

Alphas Bride 551

Chapter 551 Missing his mark

Talia and Meg went on the side to discuss the situation related to the upcoming Council of the Alphas, leaving Cornelia and James to sit on the sofa.

James couldn't get out of his head what he overheard. "Cora, is it true that one day here is like a month in the Midnight Guardians pack?"

Cornelia confirmed. "It's the same in my realm."

James' eyes lit up. "How about we go there? My father expects me to return in a few days, but we could stay there a few months!"

Cornelia's mood dropped. After one week or one month, James was planning to return home, wherever that was, and... was he planning to leave her behind? "Let's talk about it later. For now, we need to return to the Dark Howlers pack."

"Don't you want to stay for the Alpha ceremony?", James asked Cornelia.

Cornelia was not in the mood for ceremonies.

Cornelia started the day with an intention to visit the human city, but because of James, they ended up stuck in a packhouse, and then they went to a training center that was full of sweaty people smacking each other, and now they were here. No matter how Cornelia looked at this, she spent the whole day stuck indoors without seeing what this realm had to offer. If this is what a life with James will be, maybe she should go exploring the world on her own and leave him behind.

Cornelia was back to considering her original plan of returning to the witches' realm after the pack run in the Dark Howlers pack. As soon as Talia completes the ritual that will dispel the unwanted magic from Damon, Cornelia can leave.

To add to her irritation, Cornelia had a hunch that James didn't want people to know he was there. Was he really hiding from his father? If that was true, James' father was controlling and potentially dangerous.

"Why do you care about the ceremony? Can you attend it?", Cornelia asked dryly.

James didn't understand why Cornelia sounded upset. "I can stay in the back."

"What if someone recognizes you?"

"This is not about me.", James said. "It's not every day that a pack gets a new Alpha. It's quite eventful. The shaman will perform a ritual and..."

"I've seen plenty of rituals.", Cornelia cut him off.

James exhaled helplessly. "I take this as, you don't want to stay at the Lightclaw pack more than necessary."

"Correct." Actually, she didn't want to stay in this realm more than necessary, but she didn't want to talk about it. Not now.

James was holding Cornelia's hand and playing with her fingers, causing her irritation to flare and Cornelia decided to go to the restroom in an attempt to calm down.

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With nothing else to do, James moved closer to Talia and Meg.

"I am impressed, Alpha Talia.", James said. "Converting my father's supporter into yours was a brilliant move. Tony and Kalina will owe you a lifetime of gratitude, and the whole Lightclaw pack is about to wake up to a brighter future with new leadership, assuming they don't sink the ship."

"Nothing will sink.", Talia said confidently. "With Damon, Axel, and Maddox supporting Tony, no one will dare to touch them."

James chuckled. "You speak of those three, but you forgot the most powerful one."

Talia didn't comment. She knew that James was talking about her.

"You are a force to be reckoned with, Alpha Talia. I pity the guy who will dare to oppose you."

Meg stifled a laugh. "You should pity your father then."

James nodded in agreement. "And not just him. With enough ambition, Alpha Talia can unite all werewolf packs into one."

"I have no intention of uniting anyone.", Talia was quick to say. "I did this only because Alpha Magnus was threatening Damon."

"Of course, you did. I look forward to your visit to the Red Moon pack when you deal with another Alpha who is threatening you.", James said with a smile that faded when his gaze moved to the bathroom door where Cornelia was. Why was she taking so long? "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure.", Talia and Meg responded in unison.

"Do you know why Cornelia is acting weird?" Was it that time of the month? But he didn't smell any blood.

Talia was surprised by this. How the heck was she supposed to answer this? She was clueless about relationships, so she turned to Meg and gestured to her to take over.

"Did something happen?", Meg asked.

James shrugged. "We were talking about the ceremony, and then she said how she was not interested in watching it."

"There must be something else.", Meg said.

What else? "I suggested that we go to the Midnight Guardians pack because then I don't need to return so soon. I wanted to spend more time with her. Was that wrong?"

"And after that?"

James didn't get it. "Nothing. She said that she is not interested in the ceremony."

"No, no. I meant, you will go to the Midnight Guardians pack, and what will happen after that? One way or another, you will need to return to the Red Moon pack, right?"

James nodded and Talia's expression lit up when she understood where Meg was going with this.

"How does Cornelia fit into that picture?", Talia asked and she made a face when James didn't respond after a second. "Are you serious about Cornelia?"

"Of course!", James responded without missing a beat.

"Then, you should tell her. When I met Damon, my wolf was weak, and I couldn't feel the bond. Damon and I had a lot of misunderstandings because he was sending me signals I either misread or missed completely. Cornelia can feel the bond, but you can't. Tell her what it means to you, what she means to you, and what you plan to do about it."

James gaped at Talia like she was saying something outrageous. And it was outrageous because it was so simple, yet he missed it completely.

James was always confident in his observation skills and ability to deduct information, yet now when it counted, he failed miserably. Did the mate bond turn him stupid? Since they arrived at the Lightclaw pack, James was just sitting by Cornelia's side and holding her hand, and... he didn't even notice what was going on around him, or what was going on with the woman whose hand he was holding. He missed his mark completely, all of them.

Oh, God! His intelligence deteriorated! By how much? Was it critical?

The bathroom door opened, and James was quick to move there and grab Cornelia's hand.

"Let's go back.", he said.

"You are eager to return? What happened with watching the ceremony?"

"I want us to go to a place where we can have privacy to talk, Cora. I need to tell you things so you understand who I am and what I can offer." Which was not much because when he removes the identity of the future Alpha of the Red Moon pack, it was just him, a sixteen years-old boy with a lot in his head and a small savings account, and... that was it. But he didn't want to keep secrets from Cornelia. If they were really mates, she will accept him, and they will figure out things. Somehow.

Chapter 552 Talia's pep talk

Tony was in the back of a modified van with his newly-appointed Beta Nate, Talia, and Meg.

The ceremony of appointing the new Alpha and Luna of the Lightclaw pack was finalized, and they didn't have much time to celebrate before they left to attend the Council of Alphas.

Talia asked Tony for a ride, and Tony offered them to all go in one of the vehicles that belong to the Alpha.

Alpha Magnus enjoyed the latest luxuries that money can buy, saying how his image reflects the image of the Lightclaw pack. Now that Alpha Magnus is retired, all those fancy toys belonged to Tony and Kalina.

Tony and Nate were facing Talia and Meg, each sitting in a comfortable leather seat reclines fully and it offers accessories that could be nicely tucked in when not in use.

Tony looked at Talia with awe.

For years, Tony was using Damon as a role model of a capable Alpha who could overcome any obstacle.

During their visit to the Dark Howlers pack, Tony was focused on his training and trying to impress Damon, like a fangirl who got a chance to spend time with her celebrity crush.

Tony never paid much attention to Talia, thinking of her as Kalina's friend, but in the last few hours, Tony realized that he made a mistake. Talia was a powerhouse. How come he didn't see it?

Even if he didn't have a sense for such things, and even if he considered Damon's care for Talia as something that mates do, Tony definitely saw that Axel and Maddox were paying close attention to Talia and everyone was gathering around her. At that time, Tony suspected that people were kind to Talia because she was Damon's mate, the future Luna of the Dark Howlers pack.

Tony cursed himself. He was wrong. He was so wrong.

Talia was right in front of him, yet he didn't see it.

What else did he miss?

This same evening, Tony listened to Talia defending him in front of his father and talking back to Alpha Magnus. That was something Tony was never able to do. Even as his parents were leaving for vacation, Tony was full of bitterness but the only thing he could do was wish them a safe trip. They will be gone by the time he leaves, and then he and Kalina will have free hands to do whatever they want, as Alpha and Luna of the Lightclaw pack. It was surreal. And it was all thanks to Talia.

But Talia did so much more than just talking. She solved his problems and she seemed so capable, and what was he? He could disregard his Alpha bloodline, but can he disregard the fact that he is a man?

Talia saved his whole pack and put them on another trajectory, one Tony feared he will ruin, but Talia assured him that he will have the necessary support to be successful.

Tony saw himself as a failure. The biggest one there is.

How was he capable of leading a pack?

"Are you worried about the upcoming meeting?", Talia asked Tony who snapped to look at her.

He was worried about much more than just a meeting, but he didn't want to admit to it. "Aren't you?"

"What's the worst that can happen?", Talia asked with a smile.

"I don't know.", Tony said with a shrug. "How about a war and our society falling apart?"

"That will happen if we don't do something about it.", Talia said. "If you didn't notice, the greedy people in power are getting more powerful, absorbing the ones that don't resist and taking forcibly the rest while regular people suffer."

"So, we fight?", Tony asked without an ounce of determination. "We are about to face hostile Alphas who have power, real power. What are our odds of winning?"

Talia didn't like Tony's deflated attitude. He didn't sound or look like an Alpha. If he was this timid, how will others follow him? Even Nate's head was lowered, and Talia was not sure if it was in fear or shame, or maybe something else.

However, Talia understood that Tony suffered from a lack of confidence. She was there, in that dark place where she felt unworthy, and Damon was the one who encouraged her to try and give her all. Maybe this was her opportunity to give a pep talk to Tony and his Beta.

"You don't need to fight if you are fine with people like Alpha Magnus and Alpha Edward telling you what to do. You have an Alpha bloodline and as long as you are obedient, your life won't be so bad. But, can you really live like that if people around you are suffering? You saw how things are in the Dark Howlers pack, and the fact that so many people are coming in daily, seeking refuge, should tell you what they want. A normal person is not interested in a fancy lifestyle and lazing around. They crave a safe environment, a roof over their heads, and a meal on the table, and they are willing to work for it. As an Alpha, you need to provide them with such conditions. So yes, when someone wants to take basic freedoms from our people, we fight."

Tony looked at Talia seriously. She spoke with conviction. Will he ever be able to match that?

"You are an Alpha now.", Talia said. "Don't you feel the connection with your pack?"

Tony placed a hand over his chest and nodded.

"Those are their feelings, their faith in you and Lina. Use it to boost your courage when you think that you reached your limits because if you give up, there will be no one else to fight for your people."

"How do you know so much?", Tony asked.

Talia smiled. "Damon showed me what it means to be an Alpha. I always thought that Alphas are about parties, bossing around, and fights. I could imagine him in a bloody fight to get his way. But after I arrived at the Dark Howlers pack, I realized that Damon is the one who wakes up at dawn and heads to his office, and then goes to the training grounds. That's the Damon outsiders don't know about because they only see him when he is out to have fun. Damon is not the smartest, the fastest, or the strongest, but he works hard, always with his people and for his people."

