure he doesn't sit too close to Talia because he didn't want to risk Talia chasing him away. There was enough space for a bulky person to sit between them.

"What do you think of this place?", Keith asked.

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"It's beautiful."

Talia always loved nature. Plants and animals were better than people (and werewolves), in Talia's opinion.

Talia didn't feel like talking.

She hugging her knees while staring blankly at the lake in front of her, and her mind was in a semi-shutdown mode which she perfected for situations when the reality was too harsh to bear. She used to space out like that when someone bullied her at the Red Moon pack, and she didn't think that she will end up in such a state after moving away.

Keith really wanted to know what's going on in her mind. What made her turn so distant and sad? Talia was right there, next to him, yet she was a hundred miles away.

Keith could see that Talia was upset and he was brainstorming ideas on how to cheer her up without being intrusive. He created a million virtual scenarios, and all of them ended badly.

The sunset hit Talia's face, making her copper-colored hair and honeyed eyes glow like they are made out of gold. She looked like a Goddess and Keith was lost in a daze.

Eventually, Keith broke the silence, "Beer?"

Talia nodded in agreement.

Keith opened two cans and gave one to Talia before turning to face her.

Talia drank the beer quickly. The bitterness matched her emotional state and she welcomed it. Talia remembered how on the previous night, when alcohol clouded her mind, she didn't think about Damon and what he was doing, and part of her hoped that this one can get her intoxicated so that she forgets about Damon completely.

"Slow down...", Keith warned her, and he shook his head in disapproval when Talia didn't listen.

Talia finished the beer and noticed Keith's stare directed at her. "What?"

"I was wondering if you will name him.", Keith said while gesturing toward the puppy plushie. There was no way that he will admit how he was lost in daydreaming which included embracing her.

Talia looked at the plush toy. It was a cute puppy with long ears and fur that was a warm brown color.

"It's a girl. I will call her Cinna.", Talia said after some time.

"That's an interesting name."

"It's short for Cinnamon." Talia thought how the reddish shade of brown reminded her of cinnamon, so she went with that.

Keith took the toy from Talia's hands and cradled her, like holding a baby. "Hi Cinna, do you like the name mommy gave you?"

Talia blinked. "What?"

"Now we are parents of a pretty girl. Look, she has your hair and my eyes.", Keith said while grinning like a proud father, and Talia stifled a laugh.

"I didn't realize what all was included when I accepted the toy.", Talia responded.

Keith was glad to see that Talia smiled. She was gloomy since they left the parade and Keith didn't want to ask for an explanation on what caused her mood to drop. He knew that it was related to Alpha Damon, but Keith guessed that it's better if he doesn't know the details.

"Can I have another one?", Talia asked while pointing at the remaining beer cans.

"Sure.", Keith responded right away. "But I hope you drink this one slower. Or are you one of those people who enjoy the hangover?"

Talia realized that her behavior was unsightly. "I will drink it slower."

Keith nodded in approval and handed her another can.

Talia took a sip of beer and cursed internally when she realized that her thoughts went to Damon again.

Why can't she stop thinking about him?

He is now with some she-wolf, in his room which is across the hallway from hers, and he is absolutely NOT thinking about Talia or about the fair or about his broken promise.

And he said that he can't stay away from her. What a joke!

The sad part was that she believed him. How stupid.

"Do you come here often?", Talia asked Keith with the hope that a chat will keep her mind busy, and she won't think about that Devil.

"It depends on how often I want privacy.", Keith responded cryptically.

"So, is this like your hideout?"

"Something like that."

There was no way that Keith will admit to Talia that this is one of his hookup spots.

Werewolves are creatures close to nature, and they don't mind getting frisky in the open.

Keith has a room in Katya's home, but he never brought a girl there because Katya would not let him hear the end of it. Every time Katya hears that Keith was with a girl, she starts getting nosy, like Keith found a wife candidate.

But if he said any of that to Talia, she would definitely misunderstand, so he decided to keep it short and devoid of details.

