

Alphas Bride 501

Chapter 501 Yin Yang [Bonus chapter]

Talia ran up the stairs like the wind with Maya struggling to catch up to her.

Talia could feel Damon's pain clearly which came with his internal scream that threatened to break her heart into pieces. Regret. Sorrow. Desperation. Self-loathing. And she knew that he remembered, at least some of it.

"Damon!", she called from the door, and she crumbled to her knees by his side.

He was lying on the floor with a layer of dark mist around him.

'What is this?', Talia asked Liseli with her hands hovering an inch above Damon, fearing that if she touches him she might make it worse.

'He is fighting the dark magic.'

'Can we help him?'

'His Betas are watching.', Liseli said. 'I thought you wanted to keep your abilities a secret.'

Talia lifted her gaze to see Maya and Caden at the door with confusion and concern obvious on their faces.

'It doesn't matter.', Talai said to Liseli.

Caden wanted to go by Damon's side, but Maya held him back. Somehow, she had a feeling that Talia's got this.

Talia's hands started glowing in silvery light that mixed with the dark layer around Damon, making it turn grayish.

'More, we need more...', Talia urged Liseli.

Liseli didn't respond, but Talia knew that Liseli agreed. Damon was fighting not only with the dark magic, but also with the negativity because of what happened, and this was Talia's way of assuring him that she was by his side.

Maya and Caden stared at the scene in front of them that looked like it came from a science fiction movie.

Talia's whole body was glowing in silvery light that was merging with the darkness around Damon, making them look like a real-life Yin Yang sign.

'Damon... Damon... Do you feel me?', Talia spoke without using any words. 'I need you to wake up. I'm here. I need you. It's OK. Please, wake up.'

Talia didn't know if he can hear her, but she hoped she was helping him dispel the wretched magic that shut down the amazing connection they were sharing.

Talia's body trembled from exhaustion, days without sleep and not enough food took their toll on her body, but Talia didn't give up. She couldn't.

Some of his darkness seeped into her hands, but she didn't care. For weeks, Damon was by her side, patiently waiting for her to feel the bond and recognize him as her mate, and this was her turn to show support, in the only way she knew how.

She remembered when they met in the kitchen of the Red Moon pack. His expression was stern and scary, but later Talia realized how that was his way of showing concern. Damon wasn't upset that she was in the kitchen getting food, he was upset because she was hurt. She knew that now. From that moment onward Damon was obsessed with Talia's wellbeing, and even though there were moments she didn't know why he was doing things he did, now she was confident that he was doing everything he could to keep her safe.

In his silly, overbearing, reckless way, he was protecting her even when he jumped on rogues only to get himself stabbed with a wolfsbane-laced knife. Silly Alpha.

"Come on, Damon...", Talia spoke in a whisper. "You can do this. I am here. We can do this. Come back to me."

The silvery light was bright to the point of making everything in the room turn white and then it flashed in a blinding surge before it dimmed completely.

Maya hovered above Talia who was now slumped above Damon.

"What do you think?", she asked Caden.

"They are alive.", Caden responded and visually inspected two unmoving bodies, happy that they stopped glowing and the grayish mist was gone, and he hoped that was a good thing. "Let's move them to bed."

Maya and Caden lifted Talia with ease and placed her on the bed, and Damon was next.

Without opening her eyes, Talia scooted closer to Damon and put her hand on his chest.

Maya shook her head while observing the duo.

"What?", Caden asked.

"I wanted Cornelia to show me magic, yet Talia was right here, hiding a secret."

"Don't overthink it. I'm sure she has her reasons for hiding it.", Caden said. "It's best we pretend we didn't see anything until she reveals that on her own."

He tugged her to sit on the sofa. "Let's sit and watch over them. This might be a long night."

"What can we do if something happens?"

Caden shrugged. "Be a witness. Make sure no one disturbs them. That's what Betas do for their Alphas."

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Damon groaned lowly, and before he opened his eyes he felt a warm presence by his side. It was a familiar shape that fit perfectly with the curves of his body, and the sparks that ignited wherever they touched confirmed it was Talia.

He opened his eyes to see Talia's hair spread over his chest and smiled a little in relief. All the negativity he experienced must be a nightmare because there was no way that he forgot how important Talia was, and even if he didn't remember her, he wouldn't leave her behind in an unknown place. And she was right there, in their room, it was all good.

"Are you yourself?"

Caden's question made Damon look that way and he frowned. Why were Caden and Maya there?

"What do you mean?", Damon asked. The rumble in his chest made Talia stir and he tightened his hold on her.

"I mean. Do you know who I am? Do you know who she is?", Caden gestured toward Talia, and Damon's stomach sank. Was it possible it was not a nightmare?

Damon responded with a nod.

"Talía went through a lot of shit to get you back, Damon.", Caden said. "You brought Marcy into the packhouse, and she believes you will make her his Luna."

"I will fix it.", Damon said.

"I hope so. Are you OK now?"

Damon was not sure how to respond to this. Was he OK? His mind was in turmoil and his emotions were a mess, and Caden was talking again.

"Can we go to our room? If you feel anything is off with your head or your body, mind-link me. Don't keep this shit from me, man. This is so much bigger than you and your ego. I thought I lost you. We all did."

Maya didn't speak, but her troubled expression told Damon that she felt the same way as Caden.

"I will.", Damon said before calling, "Caden, Maya... thank you."

The Beta duo nodded, and they left the bedroom in silence.

Damon turned to look at Talía and he cradled her in his arms, pulling her as close as possible to his body, needing that physical touch to confirm that she was there, and this was real instead of those horrible images of him running through the forest, sitting at the dining table with Marcy by his side, leaving the cave after he shoved Talía away... His body trembled because he somehow knew that those were real also. How the hell was he going to make up this to Talía? How was he going to get over the heart-wrenching pain in his chest because he hurt his mate?

Chapter 502 The pretty and the ugly side (1)

Talía took a deep breath that filled her system with the addictive scent of the forest and dark chocolate. Damon. He was by her side, his solid arms were around her, and she wished that the last few days were just a bad dream, but the regret and sorrow that seeped into her through the mate bond told her that

she was not imagining it, and she knew he was awake and drowning himself in the grief of what happened in the last few days.

Talia looked up to meet Damon's icy-blue eyes full of emotions directed at her.

"How are you feeling?", she asked.

"I am so sorry, kitten.", he croaked, his voice breaking.

She was saddened to see him like that but also relieved because she knew he was back. Her Damon was back.

"It's not your fault."

He shook his head. "And whose fault was it?"

"If I didn't mark you...", Damon put his index finger to stop her from talking, but she pushed his hand away. "No, Damon. I want you to know that it was not your fault. I marked you and when you didn't wake up in the morning and I realized that besides glowing all over you had a fever, I panicked, and I called Axel. He came with Alpha Isaac, and I agreed that we go to the Midnight Guardians territory, believing they will help you."

Damon's brows came together in a frown as he listened to Talia's story about how Alpha Isaac and Alpha Sophia feared that he was getting too powerful, and Cassandra performed dark magic, and how Axel, Tyler, Kai, and Meg helped them get into the cave where he woke up after three days.

Damon was shocked and fascinated to find out how he found himself without memories. There was so much information that he was not sure what to focus on first, but then Talia reached the point of him waking up and she conveniently skipped what happened during those three days, and he knew that she was sparing him from feeling more guilty than he already was.

"When I woke up, I was disoriented and confused, and the only thing on my mind was to return home.", Damon said. "I know it's not much of an excuse, but I really didn't know who you were. You were talking

about dangers and asking me to stay, I couldn't feel the bond, and I thought that you are trying to deceive me..."

"Shh...", Talia shushed him because she could feel his emotions and she knew he was on the verge of hyperventilating. "I'm not done."

Damon pressed his lips into a line and tilted his head, indicating to Talia to continue.

"It wouldn't matter if you stayed because you couldn't remember me. I decided to go back and find out what they did to you and how to revert the process."

"You went back?", Damon asked breathily. "What about Alpha Isaac and Alpha Sophia?" Damon's expression darkened. Those two Alphas were set to harm him, and it caused him to forget about his mate, about the rightful Luna of his pack. That meant war!

Talia realized how that was another story, and she didn't want to talk about her so-called family or about her being the Alpha of the Midnight Guardians pack. Talia decided to keep those parts for later. "Axel helped me. Things happened and he took over the Alpha position from his parents." That was the short version with a few details omitted.

Damon felt jealousy swelling at the gentle voice Talia used when talking about Axel. Normally, Damon would blow a fuse, but this time he swallowed his grievances because he bailed on Talia, and he had no right to question her about what happened after that. He left her on her own, and his little mate managed to do the impossible. He forced himself to focus on what Talia was saying.

"After talking to Cassandra, we realized that she knew only how to use dark magic and she had no idea how to dispel it, but she said that black runes originated from witches, so we went to find them."

"Witches? How did you do all that in only one day?"

"Time passes differently there compared to here, and..." Talia stopped talking because there was so much to say, and she remembered that she can fast-forward through it. 'Can I show him?'

'Yes.', Liseli responded, glad that Talia remembered this form of communication. 'Get closer to Damon. Physical contact will help because Sapa is not here to accept the information.'

Just how they exchanged memories on the night when Damon and Talia marked each other, Talia scooted higher on Damon's body, and Damon didn't resist when Talia pressed her forehead against his.

"Relax and let me in, Damon.", Talia said.

Damon saw images flashing in his mind.

Axel and Cassandra walking with Talia through the sparse forest... silhouettes of women dancing in front of a bonfire... Evanora, Cornelia, the deal that Axel made in Talia's place... the moment when Axel and Yasmin touched for the first time in Evanora's office... Talia learning spells... Talia working in the kitchen... The celebration with witches... Axel and Yasmin in the fountain, holding each other and glowing... The witches following them back to the portal... The potion that was mixed in his food so that he remembers Talia.

Talia thought that was enough and she wanted to move away, but Liseli didn't let her.

And then Damon saw the scene in the cave when he pushed Talia away, and he felt her anguish when he left and the pain that went beyond her broken tailbone... and then he saw Axel hugging Talia and comforting her and telling her that he will help her get Damon back... and everyone gathered in the guest bedroom around Talia while planning to keep Marcy away from Damon... and Talia watching on the screen Damon having dinner and Marcy sitting in Talia's place and holding Damon's wrist.

Talia yanked her head away from Damon's.

'Why are you showing him this?', Talia asked Liseli.

'Because he needs to know. You can't show him only pretty things and hope that he will understand what you went through.'

Talia could feel Liseli's sadness. Sapa was not there.

'We will get Sapa back, Liseli. In two days.'

'Only if Damon understands how much we suffered to reach this point and how much is at stake!', Liseli said angrily.

Talia understood Liseli's anger. She reunited with Sapa only for Sapa to be taken away again, but Talia thought that making Damon feel worse than he already was, won't achieve anything.

"Damon?", Talia called when she saw that his eyes were closed firmly.

Damon wrapped Talia in a tight embrace and pushed her head into the crook of his neck, so that she can't see his face, but his whole body shook, and she knew he was crying.

"You went through so much without me, because of me, and I would do anything to take it back, only if I could.", he said in a broken whisper. "I don't deserve you."

Chapter 503 The pretty and the ugly side (2)

At the thought of Axel comforting Talia, Damon was torn that someone else supported his mate, because of the stupid thing he did.

Sure, at that time Damon didn't recognize Talia as his mate, but the emptiness he felt when they were apart should have made him stop and think about what was happening. Only Talia could fill the gap in his chest that was shaped so that she can fit in there perfectly, and if he was not a stubborn mule, he would realize that regardless of the mate bond.

Damon held Talia tightly as turbulent emotions shifted and changed, the happiness of their reunion and her holding him mixed with grief and sadness that cracked his soul because he was a complete asshole. Can he ever fix all the wrongs he did to her?

The mental image of Axel and Yasmin celebrating their union with magic and witches was a painful reminder that he never acknowledged Talia in front of his people.

Talia got to see how mates react when they recognize each other for the first time, and every time Talia was genuinely happy for her friends even though Damon never gave her such an experience. Actually, he sullied it because he was with Marcy at that time.

Damon cringed. When Talia saw him for the first time, Marcy was sucking him off, and then Talia faced Cassie, and many other women he shagged without bothering to remember them with the last one being Nora, yet even with all that dirt, Talia accepted him. This same evening Talia saw him close to Marcy, and she was still holding onto him.

Talia was such a beautiful soul and the only thing he did was hurt her over and over again.

Talia was recognized as the MVP of the tournament, others knew her as his assistant, but only a handful of people were aware of how important Talia really was. And she endured all the scornful looks and gossips, and even fought for him. He wondered if he deserved such a wonderful mate.

Damon's turbulent emotions crashed on Talia, breaking the dam that held her together, and Talia hugged him tightly while dissolving into sobs herself.

Talia was happy that Damon was back, she really was, but for days she was ignoring her grief, finding ways to push through her insecurities and keep going, and now it all swelled into an unstoppable tsunami that threatened to swallow her whole.

Damon prayed that she stops crying because it was killing him from the inside, but he knew that she needed to let it out.

He kissed Talia's hair and patted her back gently while waiting for her to cry it out.

Eventually, her sobs subsided, and he said, "I'm sorry that I hurt you so much."

"Don't think that way.", Talia responded through sniffles. "This was not your fault."

"But it is my fault.", he said. "If I was stronger, I wouldn't be influenced by some mumbo-jumbo."

Talia smiled a little. "But you are strong, Damon. You are my strength. Whenever I doubted if I can go on, I was thinking about you. You are my mate, my other half. We are meant to be together."

He wanted to say how he feels the same, but he couldn't because instead of remembering what was important, he was wandering aimlessly like a headless fly and who knew where he would end up if Talia didn't show up to rescue him.

Considering his history, it was only a matter of time before he messes up again.

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"How long will the potion work?", he asked, fearing that he will forget about her.

"I'm not sure.", Talia responded honestly. "Six to twelve hours, but it could be less or more."

They tested the potion on Cassandra, but Damon was much stronger than the Oracle, and that could mean that he will resist the dark magic, or maybe he resists the potion. I could go either way. And there was also the variable of Talia using her power to dispel the dark mist that seeped out of Damon's body. With any luck, he won't need more potion in the next two days, but Talia didn't dare to be so hopeful.