Talia stared into the darkness through the window and her brows came together, as she continued, "Even now, he went to that meeting, knowing that many Alphas will try to take what's his, yet he will face them and do his best. I guess that's what being an Alpha is, doing your best. I want to do what's best for my people, and for my mate. I know that I am not strong enough, and I'm definitely not smart



enough, but I am not alone." She turned to look at Tony. "And neither are you. Use the will of your people to boost your determination and use your friends and allies to find the best solution and it will be alright."

"I wish I recorded this!", Meg's excited voice came from the side and after a second of silence, the whole van burst into laughter, defusing the heavy atmosphere and replacing it with a light one.

Tony and Nate looked at each other and exchanged nods while silently agreeing with Talia. They were not alone, and it will be alright.

#### Chapter 553 The Council of Alphas (1)

The Council of the Alphas could be summoned in any of several locations that were hosting inconspicuous buildings which could be easily missed if one didn't know where to look. The amenities included rooms where Alphas could gather in a formal and informal setting, and also rooms where Alphas could rest.

Every location was staffed with a number of werewolves who didn't belong to any specific pack, and people addressed them as Guardians. Their tasks were to maintain the buildings and to serve Alphas during meetings, and other than that, the Guardians were neutral, and everyone treated them like national treasures that can't be touched.

Normally, these places would be used in a time of crisis, or a war where opposing sides would meet to negotiate. The Guardians ensured that matters here were settled peacefully, and some rumors spoke that they were immune to Alpha aura and they possess unbeatable fighting skills, so even Alphas looked at them with respect.

The building where the Council of Alphas assembled this time had a lounge that was decorated in dark red walls and bulky purple furniture that sat on the stone floor. One long dark-brown block of polished wood served as a bar and there were several sitting areas defined by sofas and chairs arranged in circles. That was where Alphas and their Betas gathered while waiting for the meeting to start.

Alpha Cristian and his Beta Imre arrived to see Damon, Caden, Maddox, and Maddox's Beta Oliver sitting at the bar. He didn't care about other people.

"I'm glad to see we are not late.", Alpha Cristian said while exchanging greetings with four people, and then he took a seat on Maddox's right. The assembly was summoned for dawn which should be soon, but there was no exact hour mentioned.

"Do you know who else is missing?", Alpha Cristian asked.

"We heard that twelve packs confirmed attendance, but we don't know who they are.", Beta Oliver responded.

"With you, we have nine Alphas.", Maddox grumbled.

"I see. Three more to go.", Alpha Cristian said and waved at the bartender to give him a drink.

Damon was sipping his amber-colored drink while looking at the people present through the mirror behind the bar. He knew they were watching him, waiting for him to lose composure, to give them a reason to oust him, but he had so much on his mind, that this curveball from Alpha Edward was not much.

Yes, Damon's stomach churned at the possibility of a war, because that meant casualties that could be avoided if those greedy bastards would stick to their territories, but Damon was mostly concerned about the fact that black runes were there, just under his skin, waiting to strike when he least expected, and make him forget the most important person in his life. The period where he couldn't remember Talia was like a living nightmare for Damon. He was confused and disoriented, and he didn't forget only about his mate, but he forgot about himself. He didn't want to go back there, and the fact that Talia was not by his side and he couldn't reach her via their mind-link or feel her emotions was unsettling.

Damon downed his drink and gestured to the bartender to give him another.

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The nine Alphas were separated into three distinct groups.

Damon was with his confirmed allies, Maddox and Cristian at the bar. The three of them cooperated many times before, and their core values align enough that they trust each other not to go back on their word no matter what the other party offers them.

Two Alphas were sitting on one sofa in the corner, Alpha Robert and Alpha Patrick. Their two packs were the smallest ones among the packs who were members of the Council of Alphas. Damon guessed they were neutral and will side with the majority.

In the middle of the lounge, on the largest sofa, were Alpha Edward, Alpha Richard (aka Cassie's father), Alpha Peter, and Alpha William. The four of them talked in a light atmosphere, occasionally throwing glances toward Damon, and Damon pretended not to notice them. He knew very well that those four were power-hungry and eager to see him fall, but what he didn't know was what kind of agreement those four reached nor what their strategy will be so that they could be so easygoing.

Every Alpha was flanked by his Beta who observed, measured, and reported to his Alpha every detail.

The door opened with an announcement, "Alpha Adam Hessen and Beta Milo from the Silverfur pack!"

Alpha Adam was a man in his mid-fifties with a sturdy build and straight posture, but what gave away his position of power was his unwavering gaze that moved over everyone present.

After a few seconds, Alpha Adam decided to move toward the bar with his eyes locked on Damon.

Damon was surprised by this interesting development. The Silverfur pack was eighth in size, and they wouldn't take sides in any conflict, so Damon assumed that Alpha Adam will either join two neutral Alphas on the sofa or pick a separate seating for himself and his Beta.

'Jade is Beta Milo's daughter', Caden's voice sounded in Damon's head and Damon groaned in irritation when he connected the dots.

Jade, of course! How could he forget the she-wolf model who suggested that they pretend to date so that her father allows her to pursue her career?

Just like everyone else, Alpha Adam wanted to make a firm alliance with Damon, but he had two sons, and since Damon was not gay, they agreed to push Jade onto his lap because she was still Beta's daughter.

Jade was easy on the eyes, so Damon went on a date with her. They shared a meal and bed and then parted ways until Jade called him with a proposition to pretend to date, and for a brief moment, Damon considered it. That was before he met Talia, and Caden quickly burst that fake-dating bubble. Caden reminded Damon that once a female is in, it's a headache to shake her off. Every she-wolf is attracted to power and riches, and Jade won't be any different once she experiences the perks of people who think of her as the future Luna of the Dark Howlers pack.

After Damon remembered those details, he understood why Alpha Adam was approaching him openly. Alpha Edward probably reached to them in an attempt to buy Alpha Adam's vote, and that revealed that Damon was in trouble, and the old bastard was hoping to use this situation as leverage for Jade to put her leg through the door of being his Luna.

Alpha Adam greeted everyone with a big smile on his face before turning to Damon. "Alpha Damon, we meet again."

Damon turned to face the man before returning the greeting dryly.

"It seems we will be in a position to collaborate again.", Alpha Adam said.

Damon was not in the mood for bullshit. "I don't remember us collaborating previously."

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Alpha Adam frowned. He was confident that Damon would get the hints by now. Or did Damon want Alpha Adam to be more obvious?

"The word is that you met some kind of trouble, and we can help."

The way Alpha Adam looked smugly at his Beta, made Damon's insides churn.

'Don't blame them.', Caden said. 'It's a smart move to ask for favors now when you are in a pinch. We don't know who are the other two Alphas coming, but if Alpha Adam sides with us, we will even the numbers with Alpha Edward among the current crowd.'

'They want me to make Jade my Luna.', Damon reminded Caden. 'That's his bargaining chip and he hopes I'm desperate enough to take the deal.'

'You don't need to accept.', Caden said cautiously. 'As long as you are ambiguous now...'

Damon didn't hear the rest. Just the thought of Jade flaunting her status as Damon's anything made Damon's temper flare to the point of wanting to punch someone. How can Jade compare to Talia? No one compares to Talia. NO ONE!

Damon's insides churned as he wondered, would he accept the deal if he didn't remember Talia? How would he scrape that dirt? Even if Talia forgave him, he would never forgive himself. The idea of him causing Talia pain again, and making her act like his assistant or anything other than his equal was making him feel like his heart was being torn out of his chest.

'CRACK!'

The glass in Damon's hand burst, making a mess of amber liquid and glass shards on the counter of the bar. There was some blood also as a piece of glass was stuck in his palm.

Damon pulled the glass out and waved at the bartender to clean the mess and give him another drink.

"It seems my state of mind is not the best to discuss collaborations, Alpha Adam."

Alpha Adam's smile froze. Was Damon rejecting him?

Alpha Cristian turned to ask everyone present, "When are we going to start?"

"Two more Alphas are on their way. They will be here within minutes.", one of the Guardians that was standing at the door responded.

Alpha Edward was eager for those two to remaining Alphas come. He was confident that one of the two was Alpha Magnus from the Lightclaw pack because they spoke the previous evening.

As for the last Alpha coming, Alpha Edward didn't know who it will be because responses were kept by the Guardians, but he didn't care who it was because he was confident that he will have the necessary majority to move on with his agenda.

Alpha Edward knew about Alpha Adam's plan that involved Jade, and after seeing Alpha Adam's sour expression that matched his Beta's, Alpha Edward was confident that Jade will fail in becoming Damon's Luna. After all, Damon rejected so many better candidates, and Jade was not known for the virtues required for a Luna. Why would Damon want to give status to a female who was set on traveling and exposing her body on a catwalk and in magazines? On top of that, Jade had numerous confirmed previous relationships, so there was that.

The door opened again with an announcement, "Alpha Anthony Ambert and Beta Nathan from the Lightclaw pack."

Everyone gaped at two young men who entered, unsure if they heard this right.

Alpha Edward's mind was spinning and he was not aware that he was walking toward Tony and Nate.

"Since when are you the Alpha?", Alpha Edward asked sternly, like he was addressing two mischievous boys.

Tony patted the token that was attached to the breast pocket of his jacket. "My father retired and I'm the Alpha now." Tony was surprised that his voice was steady. He actually sounded confident! Talia told him to look at everyone like they are trash that can't touch him, and the strategy worked!

"Impossible! How could this happen!", Alpha Edward exclaimed.

Tony looked at the man for a moment before asking, "What makes it impossible for an Alpha to give the position to his son? I am of age and I have my fated mate. Didn't you attend the event last month where we celebrated Kalina as my future Luna? Are you so old that you forgot?"

Maddox snickered at Tony's snarky remark and everyone wondered if Alpha Edward will explode.

But how can Alpha Edward cause trouble? If it goes beyond bickering and provocations, the Guardians will make their move and they might expel him from the meeting, and that would ruin everything.

Seeing that Alpha Edward was not responding, Tony lifted his chin smugly. "As for how I became the Alpha of my pack, relevant people know about it because they attended my Alpha ceremony."

"Do you mind?", Nate's voice sounded from behind Tony. "You are blocking the way."

Alpha Edward took a step back reluctantly, and Tony and Nate passed as they walked toward the bar.

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Tony shook hands with Maddox, Damon, Cristian, and Adam, and Maddox asked, "Seriously. When did that happen?" He pointed at the token that was hanging on Tony's breast pocket.