Talia noticed that usually chatty Keith was stingy with answers and acting mysterious, and she guessed that he didn't want to tell her the truth.

She snatched the puppy toy from his hand.

"Hey!", Keith exclaimed. "Be careful with our daughter. If you hurt her I will need to rush her to see Travis, and the poor guy is probably still sleeping. If I wake him up, he will be groggy and maybe misdiagnose her condition..."

Talia burst into giggles. Keith's expression was full of concern for their plush daughter, and it was hilarious.

"Don't worry, Cinna. Your mommy is drinking beer, but overprotective daddy is still vigilant..."

Both Talia and Keith laughed and that stopped when Keith abruptly gasped for air and lowered his head.

"Keith?", Talia asked with concern, and it took her a moment to see Damon standing a few steps away with an icy expression.

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How did Damon find his way to Keith's secret spot?

Let's rewind a bit...

Damon rushed from the packhouse, convinced that something is wrong with Talia.

When Maya told him that the group who was with Talia has no idea where Talia went, Damon thought that he is going to lose his mind.

'Don't call our warriors to search for her now!', Caden spoke into the mind-link with urgency. 'Everyone will be alerted, and it will be the same as putting a neon sign above Talia's head for Alpha Richard and everyone else to see.'

'Give us a few minutes to look into this discretely.', Maya added. 'Talia is the MVP of the tournament. Someone saw her, we just need to investigate this without alerting people...'

They have warriors everywhere as covert security, and no incident was reported.



Damon eliminated the possibility of Talia willingly going with someone because she didn't really know anyone, and considering her inexperience, Damon was worried that she was tricked.

Was she kidnapped? Did his enemies already find out who she is? Did they connect that the woman who got Alpha Richard's interest is Talia? What if she was being tortured right now?

Damon cursed himself for sitting next to Talia during lunch. If he stayed away, this wouldn't happen.

He needed to find her.

The sliver of hope came when Maya confirmed that coach Keith is missing also, and he was in that same group with Talia.

A few seconds later, Caden said that Keith was spotted going with the MVP of the tournament (aka Talia) in the direction of Keith's house.

Damon suppressed all unreasonable scenarios and rushed in that direction.

Katya was startled awake via the mind-link from Maya less than a minute before Damon banged on the door of her house.

Katya didn't know where Keith went (she was sleeping when he came to grab the beer), but she remembered that he had a few spots he would use when he didn't want to be found. As an older sister, Katya knew everything about Keith.

Normally, Katya wouldn't rat on her brother, but this was her Alpha and she had to obey.

Katya gave Damon general direction and Damon was quick to pick up Keith's scent.

And that's how Damon found himself looking at Talia and Keith sitting on the grass and sipping beer in a good mood while talking about some mother-father nonsense.

Damon thought that Talia might be hurt and suffering, and this... What the hell is this!?

Damon was glad that she was OK, but why the heck was she here with another guy?

And why was Talia looking at Damon like he was not welcome?

Damon felt the urge to rip Keith's limbs off, and his fury was amplified by his wolf's rage.

'How dares he covet our mate!', Damon's wolf growled. 'Let's kill him right now as an example!'

Damon wanted to cripple Keith, and he would probably do so if Talia was not there. Damon knew that Talia is a gentle spirit and if Damon gives in to this raging madness, she will hate him.

He decided to deal with Keith later.

"Leave."

Damon's icy tone sent chills down Keith's spine and the latter could feel murderous intent.

Keith was about to stand up when Talia grabbed his forearm.

"Stay."

Keith felt like crying.

How on earth was he supposed to refuse a command from an Alpha?

And why was Talia's one word dispelling his urge to obey Alpha Damon?

Chapter 110 - Opening Up [Bonus ]

Damon's frown deepened at Keith's resistance, and he increased his pressure. "I said, leave."

"And I said, that he should stay.", Talia said to Damon stubbornly, like his Alpha aura didn't affect her not even a little bit.

Damon would be impressed by her tenacity, if not for the pesky fly that somehow didn't leave.