"If you feel strange, let me know and I will give you another dose. In two days, on the night of a full moon, I can perform a ceremony that will dispel the dark magic completely."

Damon didn't like this uncertainty. Was there nothing he could do other than wait and hope for the best? "I was stupid before we met, and this incident showed that I am still the same bonehead because I couldn't see that you are everything good in my life. Even if this thing wipes my memories completely, I need a foolproof way of reminding myself that you are my most important person."

Talia smiled a little. She knew he meant it, but how will he accomplish that?

Without letting go of Talia, Damon reached to the side table from where he got his backup phone.

He powered it on and recorded himself with a short message, "Trust Talia and drink what she gives you. You took her to see your parents."

Satisfied with this, Damon sent the video to Talia. "If I forget about you and I refuse to drink the potion, make me see this."

"Will that be enough?"

Damon kept the phone back and gave her a meaningful look. "You are the first woman I introduced to my parents. Even if I forget about you, I will know what it means that I took you there. If you tell me what you saw on that clearing, I will believe you."

"Should I include the detail of you jumping into the waterfall?"

Damon cocked an eyebrow at her. "Include that you jumped after me, and what we did after that in the grass."

Talia pursed her lips, knowing that he was set on teasing her, but she couldn't relax. She was unsettled at the possibility that Damon might forget about her without any warning. It was like they had an expiration date and things could crumble at any moment.

Seeing that Talia's mood was worsening, Damon touched her chin to make her look up to him.

"Trust in yourself, kitten. Trust in us. You have no idea how many times you pulled me from the darkness and showed me the way. I want us to announce you as my mate first thing in the morning. Like that, even if I forget things again, at least our people will know who you are."

Talia disagreed. What was the point of others knowing if Damon would reject her?

"James' plan makes sense, let's not ruin it and risk war. This is the last step, and in the morning we will talk to Marcy. Besides, it won't make any difference if others know that I'm your mate. The only thing I care about is that you know."

"But..."

"No buts.", Talia interrupted him. "I learned that we shouldn't dwell on the past, we can't change it. We shouldn't count that things will get better in the future because we don't know what's coming. The only thing we have is now, and I want to spend my now with you, Damon."

Chapter 504 Connected in body, soul, and mind (1)

Damon looked at the little woman in his arms and smiled sadly while suppressing the pinch in the back of his throat. He won't cry, not now when she was looking at him.

Damon was happy Talia was by his side, but the guilt was eating him alive.

During their time apart, Damon felt the emptiness as his instincts screamed that something was wrong, yet he couldn't figure out what it was. He thought he was losing his mind, and somehow, he was confident it was her fault; why else would she confine him in that cave? He was such an idiot.

It was just over a day for him, and so much longer for her. Damon couldn't imagine how Talia felt after he pushed her away and left without acknowledging her for who she was. His mate, his other half, someone to whom he belonged, yet he acted with hostility.

If Talia left him like that, he would... he was not sure what he would do. But here was Talia holding him and trying to conceal any negativity so that he feels better. When did the tables turn, and she started shielding him? And it's not just from enemies, but from his own stupidity as well.

Talia could feel Damon's emotions and she knew that he was blaming himself, even though most of it was her fault.

"I am blaming myself, and you think you were lacking.", Talia said. "We won't get anywhere if we continue like this."

Damon was aware that her words made sense. How was it possible that even with all this mess she kept her cool and knew what to do without crumbling? Damon looked into her eyes attentively. "You are stronger."

Talia was not sure if he said that because of her words, or maybe he sensed that she is the Alpha of a pack now, or maybe... "Of course, I am. You marked me."

He looked at her neck. "Did I?"

Talia's lips lifted into a smile. "And I marked you as well. You are mine and I am yours and we don't need visible marks to prove it. Liseli told me that our souls are entangled, and our bond goes deeper than the skin, just like our marks."

Damon liked the part about their bond being deep, but... "I was still hoping to see a mark." He would look at it every day to confirm that this wonderful woman was his mate, and he would make her wear low-collared garments so that everyone else can see it also.

Talia pressed her palm against his chest. "Do you feel this? Do you feel the connection between us, Damon?"

He put his hand to cover hers. "I do." It went beyond the mate bond, and that was the problem. Every cell in his body was telling him that being with Talia was right, yet he still chose to leave. If he could go back in time, to that cave, he would give himself a good beating.

"This connection is a confirmation that we are meant to be together, Damon. No matter what happens, and no matter how far apart we are, we will find our way back to each other.", Talia said. Seeing that Damon's expression was not good, she thought of reminding him, "Do you remember the amusement park, when I walked away, and you found me with three guys who were bothering me?"

Damon's brows came together while wondering where she was going with that, and he gave her a small nod.

"And do you remember when I fell asleep in the forest, and you found me even though it was the middle of the night?"

Damon nodded again.

"And at the Summer Solstice festival..."

"In front of the clocktower." Damon finished her thought.

Talia smiled. "Yes. And next to the lake when I was drinking beer with Keith. You could feel the bond, and I couldn't. But I was glad that you came for me because no matter the circumstances, with you by my side, I was happy. You found me so many times, and this was my turn to find you."

Somehow, this made him feel a bit better. "Thank you for finding me, kitten."

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Talia looked at Damon and she really wanted to kiss him, but they needed to address a few more things.

"Sapa is still sealed. On the night of the full moon, I will need you to go to a designated spot so I can perform a ritual that the witches taught me.", Talia said. "Once the spot is prepared, the ritual shouldn't take more than a few minutes, so we can do it during the pack run without people noticing. We might need a small diversion..."

Damon's ears perked up when he realized how that was the reason why the old creature was not responding.

"Will the ritual help?", he asked.

"It should. The witches analyzed the spell Cassandra used on you. It seems that she combined a few, so the effect of the counter-spell is uncertain, but the two black runes that affected you sealed your heart and your spiritual strength. The potion weakened one of them."

Talia stopped talking when she felt that his anger was rising.

"That Oracle, Alpha Isaac, and Alpha Sophia will pay for this.", Damon squeezed through his teeth.

"Damon?", Talia called. "I need you to focus. We have two days until the pack run and a lot to do. Axel has the Midnight Guardians pack under control, so let's not worry about them for now. We should deal with Alpha Edward and dispel the dark magic. I want Marcy off her delusional throne. Until the spell is broken completely, I need you to pay attention to your condition, so it doesn't deteriorate. You are not alone in this as I can feel the bond, and I will sense if it's closing up again. We will get Sapa back. If the spell in two days doesn't work, we will go back to the realm of witches and try something else. After your condition is stable, we can look at other matters."

Damon's jaw tightened. He knew that she was right, but he felt wronged. Those wretched Alphas wanted to cripple him, and that hurt Talia and endangered his whole pack. How can he live with those grievances? Damon had an urge to punish the culprits as soon as possible, and breaking some bones would definitely calm some of his anger.

Damon's eyebrows shot up when he felt soft lips covering his and igniting a flurry of electric sparks all over his body. It was much stronger than ever before, and he realized that he didn't get a chance to analyze their bond since their marking.

"I missed you, Damon...", Talia said, and then she kissed him again. "Please, until morning, let us be just the two of us."

Damon's insides shook when Talia's longing swelled within him. She really missed him, and she needed more than hugs.

Chapter 505 Connected in body, soul, and mind (2)

Damon's hand disappeared into Talia's hair and his fingers grazed her scalp as he grabbed a fistful of her copper-colored locks, and he held her head in place when he deepened the kiss, kissing her like he was starving for her.

Talia whimpered under Damon's invasion that filled her system with his flavors and her hands swiftly disappeared under his t-shirt, eager to feel the landscape of his back and to pull him closer, much closer than they were at that moment.

Talia's touch seeped under his skin, relaxing the tension that was etched deep into his bones, and he held onto her tightly, like she was his lifeline because she was.

Slowly, very slowly, they undressed each other, their kisses unbreakable, and by the time the last garments touched the floor, they were both breathing heavily.

His tongue glided at the base of her neck, where his invisible mark was, and a shaky breath escaped her lips.

"Do it again...", she asked, and he obeyed.

Talia gripped Damon's shoulders tightly as her whole body shook in the rhythm of his tongue on her neck, igniting the arousal that muddled her mind. Talia thought that she might have an orgasm just by him licking and kissing her there, and she wondered if his neck will be so sensitive as well.

"Ahh...", it was his turn to exhale audibly when Talia kissed the spot where she marked him and she smiled against his skin, happy that she could affect him in such a way. But even more touching was that this strong Alpha was baring his neck for her, exposing his weak spot in a show of trust.

Talia licked the base of Damon's neck, where her invisible mark was on him, and she enjoyed the way his body shook as he gripped the bedsheet under her.

"Kitten... kitten...", his hot breath caressed her ear as he was grinding at the cradle of her thighs, spreading her juices over his hot and hard shaft, and she knew very well how turned on he was because his arousal amplified hers.

"Don't hold back, Damon...", she said breathily, and then her lips latched to suck on his neck.

Talia's head fell backward into the pillows when he entered her in one powerful jab that made both of them see stars.

She could feel his palm sliding over hers until they aligned, and then their fingers interlaced.

"Hold onto me, kitten. Don't let go."

Talia found his eyes full of emotions staring at her and she knew that he was talking about much more than just holding his hand.

"I will never let go.", Talia said, and her fingers tightened around his.

Talia's lips parted in a silent gasp when his hips moved, the friction creating sparks that reminded them of their bond and that they belong to each other.

"Damon... Damon...", Talia chanted with his every thrust as he kissed her jaw and neck, with a lot of tongue and just a bit of teeth, and she tilted her head to give him better access to the spot where he marked her so that he can kiss and lick her more because that spot right there made her body come alive.

His aura enveloped her completely like a cocoon of safety where she could be herself to laugh, cry, and anything in-between without any judgment, and Talia allowed herself to be lost in passion for the man who made her experience the most intense highs in her life.

Talia could feel the way Damon worshiped her and marveled the sensation of them merging into one, the emotions so strong that it made her want to cry. Knowing that this exquisite specimen loved her so much acted like the most potent aphrodisiac ever, and it allowed her to release all her inhibitions, confident that he won't judge her.

The intensity of sparks caught Damon by surprise. Intimacy with Talia was always the best he ever experienced, but this was on a totally different level. It was like their bodies and their souls were

merging into one in an intimate act that went beyond the pleasures of the flesh. There was a sense of familiarity and belonging, like coming home after a long and arduous journey. Talia was his home.

Damon found himself lapping at her neck, and his fangs were out on their own. It didn't make sense, since he marked Talia already, but his mind was clouded with lust and the addictive sparks, and he didn't want to think about anything other than the feeling of Talia's hot pussy wrapping his cock tightly, always in a perfect grip that made him crave for more.

Talia's sultry sounds told him she was close, and he was close as well.

He gripped her waist and changed his angle slightly before picking up the pace, ready to push her over the edge and follow right after, when piercing pain invaded his neck.

What the hell!? Did she bite him?

But this was not just any bite. It was bone-deep, and he could feel the heat spreading from there through his body.

Damn! She marked him again!

Just as he finished this thought, the pressure in his groin area increased as Talia's insides tightened around his shaft, and his head dipped to sink his fangs into her flesh while he shot his hot seed deep inside her.

Damon groaned as his body and mind were enveloped in pure ecstasy, and he struggled to rock into Talia a few more times in order to prolog their euphoria.

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Damon twitched as Talia's tongue moved over the skin of his neck.

"Mmm...", Talia hummed. 'I love you, Damon. You are mine.'

Damon chuckled, enjoying the possessive tone she used. And he was elated that he didn't pass out this time even though the new energy still simmered inside him, making him stronger in ways he was yet to discover.

Damon licked the spot where he bit her to help her heal, and it took him a few moments to realize that he heard Talia's words while her lips were busy tending to his neck. She didn't talk, yet he heard her, and the sensation was familiar because he experienced it many times before.

He lifted his head to look into her adorably flushed face and unfocused eyes, just in time to see her tongue darting to moisten her lips.

Damon smiled and spoke straight into her mind, 'I love you more, kitten.'

Talia's eyes widened. 'How is this possible?'

Damon's smile widened. 'I think we have our private mind-link, kitten. It's the mate bond.'

She stared at him stupidly. 'Can you hear all my thoughts?'

No. Her expression was changing, and he knew she was thinking about stuff, but he could hear only thoughts directed at him. However, the mischievous part of him didn't want to reveal this limitation.

'Would that be a problem?', Damon asked.

Chapter 506 Connected in body, soul, and mind (3) [Bonus chapter]

"Teach me to block stuff.", Talia demanded and when he cocked an eyebrow at her, Talia quickly explained, "I have the mind-link with the Midnight Guardians pack, and Liseli is helping me keep it closed. I would like to use it, but I don't want to share thoughts that are not for sharing, so I need you to teach me."

"Midnight Guardians...", Damon grumbled. "Forget about them. Once we do the ceremony of you becoming Luna of our pack, your bond with that wretched pack will be broken, and you will get the mind-link with the members of the Dark Howlers pack."

Talia wanted to say it was not that simple. As much as she was not interested in leading a pack, the Midnight Guardians pack members were like her children now and she felt responsible for them. But on the other side, there was Damon. Will she need to choose?

Talia heard stories about how pack members can pledge loyalty to only one Alpha or Alpha-Luna pair, but in the case of a pair, the hierarchy of Alpha being at the top was firm.

Can one Alpha have mind-links with more than one pack?

But this was not the time for discussing mind-links and packs. They were naked, his cock was inside her, and he could hear her thoughts! Or could he? The fact that Damon didn't react when Talia thought of herself as the Alpha of the Midnight Guardians pack, told her that Damon can't hear everything that was on her mind, and she realized that the Devil was teasing her again! She decided to feign ignorance, in order to determine the truth.

"That's not the point.", Talia said. "Even within our pack, I need to learn how to keep some things private. Or do you want everyone to know my dirty thoughts? And what if I expose something that's top-secret?"