Tony leaned closer to Maddox and spoke in a low voice, "I could tell you, but then I will need to kill you."

Before Maddox could say more, Tony raised his hand, indicating to Maddox to wait. "This is not the place to discuss such things." He had no intention of telling anyone what transpired in his father's study.

Damon was also curious. What trick did Tony pull for the old man to give him the spot? Damon knew very well that Alpha Magnus had no desire to retire, yet here was Tony, with his hair slicked back and a sharp suit and a token representing his pack. Did Alpha Magnus lose his mind? Damon knew that Tony didn't have the power nor mental fortitude to lead a pack.

Seeing that everyone was looking at him with a bunch of unspoken questions, Tony smiled smugly. Talia told Tony that he was the only Alpha in attendance who knew about her identity as the Alpha of the Midnight Guardians pack, and that made him feel important. He decided to give a small teaser in the form of, "I can tell you that me coming here as an Alpha is not the biggest surprise for today."

Maddox's mouth formed an "O" shape as his eyes sparkled with curiosity.

"Alpha Damon", Alpha Adam called grimly. "Only one more Alpha needs to come before we start the meeting. I think you know what kind of a deal I want."

Damon was exasperated. Why was this guy set on spoiling Damon's already bad mood? "And what kind of a deal is that?"

"It's about Jade.", Beta Milo said. "She is interested in you and the two of you have a history..."

"Hissss...", Tony's exaggerated sound interrupted whatever Beta Milo was about to say next. "I will assume you didn't hear that Alpha Damon already has an awesome woman by his side. If you know what's good for you, you will stop pimping your daughter."

Everyone gaped at Tony. Since when was he that brave?

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"What did you say?", Beta Milo asked Tony grimly.

Tony's composure cracked for a second, but then he responded, "I only spoke the truth. We are all Alphas here, was any of us pressured to take a random female for his Luna? If you think your daughter is worthy of being the chosen mate to Alpha Damon, she should earn that position on her own. What you are doing is... not right."



Maddox put his hand on Tony's shoulder and gave him a squeeze of support before adding, "Actually, considering Damon's current situation, I would more call it a blackmail."

"I agree.", Cristian chimed in. "If you are here trying to get Jade to be an Omega who will clean the kitchen, no one would say a word. However, you want to attach her to Damon, as his Luna. That holds a lot of weight. Did any of us get our current position because we made a deal? We all earned it. Luna is the one who proved herself as worthy by being better than the others, or because the Moon Goddess said so. If Damon accepts an undeserving female to accompany him, it will ruin his pack. Is that what you are trying to do here? To ruin the Dark Howlers pack?"

Alpha Adam and his Beta were both furious. They were surrounded by youngsters who were looking down on them!

Damon was pleased that his friends spoke up and shut down those two pesky people. There was nothing left to say.

Damon got his next glass filled with amber liquid when the door opened with an announcement, "Alpha Talia Moonrider and Beta Meghan from the Midnight Guardians pack!"

'CRASH!'

This time, the glass from Damon's hand fell on the stone floor and broke into a million pieces.

Damon wondered if his ears malfunctioned but then he saw a familiar figure in a dark gray knee-length pencil skirt and a matching blouse, and her hair lifted into a neat bun, and... that was his kitten! She wore high heels and light makeup that added a few years to her appearance, and she had a shiny token hanging on the left side of her blouse, but that was definitely her! Talia.

'Surprise!', Talia's voice sounded in Damon's head, and he could hear that she was smiling even though her expression was serious as she made her way to sit on an empty sofa with Meg one step behind her.

Damon was pulled out of his shock when Maddox smacked his shoulder with much more force than necessary.

"Is that...?"

"KHM! KHM!"

Caden's exaggerated cough cut off Maddox's question which was definitely related to Talia.

Maddox looked at Caden and it took him a moment to realize his almost-mistake. Talia didn't approach them because she wanted to conceal her identity!

"Another one, Alpha Damon?", the bartender asked sourly. Damon was more spilling than drinking, and he already broke two glasses for no apparent reason!

Damon gestured that he wanted another one. With Talia showing up in this den of wolves, he definitely needed a drink.

'Why are you here?', Damon asked Talia while peeling his eyes from her with difficulty. He didn't want to stare at her, fearing that his expression will blow her cover. But the fact that he looked away made him the odd one because all other eyes were on Talia.

He used the mirror behind the bar to look at her. She was beautiful.

'I heard that Alphas are gathering, so I thought of joining. Did you miss me?'

Damon caught her gaze in the mirror and he couldn't believe this. Was she flirting with him? In this situation? Did she know how dangerous this was?

'You should leave. Now.', Damon said ominously.

'Not without you.', Talia responded. 'I know that you want me to stay home and be safe while waiting for you, but I can't be safe knowing that you are facing the storm. Didn't you say that we are equals?'

'This is not about being equals, kitten', Damon said, his voice much softer than before. 'This is about all these people ripping you into pieces if they find out that something is wrong.'

'What could go wrong?', Talia asked.

Damon groaned as a million bad outcomes flashed in his mind. 'I knew that Keith will be useless as your guard. You probably winked at him, he fainted, and all others wished you a safe journey. Or are they outside waiting for you with banners of support while you risk your life here? And how did you reach here without a plane? And...'

'Damon!', Talia interrupted him. 'This is not about Keith and others being useless, but about me being capable. Cornelia used her magic to transport me here, but before that, I made a quick stop to the Lightclaw pack.'

Damon immediately understood one thing. 'You did something for Tony to become an Alpha.' This was worse than he thought!

Damon reached for the glass that the bartender gave him. He really needed that drink.

Talia didn't deny it. 'I wanted to talk to Alpha Magnus, to make him see the reason, but he was stubborn and one thing led to another. Don't worry, nothing happened.'

"PFFFT!", Damon sprayed a mouthful of whiskey all over the bar. Everyone at the bar looked at him questionably, the bartender included, but Damon was busy arguing with Talia through the mind-link.

'Nothing happened? You toppled the leadership of another pack. That's war!'

'There will be no war. I was careful. Axel was with me.'

'Axel...!', Damon grumbled. 'So, he could come with you, and I was left in the dark?'

'If I told you, would you let me?', Talia asked.

Damon jabbed his hand into his hair. He knew she was right. He wouldn't let her, but there was a reason for it.

'It was safer for you to stay home. This is only for Alphas, and you can't expect that people will allow you to stick around.'

'What can they do? I have the token that proves I'm the Alpha.'

'This is more than just a token, kitten. There is a device to check if you are real Alpha.', Damon said dejectedly. He assumed that she was here because Axel gave her his token, and Damon was ready to punish Axel severely for enabling Talia to join this shitshow. 'We need to find a way to get you out of here. I will create a diversion and you...'

'Damon, do you trust me?', Talia interrupted him.

'With my life.', he responded without missing a beat. But he was not sure if he trusted her with HER life.

'I can feel that you are worried for me, for us, for our pack, but you are not alone. Let me do how much I can.', Talia pleaded, and she let him feel through their mate bond all the love and admiration she had for him. 'I have a lot of things to tell you, Damon. Let's talk when this is over, and until then, trust me.'

Damon released a frustrated breath. He wanted to argue and talk some sense into her, but how can he say no to his kitten?

Chapter 556 The Council of Alphas (4)

Caden saw that Damon's expression was changing and it dawned on him... 'You can communicate with Talia?', Caden asked through their pack mind-link.

Damon smiled a little. 'Since marking.' The second marking, but Damon didn't want to go into details.

Caden never heard of such a thing, but he never saw werewolves glowing either. With Talia, anything was possible. She was just one surprise after another. 'What does Talia say? Why is she here? Is she really the Alpha of the Midnight Guardians pack?'

'I don't know, Caden. She asked me to trust her.'

'And you don't?'

Damon was aware that Talia could probably suppress them all with her aura. However, Damon knew that Talia was a gentle soul, and he knew how vicious some Alphas can be. Other than a few people who were sitting there with him, everyone was waiting for Talia to trip and fall on her face. Alpha Richard was the one who hired mercenaries to snoop about Talia's identity, and he hated her for the embarrassment he endured at the Lightclaw pack. And there was Alpha Edward, one of the reasons why she spent most of her life hiding in the attic! Every fiber of Damon's being screamed to go there, wrap Talia in his embrace, and protect her from everything.

'I think that she is way over her head.', Damon said to Caden.

'I disagree.', Caden responded. 'I think that Talia is smarter and stronger than you give her credit.'

'Do you think I'm underestimating her?'

'No. But I think that you are overestimating yourself.', Caden said. 'This is not a fight you can win by yourself. Talia knows that and she wouldn't be here without a plan. Yesterday you announced to our warriors that she should be treated as an Alpha, your equal. Did you change your mind already? She surprised us many times so far, and I have a feeling that she will perform another miracle.'

Caden regretted that Maya was not here to see whatever Talia was about to pull out of her sleeve. Will it include more glowing? Maybe he should record it so Maya can see it later.

Damon looked at Caden thoughtfully. 'You are right. Talia visited the Lightclaw pack before coming here.'

Caden's eyes widened. 'Tony mentioned that him coming here as an Alpha was not the biggest surprise. He knew that Talia was coming. Was she behind Alpha Magnus' sudden retirement?'

When Damon confirmed, Caden really regretted that Maya was not present. She would enjoy this so much!

Damon used the mirror behind the bar to see that everyone was stealing glances at Talia and Meg, and Alpha Edward was staring at them openly.

Alpha Edward was in shock to find out that Alpha Magnus was replaced, but now another new face showed up. Talia's last name matched with the Alpha family from the Midnight Guardians pack, but he never heard Alpha Isaac or Alpha Sophia mentioning a daughter. Or was she Axel's mate who took his last name? That was a possibility, but then Axel should attend this meeting and not his mate.

Alpha Edward wanted to rip off that scarf that was around Talia's neck. He was unable to check if she was marked with that fabric covering her up!

"Since everyone is here", a Guardian spoke from the door. "The meeting will start in ten minutes."

Alpha Edward gave a meaningful look to Alpha Richard and then tilted his head toward Talia, silently giving an order for Alpha Richard to investigate the situation there.

Alpha Richard knew very well what Alpha Edward wanted, and with a stiff smile, he walked toward Talia.

"Alpha Talia, right?", Alpha Richard called, and Talia looked up at the man, wondering if he will recognize her as the woman who embarrassed him and his daughter (aka Cassie) at the Luna announcement ceremony at the Lightclaw pack. Based on the polite tone Alpha Richard used, Talia guessed that he had no idea who she was. Perfect.