The only thing that saved Keith's neck at that point was the fact that there was some distance between him and Talia. If Keith dared to touch her, Damon would eliminate every part of Keith's body that came into contact with Talia.

Damon glared at Keith who stumbled to get on his feet and the back of his shirt was drenched in a cold sweat like someone poured a bucket of water on him.

Keith's werewolf instincts made him painfully aware of how close he was to being ripped into shreds.

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"I'm sorry Talia, but..."

Talia was upset that Keith gave in to Damon's unreasonable demand, but she was even more upset that Damon came here like he owns the place.

He might be the Alpha of the Dark Howlers pack, but he is not her boss!

Damon promised that he will come to the festival, and he didn't. Instead of following through on his word, he ended up getting himself a woman, and then he showed up out of nowhere and spoiled this little peace she managed to create for herself (with Keith and Cinna).

Even for someone as timid as Talia, that was the last straw.

She was done with being pushed around and humiliated.

Talia came to the Dark Howlers pack to improve her life, but thanks to Damon, everything was going downhill. The moment she makes some progress, Damon casts a shadow on it.

At this rate, it would be better if she just stayed in that attic. Actually, anywhere will be good as long as it's far away from this Devil.

"Fine!", Talia exclaimed.

She collected the lunchbox and the plush toy, and stood up. She grabbed Keith's hand. "Let's go."

Damon couldn't believe this. He swatted Keith's hand away from Talia and pulled Talia toward him. "Where are YOU going?"

Talia stepped away from Damon. "You said that Keith should leave, and I'm leaving with him."

"The hell you are!", Damon snapped.

"And what will you do if I don't listen? Spank me again?", Talia hissed.

Keith's mouth hung open. What did he hear just now?

Damon glared at Keith whose knees turned into jelly. At this rate, Alpha will really kill him.

Damon pinched the roof of his nose and exhaled irritably before turning to Talia, "I said that he should leave because I want to talk to you. Or are you fine being here with the coach in his screwing hideout?"

Keith's mind was spinning. First Talia got him into trouble, and now Alpha Damon? How did he find himself in the middle of this (whatever this is)?

Talia paused and her eyes moved to Keith. "Is that true? Is this where you bring women to...?" She couldn't finish.

"It's not like that.", Keith was quick to say.

Keith had no idea why he was denying it. But Talia looked like a disappointed girlfriend while Damon looked like a furious parent who caught his daughter's boyfriend trying to get into her panties. And how did Damon know that this was Keith's hookup spot?

"No one needs your explanations.", Damon squeezed through his teeth at Keith. "Leave, or do you want me to make you?"

Keith saw Damon flexing his fingers into a fist repeatedly and he stepped away on an instinct.

"I was just worried about Talia.", Keith said.

"Talia should be warier of you than me.", Damon said curtly. "Now, scram."

Keith hesitated because he didn't want to leave Talia at Damon's mercy, but the truth was that if Damon wanted to do something, Keith couldn't stop him. Also, Talia said that she is staying in the packhouse, so if Damon was set on doing something despicable, he could do it there without anyone knowing, and not here in the open.

After thinking about his options, Keith realized that staying won't serve any purpose other than him getting seriously injured.

Keith gave a guilty look to Talia and then he scurried away.

Talia couldn't believe this. She clutched her lunch box and the plushie puppy (aka Cinna) and moved to pass by Damon.

Damon blocked her way. "Where do you think you are going?"

Talia was exasperated. "Why are you here?"

"You said that you will wait for me. You said that you will not leave me." All the rage was gone from Damon's voice, leaving only sadness that made him sound like he was pleading.

Talia realized that he was not talking only about the festival, but about the promise she made when he took her to the amusement park.

"I said that I won't leave as long as you need me."

"I need you."

Talia shook her head. "That's not true."

Damon didn't get it. "What makes you say that?"

Talia inhaled a shaky breath, regretting that the beer she drank didn't give her a bigger buzz. Maybe if she was intoxicated, she wouldn't care. If only these unreasonable pesky feelings go away, everything would be so much simpler.