Damon had to agree with this one. It would be inconvenient. He wanted to keep this for later, but her discomfort was tangible, so he explained, "The most important is the intent to communicate. For Alphas, we receive thoughts from the ones who submit to us, so you will need to learn to block the noise. However, your thoughts won't go to the ones who are weaker than you are, unless you want it to happen. The weaker ones can learn to shield their minds, but that has limited usability as nothing can prevent a more powerful pack member to hear their thoughts. We don't do it normally because it's an

invasion of privacy, but more than once I ended up overhearing other people's mind-link conversations accidentally. It happens."

Talia wanted to make sure, "So, others can't hear my thoughts unless I want it to happen."

"Correct."

Talia thought how that was handy. Why didn't Axel tell her this simple lesson? But then... maybe this was valid for Damon because Damon was much stronger than Axel.

Talia smiled at Damon foolishly. Her mate is the strongest Alpha! Talia wondered how she stacks against Damon.

"What about us?"

'Can you hear this?', Damon's voice sounded in her mind, and Talia nodded.

A second later, he asked with a normal voice, "How about that?"

Talia shook her head. "There was nothing."

Damon smirked in satisfaction. "You can hear my thoughts only if I want to share." A moment later, he admitted the second part, "And it's the same for me from you."

Pride swelled within Talia. "Doesn't that mean we are equals?"

Damon hummed in confirmation. "Equals." He liked that.

Damon's eyes widened in shock when graphic images of Damon pounding himself inside Talia from behind flashed in his mind. What was that?

Talia smiled and Damon heard her smug voice in his head, 'It seems I can share more than just voice. Images work as well.' Talia remembered how Liseli shared information previously and thought of giving it a try.

Damon gaped at her. 'Was that you?' Was she telling him how she wants him to take her? Damn! That was hot! This mind connection will definitely come in handy!

Talia's arms snaked around his neck, and she pulled herself higher to speak against his lips, "Make love to me, Damon. We have until morning..."

Damon closed the fraction between them and kissed her fervently, eager to fulfill her every need and want, especially if it involved more sex.

While Talia and Damon were indulging in carnal pleasures...

James, Petra, Erik, and Zack returned after their night out in Darkbourne. They didn't go inside the packhouse but made a circle around it and went to the garden.

James was having the time of his life.

After a day full of fun and games, they had dinner in a restaurant. James could order whatever he wanted, it was noisy, he drank beer while getting the sauce from roasted ribs everywhere, and there was no one to tell him that the future Alpha should mind his image.

Whenever he attended events with Alpha Edward, James needed to follow his father obediently and use his stoic expression to project an image of a firm and dependable Alpha. Alcohol was prohibited for James, but everyone he knew drank as werewolves don't care about the legal age for drinking that applies to humans.

Well, his father was not present to control him now, and James knew that it was a matter of days before he needed to return to his exhausting routine, so he wanted to make the most of the time he had left here. He thought of this as his early birthday present.

After getting their fill of delicious food, James, Petra, Erik, and Zack headed toward the lake where on the clearing was a bonfire and a lot of teens gathered. Someone brought a guitar and there was music and dancing and James joined them for skinny dipping in the lake. There was plenty of beer to complete the experience of an evening to remember, and even though James was not much of a dancer, he didn't refuse when some girls invited him to join.

Zack told James how that was normal for an evening during summer, but James never experienced anything like that.

For James, this whole visit to the Dark Howlers pack was like a vacation, the best one ever, and that was why he didn't object when they went around the packhouse, thinking that his friends have another pleasant surprise for him. Why else would they go to the darkest part of the garden?

Well, James was surprised, or more like shocked when Petra pushed him behind her, and Zack and Erik stood on Petra's left and right.

"Come out. No need to sneak around.", Zack said sternly into the darkness.

James' eyes widened when the bush moved a bit and a dark figure showed herself.

"I am not sneaking.", a female voice responded.

Petra snorted. "Yeah, right. Why are you following us?"

A set of pearly white teeth was revealed when the female smiled and then she stepped closer, and they could all see a slender woman with chocolate-colored skin wearing a dark-gray t-shirt and shorts. Cornelia.

Chapter 507 Mates? (1)

James was embarrassed at the fact that Petra, Zack, and Erik noticed they were being followed, yet he didn't. No matter how buzzed he was from beer, and how much fun he had, as the future Alpha of the Red Moon pack, he should catch onto these things before others.

James cursed internally. Things like these will make him look incompetent. If his father gets a wind of this, James will get punished and probably his training regime will increase.

The situation became worse when James realized that the woman didn't have a wolf, which meant that his three friends were protecting him from a human. This was definitely a new low from him.

He should be the one standing in front of whatever was coming and confidently telling the intruder to scam or face the consequences, but when his eyes met Cornelia's, James found himself dumbstruck. He never saw a woman more beautiful in his life, and the way his wolf stirred told James that they agreed on this point.

Was she here for him? It seemed like it. Why else would she crane her neck to look at him through the visual obstruction that Petra, Zack, and Erik provided?

Cornelia went to explore the town. Considering her experience with Mindy tackling her, Cornelia decided to stick to the shadows and observe people and surroundings.

The group of four teens got Cornelia's attention as she felt a silent pull she couldn't recognize, so she followed them for most of the evening while trying to figure out what it was.

It's not that no one noticed Cornelia, there were patrols mixed in with regular folks, but without her wolf, they assumed Cornelia is human, hence harmless. Warriors guarding the packhouse knew she was staying there as Gideon's cousin, so no one blocked her way.

"Answer me! Why are you following us!?", Petra demanded, and her shoulders tightened as she lowered her body and her arms spread, ready to attack at any moment.

Cornelia glanced at three teens who were on high alert, and she didn't want to waste words on them. With a wave of her finger, a streak of silvery light appeared out of thin air and split into three, shooting

at Petra, Zack, and Erik who were too surprised to react to this development. They never saw anything like it, and by the time they recovered, neither of them could move a muscle.

'What the hell?', Zack cursed into the mind-link for Petra and Erik to hear.

'I can't move!', Petra exclaimed in panic. 'Should we alert the guards?'

'Wait.', Erik said. 'She doesn't appear hostile.'

'You call this NOT hostile?', Petra hissed.

'We are not harmed. Only incapacitated.', Erik said flatly.

'What will we do if James is harmed?', Petra asked. 'It's our mission to protect him!'

By this time, Zack calmed down enough to analyze the situation. 'If she wanted to harm us, we would be gone before we knew what hit us. I don't like this, but let's think about the consequences. Our only option is to call guards, which would count as a mission failed. Stay alert. Don't rush into things. If she did this on the driveway to the packhouse, we would be gone without knowing what hit us.'

Petra and Erik agreed with this.

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"Can I talk to you?", Cornelia asked James.

"Me?", he asked with surprise evident in his voice. Why would this mysterious beauty want to talk to him?

"Will you hide behind your girlfriend?"

James cleared his throat. "Petra is not my girlfriend. We are just friends."

"Just friends.", Cornelia repeated. "Good."

James firmed his resolve and walked between Petra and Erik to stand in front of them, wondering why neither of them moved. Petra's back was blocking his view and he didn't see the silvery light display.

"What is your name?", Cornelia asked.

"James. Why are you looking for me?"

James dismissed the idea of Cornelia being hostile due to the fact that they were in the middle of the Dark Howlers pack. Who would dare to attack him openly? His next guess was that she was interested in him because of his identity. It wouldn't be the first time for a girl (or a woman) to come onto him. After all, he is the future Alpha of the Red Moon pack.

But she asked for his name, and James wondered if she really didn't know who he was or maybe she was just a good actress, good enough to trick the observation skills that he polished to the extreme.

Cornelia looked at James and her smile faded. "Can't you feel it?"

"Feel what?"

"Aren't you a werewolf?", she asked her next question.

"Yes. So?"

Her eyes moved over his face as if searching for something, and then she released a breath of disappointment.

"Nothing.", Cornelia said and lifted her hand, her index finger rotated in the air, and Petra, Erik, and Zack were able to move now. "I apologize for disturbing you. It seems I made a mistake."

The sadness in her voice cut James' heart in half and when she turned to leave, he was quick to grab her wrist.

"Wait!", James exclaimed. "What should I feel?"

Cornelia stared at the point where he was holding her, his hand warm and firm, big enough to circle her wrist completely.

She twisted her hand, to get out of James' grasp. "Nothing. It's not important."

"But it is!" He knew it was. James moved to stand in front of Cornelia and block her way. "Tell me."

Cornelia thought that there was no harm in asking, "Doesn't your kind feel when you meet your soulmate?"

James' eyes widened. "Mate? Yes, we can feel it." He swallowed hard when he realized an impossible possibility. "Are you saying you are my mate?"

Cornelia shook her head. "Obviously not. Otherwise, you would feel the pull, and there would be no need to ask."

Cornelia was confused. She felt something and while following them, she identified that it was not Petra, nor Zack, not Erik, which left James. And now that he stood in front of her, the energy was clearly there, but maybe it was something else.

She thought that maybe all those clothes were interfering with her senses, so she swiftly removed her t-shirt.

James' eyes widened in shock. No bra!

He couldn't believe that just this sight made his pants tighten in the groin area! Sure, he was a healthy (almost) sixteen years-old boy, but he saw plenty of flesh in his life and this shouldn't affect him so much. However, her breasts were round with perky peaks, and he balled his hands into fists to prevent himself from groping her. When did he turn into a lecher?

James stared at Cornelia's perfectly round breasts for a second longer than appropriate before he was able to force his gaze to meet Cornelia's.

"What about now?", she asked.

"It doesn't work that way.", James squeaked and cursed internally at his voice that betrayed how aroused he was.

Chapter 508 Mates? (2)

James cleared his throat before saying, "I can't feel my mate because... I am not of age yet."

Cornelia looked at James from top to bottom. What did he mean by, not of age yet? "You seem fully grown."

James puffed his chest proudly. Yes, he was tall and muscular for his age, but he still had years to grow and there was also the point... "We can feel it after our eighteenth birthday. Well, some can feel it earlier, but not two years earlier. I am just sixteen years old." He wished that he was older so that he can confirm if the beauty in front of him was his mate. Then he would whisk her away and have sex with her, forever.

"Oh...", a sound of understanding escaped Cornelia's lips. "Well, then... James. I guess I will see you in two years."

James' jaw fell open slack as he stared blankly at Cornelia's retreating back, and it was a beautiful back, just like the rest of her.

James nearly fell when Petra nudged him.

"Are you nuts? If she is your mate, you can't let her go.", Petra hissed.

"But, I don't feel it.", James said.

"Really? Are you saving yourself for your mate?", Erik asked, and James pressed his lips into a line.

It was too late for James to save himself because he already experienced sex with more than one woman. But if he says that, his friends will probably see it as bragging, and not think how sick was for women to throw themselves at a thirteen years-old boy only because his father was an Alpha. Most of the females were in their late teens, but some were much older, and then there were a few girls his age. At first, it was just kissing and fondling, but in time things progressed and who would say no to a free meal?

Eventually, James realized that those women didn't care about him at all, and some of them were coming onto him only because their family pressured them, and James got disgusted by the whole thing. He didn't want to become like his father, a lecherous man who disrespected his chosen mate by sleeping around, so James decided to focus on training and studying, and concealing the fact that he didn't have an Alpha aura.

"Aren't you attracted to her?" It was Petra who asked, making James think about the beauty with chocolate-colored skin and those breasts that would perfectly fill his palms.

James blushed a little. Was he that transparent?

"It seems she thinks you are mates.", Erik said. "Will you be OK if she ends up with another man?"

James' jaw tightened. What other man!? His insides jolted when he realized that he was possessive. This never happened before. "It doesn't make sense. She is not one of us. How can a human recognize a mate?"

"First, she is hot. Second, she was into you. And third, she is not human.", Zack said. "Didn't you see that we didn't move? It was her doing. With a wave of a finger, like magic."

"Is she a fairy?", James asked.

"Whatever she is, it's not human.", Erik responded while scratching the back of his neck. "To be honest, I would give my left testicle for such a beauty to throw herself at me."

Petra made a face at Erik. "Gross." And then she turned to James. "I am watching you for the last few days, so I have an impression that you are not easy to sway. We went skinny dipping tonight and you didn't even blink at any of the girls that were trying to seduce you, yet this one fully clothed made you flustered. And when she removed her top you gaped like you never saw a woman in your life."

James touched his nose. "She is beautiful, but..."

Petra rolled her eyes. "But, what? You are attracted to her, and it's obvious that it's mutual. Go after her. What's the worst that can happen? Just don't be hasty in marking her. Or are you thinking that you are too young? Recent studies show that humans in Iceland and Germany have sex for the first time at fifteen years old, and you are older than that. And not human."

James frowned. Why did Petra know information related to the sexual habits of people from Iceland and Germany? But Petra was right. As much as James saw attractive females, none of them made his heart race or his wolf stir like the dark-skinned beauty that just left.

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Cornelia held her shoes in one hand and her t-shirt in another, and she stood in the grass in front of the packhouse while looking up at the starry sky.

This was her first evening in the human realm, and she wasted it on chasing ghosts. But it was not a complete waste. She saw people walking on the streets and eating in restaurants, and then she saw them dancing in front of the bonfire and going swimming after discarding their clothes.

Now that she was on her own, Cornelia realized that her heart was heavy because she really missed her sisters at home. Maybe she should go back and forget about this exploring the other realms nonsense.

Cornelia saw Yasmin with Axel happy and full of smiles, and she wanted that connection. She jumped on a chance of going with Talia and maybe finding her soulmate, but now she wondered if she was hasty.

She recalled what she did since coming to the human realm. Cornelia met an interesting man tending to plants, but then she got tackled by a jealous she-wolf (aka Mindy), and since then she was mostly stuck in a room. She thought that going out in the evening to explore will help her embrace this new realm, but at the end of the day, she didn't belong here, and she was lonely.

Cornelia decided to talk to Talia in the morning and see if she can return to the Midnight Guardians pack. With Yasmin there, she might feel better, and if that doesn't work, Cornelia will just go home. There were plenty of other witches eager to explore what was on the other side of the portal.

Cornelia felt a prickling sensation on her bare back, like someone was touching her there, along her spine, and she whipped her head to see a person walking toward her. James.