"Yes?", Talia responded questionably.

Alpha Richard cleared his throat awkwardly because Talia was still sitting on that sofa, and he was standing. "I am Alpha Richard from the Steelbite pack."

Talia nodded in acknowledgment of his words but didn't say anything else.

Alpha Richard felt like slapping her. He is her senior, why was that skinny girl not showing him respect?  
"I was wondering if you know what this gathering is about."

Talia tilted her head. "I responded to a summon because I guessed it's important. Did I miss something?"

"We are here to discuss the unruly behavior of some Alphas and to sanction them appropriately.", Alpha Richard said cryptically.

Talia's eyes widened. "Did someone complain about my pack?" She turned to Meg. "How come I didn't hear about it?"

"No, no!", Alpha Richard was quick to say. "It's about someone else."

"I see.", Talia said. "I look forward to seeing the evidence."

"Evidence?", Alpha Richard asked and looked at Alpha Edward who didn't move from his spot, but he was obviously listening in.

"Yes, evidence.", Talia confirmed. "If the Council of Alphas was summoned to discuss someone's actions, with no evidence, it's just slander. We are all busy people with no time for dealing with gossip. My time away from the matters I should attend to costs money and potentially puts my pack in danger. If you are wasting my time, I expect to be compensated."

Alpha Richard stared at Talia unsure if he understood her right. "What?"

Talia exhaled irritably and glanced at Meg.

Meg took that as a cue to speak.

"Why do you look confused? My Alpha said that this should be important, and it better be supported by evidence, otherwise we are all wasting our time here and someone should pay for it."

At the bar, Maddox chuckled and elbowed Tony with, "Aren't you bummed that she is not your Beta?"

Yes! Tony wanted Meg to be his Beta! But Nate was right there, so he couldn't say that.

"Every person has his strengths.", Tony responded politically.

Alpha Cristian leaned closer to Damon so they are not overheard. Alpha Adam and his Beta were gone, but with everyone having werewolf hearing, he still lowered his voice to say, "I think I know why you kept your mate a secret so far. She is worth stealing."

Damon narrowed his eyes at Alpha Cristian, but he didn't respond. His kitten was awesome.

Alpha Richard didn't understand what Talia was trying to say. Was she a righteous person who expected evidence, or was just compensation enough to win her vote? But he couldn't clarify that in front of everyone.

Alpha Richard was aware of their audience as everyone was eavesdropping. He leaned closer to Talia and asked in a low voice, "Do you mind if we step outside and talk in private?"

Talia cocked an eyebrow. "I apologize Alpha Richard, but you are not my type."

'PFFFT!' Damon sprayed a mouthful of whiskey on the bar, and the bartender's frown told him that he won't be getting any more drinks. He was just wasting it!

Alpha Richard was flabbergasted. Why did Talia make it sound like he was making a move on her?

Chapter 557 The Council of Alphas (5) [Bonus chapter]

Everyone was now openly looking at Alpha Richard and Talia, and they clearly heard Damon spitting out his drink which was followed by snickering from Maddox, Tony, and other people who were there.

Alpha Richard glanced toward the bar angrily before looking at Talia. "That's not what I meant."



Talia looked at the man innocently. "Did I misunderstand? I thought you wanted me somewhere private."

"To talk.", Alpha Richard said irritably.

"Riiiiight.", Talia drawled sarcastically. "Still, I will decline. We are not familiar with each other."

"You are misunderstanding something. I only want to talk."

"If it's just talking, why can't it be done here?", Talia responded with a question. "The fact that you want privacy is telling me you are up to no good. I heard about your reputation, Alpha Richard, and I was warned not to be alone with you in places that provide privacy."

Alpha Richard was furious. Talia's words made him sound like a lecherous man who would go after girls who barely came of age. He liked his women more mature, alright!? And it's not like he would just go at it without restraints. Actually, among the Alphas, his reputation in womanizing was low.

And then it hit him: she was doing this on purpose! And the fact that she was still sitting was rubbing him the wrong way.

"You will regret this.", he squeezed through his teeth.

"Are you threatening me?", Talia asked Alpha Richard, and then she turned to Meg. "It seems that our relationship with the Steelbite pack is worse than we thought." Talia craned her neck to see the two Guardians that were at the door. "How far can he go? If he decides to attack me, am I allowed to defend myself?" When Talia and Meg arrived, they were welcomed by two guys who told them a few points about the Council and how violence won't be tolerated.

Alpha Richard swiftly lifted his hands, palms toward Talia, and took a step back. "Let's stop this here before things escalate."

Talia frowned a little. "You approached me, you started it, it's only fair that you finish. But can you just walk away as if nothing happened?"

"What do you expect me to do?", he asked with urgency.

"You should at least apologize.", Meg said from the side.

Alpha Richard nearly choked on his saliva. "I should, what?"

"Apologize.", Tony said while approaching them, and Nate was one step behind him. "You came here and threatened Alpha Talia when she refused to leave the lounge with you. We all heard you. The least you can do is apologize. But just words aren't enough. I think that an annual tribute would be in order, for the next ten years. It's a good way to show sincerity and a reminder for you so it doesn't happen again."

Alpha Richard couldn't believe this. A tribute? He was already having a headache because of the tribute to the Dark Howlers pack that came with an excessive amount of embarrassment, and now Tony was talking nonsense about how there should be another one?

"What's in it for you?", Alpha Richard snapped at Tony.

Tony was high on adrenaline. Showing up here among Alphas with no one daring to scold him, got into his head.

Talia told Tony that she will stay away from Damon, Maddox, and Cristian, so that people don't guess her identity, but Tony was a free agent. Talia made him an Alpha and what kind of a person would he be if he just stayed and watched as his father's so-called allies mistreated her?

Talia told Tony that this meeting was about vultures going at Damon and they will be extra-careful not to provoke others so that Damon doesn't get more allies. She also told him to keep his head high because people won't see him as a person, they will see him as an Alpha of a pack, and no one will dare

go too far out of fear of starting a war. As for Tony, he was eager to test the limits and find out how far was that 'too far' Talia spoke about.

Tony stood in front of Alpha Richard now, and somehow, Tony appeared to be taller than before.

"Alpha Talia and my Luna are close friends, and in extension, I consider Alpha Talia my friend as well. How can my people respect me as their Alpha if my friend gets bullied in front of me and I don't interfere?"

Alpha Richard glanced around to see if anyone else will interfere, but everyone just stood and watched which made him feel awkward. He cursed internally when he realized that people were waiting for one of the parties involved to make a mistake and with Tony coming to backup Talia, Alpha Richard was at disadvantage. But he was not a greenhorn who didn't know how to twist the situation.

"Does Alpha Talia need you to speak for her?", Alpha Richard asked.

"Of course, not. But I am a gentleman. I can't stand on the side and watch as a pretty lady gets harassed.", Tony said like it's a totally normal thing.

'CRACK!'

Crips sound of glass breaking was heard as Damon crushed the glass he was holding onto.

'Calm down, love.', Talia's voice sounded in Damon's head.

His fury fizzled away when he realized that she called him love, but... 'How can I calm down when another man is your shield and he called you a pretty lady?'

'Are you bothered that Tony called me pretty or that he came to my aid so that Alpha Richard and his cronies don't make the connection between the two of us?'

Damon cursed under his breath. When she put it that way, he ended up being the unreasonable one, but Damon wanted to be the one giving Talia compliments and protecting her!

'You are not alone.', Talia continued. 'WE are not alone. I am glad that Tony stepped out because if all of our friends do the same, it will be difficult for Alpha Edward to point fingers at any of us.'

Alpha Richard mumbled an apology to Talia with, "I suggest that we all take a step back and think about what's at stake here. If necessary, we can talk about this further, after our meeting."

Talia nodded in agreement and Alpha Richard was not happy about this outcome where he needed to retreat first. He consoled himself with the thought of how Talia will soon see who the power players are, and she will be the one apologizing.

Alpha Edward was watching this scene and he didn't like this, not even a little bit.

Tony was obviously on good terms with Damon, and with Tony stepping up to defend Talia, there were high chances that the Midnight Guardians pack will side with Damon, and that meant Alpha Edward's majority became shaky.

"It is time!", a Guardian from the door announced. "Please move to the conference room so that the meeting can start."

"Before we head out, I want to ensure that everyone here is an Alpha!", Alpha Edward exclaimed, making everyone turn to look at him.

Chapter 558 The Council of Alphas (7)

Damon felt pride swelling in his chest at the way how Talia commanded this group of Alphas.

She looked at them without shrinking and he really wanted to build the shiniest pedestal in the world and put her on it so that everyone can see how amazing she is.

Talia felt Damon's support washing over her and it reinforced her resolve not to crack.

She lifted her chin proudly and said, "I'm not the one to bully people with excessive demands, but considering the amount of trouble I would get if I fail the test, I agree with my Beta. A kneeling apology will suffice."

Seeing that Alpha Edward hesitated, Talia decided to push his buttons. "Why are you not agreeing? A minute ago, you were confident that I'm an impostor who doesn't belong here. If you are right, there won't be a need for apologies or..."

"I agree.", Alpha Edward interrupted Talia's chatter.

"Good!", Talia exclaimed. "Now I want to see who else wants me to take this test."

"Wait a minute!", Damon said from the side, making everyone look at him.

"Why are you meddling?", Alpha Edward hissed.

Damon approached the group that was now forming a circle around Talia and Meg.

"I see that you and Alpha Talia are negotiating.", Damon said without removing his gaze from Alpha Edward. "If she passes the test, she gets an apology from Alphas who doubt her, and if she fails, you get to kick her out, but I have a feeling that it should be more than just words."

Alpha Edward frowned. "What are you talking about?"

Damon stuffed his hands into his pants pockets and looked at Alpha Edward smugly. "The two of you are wasting our time. It's been hours since I left my pack to come here and I still have no idea why. And now you are arranging this play that I need to watch without any benefits. Why would I care if you and a few more get on your knees?"

Alpha Edward's face darkened. "You want benefits? Isn't it in everyone's interest to confirm that..."

'PAK!'

Talia clapped her hands loudly.

"Alpha Damon is right!", she exclaimed. "I apologize for not realizing that Alphas won't be happy with just watching without participating."

Alpha Edward looked at her like she lost her mind. "You want people to participate? Didn't we agree that not everyone needs to do the test in order to save time?"

"You already wasted so much time that a few more minutes won't make a difference.", Alpha Cristian chimed in. "Let Alpha Talia speak. I am curious about her idea especially if it will bring me benefits."