Talia steeled her will and looked into Damon's icy-blue eyes that were full of questions.

"You don't need me, Damon. If you do, you would come when you said you will, and not spend time with some she-wolf you picked up after lunch."

Damon was confused. What she-wolf? "Is that what you think?"

"It's not what I think. It's what everyone thinks."

"Who is everyone?"

"For every festival, you pick up a girl and no one sees you until morning. Is that false? Is everyone lying? Why did you say you will come back? Why did you say you will spend the evening at the fair with me?" Why did you make me feel like I matter? "Was the girl you picked up earlier not good enough? Why don't you pick up another one and leave me alone?"

Talia exhaled in frustration. She couldn't believe that she lost her temper and said all those things.

"I'm sorry, Damon. I said that I will not leave, and I said that I will stay in that room, but I can't. I don't belong there."

Damon touched Talia's chin and tilted her head up so that he can see her face.

"And where do you belong, kitten?"

Talia pressed her lips into a line. Why did he call her kitten? Why was he playing with her heart? Why did he look at her like he cares?

"What do you want from me, Damon?"

"You are asking the wrong question."

"And what question should I ask?"

"This is not about what I want. It's about what YOU want.", Damon said and inched closer to Talia until they were close enough for him to wrap her into his embrace.

Talia felt Damon's warmth all around her and his firm body against hers and his scent... and she hated that somehow she ended up leaning on him. How can she be strong and independent if one hug from the Devil is all she needs for her resolve to crumble?

"You want to leave?", Damon murmured into Talia's hair. "I won't stop you, kitten, but first, I need you to be honest with yourself. Where will you go? Where do you belong? Is there a place you would feel better than right here?"

Talia was stunned. Damon's words were outrageous and confident and... he was right.

She didn't have a place to go, not because she didn't know where, but because right there in his embrace, she felt at home.

Talia looked up at Damon to meet his icy-blue eyes. No matter how she thought about this, it didn't make sense.

Sure, she fell for Damon, but what about him? Why was he sticking to her and giving her hopes that there might be something more than her wishful imagination? Or is he really a cruel person and only playing games with her?

"Why are you doing this, Damon?", she asked in a whisper.

"Because there is only one girl who gets to call herself Mrs. Blake. It's just you, kitten."

Talia didn't get it. "Why?"

"You make me smile, no matter how my day went. Your proximity puts my mind at ease. You make me feel not alone..."



And that did it. Talia's vision blurred with tears in an instant as the dam which contained her emotions gave in.

That feeling of not being alone... she had that as well.

Since she was aware of her existence, Talia was always alone. In the common building which some called the orphanage, and later in the attic. Talia was used to it, that's how things were supposed to be.

However, when she was with this Alpha who suffers from severe mood swings, who makes her feel all kinds of emotions she believed are only for someone else to experience, under all those fears and insecurities, with Damon's proximity and his solid embrace, Talia felt not alone and she didn't hate it. Not even a little bit.

The insulated lunch bag and the plush toy fell on the grass at the same time as Talia's arms moved around Damon to fist his shirt.

Damon's heart cracked because he could feel her emotional turmoil, but he was also a bit happy because he knew that she finds comfort in him.

Talia was not ready to admit the strength of her emotions, but she needed him, just how he needed her, even though she couldn't feel the bond.

Damon picked up Talia gently, and he sat on the ground with his legs crossed in the lotus position before placing Talia to sit right there.

He cradled her in his arms and rocked gently while waiting for her to cry it out.

"It's OK, kitten... let it out...", he murmured and Talia cried harder, releasing all the frustration and helplessness she piled up within her over the years.

Since Damon met Talia, he saw her timid and embarrassed and happy and expressing many other emotions, but he never saw her crying.

He despised every sob which escaped her beautiful lips, yet he knew that this was Talia showing him her vulnerable side. She was opening up to him. Finally.

At that moment, Damon didn't only embrace Talia's body. He embraced her aching heart and her mind full of insecurities, and Damon hoped that he will be able to instill in Talia this sense of belonging that can be experienced only when mates are together.