"Did you forget something?", she asked before he could get too close.

She was not in the mood for a chit-chat.

The desire to get closer to him was there again, and this time she didn't want it. She wanted to go home.

James cleared his throat and thought how this conversation would be easier if she put that t-shirt back on instead of holding it in her hand, but at the same time, he didn't want her to cover up.

Of course, Cornelia noticed that his eyes gravitated toward her breasts. She had no problems staying like that, but his behavior irked her.

She folded her arms under her breasts, giving them a push up. "Hey! My eyes are up here."

Chapter 509 Mates? (3)

James felt like an idiot. Did he stare at her breasts and get caught? Since when was he not able to control such a simple thing like where he was looking? It seemed that his years of watching his actions went down the drain in front of Cornelia, and the fact that his wolf was restless was not helping.

"Did I offend you? I apologize.", James said.

Cornelia approved of his docile behavior. "I am not offended. Why are you here?" She thought that their interaction ended in the garden.

"You didn't tell me your name."

"Cornelia."

"Cornelia.", James repeated. "Can I call you Cora?"

Cornelia blinked. No one ever gave her a nickname. Others used her full name, or 'sister' or 'priestess'.
"Is my name so bad that you want to shorten it?"

"I like Cornelia, but I think that nickname makes it more intimate. People who are close get to use nicknames."

"And you think we are close?"

"Two minutes ago, you said we are mates. It doesn't get closer than that."

Cornelia thought how that made sense, but... "There is no point in clinging to what I said if you don't feel it."

"But you can feel it, right? Can you tell me about it? How can you feel it when you don't have a wolf?"
He was genuinely curious.

To Cornelia, it was obvious that James was interested in her, but that was not what she wanted. Cornelia lived for centuries with her sisters from the Coven, and she was not looking for a casual companion. She was hoping for a soulmate, someone who will worship her, and she will do the same in return, someone who will look at her how Axel looked at Yasmin, and if this boy couldn't feel the bond, he could find other women or abandon her completely, and that would break her heart. How Cornelia saw this, it was better not to start anything.

Cornelia grew up with teachings that a soulmate was not about sex and having babies, but it was about acceptance, care, protection, and making each other happy. Over the years, Cornelia imagined her soulmate as tall, short, slim, chubby, male, female, and on a few occasions, she even imagined a plant. But she never thought it would be someone too young to identify their bond. Sure, if James was human he wouldn't feel the bond anyway, but he was a werewolf, and as such he should know better than a witch when his other half was in front of him.

With all that in mind, Cornelia decided not to answer his questions.

"What's the point? No matter what I say, there is no way to prove it. Or will you believe a stranger who approached you with a story that you might be soulmates?"

James agreed with this. If he neglected the attraction, there was definitely no reason to believe her, and he shouldn't throw caution out the window just because she was gorgeous. Dozens of females told him stories about how they were destined to be together, with promises that it will benefit them both if he picked them as his chosen mate, all in the hopes of being the next Luna of the Red Moon pack.

What if Cornelia was just a woman who was after power and status? He shouldn't ignore that possibility.

"So, now what?", James asked.

"Now, nothing. You go your way, and I will go mine."

Cornelia gave him a sad smile and moved around him to go to the packhouse. She didn't want to go back to the room that felt cramped no matter how big it was, but she didn't want to stay outside with James either. The pull was definitely there, but he couldn't feel it, and it gave her a feeling of rejection that was cracking her heart.

James couldn't believe this. "Wait! You are leaving?"

Cornelia stopped in her tracks and turned to face him. "Don't tell me you expected me to stay? If I understood you correctly, you won't know for at least two years if the person in front of you is your mate or not. If we are mates, and it's destined, we will meet again."

Maybe this encounter was nature's way of telling Cornelia that she was not ready for a soulmate, or maybe that she won't ever find that ideal she was hoping for. After all, if James was her soulmate, she should accept him even if he was too young to feel the bond, but Cornelia was not willing to put herself out there if the other party won't do the same in return. Somehow, it didn't seem right.

And just like that, Cornelia turned and left James behind to stand there and gape in disbelief.

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"James!"

A call from a female got his attention and James' insides tightened when he realized it was his sister. Why was Marcy here? Shouldn't she be confined in another house? What the hell happened while he was out? It was all fine during breakfast!

Marcy walked toward James. "I saw you from the window." She gestured to the window on the second floor of the packhouse. "I thought you came here to train, not to chase women."

James stuffed his hands into his pant pockets. He was surprised by Marcy's unexpected appearance, but he had no intention of showing it.

"And I thought you came here to become Luna, and not to spy on me."

Marcy blinked. "I was not spying. I couldn't sleep and I saw you accidentally." Marcy's lips lifted into a smile. "Who is she? Someone important? As the future Luna of the Dark Howlers pack, I can set you up." Marcy ended with a wink.

"I don't need your help with women."

"Did I see it wrongly, or did she leave you behind?", Marcy asked teasingly. "One would assume that your identity as the future Alpha would be enough to have women dying to get their hands on you, yet this one left. Topless, but she still left. Or was she not to your taste?"

James fought against the rage that swelled inside him. Why was Marcy talking about Cornelia when she had no idea what actually happened?

"Why are you here, Marcy?", James asked stiffly. "Shouldn't you be hiding in the other house?" He really wanted to know the answer to this question.

"Alpha Damon said that the danger is over so there is no need for me to lay low."

"He is back?"

"Yes. And the first thing he did was to move me here, and then we had dinner and walk in the garden." Marcy didn't want to talk about how that walk ended. It was not important, but she had another question, "Did you know that Commander George found his mate?"

"Yes. Dawn. What about it?"

"Nothing.", Marcy said quickly.

She hoped that the stiff answer from James meant he didn't know what happened between her and George. Considering how close James and George were, if James didn't know, no one else knew either. It will be George's word against Marcy's. The only thing George had on Marcy was that he took her v-card, but Marcy was confident that after she sleeps with Damon and cuts herself so that some blood ends on the bedsheets, the point of who took her virginity won't be important and she will be free from George blackmailing her.

With that, Marcy decided to change the topic. "I'm excited about tomorrow."

"What's tomorrow?"

Marcy smiled widely. "Alpha Damon will announce to the world that I will be his Luna."

James knew that was the plan. Tomorrow, they will drop the final bomb on Marcy where she will realize that she was manipulated and used as a decoy, but the fact that Marcy was in the packhouse rubbed James the wrong way. That was not part of his plan, and if this was different, who knows what else changed? There were too many variables, and he needed more information, but Marcy's head was in the clouds, and she obviously didn't know what really happened.

"Since the big announcement will happen tomorrow, I suggest you get good rest. The news about the Dark Howlers pack getting their Luna will go viral. People will want to know more about you. The WW Magazine will definitely request an interview and a lot of photos. You shouldn't allow people to see you with dark circles under your eyes."

Marcy lifted her hands to touch her cheeks like she was checking if she had something there. "You are right. I will go and get some beauty sleep. See you at breakfast!", Marcy ended in a singing voice and skipped into the packhouse.

Chapter 510 Together as one (1)

The first sunrays of the day peeked over the mountains in the distance, creating a beautiful scenery outside, but Damon's full focus was on the little woman who was sleeping in his arms.

Talia didn't want to sleep, but after their third lovemaking session, her eyes closed, and she succumbed to the exhaustion that accumulated over the last few days, with her arms wrapped around his body tightly.

Damon was tired as hell, but he feared that if he falls asleep, the dark magic might stir when he was unaware, and he will forget about Talia again. He didn't want that to happen. Forgetting Talia was forgetting who he was, and before yesterday, Damon didn't understand how much she changed him.

From the moment he identified Talia as his mate, Damon's world flipped upside down, and he didn't want to go back to that empty existence that he tried to fill with training, work, and random women, only to be empty again at the start of the next day. The only way for him to feel at peace was with Talia by his side, and he didn't want to lose this.

'Damon?', Caden's voice sounded in his head.

'Yes?'

'Sorry if I woke you up...'

'I'm awake.', Damon interrupted Caden. 'Tel me.'

'Are you yourself?'

Damon made a face. He didn't like that Caden was questioning him, but then... he had a reason to do so. 'Yes. I know who I am and who Talia is, but I might forget about you if you don't get to the point of why you are disturbing me this early.'

'It's Marcy. What should we do with her?'

Damon didn't want to deal with Marcy, and he hoped that this was the last day of Marcy in their lives. 'Nothing changes. We will proceed per James' plan. Ask Marcy to contact her father before breakfast with the latest updates from her side. If she asks what's the rush, tell her that we have a lot of things planned for today. Talk to her with respect, like she might be your Luna; that will get her excited. When she joins us for breakfast, we will tell her the truth.'

'Alright.', Caden responded with relief obvious in his voice. 'Anything else?'

'No. Don't bother me until breakfast.', Damon grumbled and closed off the mind-link.

With that, Damon's attention was back to Talia.

She was so fragile, yet so strong, beautiful in every way possible.

Damon's neck was stinging because his feisty kitten marked him again! He never heard about mates marking each other more than once, but then... he never heard about mates who have ancient spirits for their wolves that were separated by the Moon Goddess herself.

Everything about Talia was out of the ordinary, and Damon enjoyed every minute of it. As long as she was by his side, Damon's world was a happy place.

Damon smiled dreamily at the memory of him marking Talia for the second time in the throes of passion. He didn't think of doing it, but something inside him stirred and urged him to do it again, and he did.

Damon tilted his head in an attempt to see Talia's sleepy expression and his eyes lit up at the sight of redness on Talia's neck. It was not big, and it was barely visible, but he hoped it will not heal and stay there forever because that right there was where he marked her last night!

"Mmm...", Talia mumbled unintelligibly and tightened her arms around Damon.

Damon was quick to press his lips to the top of Talia's head. "Shh... sleep, kitten. It's still early. I'm here, watching over you."

Talia smiled before her eyes opened to meet Damon's icy-blue orbs that were full of emotions and definitely not icy.

"Good morning, my love.", Talia said dreamily.

Damon stared at her, unaware that he was holding his breath. Talia rarely called him anything other than his name, and this time she called him her love, and he wanted to remember this moment.

Talia put her hand on his cheek. His emotions told her he was fine, and that their bond was stronger than ever, but his frozen expression didn't seem right and considering that on the previous day he didn't know who she was, she was worried. "Are you OK?"

Damon smiled at her foolishly. "Never better."

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Damon's arms tightened around Talia, and he curled to envelop her body with his while burying his face in the crook of her neck. "I want us to stay like this forever.", he mumbled.

Talia giggled with relief when she confirmed his clinginess as a sign that her Damon was right there, holding her against him like he will never let go.

"Just like this?", Talia asked and shifted a bit so that their bodies fit better against each other.

"Mhm...", Damon hummed in approval.

"Oh, I thought you would prefer something like this...", Talia said playfully and then graphic images of her and Damon flashed in his mind.

Damon chuckled lowly. "That will work as well, Mrs. Blake."

Talia lifted her head to look at him. "You know, when you called me Mrs. Blake the first time, I didn't get it. And then I thought you were teasing me."

"And now?"

"Now even if you don't mean it, I have no intention of letting you go. You are mine."

Her possessiveness turned him on. Did she know how sexy she was when her eyes flashed with determination? And she was determined to keep him for herself. That was the most potent aphrodisiac ever!

"I am yours. I always was.", Damon said with all the seriousness in the world while pushing a lock of hair behind her ear. "Even when I was not aware of your existence, I was searching for you...", Damon's voice trailed when he realized that Talia was glowing.

And it was not only Talia, he was glowing as well.

Damon lifted his hand to observe as it was enveloped in silvery light.

"What is this?", he asked breathily.

Talia slid her hand into Damon's, and the glow started pulsating in the rhythm of their matching heartbeats.

"This is what happens when we are together as one.", Talia said. "It's a manifestation of our strength and powers. I assume you still need to figure out what powers you got after I marked you, and there is a chance it won't happen until we dispel the dark magic, and you get Sapa back. However, I can tell you that since our marking, my strength and speed increased. I might be able to take you on."

Damon smiled mischievously. "We should spar so you can prove it."

Talia's cheeks heated. She knew very well that their sparring sessions had a tendency of turning hot and steamy. She was nearly out of exercising clothes because Damon would rip them into shreds and the fact that he was projecting into her mind images of Talia on all four on top of the exercising mat with Damon behind her was making her heart race. Damn! That was hot!

Chapter 511 Together as one (2) [Bonus chapter]

Talia and Damon enjoyed their current intimacy. They were lying side by side on the bed, naked, and gazing into each other's eyes. It was cheeky and comforting and the silvery glow around them made the moment much more special as proof that their bond reached the next level.

They relished the present while silently exchanging emotions and it was the best thing ever. However, Talia was aware that there were many things she needed to tell him, so she decided to start with one.

"There is a prophecy in the Midnight Guardians pack that speaks about a child blessed by the Moon Goddess who will bring calamity. Axel and his parents believe that's me."

Damon's brows came together in a frown. Talia didn't tell him anything about what happened at the Midnight Guardians pack, or with Alpha Isaac and Alpha Sophia. The only thing he knew was that two Alphas lost their positions and that Axel was now in charge of that pack. But one thing bothered him more than that Alpha family.

"Calamity? You?", Damon asked while shaking his head. How could the kindest person he ever met be the bringer of bad things? "I will show them calamity when I get my hands on all the people who dared to harm you and get between us."

Talia was touched by Damon's words. There was no questioning, no doubts, no fear, only acceptance.

"Aren't you worried that my abilities might get out of control?"

"No.", Damon said right away. "The only thing that worries me is that one day you will realize I am unworthy of you, and you will leave me."

"That won't happen, silly.", Talia said and poked his chest with her index finger in fake anger. "I didn't leave you when I didn't know we were mates. How could I leave you now when I know that you are mine?"

Damon pursed his lips. "True. You shouldn't abandon me. I will be lost without you."

Talia looked at the Alpha who melted her into an emotional mush with a few words. But a second later his mood worsened.

"What's wrong?", Talia asked.

"I want you to tell me who gave you hard time or looked down at you. They can't be left alone."

"You know I can take care of myself, right?"