Talia gave him a grateful nod before saying, "I don't want everyone to take a test, but, how about a bet?"

"A bet?", Alpha Edward asked in confusion.

Talia raised her index finger. "One million dollars each. Every Alpha in this room gets to pick if he believes I'm the real deal or an impostor. The winning group gets their money back and splits the rest. The losers will get no money and need to kneel and apologize."

"WHAT! Are you out of your mind?", Alpha Edward shouted, but before anyone could agree with him, Maddox was already by Damon's side.

"I will play that game!", Maddox announced.

"Me too!", Alpha Cristian was quick to add.

'I sure hope you know what you are doing.', Damon's voice sounded in Talia's head. "Count me in."

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Talia looked around to see other Alphas gathered in groups to discuss the pros and cons of putting their money for Alpha Edward or for Talia.

Other than Tony, none of them knew for sure if Talia was the real deal, and even Tony knew only because Axel confirmed it. But these Alphas were aware that if they put their vote on the wrong side, it will be much more than just a million dollars on the line. Most of them were contacted by Alpha Edward in advance, and since he was the one challenging Talia, their vote will confirm their loyalty.

With nothing better to do, Talia was observing the spherical device that was placed on a small pedestal, resembling a crystal ball made out of copper or some other rust-like material. It had carvings of wolves and a moon etched into it. It was beautiful.

"Alpha Talia", one Guardian said from the side. He was the one who brought the gadget. "This device measures the bond between you and your pack. We call it the Sphere of Power. For a person not belonging to a pack, it won't show any reaction." He put his hand on the item and nothing happened. "Since you are an Alpha, the amount of light will reflect how much your people believe in you."

Talia placed her hand over her chest, remembering Axel's words how she can feel the hopes and support of their pack members. Axel also said that those will amplify her strength and abilities. Was this device measuring that?

"So, only Alphas of packs can make it work?"

The Guardian shook his head. "Only leaders can make it work. You don't need to be an official Alpha of a pack. As long as people follow you, the device will react to your touch."

Talia became restless after hearing these words. Sure, she was an Alpha of the Midnight Guardians pack, but were people actually willing to follow her?

'This is brilliant!', Meg praised Talia through the mind link.

'You think so?', Talia was not sure how this will end.

'Of course!', Meg was confident. 'Once the results are out, the misogynistic bastard from the Red Moon pack will suffer a loss, and that will shake the confidence of his cronies. Why would they side with a guy who lost before the meeting even started?'

'But they will test if I'm the real Alpha.'

Meg frowned. 'Are you worried about that?'

'What if the bond between me and the pack members is not strong enough?'

Meg shook her head in disapproval. 'Don't be silly. The whole pack worships you. They all felt your power during the Alpha ceremony, and Axel is reminding them how he found his mate thanks to you, and how you will do the same for everyone else.'

Talia was not convinced. 'Even after all this time?' Sure, it was only two-three days for her, but for the Midnight Guardians pack, that was more than two months!

'Especially after all this time.', Meg said with confidence. 'Axel explained to everyone that the two of you are working on ensuring the safety of our pack members. Do you know that since you became the Alpha not a single person tried to leave without permission? And now that Axel and Yasmin returned with the baby-news, I'm sure that the crowd is going wild.'

Talia closed her eyes and felt the emotions of the Midnight Guardians pack members. They were happy and excited hopeful and... 'Thank you, Meg, for reminding me what's important.'



Meg looked at Talia smugly. 'That's what a Beta should do for her Alpha. It doesn't matter what these old farts are scheming. Just like what you told Tony, remember that you are not alone. Believe in yourself, in your allies, and in your pack. If any of them dares to give you shit and crosses the line, I will blow them away and blame it on PMS.'

Talia stifled a laugh. She was really grateful that Meg was by her side.

Chapter 559 The Council of Alphas (8)

Talia looked at Damon who was talking with Maddox, Tony, and Cristian in low voices, with their four Betas standing at a respectable distance.

Damon wanted to stay by Talia's side, but Talia told him how that was not a good idea and that he should be with his buddies until Alpha Edward shows his cards.

Talia feared that if they were too close, she might reach to hold Damon's hand or lean on him and that would be a big revelation they were not ready to make yet. She wanted Alpha Edward to believe that she was on her own, isolated, and vulnerable because if he realized that she has the backing, he might retreat for now and hit them later when they are not expecting.

Talia believed that they were at an advantage because their enemies didn't know she was Talia, the mysterious girl from the Summer Solstice festival, the one who went as Damon's date to Kalina's Luna announcement ceremony, Damon's assistant... Damon's mate.

'You believe in me, right?', Talia's voice sounded in Damon's head.

'Kitten, even if you say that the rain is dry, I would support you.'

Talia's lips lifted into a smile. This was not about if she was right or not, but about Damon supporting her unconditionally. Wasn't he the sweetest? And she loved their private mind-link that was like a super-cheat. Talia noticed that when they were using it, Damon's eyes didn't lose focus like when he was mind-linking the pack members, so no one knew they were communicating secretly.

'You are the best mate one could have.'

Damon perked up. 'I am. You better reward me for this.'

'I will. I will do anything.', Talia said and then added in a lower voice. 'And I mean... anything.'

'Damn, kitten! How am I supposed to focus with a raging hard-on?'

"PFT!", Talia burst into giggles, and Meg looked at Talia with concern, wondering if all this pressure was too much for her Alpha.

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"Isn't there some time limit?", Talia asked the Guardian who was standing next to the Sphere of Power.

"None that we will enforce.", he responded. "We are here to serve Alphas who are members of the Council and to ensure that all activities here pass in peace."

Talia noticed that he said how they were serving, yet everyone was treating them with respect. That definitely meant something, but she felt that it was not her place to ask about it.

Talia shifted on her feet and looked at the group of people where Alpha Edward was. They were chatting and laughing like they had the whole day available for idling.

"Are you in a hurry, Alpha Talia?", the Guardian asked, noticing her impatience.

Yes! There was the pack run, the full moon, the ritual to dispel the black magic that was plaguing Damon, and it was all scheduled for that evening. The windows showed that outside dawn was replaced by the sunrise, and even though there was a time difference of two hours between this location and the Dark Howlers pack, Talia was worried because they didn't even start yet! But she couldn't say any of that.

"I don't think there is a point in dragging this.", Talia said. "They have no evidence either way, so what's happening are mind games and deals under the table."

The Guardian was unable to hide his surprise.

"Do you think I'm wrong?", she asked.

"No. But I think you are bold to call it out openly." He chuckled. "Alphas are proud, and they prefer when people think of them as the ones in charge. When you say that they are being swayed by someone else it makes them appear...", he paused while picking the right word. "Weak. They will retaliate only because of this insult, to prove you wrong."

It's not that Talia didn't understand but, "If they are against me just because I said the truth, it will prove they are weak. As Alphas, they should know that power is not measured only by one's aura or how strong the punch is. And if they measure their worth by who accumulated more, that makes them open to manipulation which is a weakness by itself."

"Your wisdom is beyond your age Alpha Talia. I hope that years in power won't corrupt you."

Talia was not sure how to respond to this, so she smiled awkwardly.

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Eventually, Alphas gathered around Talia.

"How are we going to do this?", Maddox asked. "I assume that most of us don't have so much cash lying around."

The Guardian spoke, "If you allow me to suggest a solution. You can use your tokens to indicate your vote. If you lose, you will be required to pay the winners as soon as you get home, no later than one week from now."

After some murmurs, everyone agreed.

Damon put his token first on the table, on Talia's right. "I believe that Alpha Talia is the real Alpha of the Midnight Guardians pack."

Alpha Edward put his token on Talia's left. "I'm not so sure about it."

One by one, tokens were placed.

Alphas Maddox, Tony, and Cristian put their tokens next to Damon's, and on the other side were tokens from Alphas Edward, Richard, Peter, and William.

Alpha Adam was looking at Damon like he was hoping for a sign that he will acknowledge Jade as his Luna, but when Damon ignored him, Alpha Adam put his token next to Alpha Edward's.

Alpha Robert was quick to follow and put his token on the bigger pile, which made Alpha Edward smirk victoriously. He definitely had a majority.

His smile fell when he saw that Alpha Patrick put his token on the other pile, surprising Damon and everyone else present because Alpha Patrick and Alpha Robert were usually sticking together. Alpha Edward wanted to ask Alpha Patrick if he was out of his mind to side with those reckless youngsters, but he gave up on that. It was six vs five, and Alpha Edward was looking forward to the results of the testing.

"This is it.", Alpha Edward said while rubbing his hands and then he waved at Talia to get going with the test.

"What's the rush?", Talia asked while removing her token.

Alpha Edward frowned when Talia put her token on her right, and with that, each side held six tokens. Somehow, it reminded him that if Talia passes this, it will create equilibrium. But he didn't think she can pass. Even if she was the real Alpha, she was young, without any accomplishments. It takes time and effort for people to support her, and she was definitely a greenhorn in this Alpha business so assuming that the sphere will react, Alpha Edward will challenge her on how it was not enough. He didn't care if he was right. As long as he creates disruption, there would be doubts he could use to his advantage.

Chapter 560 The Council of Alphas (9)

Talia glanced at Alpha Edward who stared at her token with a frown, and she asked the Guardian who somehow ended up being the judge there. "If my challenger can participate, so can I. Right?"

The Guardian nodded in agreement. "It makes sense."

Talia looked at the Sphere of Power apprehensively. "So, how does this work? Do I just put my hands there, or...?", her voice trailed, waiting for further instructions.

"Put your hand on the sphere while thinking about the bond with the people who follow you."

Talia would appreciate more details, but the guy didn't say anything else, so she knew that this was as good as it gets.

Talia extended her hand gingerly and focused on the sensation in her chest that was brewing there since she became the Alpha of the Midnight Guardians pack.

The cold metal made Talia jolt and she stared at the sphere that didn't react.

'Liseli? Help!', Talia panicked after two seconds. Alpha Edward was already snickering victoriously.

'This is all on you, kid.', Liseli responded.

'It's not working!'

'Because you are not a leader.'

Talia couldn't believe this. 'What!?'

'Right now, you are a scared girl who is hoping for a miracle. There are no miracles, Talia. Trust yourself and trust your abilities. Do you think that Selena would make me your wolf if she didn't believe you can handle me?'

'That's a nice speech, but how do I trust myself?'