"I do. But I hope you will allow me to take care of you. I am your mate and making sure you are safe and happy is my right and duty.", Damon said earnestly before asking, "Will you allow me to do it?"

"Only if I can take care of you in return."

Damon's lips lifted into a smile. "I will be counting on that, Mrs. Blake. I want to announce to the whole world that the Dark Howlers pack will be led by two Alphas, as equals."

Talia's heart soared. She thought that being Damon's Luna was an honor, yet here was Damon, wanting to place her on a pedestal as his equal, and change the structure of his pack that was there since its founding by Damon's ancestors. Can he be any sweeter? But there was one technicality... "Let's leave

that announcement for after the dark magic is dispelled. Our pack should know about it first, and then the rest of the world."

'Our pack', words echoed in Damon's mind. "I think that I saved a planet in my last life to deserve such an amazing mate."

"And you probably destroyed a few while saving that one because you have Marcy and so many others clinging onto you.", Talia said without missing a beat.

Damon was not discouraged, not now when he had a plan to take care of Marcy. And when the world finds out that Talia was not only his fated mate but also his equal, other women will be nuts if they still feed their delusions of being worthy of him. No one was better than Talia.

Damon nuzzled Talia's nose with his. "There can be millions of them dreaming about me, but those will stay dreams because I have eyes only for one woman."

"Mine.", Talia said.

"Mhm...", Damon hummed in agreement. "Yours, kitten. And you are mine."

He touched her neck with his index finger and Talia's eyelids became heavy. He loved her reaction.

"My mark is showing.", Damon said with pride, and Talia's eyes snapped open.

"What?"

"It's faint, but it's there."

Talia scooted higher to check his neck and she smiled a little.

"Is there something?", Damon asked and a moment later an image flashed in his mind, showing his neck with an irregular light pattern on the skin that looked like an old scar, but Damon knew that he never had scars there. Talia's mark was forming there.

"Show me mine.", Talia demanded and a second later she frowned. "It's a hickey."

Damon narrowed his eyes in protest. "What do you mean, a hickey? Don't you see the lines? Normally it takes a few days for a mark to take shape."

"If you say so.", Talia responded and moved closer to plant small kisses at the base of his neck. She didn't really think about Damon wearing her mark, but now that it was there, she was happy and eager to see how it will look when it was done forming.

Damon shivered at her butterfly-light kisses on his skin. It aroused him almost as much as Talia's naked body sticking to his. His eyes widened when he felt her teeth there.

"What are you doing?", Damon rasped.

"If I bite you again, I might speed up the process. I want everyone to know you are mine.", Talia said cheekily.

A hearty laugh ripped from Damon's chest. He really loved that she was claiming him as hers.

In one swift move, he rolled them over, ending on top of her.

"Did you forget that marking is the sweetest when I'm deep inside you? Should we start?"

"Aren't you just sweet-talking your way into sex?"

"For sex with you, I will do anything. Sweet talking included. But that is only for you, kitten." Damon cocked an eyebrow when Talia pursed her lips. "There is no point in faking grumpiness because I can feel

your emotions, and there is this..." Damon took Talia's hand into his and lifted it at their eye level, both hands glowed in rhythmical pulses of silvery light like the rest of their bodies.

"What about it?", Talia asked, unsuccessful in suppressing her smile.

"The bond between us is stronger. I can feel it inside me and all around me, just like this glow. It's magical. You are magical. Mine. And I know you want me just as much as I want you."

Before Talia could respond, Damon captured her lips with his, and she realized that she didn't want to talk because there was no need for words between them. They could feel each other's emotions, and the sense of belonging and acceptance was overwhelming, making their love swell to another level, igniting the passion that came with arousal they were eager to quell, even though they knew it will never be enough.

Chapter 512 Unpleasant breakfast (1)

During their morning shower, Talia checked Damon's condition.

There were no black runes visible on his body, Sapa was unreachable, and their bond was solid.

Witches told Talia that the black runes were unpredictable, and she really hoped that the full moon ritual will be effective and that Sapa won't suffer any permanent consequences.

Damon assured Talia that he was fine, other than not being able to reach his wolf.

After double-confirming that both of their necks still had remnants of the last night's marking (even though they didn't mark each other again in the morning), Talia and Damon reluctantly left the bedroom in time to join others for breakfast.

They enjoyed the privacy that the third floor of the packhouse provided, but they had guests and many important things to handle. Lovey-dovey time was over. For now.

Talia and Damon descended the stairs into the lounge on the main floor to see Cornelia sitting on the sofa. She stood up and looked at them, as an obvious sign that she was waiting for them.

Cornelia saw Talia and Damon coming down the stairs and holding each other tightly like they didn't want to put a single fraction of space between them. Cornelia never met Damon, but she knew that he was Talia's mate because he looked at Talia in the same way Axel looked at Yasmin.

Cornelia hid the dejection that grew inside her behind a stiff expression. Will she ever get to experience that feeling of intimacy that only a mate could provide? Before last night, Cornelia believed that her mate was out there, and they will meet eventually, but now that she met him and the magic didn't happen... Cornelia was not sure what to expect.

'That is Cornelia. She is a high-ranking witch.', Talia told Damon through the mind-link. 'Thanks to her we have the potion and spell to remove dark magic.'

Talia was happy that the mind-link came in handy already. It was like their little secret and it made her feel even closer to him.

Damon knew from memories Talia shared who Cornelia was, but he appreciated this reminder because any female other than Talia was not important, hence, in danger of being forgotten.

When Damon and Talia reached the bottom of the stairs, Cornelia called, "Talia, may I have a word?"

Seeing that Damon had no intention of letting Talia out of his hold, Cornelia added, "I will appreciate it if I can talk to Talia in private." Damon was Talia's mate, but to Cornelia, he was a stranger.

Damon frowned, but he didn't object, so Talia took that as an OK.

"Let me introduce you first. This is Damon, my mate."

And just like that, Damon's sour mood was gone. This was the first time for Talia to announce him as her mate!

"Damon, this is Cornelia, the Priestess in the Silver Flame Coven. Until we officially open the passages, and our people start mingling, we will be introducing her as Gideon's cousin."

Cornelia and Damon exchanged a few pleasantries and then Cornelia went with Talia to the living room, leaving Damon to stand in the lounge.

Damon didn't want to go to the dining room without Talia and he also didn't want to leave Talia out of his visual range but sneaking on them didn't seem right.

Damon got an idea.

He took his phone and turned on the feed from the security camera in the living room, and then he put a Bluetooth earpiece in to listen to what was going on there. With that, he went to the dining room.

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In the living room...

"It seems that the potion worked.", Cornelia said.

"Yes, thank you. Is that why you wanted to talk to me in private?" Talia didn't want to waste time on chit-chat because being away from Damon was making her nervous, and Marcy might be there any moment.

Damon told Talia the plan and she knew Damon got this under control, but still, she needed his proximity.

"I want to leave.", Cornelia said.

Talia was confused. "Leave? Where?"

"Back to the Midnight Guardians pack, and maybe home."

"Why? Did something happen?", Talia continued probing. She remembered that Cornelia was enthusiastic to explore other realms, so this request came as a surprise.

Cornelia was not willing to talk about James and what happened between them. Or maybe it was better to say what DIDN'T happen.

Last night, Cornelia spotted many mated couples, and right here in the packhouse were Mindy and Gideon, Maya and Caden, Dawn and George, and now Talia and Damon. They were all couples, and the fact that James couldn't see her as his mate was gut-wrenching. After a night of no sleep, Cornelia's resolve to leave this place firmed. She wanted to go far away from James.

"I feel homesick. That's all."

Talia didn't believe her, but she also didn't feel it was right to probe into Cornelia's private matters. They were not close and if Cornelia didn't want to open up, there was nothing Talia could do about it.

"I understand.", Talia said. "But will you consider staying another day or two? Tomorrow evening is the full moon, and I would be at ease with the knowledge that you will be here in case something goes wrong with the ritual or if Damon relapses."

Cornelia was not willing, but she remembered Evanora's words that since Cornelia was going with Talia, it was her duty to represent witches and leave a good impression. With that, Cornelia agreed reluctantly. It was just one extra day. "Alright. After the ritual, I will leave."

"Thank you, Cornelia. In the meantime, if there is anything you need to make your stay here more pleasant, just let me know. If you want, we can arrange for someone to show you around. Darkbourne is nearby, and there is a human city a bit further. The human city is bigger and has many things you didn't see."

Cornelia thought that going sightseeing would be nice. It will definitely be better compared to sitting in the packhouse and waiting for the time to pass, and she didn't want to risk lingering in the area and bumping into James again. "Yes, please. I would love to see the town with someone." Maybe she could go into the restaurant or a sweetshop and try local delicacies.

Talia was happy with this. "Excellent. We can assign you a few warriors to act as guides and for protection. Let me think about this and we can talk more after breakfast." Talia was eager to join Damon and she could mind-link with him about who would be the best to escort Cornelia.

...

Talia and Cornelia entered the dining room and Talia quickly scanned the people present, releasing a breath of relief when she confirmed that Marcy was still not there.

Damon was already on his feet, holding a chair for Talia to sit, on his left.

Cornelia's brows came together at the sensation of a familiar pull, the same one she felt last night. Her sight fell on the back of a head full of blonde hair and she couldn't believe her luck. James. What was he doing there?

Cornelia met him last night in the garden, and then in front of the packhouse, but she didn't imagine that he would actually be here!

Chapter 513 Unpleasant breakfast (2)

Talia led Cornelia toward the dining table where others were seated.

"I guess this is your first time eating here with everyone, so let me introduce you", Talia said to Cornelia before turning to speak to others in a louder voice, "To the ones who don't know, this is Cornelia. She is Gideon's cousin from far away and she is not used to our customs. I hope everyone can be civil and open-minded."

Talia spoke to Cornelia, "No one here has bad intentions, so if they offend you, it's not intentional. Keep in mind that our ways of living are different. If anything is making you uncomfortable, you need to say so." Talia glanced at other people. "It goes both ways."

Talia gestured while talking to Cornelia, "You met Damon, he is the Alpha of the Dark Howlers pack. He owns this place, so if you are not pleased with something, you can tell me or tell him directly. You should be familiar with the next few faces, George, Dawn, Gideon, Mindy, Maya, and Caden. I don't think you met the others. That's James, he is visiting from the Red Moon pack with George, and the others are locals, Petra, Erik, and Zack."

With that, Talia told Cornelia that she can sit at any available spot, and Talia moved toward the chair that Damon was still holding for her.

Dawn, Maya, and Mindy were looking at Damon anxiously, and only when they confirmed he was treating Talia well did they relax. After last night's dinner where Damon allowed Marcy to get close, no one knew what to expect.

Cornelia took her seat on Damon's right without engaging in pleasantries.

If Cornelia knew that James will be right there, at the same table, she would skip breakfast, and ask for food to be brought to her room.

Cornelia shook off the unpleasant feeling. James or not, she will be here for another day or two, help with dispelling the dark magic, and leave.

Talia noticed that Cornelia's mood dropped once they reached the dining room, and she took a mental note to ask Cornelia if someone from the people present offended her somehow.

James gripped the knife in his hand, hoping it will conceal the fact that his hands were shaking.

The whole night he couldn't sleep. James wanted to think about Marcy's unexpected appearance in the packhouse, and what it meant to their plan, but he couldn't focus. His mind was wandering toward the chocolate-colored beauty that appeared out of nowhere and disappeared in the same way. Her absence created a longing he never experienced before.

James cursed himself for allowing Cornelia to leave like that, and he wondered if he will really need to wait two years until he can see her again. The thought that he won't see her ever again was disturbing. Yet here she was, right in front of him, at the same table.

He felt like facepalming. Didn't she go into the packhouse last night? Why didn't he think about the possibility that she was staying here?

James thought of himself as a levelheaded guy whose biggest strength was his brain, but when it came to Cornelia, he turned into an idiot.

Did Talia say how Cornelia was from far away? Maybe she really didn't know about James' background. Even if she knew, it wouldn't change the fact that his heart was thundering against his chest, and he was so anxious that he feared that whatever he ate so far might come out the same way it came in. If he actually vomits, that would be so embarrassing!

James grabbed his glass of water and started sipping anxiously, counting silently from one thousand backward and praying that he won't puke his guts out and make a total ass of himself.

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Damon was busy putting food on Talia's plate and Talia noticed that Cornelia didn't look far from the food items that were closest to her.

"Let me know if you need help with anything.", Talia said to Cornelia.

"This is fine.", Cornelia responded, but Talia was not convinced.

"You must taste these sausages."

Damon piled up quite a bit of everything for Talia, but the serving plate with sausages was on the other side of the table already.

"James, can you pass the plate with sausages?", Talia asked, and James was quick to drop his glass of water and grab the plate Talia requested. His grip was shaky, and the sausages nearly spilled on the table, but Petra's nimble hands grabbed it and saved the day.

"Let me do it.", Petra said, and James let go in favor of returning his focus on the glass of water.

At the sight of Petra passing the plate, Talia thought of something.

"Where are you guys going after this?", Talia asked Petra.

"James said that he has some matters to handle after breakfast. Erik, Zack, and I were planning to hang out in the town square until James is done, and then the four of us will head to the human city for the day."

Talia knew that the work James had after breakfast was related to Marcy.

"Cornelia", Talia called. "Petra, Zack, and Erik will be in Darkbourne and head to the human city later with James. They usually have some fun activities planned. You can consider joining them if you wish." She glanced at Petra. "That's not a problem, right?"

Petra shrugged with, "The more, the merrier."

Cornelia looked at Talia blankly. "I thought you will give me a few warriors for protection."

Damon felt that it was his turn to speak. "Petra, Erik, and Zack might appear young, but they are capable. With them around, you don't need to worry about safety."

Petra, Zack, and Erik exchanged worried glances. Them to keep Cornelia safe? Ah, their Alpha didn't know that Cornelia froze them with a wave of her finger, but they didn't want to talk about it.

"That's not what I meant.", Cornelia said and turned to Talia. "I don't want to look like a grownup taking youngsters for an outing."

'COUGH! COUGH!', James coughed violently, nearly choking on the water he was drinking. Was she talking about him? Damn it!

Talia thought about Cornelia's comment, and she realized that it made sense. Cornelia's appearance put her in her early twenties, and even though James, Zack, Erik, and Petra were not little kids, it was obvious they were younger.

Talia turned to Damon. "What do you think? Can you get two warriors to escort Cornelia for the day?"

"Absolutely.", Damon said and glanced at Caden. "Can you take care of that?"

Caden nodded and his eyes lost focus. A second later, he spoke, "They will be here in half an hour."

"Great!", Talia exclaimed. "Petra, if you can suggest a few spots nearby for a total newbie who wants to experience our way of living and human customs, that would be great." She turned to Cornelia. "I'm sorry, I would give you a tour personally, but with everything going on..."

"It's fine.", Cornelia assured Talia. She knew that Talia was busy, and it didn't matter who accompanied her, as long as she gets out of this place and it was not with James.

Chapter 514 Unpleasant breakfast (3) [Bonus chapter]

A stifled gasp from the door of the dining room got everyone's attention, and they didn't need to look there in order to know who it was. Marcy.

Earlier that morning, Caden told Marcy that Alpha Edward was asking about her and that she should contact her father before breakfast because she will have a busy day ahead of her. "Alpha Damon will share more information with you..."

Marcy was not happy that this request came on such short notice; she will be late for breakfast! But Caden was unusually respectful, making her feel important, and the thought of a busy day with Alpha Damon improved her mood.

Marcy was happy to hear the approving tone of her father, and she got carried away while explaining how things were going better than expected. Marcy told him that she was staying in the packhouse, Damon's Beta was treating her as his superior, last night the wretched assistant (aka Talia) was nowhere to be seen, and after dinner, Marcy and Damon went for a romantic walk in the garden. Marcy didn't mention George interrupting them because that was not important. The highlight of her report to Alpha Edward was that by the end of the day there will be big news for him.

Alpha Edward wanted to know the details, but how could Marcy tell him when she didn't know herself? However, she assured him that things were great and that he shouldn't worry.

"Wait until evening, daddy!", Marcy said excitedly. "By then, you will know everything and I'm sure you will be pleased."

"Alright.", Alpha Edward agreed, Marcy's enthusiasm was promising. He had a few questions.

"How is James doing? Is he behaving?"

Marcy almost mentioned the exotic beauty from last night, but then she thought how that might steal her spotlight, so she decided to skip it. "I don't see James much. With Alpha Damon's warriors protecting me, James and George are mostly away. I guess they are training but you know that I don't go to those dirty and smelly areas." She also didn't want to talk about George or his mate.

Alpha Edward was pleased to hear that George and James were busy. "What about Nora?"

Marcy's insides tightened. Normally, Marcy wouldn't think much about this. After all, her father was asking about everyone's status, like a good Alpha. But Marcy knew that Nora was sleeping with Alpha Edward and Marcy responded stoically with, "Nora knew why we came here, and even with that, she tried to seduce Alpha Damon, my future husband. Nora is in the dungeon and will stay there until she says that she is sorry, and she is convincing enough for me to believe her."

Alpha Edward didn't want Nora to suffer, but the priority was for Marcy to secure her position. "Make sure she is not mistreated. Explain that if she behaves, you will let her out before your Luna ceremony. We will come as a family, and Raymond will be upset if his daughter is locked up. People might ask questions, and we want to avoid negative publicity."

Marcy rolled her eyes while wondering who will be more worried, Nora's father or Nora's lover? But Marcy agreed with the point that if Nora is not present, it will be bad for them, and she can't let Nora be seen with bruises either. "I understand, daddy. I will talk with Damon about this when I get a chance..."

After her talk with Alpha Edward, Marcy fixed her hair and makeup, and she picked the perfect dress. She was already late, and she could at least be visually pleasing to her future husband.

What Marcy didn't expect was to see that the wretched assistant was back and sitting right next to Damon! And was Damon cutting the food on Talia's plate?

They were all quiet now, but Marcy heard lively chatter before she appeared. They were like a cohesive unit that stopped functioning the moment they became aware of Marcy's existence. Was that how they will greet their future Luna?

Since Marcy didn't move from the door, Damon glanced there and gestured with his knife toward several empty chairs. "Sit and eat something, Marcy. After breakfast, we will go to the study to discuss a few important matters."

Marcy pressed her lips into a line and walked toward one of the chairs. She was not hungry. She didn't want to eat. She wanted Talia out of there! Did he really expect her to enjoy a meal in that setting?

Was there a need for Talia and Damon to hold hands? And it was right there on the table, for everyone to see!

Marcy told herself to calm down. This was just another test. Alpha Damon wanted to see how his future Luna will behave in unexpected and unpleasant situations, and Marcy was determined to show him that she was up to the task.

Marcy was not the only one who had trouble swallowing the delicious meal that Stephanie and Zina prepared.

Mindy didn't like Marcy, and her irritation bounced on Gideon. The poor Shaman was confident that he will end up with heartburn after this.

"Eat, princess...", Gideon urged Mindy while offering her extra strawberries and whipped cream on a waffle with the hope to distract her. The food didn't do much, but the way he squeezed her thigh under the table got her attention and Mindy opened her mouth obediently to accept his offerings.

It was a similar situation with Dawn and George. Dawn was on pins and needles from the moment Marcy appeared, and no matter how much George acted like Marcy was not there, Dawn was not happy.

James was jumpy because of Cornelia, and Cornelia was mirroring James' emotions.

Maya and Caden feared that this plot to use Marcy against Alpha Edward will explode into an all-out war, and the three teens could feel the tension in the air, but they didn't dare say anything about it.

It was not a pleasant breakfast.

'Relax, kitten...', Damon's voice sounded in Talia's head. 'You know that this is Marcy's last meal before her world collapses.'

Talia didn't remove her gaze from her plate while responding to Damon, 'What if she doesn't cooperate? What if she decides that since she is going down, she will drag us with her?'

The truth was that James advised Damon to keep the charade going until they spill the truth to Marcy, but after the incident of forgetting about Talia, Damon couldn't make himself ignore his mate or pretend that she was not important. Damon knew that Talia needed comforting and assurance, and he needed it as well. If things collapse, there will be war, and Damon was ready for it.

How Damon saw this, Alpha Edward was set on getting his hands on what's Damon's, and Damon had no intention of giving it willingly. Whatever they were doing was only postponing the inevitable: an open confrontation between two packs.

'I know that this can backfire', Damon responded, 'But will you prefer that I go with their plan and make her my Luna? I would rather cut off my dick than be with her.'

Talia knew that this was Damon's attempt to put her mind at ease. 'It must be serious if you are willing to cut that off.'

Damon shifted into his seat. 'I am not willing. That's why I won't do what they want.' He was already holding her hand, and he lifted it to place a kiss on her knuckles while continuing through their mind-link, 'Every part of me is yours and yours only. Other women are not allowed close.'

Talia smiled at the cheeky Alpha who suddenly became romantic. Sure, others couldn't hear his words, but they definitely saw him holding her hand and kissing it.

Marcy did her best not to look at the lovey-dovey couple, but it was hard. Damon was all around Talia, Gideon was feeding Mindy, and George and Dawn spoke in whispers while eating from each other's plates. Among all couples, Maya and Caden were the most conservative one, and Marcy didn't care about Cornelia or the four teens at the table.

The only thing preventing Marcy from flipping the table and throwing an all-out tantrum was the thought that this was a test and that after breakfast she will find out the exact time when Alpha Damon will announce her as his Luna, and they will decide on a date when her Luna ceremony will happen, and after that, she won't need to endure.

Chapter 515 James' plight

Cornelia was first to leave the table. She grabbed an apple and went to her room with, "Let me know when warriors are here so I can head out."

On instinct, James was about to stand up and head after her, but then he stopped halfway. Why would he go after Cornelia? What would he say? Reluctantly, James returned to sit in his chair.

James didn't get it. He met many beauties, but none made him irrational. It was not like him. He rubbed his forehead with force while trying to understand what was going on. He was restless while Cornelia was there, and now that she was gone, it was worse. Or better. He was not sure.

"James, can we have a word?", Petra called.

James glanced to see that Damon was still busy feeding Talia before responding to Petra, "Sure", and then he followed Petra into the garden.

"What are you doing?", Petra asked.

James had a feeling that Petra was poking her nose in his non-existent relationship with Cornelia. "What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. Are you OK with Cornelia going out with some warriors?"

Was he OK? No. But what could he do? "You don't understand. Things didn't work out."

"What is there to understand? You shouldn't let her go without looking into it thoroughly. What kind of Alpha stays away from his fated mate?"

James paused. Petra hit a sore spot. "Is this only because I'm the future Alpha?"

"Of course not. Everyone is looking for their fated mate because that's the only way we can be truly happy. You are not of age, but she obviously is. Will you wait two years until you seek her? What will you do if you find her and confirm she is your mate, but she already has a man?"

James' temper flared. "Why are you meddling?"

"Because...", Petra paused and pressed her lips into a line. "It was my older sister. She was 15 years old when a guy approached her, and she chickened out. She was attracted to him, but the idea of a mate

and spending the rest of their lives together scared her. And do you know what happened when she found him four years later?"

James could guess. "He settled with another woman."

"Yes.", Petra confirmed. "She was human. He didn't mark her, but he couldn't leave her either. He told my sister that he was lonely and drunk, and things happened, and the woman got pregnant. They had a child. He offered my sister to live with them as a second wife. Of course, my sister couldn't accept it, so she rejected the bond. Since then, she is withering away, and it hurts like hell. Our whole family is suffering."

James understood why Petra was so pushy and he wondered if his family would care if he ended up emotionally damaged. Well, definitely not. He was already damaged by the harsh training and discipline his father forced on him. His mother didn't bother to intervene, while his sister was not there.

But even with all that, how was the story of Petra's sister applicable to James' situation? "Did you expect your sister to live with a guy before she was ready?" Or should he go and start a family? He is only sixteen years old! He can't even provide for himself. And who knows how Alpha Edward would react if James brings in a woman with him?

"Of course, she was too young to live with him, but if she agreed to dating, it would be different. Mates don't hurt each other. He wouldn't force her if she was not willing and ready, and if she was by his side, he wouldn't look for other women.", Petra said in one breath. "Listen, James, I'm not saying that you should jump on Cornelia and claim her as your mate. But I am saying that if you let her go, you will regret it."

James opened his mouth to respond when a shout came from the door.

"James! It's time."

It was Caden.

"I need to go."

"Think about what I said!", Petra pleaded.

James didn't turn to respond.

Petra looked at James' departing back and she knew that the story about her sister moved him, but she also had a feeling that it was not enough. James needed proof that Cornelia was his mate.

Petra got an idea and she dashed toward the dining room, hoping that the person of interest was still there.

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"Shaman Gideon!", Petra called when she saw Gideon leaving the dining room with Mindy by his side. "Can I have a minute of your time?"

Gideon groaned. He was about to go with Mindy to their room and enjoy some alone time before they go to the tailor for the final fitting for Mindy's ceremonial clothes, and now this youngster was cutting into their time. If he knew that the packhouse would be so lively, they would stay in their cabin and come only for the ceremony. But Mindy was already facing the girl, so Gideon grumbled, "Speak."

Petra realized that Gideon was not in a good mood. "I was wondering if you have a way to tell if two people are mates."

Gideon's brows came together in a frown. "Why would they need me to tell them?"

"Because they are not of age."

"If their wolves are not telling them they are mates, it means they are not ready.", Gideon said.

"But what if one is underage, and the other one doesn't have a wolf?"

Gideon thought how this was oddly specific. "If you want my help, I need you to stop talking in riddles."

Petra glanced around, to make sure no one else was in the hallway, and then she spoke in a whisper, "I suspect that James and Cornelia are mates."

Gideon blinked. The clumsy youngster from the Red Moon pack and a witch? He would pay for a ticket to watch that movie!

Well, James was not clumsy, but Gideon saw him nearly dropping a serving plate with sausages, and then choking on water, and staring at the plate with food and... Gideon didn't have a good opinion of James.

"What makes you think they are mates?", Gideon asked.

"Cornelia approached James last night, but he bailed because he didn't feel it.", Petra said. "Is there a potion or a ceremony that will tell James if she is his mate?"

"What's with the urgency?", Gideon grumbled.

"Cornelia will spend the day with some random warriors instead of with James. What if they are mates and this day apart draws a wedge between them? James will go to his pack soon, when will they meet next time?"

Mindy's whole body was bouncing from excitement. "There must be something you can do so they realize they are mates."

Gideon turned to Mindy. "What makes you think they are mates?"

"Because of Talia.", Mindy said matter-of-factly. "She has the power to matchmake mates."

"She does?", Gideon asked with disbelief obvious in his voice.

"She does.", Mindy confirmed with confidence. "Mates are popping up around Talia like mushrooms after the rain!"

Chapter 516 Marcy's collapse (1)

Gideon was in a predicament.

He could deny Petra, but how can he disappoint his pumpkin-infused beauty when she looked at him with those sparkles in her eyes? But if there was a way to find out who is whose mate earlier than their wolves would allow it, everyone would be doing it. Did Petra come here to make him look incompetent in front of Mindy?

Gideon turned to Petra. "You said that James doesn't feel the bond and that's why he is keeping his distance from Cornelia. What are you expecting me to do about it? Force him?"

Petra shrunk when she realized that Gideon's mood worsened, but she couldn't give up. "I apologize. I know Cornelia is your cousin, but I saw them last night. James was flustered when he saw her. He is always calm and composed, but in front of Cornelia he was like a teenager who met his first crush."

Mindy giggled. "Well, he is a teenager, and she is his crush. Maybe not the first crush but will be his last. We will take care of it."

Petra's eyes widened. "You will?"

Gideon turned to look at Mindy. "We will?"

Mindy smiled knowingly and spoke to Petra, "Your task is for James to not leave the packhouse before Cornelia. I will let you know when things are set. And make sure he doesn't suspect anything." She turned to Gideon. "We will need Maya's help."

Gideon was curious to find out what was on Mindy's mind because it appeared that she had a plan. His mood dropped when he realized that this mate nonsense will cut into their lovey-dovey time. Ah, if he knew, he wouldn't agree to stay in the packhouse!