'It was never about you because you don't think you are worthy.', Liseli responded. 'Every time you did something amazing, it was for someone else. Do this for the Midnight Guardians pack. Do this for the Dark Howlers pack. Do this for your mate. Do this for my mate. Do this for your friends. Do this for your guards who are probably panicking because they figured out that you are missing...'

Talia closed her eyes and imagined the scene of her standing on the terrace with Axel by her side. They were facing hundreds of members of the Midnight Guardians pack who were chanting, "Long live Alpha Talia!"

A buzzing sound got Talia's attention and she opened her eyes to see that the sphere was glowing in a blindingly silvery light.

Liseli sent another mental image to Talia. This one was with Damon by her side, and warriors of the Dark Howlers pack were all bowed toward the couple with their fists over their hearts.

Talia's eyes widened when she saw a thick stream of gray snaking around the blindingly white sphere.

Another image popped into Talia's mind. This one was a breakfast in the garden. Damon was feeding Talia, and at the same table were Maya, Caden, Kalina, Tony, Maddox, and Tatiana, and then she saw the dinner table that included James, Cornelia, Dawn, George, Mindy, and Gideon. Zina's and Stephanie's images came next.

With every next person, another colorful string appeared, or existing ones became thicker. Blue, red, purple, yellow... and they were all rotating to create a fantastic display of colors that was shining because the silvery light acted as an amplifier, like when the sun hits the mosaic glass.

'Is this supposed to happen?', Talia asked Liseli. She had no idea about the Sphere of Power, but the way everyone gapped at the glowing ball was making her unsettled.

'I'm not sure. I can tell you that each of your powerful friends will use their influence to assist you unconditionally, so people like Tatiana and Kalina are counting for at least a dozen people each.'

"What does this mean?", Alpha Edward asked under his breath.

The Guardian snapped out of his daze. He was staring at the sphere whose brightness was still increasing and then he looked at Talia like she was growing a second head. It took him a long moment to grab Talia's wrist and pull her hand away from the sphere that dimmed the moment Talia lost contact with the object.

"I believe this confirms that Alpha Talia has the loyalty of her pack.", the Guardian said.

"How is that possible?", Alpha Edward asked angrily. He had never seen the sphere working before, but his father told him that the red color represents the Red Moon pack, and there was at least one red string in there. Did that mean that someone from his pack was more loyal to Talia than to him, the Alpha? "Your sphere is broken! How can she have loyalty from other packs?"

The Guardian frowned at Alpha Edward. "What makes you think she has the loyalty of other packs?"

"The colors!", Alpha Edward said while pointing at the sphere frantically. "Why were there different colors?"

The Guardian paused for a moment before responding, "Different colors represent the type of loyalty. The most prominent color was the silver light with white streaks, and that means her pack members follow her willingly to the point of worship."

Alpha Edward gaped at the Guardian, wondering if he could call out his statement as malarkey. His plan was to accuse Talia of cheating or not being good enough, but how can he do that when everyone saw the way the sphere lit up and the guy said that her pack members worship her!?

"You can collect your tokens.", the Guardian said. "The ones who lost have one week to pay their debt. If not, the Guardians will intervene." He turned to Talia. "Alpha Talia, I hope you can stay after the meeting is over. We would like to discuss a few things with a promising Alpha like yourself..."

Alpha Edward paled. He just lost one million dollars and a lot of face.

Maddox was rubbing his palms happily. "Thank you, Alpha Talia. This was the easiest million I ever earned. What do you want as a thank you present?"

Talia shook her head. "No need. But if you can invest a portion of that money into a shelter for abused and abandoned, that would be wonderful."

At the mention of a shelter, Maddox's mood dropped when he remembered how just before he left for this wretched meeting, he got a call from Mindy who told him that Marcy was on her way to their shelter. Marcy! What the hell!? Maddox wanted to punch Damon for dragging him into that mess but now was not the time.

Tony thanked Talia with, "My reign as the Alpha of the Lightclaw pack is starting with a million dollars, thanks to you. If you ever need anything, don't hesitate to ask."

Talia collected her token while listening to Alpha Cristian's words of praise, and she met Damon's shocked gaze.

'Damon?', Talia called. 'Are you alright?'

'You really are the Alpha of the Midnight Guardians pack.', Damon said after some time. 'And a very good one.'

Talia bit her lower lip. Why did she feel guilty about it? 'I'm sorry. I wanted to tell you but there were so many things...'



'This was unexpected. I know you said to trust you, and I waited to see how far you will go, ready to cause a scene and carry you out of here into safety. I would never allow Alpha Edward or any other bastard to touch you.'

'Thank you, Damon.' She really meant it, surprised that Damon took this calmly. 'You can be angry at me when this is over, OK?'

Damon shook his head. 'I can't be angry at you even if I try. You are too sexy for that.'

Talia bit the inside of her cheek harshly to prevent herself from laughing.

Chapter 561 The Council of Alphas (10) [Bonus chapter]

'Damon?', Talia called through their private mind-link. 'What makes you say that I'm a good Alpha?'

'I never saw this sphere before, but I heard stories about how it changes color. Not glowing, only changing color, yet you made it glow like a disco ball.' Damon noticed the shock on the Guardian's face when he pulled Talia's hand away from the device. Why did he stop her? Damon had a feeling it was related to the request for Talia to stay behind after the meeting. But Damon didn't want her to worry about that now. 'You have no idea how proud I am that you are mine, kitten.'

Talia's breath hitched when Damon's emotions flooded into her through their mate bond. There was an endless amount of love and acceptance and everything good that exists in this world. She suppressed her desire to jump on him and hold on until the end of time.

Alphas Robert and Patrick both smiled while taking their tokens.

"Why are you so giddy?", Alpha Edward asked Alpha Robert dryly. "You lost."

Alpha Robert paused. "Not exactly. Rick and I didn't want any part in this bet, so we agreed to cover for each other."

It took Alpha Edward a moment to understand. "You placed bets on opposite sides on purpose."

"That's right.", Alpha Patrick said. "Since I lost, Rob will write off my debt so we both get to keep our money. Maybe a million dollars for you is something to play with, but for us, that's a lot of money."

"You will still need to kneel and apologize.", Alpha Richard said victoriously like that didn't apply to him.

"Unfortunately, that's true.", Alpha Robert confirmed. "But I will do that while thinking how it was worth it because it will enable my pack members a better life. What about you? Was it worth it to provoke the strongest Alpha of the next generation?"

"What makes you think she is the strongest?", Alpha Edward asked.

Alpha Robert shook his head in disapproval. "You should know a thing or two about that sphere. Did you ever hear about it reacting in such a way? How long is she an Alpha? A few months, at most. Imagine what will happen in a few years. Her potential is unlimited." He inched closer and spoke in a lower voice, "And didn't you notice how all youngsters are standing behind her? That should give you a clue who is in charge there."

Alpha Edward's face darkened. He was right. In their society, it's disgraceful to stand behind someone who is weaker, but more importantly, did he just lose a vote? Sure, Alpha Robert didn't say that he will support him, but Alpha Edward saw both Alphas Robert and Patrick wavering and he was confident that they will give in when it counts, however, after this, his confidence dwindled.

"You can't be serious about this greenhorn posing a threat.", Alpha Edward said to Alpha Robert.

"Oh, he is serious.", Alpha Patrick responded from the side. "And let me tell you now for everyone to hear, if you drag us again into your games, our two packs will cut off all collaboration with you."

Normally, Alpha Patrick wouldn't dare to speak to Alpha Edward like that, but he was pissed that the latter agreed to this ridiculous bet in a way that forced everyone to participate. Alphas Patrick and Robert were planning to stay neutral until the last minute, and they had no idea that they would be forced to choose before the meeting even started!

Alpha Edward gritted his teeth. How dares this small Alpha talk to him like equals? His annoyance rose when he realized that he probably lost two votes, and if he lost them, it means that Damon got them. Damn it!

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Alpha Richard raised his hand, to get everyone's attention. "Now that this was settled, we can go to the meeting."

"Not so fast!", Meg snapped. "Did you forget that you just lost a bet?"

Alpha Richard frowned at Meg. "We have one week to pay."

Meg lifted her chin smugly. "And you have one minute to get on your knees."

Alpha Richard's face fell, and he turned to Talia. "Is that really necessary?"

Talia tilted her head. "If it was me on the losing side, would you forgive me that I lost?"

Alpha Richard opened his mouth to protest, but Alpha Edward cut him off with, "Let's be done with this."

Alpha Richard was flabbergasted. "You... You... are going through with it?" Alphas don't apologize and they don't bow to anyone. That's what makes them Alphas. If anyone finds out about this, they will be laughing stocks!

"Alpha Richard!", Talia called. "If you are trying to wiggle out of this simple act of apologizing, I can only assume that you will go to great lengths to avoid paying the one million dollars you lost here."

Alpha Edward wanted to give him a good beating. Was Alpha Richard such an idiot that he didn't realize their current situation? There were now six Guardians in the room, all of them looking at them sternly, and there were Talia and four other Alphas by her side, all waiting for them to make the wrong move.

"Let's do it quickly so we can move onto the meeting.", Alpha Edward squeezed through his teeth.

Alpha Edward balled his hands into fists as he went down on his knees in slow motion. Somehow, it was a much easier thing to do in his mind as his body was refusing to cooperate. His wolf protested the submission, but Alpha Edward pushed him to the back of his mind. Stupid beast! If he acts out, they might lose much more than just some dignity.

One by one, six Alphas were on their knees, mumbling apologies for doubting Talia.

"That doesn't sound very sincere.", Meg said from the side.

Talia waved her hand, indicating to Meg to let it go. "This is how far their sincerity goes. Take a note that we won't be collaborating with these six in the future." If not for shaking Alpha Edward's position in the eyes of his cronies, Talia wouldn't bother with these apologies. She was confident that they would jump at her throat if they only had a chance, and she was not wrong. The malicious intent rising from those six was tangible.

'CLICK!'

A sound was heard on Talia's left, and she turned to see that Maddox took a photo.

"This needs to be commemorated.", Maddox said with a grin and showed the screen of his phone that had six Alphas kneeling in front of Talia.

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Maddox shrugged and stuffed the phone into the back pocket of his pants.

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"I've got a better angle from here."

Maddox walked to Cristian with, "Let me see."

The six Alphas that were on the ground were close to exploding from anger. They were being treated like circus attractions! Alpha Edward and Alpha Richard blamed Talia, while the other four directed their anger at Alpha Edward. If he didn't drag them into this unnecessary trouble, they wouldn't be embarrassed.