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In the study...

Marcy was sitting on a chair, and she looked at the other people present.

George, Dawn, James, Damon, Talia, Maya, and Caden.

She could understand that Maya and Caden were there as Damon's Betas, and James and George as representatives of the Red Moon pack, but why were Dawn and Talia there? OK. Maybe Talia was still in her role as Damon's assistant, but what about Dawn?

What rubbed Marcy the wrong way was that Talia was sitting in Damon's executive leather chair with him standing behind her. This made Talia look important, and Marcy was sitting on a regular chair, damn it!

Talia was not comfortable with being in the same room with Marcy, but Damon told her that there will be a good show to watch and that he will give Talia a choice of delivering a final blow to the woman who dared to bully her at the Red Moon pack. Until then, Talia was to let him handle things.

"Thank you for coming here.", Damon started. "I wanted us to have this conversation so that we are all on the same page about changes that are coming for the Dark Howlers pack."

Marcy lifted her chin. It's happening!

"Tomorrow evening is the full moon, and we will have our first pack run in a decade." He turned to George and James. "I hope you will join us as guests. I will be leading the run with my mate, and my future Luna."

Marcy blinked rapidly. Did he say, mate? Surely, he thought, 'chosen mate', right? RIGHT?

Marcy would feel better if Damon used names, like, if he said that he would lead the pack run with Marcy.

"We appreciate the invitation, Alpha Damon", George said. "However, we will need to refuse. Pack runs are your chance to demonstrate leadership and establish the hierarchy. Guests will only bring confusion. We will be there for the ceremony."

James nodded in agreement with George's words and Damon didn't object. It was all for show anyway.

"Do you know how you will start the run?", Caden asked.

"After Shaman is done with the ceremony, my Luna and I will shift into our wolves and..."

Marcy didn't hear the rest because her ears were buzzing. Did Damon say they will shift into their wolf forms? Problem! After she rejected George, Marcy's wolf was weakened, and after George accepted rejection, Marcy didn't feel her wolf at all. How was she supposed to shift?

"Miss Marcy, are you alright?"

Maya's question got Marcy's attention and she quickly schooled her features.

"Yes, yes. I was listening." And it will be LUNA Marcy soon!

Damon cleared his throat and repeated the last part, "As I was saying, other details will be left to my Luna to decide."

Marcy wondered how much she missed. What was she supposed to decide?

Another red flag appeared when Marcy realized that Damon was looking at Talia, and then Talia spoke, "I don't want to break traditions. I will talk to Shaman Gideon to see protocols related to the pack runs when Damon's parents were leading the pack, and unless something is against what we stand for, we will go with it."

"Good approach.", Caden praised Talia. "It will definitely score you points with older generations..."

Marcy's stomach dropped as she refused to accept this. Why were they talking to Talia like she was the star of this pack run? And they ignored Marcy completely. Marcy told herself that this must be another test. As the future Luna, she needed to speak up and take the place that belongs to her rightfully.

"Excuse me", Marcy spoke under her breath while standing up from her chair in slow motion. When everyone looked at her, Marcy asked, "What is the meaning of this?"

"Were you not paying attention, Miss Marcy?", Damon asked. "We were discussing how I will lead the pack run with my future Luna."

Marcy smiled nervously as an ominous feeling gripped her heart. "Shouldn't I be involved in this discussion?"

Damon cocked an eyebrow at her. "I apologize for the inconvenience, but your status doesn't qualify you to participate, not even as a guest."

"I don't qualify?", Marcy asked in disbelief. How can she not qualify? She should be the star of the pack run!

"Someone who came to my pack with an intention to deceive me and become my Luna, doesn't qualify.", Damon said in a flat voice and Marcy felt her insides churning.

"Deceive you? What do you mean?"

"I think you know exactly what I mean."

"You-you...", Marcy stuttered. "You want to do this without me? That's not acceptable!"

"This is my pack. I can do whatever I want."

"But... you promised! You can't go back on your word!" Marcy was shaking now. Why was no one helping? They all watched as Damon collapsed everything she believed was true!

"What did I promise?", Damon asked.

"You promised that today you will make me your Luna!"

"No. I said that today I will announce who my Luna will be and that's what I'm doing. It has nothing to do with you, Miss Marcy, it never did. Talia will be the one to lead this pack with me."

Marcy gaped at Damon like he was growing a second head.

Chapter 517 Marcy's collapse (2)

"You want to replace me? Your Elders won't allow it!", Marcy exclaimed desperately. Alpha Edward told her that he was working with a few Elders from the Dark Howlers pack and that Marcy will have their support once she becomes Damon's Luna.

Damon sneered. "Elders of the Dark Howlers pack barely hold any power and they definitely can't decide who will be my partner. They can accept my decision or lose their position."

Marcy looked at Damon in disbelief. Was he bluffing? That's not what her father told her, but Damon seemed confident. Now what?

It took Marcy a moment to remember an important person. "What about my father? My father won't allow it. You called me here only to embarrass me like this. My father will retaliate. Will you risk thousands of your pack members getting hurt and killed because you offended the Red Moon pack?"

Damon's anger swelled when he saw Marcy talking like she has an advantage. At first, Damon suspected that Marcy was just a pawn in Alpha Edward's hand, but now he confirmed that she was trying not only to manipulate him but actually threatened him with a war.

How twisted was her mind to think that things will end well after she said words that sounded awfully like, 'marry me or there will be a war'? She was just as power-hungry as her father.

Damon suppressed his urge to snap Marcy's neck and he kept his voice even while saying, "I am aware that Alpha Edward won't approve, but I doubt there will be a war when the news spreads how you came here to be my Luna in the company of your fated mate. What you did was showing blatant disrespect to an Alpha and you went against the Moon Goddess. No one will support such an act. Not even Alpha Edward will dare to condemn me for kicking your sorry ass out of my territory. Or would you rather that I send you into the dungeon?"

Blood drained from Marcy's face. Damon knew!

Marcy's head snapped to stare at George who looked at her with a satisfying smile on his face. But probably more irritating was that Dawn was sitting on the sofa next to George, their shoulders and hips connecting while holding hands with their fingers interlaced. Why was George allowed to sit there and enjoy with his mate when everything Marcy wanted was slipping through her fingers?

Marcy glared at Talia and spoke to Damon, "So, you will rather make this nobody your Luna instead of me who has the backing of the Red Moon pack?"

Damon narrowed his eyes at Marcy. "Just to make things clear. You should consider yourself lucky to be alive. That's how much protection of the Red Moon pack is going, but it's running thin at this point. If you call Talia names one more time, you will join Nora in the dungeon. Learn your place, Miss Marcy. No one will insult my fated mate, not even if they have the backing of the Red Moon pack."

Marcy's mind shook like a sledgehammer hit her. "Fated mate?"

Talia felt no pity for Marcy. Why did she sound like it's the first time she heard that Talia and Damon were mates? Talia was confident that Marcy should know that.

Damon's firm hold on Talia's shoulder helped Talia stabilize her emotions while facing her bully, the princess who hit her when she was at her lowest.

Talia clearly remembered seeing Marcy at the welcoming party in the Red Moon pack. People were swarming around Marcy, all with smiles on their faces, eager to leave a good impression.

Marcy had everything and what did she do? Marcy rejected her mate and came here with the intention to take Talia's mate.

Talia told Marcy that Damon was her mate. She warned Marcy to stay away, but she didn't. Talia healed Marcy so she doesn't die from breaking the mate bond, but Marcy didn't learn.

Actually, Marcy was escalating. The more Marcy thought that things were going in her favor, the more despotic Marcy's attitude was.

Talia enjoyed seeing Marcy falling off her high horse as the information sank in that she won't be Damon's Luna.

Marcy won't be Damon's anything, and Talia wanted to make sure that Marcy understood she had no chance of getting close to Damon. Not with Talia around.

Talia pulled the collar of her blouse to the side, to expose the left side of her neck, and spoke to Marcy who was staring blankly at Damon. "Just in case you forgot what I told you before, Miss Marcy..." Talia waited for Marcy to look her way before continuing, "Damon and I are mates. Fated mates. See this? Marked. Mate."

Marcy's eyes flashed in disbelief. That was a mark right there, and the way Damon's hand rested on Talia's shoulder, told Marcy that was his mark! What was Marcy supposed to do now? Give up? How can she give up when she was already here? Everyone knew that she was here to become Damon's Luna, her inbox was full of congratulations and messages how they were the perfect couple, and if she returns empty-handed, she will be the laughingstock!

Marcy turned to look at Damon pleadingly.

"But, my father..."

"Oh, for fuck's sake!", James snapped.

His emotions were all over the place because of the thing with Cornelia and he didn't have patience for this circus. He thought that by now Marcy would realize she was cornered, but it was obvious she was still struggling, and James decided to spell it out for her.

"What about father, Marcy? What do you think he will do when you go to him crying how Alpha Damon bullied you? Do you think that father will comfort you, or will he see you as failing your mission? THINK!"

Marcy's whole body jolted when James shouted, but he was not done talking.

"You should have an idea how important this was to him. Do you know how he will punish you? You grew up in Europe, so let me tell you. His favorites are silver and wolfsbane. First, he will chain you, then he will peel your skin slowly and sprinkle a mixture of silver and wolfsbane, just enough so your healing slows down but not enough to cause permanent damage, and then..."

"Stop!", Marcy shrieked and plopped back into her chair. She never saw her father doing those things, but she heard rumors. He was ruthless and there was a reason everyone feared him. But no matter how scary Alpha Edward was, it won't change her current situation. Now what?

Marcy looked around the room to see mocking smiles and eyes that were happy she was in this situation, and only Alpha Damon was looking at her seriously.

"Will you leave me like this after you had your fun?", she asked.

"Do you think I'm having fun? It was you who dragged me into your family's drama for acquiring power.", Damon spoke in a dangerously low voice that made Marcy shrink in her chair. "I don't owe you anything, but I will help you if you do something for me."

"I want you to protect me from my father.", Marcy was quick to say. "I want your guarantee that he won't harm me."

"It seems you have something on your mind.", Damon said.

Marcy nodded. "Europe. Paris. Give me money and send me there and you won't hear from me. A million euros. You can afford that much."

James facepalmed. "You really are stupid. That's the first place father will look for you."

Marcy made a face. "Do you have a better plan, little brother? One that's less stupid?"

"It will depend on your cooperation.", Damon said.

Marcy wanted to ask what their plan was, but she knew there was a price to pay, so she asked, "What do you want me to do?"

It was James who moved to give Marcy a few sheets of paper.

Marcy took the papers and frowned at her brother. "You are part of this."

James shrugged. "Part of what? Of saving your ass? Yes. You are welcome."

Chapter 518 Marcy's collapse (3)

Marcy was not sure what to think about this. Too many things happened, and it was difficult for her to wrap her head around current events.

After George severed their mate bond completely, Marcy thought she was going to die, but then she woke up and Damon showed up and said that she was poisoned and he will protect her, find the culprits, and make her his Luna.

Were those all lies? Was George in this from the beginning? Marcy was not sure, but her hatred toward George was tangible.

Last night's events filled Marcy with the hope that she will escape her father's grasp, and the only ways were for Marcy to disappear or to stand at the top, as Alpha Damon's Luna. Of course, the option of Marcy having it all was much more pleasing than living in the shadows.

That same morning, Marcy woke up as the princess of the Red Moon pack, convinced that she will be the future Luna of the Dark Howlers pack, yet now she felt the ground shifting under her feet with everyone in this room knowing that she came here with her mate and a bag of lies.

But... Were those lies?

Marcy looked at Damon and pressed her lips into a line. He was handsome and powerful and if he treated her well, she would do the same in return. They could have been allies, helping each other achieve their goals, but he choose Talia which left Marcy in a difficult situation.

Marcy's hatred for Talia swelled. If not for Talia, Damon would accept Marcy and everything would be fine!

Marcy was painfully aware that James was right. She couldn't go home. Her father would punish her brutally. But how will they protect her from the wrath of Alpha Edward? James seemed confident, so Marcy forced herself to focus on the words that were on the papers she received.

With every passing moment, Marcy's expression changed, and her heart beat so quickly that she thought she might pass out.

Eventually, Marcy spoke without lifting her gaze from the papers. "You want me to say that I'm abandoning my family because I'm traveling the world?"

"Yes and no.", James said. "You are not abandoning our family, just Alpha Damon, and the position of his Luna. The official story is that you grew up in Europe, and you saw its wonders. As such, you are curious about what else the world has to offer, and you don't want to be tied to the territory of one pack as their Luna. Not if the Alpha is not your fated mate. See, like that, our father will be convinced that you are not here. Alpha Damon was kind enough to provide decoys who will travel with your identity so that it looks like you left the country. If our father wants to search for you, he will look in Japan or in India where leads will point him, and not blame Alpha Damon. Actually, no one will blame Alpha Damon, so our father won't have allies to attack the Dark Howlers pack no matter how greedy he is. Everyone wins."

Marcy narrowed her eyes at James. Everyone wins except for her. "What do you get from this?"

"I get that when I take over as the Alpha, I don't need to deal with the mess of a war.", James responded and gestured toward the papers in Marcy's hands. "This arrangement is temporary. When I become the Alpha, you can return and take back your identity if you wish. Or would you rather risk going back now so our father can kill you in a fit of anger?"

Marcy knew that Alpha Edward will punish her, but killing was too extreme. "Father won't kill me."

"Let me tell you about the current situation, Marcy. Everyone knows that you have your eyes set on Alpha Damon and being his Luna. You spent days in his packhouse, and no one will believe that you didn't sleep with him. Do you think that any respectable Alpha would take you for his Luna with that reputation? Our father invested years and a lot of money in grooming you so that you can help him seize more power. The moment he realizes you are of no use to him, you will wish you are dead."

James leaned closer to Marcy. "Or do you think that father set you up as Alpha Damon's Luna because of Damon's good looks and he wished for you to have a happy life together? Any unmated Alpha would do, and if that's not an option, he would set you up to be someone's mistress. Or maybe he would keep you at home so you can entertain his guests who want to shag more than just Omegas. There are options, but none is good for you. Unless you want to be used like a sex doll for the pleasure of others."