Chapter 562 The Council of Alphas (10) [Bonus chapter]

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Chapter 563 Preparations for the ceremony

After dinner, females from the packhouse went into one spare bedroom, while males went into another.

It was part of the tradition to prepare separately for the ceremony.

They would put traditional leather clothes on and accessorize with necklaces made of teeth and colorful pebbles in an attempt to show themselves in their best edition for their mates and the rest of the pack.

When it was time for the ceremony to begin, females, elderly, and children would gather close to the altar where Shaman was, and males in their prime would form a circle around them, symbolizing that they will protect the pack.

After the Shaman completes the ceremony for the Moon Goddess to bless them, elderly and children would disperse and head home, while females and males would shift into their wolf forms and dash into the forest. Females would go first, for males to chase after them. The ones that were mated would look for their mates, while others would treat this as a big mixer. No matter how random it looked, they would all be following after their Alpha, Luna, and other high-ranking members of the pack, to complete one circle around their territory, after which they would be free to enjoy time with their mates, or their partner for the night, with the whole event ending after the midnight. Some would use this time to hunt and present their catch in the hope to woo another wolf.

Pack runs were full of positive energy where pack members get to show off their outfit, physique, speed, and hunting skills.

A pack run after a decade was a big deal. Everyone was impacted and the whole Darkbourne was buzzing with excitement.

Maya prepared one guestroom in the packhouse, and that's where Maya, Dawn, Zina, Mindy, Talia, and Cornelia gathered.

Talia wanted Sandy and Lulu to be with them also, but Damon objected. Per Damon's arrangement, Talia's six guards were already dressed up in ceremonial clothes and waiting outside for Talia to be ready. They will escort her until she reunites with Damon, and Damon threatened Talia that if she objects to this deal, he will spill the beans and tell her guards how they failed on their first night to watch over her. Talia agreed reluctantly to treat her personal guards as her guards while they were on duty.

The guestroom had four full-length mirrors and four stations where they could sit to do their hair and makeup.

Each of the females had a leather outfit that covered the chest area, leaving their abdomen exposed, and the bottom part was a skirt of several overlapping layers. It all stayed together with one string that when pulled made everything fall down. It was convenient so the fabric doesn't rip when they shift into their wolf forms.

Females wore stylish necklaces of colorful pebbles, and they were braiding each other's hair and decorating it with small flowers that Cornelia and Mindy gathered earlier that evening.

"I saw that some necklaces are made of teeth.", Cornelia said while checking out herself in the mirror. She approved of this outfit, it was not restricting. Since she came to the human realm, these were the most comfortable clothes she put on, and she wished that she could wear this every day.

"Hunters preserve teeth of their catch and so jewelry can be made out of those.", Maya explained while pointing at her necklace that had teeth in it. "One can wear these if he caught them himself or if it was gifted by a hunter who is mate or family member. You can't buy it."

Talia touched the soft leather that hugged her hips. It was light brown and it had embroidered with black thread shapes of wolves and moon on it. It was beautiful. Talia smiled at Maya gratefully. Talia was so consumed with everything that was going on, and she totally forgot about ceremonial clothes, but Maya made arrangements not only for Talia but for Cornelia as well.

Talia won't be there for the ceremony, but she hoped that Damon will see her like that, and that he will approve.

Talia put her hands over her chest. She was nervous.

"Don't worry, Talia.", Dawn said. "We are here to support you." Her chin shivered when she remembered that she will leave soon. "This is my first and last pack run in the Dark Howlers pack." She was emotional.

Talia and Zina gave Dawn hugs at the same time, making it a three-girl-hug.

"Don't be sad.", Talia said. "I will change rules so you can join every pack run, even after you leave the Dark Howlers pack. You and George will always be welcome here."

"I hear that the Red Moon pack doesn't do monthly pack runs.", Zina said. "So, the two of you make an excuse to come here."

Dawn nodded while sniffing. She didn't talk about this with George, but she hoped he will approve. On the other hand, considering George's plan to take down Alpha Edward, Dawn didn't dare to think so far into the future.

A mental image of Damon flashed in Talia's mind. He was topless, wearing a black skirt-like garment that reached half of his thighs, black patterns were drawn over his skin, and he had around his neck several necklaces made out of teeth that were big as Talia's pinky finger. Talia could see Damon smiling cockily while striking a pose and flexing his muscles.

'What do you say of your man, kitten?', his voice sounded in her head. 'Do I look tempting enough for you?'

Talia realized that Damon was communicating with her mentally.

'For a moment, I thought I'm hallucinating. You look delicious.', she responded. 'Is that black paint edible?'

Damon chuckled in response. 'You won't know unless you try. But even if the paint is not edible, your man is.'

Talia bit the inside of her cheek to prevent herself from laughing at the shameless Alpha who was thrusting his hips suggestively. Other females will think she went crazy if she just starts laughing for no apparent reason.

Talia touched her hair which was braided and wrapped around her head like a crown, and she moved to stand in front of the full-length mirror before sending him back a mental image of herself.

Damon whistled loudly, making Talia wince.

'Which room are you in?', Damon asked with urgency. 'I'm coming to pick you up, and we can leave this pack run business to others to handle.'

Talia giggled. 'Thank you, Damon.' She needed that boost in confidence that only he could provide. And she was super happy that he got to see her, and he approved.

Talia glanced at the time before releasing a sharp breath. 'It's almost time.', she told Damon.

'I will wait for your signal that things are ready, and then I will find you.', Damon responded. 'After that, it will be just the two of us and our wolves.'

Talia felt Liseli leaping with joy. 'Liseli is looking forward to meeting Sapa again.'

'Me too, kitten. I gotta go now. Gideon says it's time for a speech and Caden and I need to be there.'

'I will see you soon.', Talia responded as Maya was telling Mindy that it was time to go.

This was a sign for Talia that she needed to start moving also.

Chapter 564 The pack run (1) [Bonus chapter]

Talia and Zina walked out of the room to be greeted by Keith, Liam, Pierce, Caleb, Sandy, and Lulu who bowed respectfully.

All six of them wore ceremonial clothes and had patterns drawn on their skin with black paint, similar to what Talia saw on Damon. They also had impressive necklaces made out of teeth.

Talia noticed that Keith had the most drawings on his body among her guards.

"What do those patterns represent?", Talia asked Keith, genuinely curious.

Keith puffed his chest proudly. "These are for challenges I won against worthy opponents." And also, fights against rogues and for lives taken, but he didn't want to sully Talia's ears with harsh words.

Keith enjoyed the way Talia looked at the drawings that adorned his body, and he appreciated the fact that Talia didn't see him as a pampered trainer, but as a capable warrior he was.

He knew that Talia was mated to Damon and that harboring those feelings inside his heart was futile, but there was nothing he could do about it other than to protect Talia with everything he's got and to step away when Damon was nearby because seeing Talia happy with another man was too painful to bear.

Keith wondered if this was the Moon Goddess' plan all along, to turn him into a faithful dog who will follow his master with the hope to get praise.

Unaware of Keith's thoughts, Talia commented on the drawings on his body. "You won many fights." She turned to look at the rest of her guards. "You all did. I am lucky to have you keeping me safe."

Talia noticed that her guards were looking at Zina curiously, so she explained, "Zina will be coming with us. I need to do something during the ceremony and her assistance will be necessary."

They were all surprised that Talia will be absent from the ceremony.

"Where are we going?", Keith asked.

"I'm not sure.", Talia admitted. "It's related to the full moon and Shaman said that it will show me the way."

It was not Gideon, but it was Evanora, but Talia didn't want to go into details.

Zina's role was to accompany Talia and to communicate with Maya and Caden via mind-link so that the Beta duo knows what's the status on Talia's side, and for Talia to know what was going on at the ceremony.

Keith and the other five guards didn't know about Damon's condition. Damon didn't want more than necessary people to know about him being impacted by the dark magic, and Talia agreed. If the news spread that Damon was attacked by the Oracle from the Midnight Guardians pack, all kinds of trouble might ensue, and they wanted to avoid animosity among the two packs because of a few malicious individuals.

The party of eight exited the packhouse to be met by a river of people who were moving toward them, parting in the middle to pass on the left and right sides of the packhouse. Those were members of the Dark Howlers pack, all of them in traditional clothes and good spirits, some carrying flowers to leave as offerings at the ceremonial altar that was set up behind the garden, and Talia really regretted that she will miss this event.

"Next time, we will join them.", Zina said to Talia.

Talia turned to look at her friend. "Am I that obvious?"

Zina shook her head. "We are all feeling the same, but you are easy to read. Let's accomplish this task so that we are not missing the event of the decade for naught."

"Thank you, Zina.", Talia said. "It means a lot to have you here with me." It really did. She knew that Keith and the other five were there because Damon ordered them, but Zina was there as a friend.

Talia remembered Damon's words about how only people close to her can backstab her, and she looked at the seven people around her. Six of them were her guards, but Talia considered all of them her friends, and she couldn't imagine that any of them would betray her.

She was their Alpha, and their betrayal wouldn't be petty things like stealing the best-looking dessert, but serious matters that could impact her safety, and Damon's, and the safety of the whole pack, and Talia's heart cracked at the thought that any of them would be willing to go that far. She knew that Damon's concerns were not made up, but she hoped that he was wrong, at least about these people.

With a deep breath to steel her resolve, Talia walked forward with Zina, and six guards circled them. They blended with the other people perfectly, except for the fact that they were moving in the opposite direction.

Talia turned to the left, emerging from the river the crowd created. Once the clamor died behind them, Talia closed her eyes and chanted the words that Evanora taught her to improve her sensitivity to nature and help her see the path that will lead her to the optimal location for the ritual. A few seconds later, Talia allowed her instincts to guide her, and she moved slowly at first, but her every next step came with more confidence that she knew where she was going.

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Back in the packhouse, Damon was standing at the window of the living room with his hands clasped behind his back and looking out to see the crowd gathering to fill up the clearing beyond the garden and overflowing in every direction. Those were his people, excited and happy, and he really wished that Talia was by his side so that they can enjoy this scene together, but he feared that if they meet now, it would be nearly impossible to separate. He had a task to do, and so did Talia, and soon they will reunite. Soon.

Cornelia peered into the living room to see James who was wearing skimpy ceremonial clothes that were held by one string around his waist, allowing the leather garment to reach half of his thighs. She never saw him exposed like that, up close, and she was not sure if he was really the most handsome man she had ever seen, or if that was the soulmate bond messing with her eyesight and with her reasoning.

James turned to look at Cornelia and she clearly saw his eyes widening as he took in her form.