Marcy shuddered at this thought, but for the first time, she believed James. Nora was sleeping around, and Marcy suspected that her mother was doing the same. There was no way that Alpha Edward didn't know about it, and he allowed it to happen. Heck, maybe he even encouraged it. Marcy wondered if that was the reason why Nora's mother left the pack.

Marcy turned to Damon. "Promise me protection."

Damon cocked an eyebrow. "You are in no position to set demands. But I can give you a different identity. What will you do with it, will be up to you."

Marcy knew that she was cornered. It was either to take this flaky deal or to return home and suffer punishment. Running away on her own was not an option. Maybe if she had more time, she would come up with a plan, but time was a luxury she didn't have.

Marcy cursed herself internally. If she didn't waste time daydreaming about being Luna of the Dark Howlers pack, she would be able to come up with something. But it was too late for regrets. The only thing she could do was go with it and hope for the best.

"How do we do this?", Marcy asked Damon and Maya was quick to stand and provide instructions, "You have one hour to memorize that speech and make it believable. It will be broadcasted over the live stream for everyone to see..."

Marcy returned to her room in low spirits. She was completely defeated.

She glanced around to see that the laptop, tablet, and cell phone were not there. Of course, Alpha Damon got those removed so that she can't contact outsiders.

Marcy laughed weakly at her own predicament. Even if he gave her a phone, she had no one to call. People she knew either didn't care or would be glad she was in a pinch, but none of them would dare to get their hands dirty and risk angering Alpha Edward.

Marcy threw sheets of paper on the bed and stared at them blankly while remembering James' confidence while he explained to Marcy how she should deliver the speech, pointing out a few key words to maximize the effect of people siding with her.

"It's in your interest to appear believable. Like that, father won't dare to search for you openly, and even if someone recognizes you, they will shield you from your controlling father. Remember, you are not giving up a marriage or running away from home. You are fighting for your hopes and dreams..."

Marcy looked at her little brother and she wondered when did he start talking like a grownup. If he read that speech, she would believe him. James was amazing, and Marcy... was no one. She was unable to keep her mate and she failed in getting married, two things that come normally to most she-wolves.

Marcy slumped on the bed and cursed under her breath.

All this was such a shit-show, and only two months ago she was in Paris, enjoying her life and dreaming about travel and making macaroons as her next class that might allow her to open her bakery.

Actually, she could still do it.

Damon will give her a different identity, and with that, she could go wherever she wanted and there were many places where she could perfect her macaroon-baking.

Chapter 519 James' realization (1)

After Marcy left the study, others agreed to meet in about one hour before dispersing.

James didn't have much to do, so he decided to head to his room.

Dawn and George went to their room, Caden stayed behind with Talia and Damon, and Maya lingered in the hallway on the second floor while checking something on her phone.

James didn't expect to see Petra, Erik, and Zack in the lounge area at the bottom of the stairs on the main floor of the packhouse.

"You are still here?", James asked. They were supposed to go to Darkbourne and wait for him there.

Zack spread his arms. "As you can see. We got delayed, and then thought of just hanging out here until you are done, so we can all go together."

James was glad that his friends were waiting for him, but... "I will be at least one more hour."

James couldn't leave until Marcy made her public announcement, and after that, Alpha Edward will probably call him for an explanation, and James will need to pretend that he was training with George and had no idea what Marcy was up to, and he was blindsided just like everyone else. He can do that. James was feigning ignorance for years, so it will come naturally.

"That's not a long time.", Erik said. "How about we play something on PlayStation while we wait?"

James was about to agree, when Mindy's voice drifted from the side hallway, "Did you pack a change of clothes?"

James turned to see Mindy and Cornelia appearing and he forgot what he was about to say. Cornelia was wearing a cream-colored summer dress that exposed her arms and her legs knee-down, and James really wanted to put his hands on that belt that circled her waist. She was a vision of beauty.

"A change of clothes?", Cornelia asked.

To James' disappointment, Cornelia didn't pay attention to him as she passed only a few steps away, toward the main door of the packhouse.

"Yes. In your plan for today is a visit to the aquarium. They have a show with dolphins where they splash around and the audience gets wet.", Mindy explained and laughed when she saw Cornelia's confused expression. "Don't worry. It's fun. Maya told me that Theo and Mike are reliable, and they won't gape when your wet clothes stick to you, but I'm not sure about the rest of the people who will be there. So... can I assume you don't have spares ready?"

Cornelia looked at her dress helplessly. She didn't really have many clothes, only what Maya gave her yesterday.

Mindy waved her hand like it was not important. "Don't worry about it. I will lend you some of mine. But since we are here, let me introduce you to your two handsome escorts for today."

James couldn't stop looking at Cornelia who was beyond beautiful in that dress. But... did Mindy say how Cornelia will get wet to the point of needing to change clothes? And what was that about handsome escorts?

His eyes widened when he saw two warriors who were standing at the main door and they shook hands with Cornelia, each of them held Cornelia's hand for a few seconds longer than necessary.

Both guys were tall and muscular, which was not unusual for warriors. They looked to be in their late twenties, and James didn't like that they smiled at Cornelia. As escorts or security, they should be professional. Was there a need to be that friendly?

"I apologize for coming here without being ready to go. If you can give us a minute, I just want to make sure Cornelia has a change of clothes.", Mindy said and tugged Cornelia to move upstairs. "Come so you can pick something you like."

James pressed his lips into a line. Zack and Erik were chattering about the game they wanted to play on the PlayStation, but James was completely focused on Cornelia who walked by two steps away from him, without sparing him a glance. Did Cornelia forget that last night she approached him with a story about how they were mates, and then she removed her top? The shape of her breasts was still vivid in James' mind. But then he said how he doesn't feel it and she left. Did he lose her forever? His chest tightened.

"It could have been worse...", a non-enthusiastic voice from one of the warriors got James' attention. It was the one who introduced himself as Theo.

James didn't want to eavesdrop, but he couldn't help it.

Mike snorted. "Last week we were stuck with patrol on the North side, and this is so much better than those barren rocks. We get to spend a day in the human city with a beautiful woman, all expenses paid, and the fact that Cornelia is unmated is a bonus."

James frowned at this. Why would those two care if Cornelia was mated?

"What if she wants us to be stuck in a museum? Or some other boring place?", Theo asked grumpily.

"Did you forget Maya's instructions? She said that Cornelia is new and it's up to us to show her fun. I feared that she is underage or too old, but like this, it's perfect."

Theo slapped Mike's chest with the back of his palm. "You are right! Why didn't I think of that? Forget about the aquarium. Let's take her to some real grown-up fun. Skydiving? Ziplining? Bungee-jumping? Chicks love the thrill. When her legs get too shaky, we will have a nice meal to calm down with a few cocktails and we can end the day in the Shifters."

Mike nodded in agreement. "How about a bet to make this interesting?"

Theo was interested. "A bet?"

Mike confirmed. "She is of age, and free for the picking. The rules are the same. The one who doesn't score a night with Cornelia pays the tab in Shifters."

Theo's lips lifted into a knowing grin. "You think you are her type? She was obviously more into me."

Mike chuckled. "You will see when those fine legs hug my waist, and you are stuck with the bill."

"Me, stuck with the bill?", Theo asked mockingly. "What if she is like the last one, and wants to have a go with both of us...?"

James didn't hear the rest as his ears were buzzing.

He heard similar talks many times before and he knew that those were normal occurrences. After all, werewolves are promiscuous with both males and females having needs, and giving in to their urges, but the idea of Cornelia being the subject of such talks was making him nauseated.

And then Cornelia passed by James again with Mindy and he looked helplessly as two women stood between Mike and Theo and then Cornelia walked with the guys, leaving Mindy behind to wave from the door.

Cornelia now had a small backpack, obviously with a change of clothes, but James couldn't focus on anything other than the fact that Cornelia was about to leave with two men, both set on seducing her.

Cornelia was not smiling at them, but she didn't push them away either. James panicked. What if they succeed? What if they force her? She was so small and fragile compared to those two bulky guys!

Without thinking, James found himself at the door, next to Mindy.

"Where are they going?", James asked without removing his gaze from Cornelia who was about to sit in the back of a car with Mike holding the door for her. Mike and Theo had friendly smiles on, but James knew how those were masks of predators stalking their prey, and their prey was Cornelia!

"To the human city.", Mindy responded. "It's up to Theo and Mike to decide where exactly because Cornelia is new to the area." Mindy shot a side-glance at James. "They are good guys. She will be fine."

'Good guys!?! How can she be fine!?!', James raged when Mike closed the door and he and Theo exchanged smug smiles before moving to get into the front of the car themselves.

Graphic images of Cornelia with Mike and Theo flashed in James' mind, and he saw red.

Chapter 520 James' realization (2) [Bonus chapter]

"What the...?", Mike's curse was cut short when someone grabbed his arm and yanked him out of the car before he could start the engine. They were in front of the packhouse, so Mike's guard was down, and he didn't expect it.

"Stay there!", James ordered Mike, who found himself stupefied by the fierceness of the teen in front of him. Mike recognized James, and even though there was no Alpha aura, James' physical strength was surprising.

James swiftly opened the back door to say to Cornelia, "Come out."

Cornelia didn't move a muscle as she tried to process what happened.

Cornelia saw James standing in the lounge area, and then at the door next to Marcy, and Cornelia did her best to ignore his presence. Even without looking, she could feel the pull and she suppressed the urge to go to him, believing that her emotions will stabilize once they put some distance between them.

Cornelia didn't expect that James will dash to the car so quickly that there were afterimages behind him, and then he violently pulled Mike out of the car. What was that about? And now he wanted her to come out?

James grit his teeth when he realized that Cornelia was not moving. He leaned so that his head was inside the car, and he could see her. "Can you get out? Please."

Cornelia scooted further away from him. "Why? Are you going to attack me also?" She could freeze him with a thought, but Cornelia didn't want to harm him.

James cursed under his breath. "I did it for you. Now can you get out so we can talk?"

Cornelia didn't believe him. He attacked one of the men who was supposed to escort her, for her? And she was confident that they didn't have anything to talk about. She shook her head, refusing to comply.

James was irritated. Why was she so stubborn? And just like that, he sat in the back seat next to Cornelia and closed the door behind him.

"You, get out.", James ordered Theo who was sitting in the front passenger's seat. "I want to talk to Cornelia in private."

'And close the door when you exit the car.', Maya's voice sounded in Theo's mind.

Maya was watching this from the window on the second floor of the packhouse.

Maya is one of the believers that Talia has a matchmaking ability, so when Mindy asked her for help with James and Cornelia, Maya didn't refuse. She was curious if Talia's power will reach someone who is only sixteen years old (aka James), so after the meeting with Marcy, Maya lingered in the hallway, in front of the open window that provided a good view of the driveway in front of the packhouse.

At first, Maya didn't understand why Mindy requested two handsome soldiers to escort Cornelia, and what was that with required dirty talk before they leave the packhouse? But now Maya wanted to congratulate Mindy on her plan to use James' possessiveness to trigger him. Once Mindy joins the pack officially, having such a sharp (and slightly twisted) mind will definitely come in handy and Maya hoped that Mindy will accept to be Talia's ranked member.

And this officially became another notch on Talia's post for matched mates!

Maya's eyes sparkled as she was imagining the advertising campaign. They will call it, "Talia's Cupid services" and have Valentine's and New Year's specials. They will make a fortune!

In the car...

Cornelia wanted to get away from James, yet she ended up confined with him in a tight space. She glanced at the door behind her while trying to figure out how to open it, but there were several buttons and notches, and she didn't know which one will allow her to get out.

James frowned at the sight of Cornelia who was leaning away from him, how much the car allowed. And why was her hand moving over the door? Was she trying to give him a slip?

"I won't harm you.", James said. "I heard them talking about seducing you and..."

"Should I thank you?", Cornelia interrupted him. "You ruined my day. Who knows if they will be willing to escort me now?" And getting replacements will probably take time.

James couldn't believe this. Was she still willing to go with those two? But her hand moved away from the door, and that was a good thing.

"Didn't you hear what I said?", he asked.

Cornelia closed her eyes and exhaled slowly to calm down. He was too close, and it was messing with her mind. But she couldn't give in to the pull, not when he didn't feel it.

"I heard you.", she said. "Do you think I can't take care of myself?"

"It's two of them, and only one you."

Cornelia made a face. "Why do you care?"

"Because...", James paused. Why did he care? "Because I feel a knot in my chest at the thought of you going with them."

Cornelia snorted. She had no intention of finding herself random guys as romantic companions, but James' behavior rubbed her the wrong way. "You don't want me, but no one else can have me either. If I knew it will end up like this, I wouldn't say anything last night."

"Cora..."

"Don't call me like that!", Cornelia snapped. She was irritated but mostly sad. She could feel the bond, and her emotions were not reciprocated, and it was killing her on the inside.

"Even if you didn't say anything, I would still feel it."

Cornelia's eyes widened. "Feel, what?"

"This...", James said and reached to hold her hand into his. "A need to be close to you, and not to share you. I don't want you to be with anyone else because I want you to be with me."

He scooted closer to her and put his other hand over Cornelia's. He was slightly disappointed that her hand was slack between his, but at least she didn't pull it away.

"I don't feel the bond, but I feel other things.", James said. "Last night, I couldn't sleep because you were racing in my mind. That never happened before. During breakfast, I fought against my urge to sit by your side and when I heard those two guys saying how you are easy on the eyes and they wanted to seduce you, I lost it. Werewolves are this protective only when they meet their mates."

Cornelia looked at her hand that was sandwiched between James'. "Are you saying that you believe me?"

"I just met you, there is absolutely no logic in me believing what you said.", James responded without missing a beat. "But I believe what I feel, and something inside me is urging me to be with you. Will you let me?"

"Let you do what?", Cornelia asked cautiously.

James paused. What the hell was he supposed to say? That he was turned on by just sitting next to Cornelia and holding her hand? He really wanted to rip her clothes off and pounce on her, but there was no way he would say that or act on it. It wouldn't end well.

Ah! Normally, he would come up with several great ideas and a few backup ones within a second, yet now his mind was full of Cornelia and the feeling of her soft hand in his, and there was nothing else.