Before Cornelia could react, James was in front of her, holding her hand and pulling her into the living room.

"You are stunning", James said breathily. She really was.

James wanted to scoop Cornelia in his arms and take her to a place with privacy and stay there forever, but their forever was uncertain and for the first time in his life James really wished that he had the Alpha aura strong enough to protect Cornelia from everything bad in the world, or maybe that he was born as a no one important so that his father won't care about him.

Chapter 565 The pack run (2)

James knew that they were stuck with the reality where he was James Redmayne, the future Alpha of the Red Moon pack without an Alpha aura, and he was facing the most beautiful woman in the world who was his mate and who squirmed under his hungry gaze, and somehow... she made his heart sing, which was not a bad thing, not even a little bit.

James chuckled. "You are lovely when you blush."

"I'm not blushing.", Cornelia said quickly.



James lifted her hand to place small kisses on her knuckles. "Whatever you say, gorgeous."

Caden whistled loudly. "Who said that teens don't have their courting game on?"

James knew that this jab was directed at him, but he couldn't care less. His chocolate-colored Goddess was in front of him, and nothing else mattered. He didn't want to allow dark thoughts about his father to spoil this moment, and compared to that, Caden's teasing was nothing.

"Maybe you should look at your mate, and not at teens.", Maya said from the door, getting Caden's full attention.

Caden grinned at Maya. "I see that the Moon Goddess gave me her blessings early." He sashayed toward Maya and pulled her close to him, making sure that their hips were connected firmly so she can feel that he was hard already.

"Tonight, we make pups.", Caden's breath splashed against her ear.

Maya burst into giggles and pushed him away, but without any strength, careful not to make smudges of the black patterns that still didn't dry on his skin.

Mindy made a beeline toward Gideon and twirled on her toes so that he can see her from every angle. "What do you think?"

"I fear I will forget the steps for the ritual.", Gideon said.

Mindy didn't get it. "Nonsense. We practiced more than once. But just in case, I will stand close to you and whisper if you forget something."

Gideon chuckled. "The closer you are, the more I will forget."

Mindy stifled a laugh when she realized that he will forget steps of the ritual because of her. "I take that as you approve of your mate in this outfit."

"I approve of you without an outfit, just how mother nature intended, but this will do.", Gideon said with a straight face, but the twinkle in his eyes spoke about mischief and all the X-rated things he wanted to do with Mindy.

Mindy slapped his shoulder playfully. "Come on, we should go out first. People are waiting."

Mindy was nervous. For everyone else, this was the ceremony before the pack run, but for her, it was also the ceremony where she will officially become a member of the Dark Howlers pack. She wished that Maddox and her parents were present, but she knew that according to ancient customs of werewolves when a she-wolf finds her mate, he becomes her family. Mindy's family didn't want to cut their ties with her completely, and she loved that part, but she still missed them.

A pair of strong arms circled Mindy's waist from behind.

"How about tomorrow you call your brother and decide on a good time for us to visit your family?", Gideon asked.

Mindy craned her neck to look at him. "Are you serious?"

Gideon kissed the tip of her nose. "I am serious about getting to know the family where my spitfire mate grew up. Who knows, maybe we will get along? I have a suit and a necktie, and I wonder if it still fits me well."

Mindy smiled and leaned into him. Somehow, his words made her miss her family a bit less. "I will call Max tomorrow."

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Dawn peeked into the room in time to see Gideon and Mindy stepping out through the side door.

Dawn's whole world stopped as she gaped at George. His torso was exposed, showing not only the tattoo on his chest but also numerous patterns that were drawn with black paint, telling stories of fights worthy of an Alpha that was presenting himself as a Commander from the Red Moon pack. Dawn was confident that only Damon had more artwork on his body, but she couldn't look away from George to compare and confirm.

George's lips lifted into a smug smirk at the sight of Dawn who was obviously dazed by his appearance.

George regretted that he didn't have his spoils from hunting handy that came in form of impressive necklaces so that he can put them all around Dawn's neck, and he regretted even more that this was not their pack where Dawn would show up as his Luna and be celebrated by their people.

"What's got into you?", Dawn asked George. She could feel his emotions through their mate bond.

George didn't want to share his thoughts and spoil the mood. "I regret that I can't join the pack run." As an outsider, George will attend the ceremony, but not join the run. When in wolf form, werewolves are more susceptible to following their instincts than reason, and another dominant wolf would definitely confuse members of the Dark Howlers pack which can be seen as a challenge to the existing hierarchy. George didn't want to fight with Damon or his generals, at least not in this setting.

Dawn smiled and put her arms around George's neck. "We can have a run of our own.", she said teasingly. "Wouldn't you like to hunt for your mate tonight?"

A low growl formed in George's throat.

"The hunt is on.", George said, and then he took Dawn's breath away with a kiss that made her toes curl.

Petra, Zack, and Erik entered the living room, dressed for the occasion. Three teens were not of age, but as junior warriors, they had the right to join the pack run.

The teens were not sure if they should approach James and Cornelia who were holding hands and talking in whispers; the mood over there was definitely cozy.

Petra smiled at the sight of James who embraced the idea of meeting his mate early. She didn't know how James and Cornelia will make it work, but she was confident that the Moon Goddess wouldn't arrange for them to meet if there was no way for James and Cornelia to end up together. The Moon Goddess knows best, and she doesn't make mistakes.

"You three!", Caden called for Petra, Zack, and Erik to come closer. "I have a task for you. I need you to go out there and spread information about how Alphas have something special going on. Talia won't be here for the ceremony because Damon will need to find her, and after the ceremony, the rest of the pack will join them..."

It was to cover up the fact that Talia and Damon will be absent, and Caden added, "Feel free to shut up any Elders who are using this to sow discord. Tell them that our Alpha needs to prove himself as worthy of his mate by hunting for her. It's a tradition we all followed and if they have a problem with that, they can complain to the Moon Goddess."

Petra, Zack, and Erik moved out, this time with a goal on their minds.

Chapter 566 The pack run (3)

Mindy and Gideon reached the podium that was built for this occasion.

In the middle was an altar with a fire on top that was crackling since that afternoon.

Gideon immediately got busy arranging some items on the altar, and Mindy wanted to take a good look at the people gathered. With just a single glance she was confident that there were more than three thousand people. If this was the Blue River pack, this would probably be the whole pack, yet here people were still coming. It was massive.

Mindy's mood was dampened by the fact that she didn't know anyone. She grew up as the princess of the Blue River pack and faces there were at least familiar while everyone knew her name, yet now every gaze she met was questioning as people obviously wondered what she was doing up there.

It was strange to be surrounded by the crowd, yet feel alone.

Mindy wanted to ask Gideon for a hug or maybe to introduce her as his mate, but he was busy, and this was not the right time to be clingy, so she swallowed her grievances and went behind the podium where she previously kept dried herbs that Gideon will throw into the flames during the ceremony. At least she could do something to occupy herself and be useful.

Mindy knew that staying in the Dark Howlers pack as Gideon's mate will be an adjustment, but she didn't think it will hit her that hard.

"Do you need help, Gidi?", a female voice got Mindy's attention and she frowned. 'Who the hell is Gidi?'

"Thank you, Nina, but I got it covered.", Gideon responded, and Mindy could hear that he was smiling.

Mindy's instincts told her something was off. Why was he so friendly with a random female?

Mindy whipped her head in that direction to see a female on the podium who was approaching Gideon with more sway in her hips than Mindy approved. Nina had ample bosom to fill the top part of her leather outfit, and the woman looked to be in her mid-thirties, but Mindy knew that she was way older than that.

"I saw you have a young assistant. Are you sure you want to let her do this? This ceremony is a big deal. What if she messes up? You know I can be helpful.", Nina ended in a singing voice.

Gideon scratched the back of his head and Mindy wondered what his expression was. Was he smiling? Even if he wasn't, Nina was smiling coquettishly for both of them.

Jealousy, dejection, and disappointment swelled in Mindy's chest, making it difficult to breathe and she clutched dried herbs in her hands.

Why didn't Gideon tell this Nina person to scram? Why was she still standing there?

Gideon could sense unknown negative emotions and he turned to see Mindy. His brows came together when he saw her knowing look and eyes full of tears.

"Mindy... no..." , he said, but it was too late. Mindy already threw the herbs from her hands and was moving swiftly into the forest. She didn't want to talk to him. She didn't want to talk to anyone. She wanted to go home.

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"Mindy, wait!" , Gideon shouted and a second later, he grabbed her hand. "Where are you going?"

She looked away. Now on top of all negativities, she was embarrassed as well that he got to see her like that. Mindy was always strong-willed and independent, and it was not like her to snap because of a random woman. Was she really this insecure? It was a foreign feeling and Mindy didn't know what to do with it. But this was more than just Nina, it was about Mindy giving up everything to be with Gideon, yet he took it for granted. Damned be the mate bond if it only caused one of them to compromise and make sacrifices!

"Mindy, what's going on? Princess..."

"Don't call me that!" , she snapped. "And leave me alone."

"No. I want to hear what's going on."

Mindy sneered. "Like you don't know."

Gideon gritted his teeth. "Is this about Nina?"

"Why are you asking if you know? No one will notice that I'm missing, and your whole pack is waiting for you to conduct the ceremony so they can go and frolic in the forest. Why are you here? You have Niiina to help you with the ceremony, Gidi. And she can warm your bed also. It's obvious that you don't need me."

"Are you jealous?"

She struggled out of his hold. "Fuck you and fuck your ego!"

"Damn, Mindy! She is no one!"

"I don't believe you. If she is no one, why didn't you tell her to scram? Why didn't you tell her that the young ignorant assistant is your mate? She looked down at me. She insulted me. And you let it happen. My brother was right. This won't work."

Gideon gaped at her in disbelief. "What are you saying?"

"I am saying, fuck you, Gideon!", Mindy shouted.

"Stop cursing! Can you calm down and listen!?", he shouted back at her. "I didn't respond to Nina because I was busy thinking about the ceremony. I didn't tell her we are mates because she doesn't deserve to know before others. You are telling me to fuck myself, but that won't happen without your involvement. There is no woman for me, other than you."

Mindy snorted. "Those are some big words, Shaman Gideon. But your actions are not backing them up."

Gideon exhaled helplessly. "What do you want me to do? To tell every woman to scram?"

"Of course, not.", Mindy responded right away. "Feel free to socialize with every woman who gets close to you. I can see that they are willing to help with anything you might need. But I will be damned if you expect me to sit back and let it happen. You want to be served by other women? I will be glad to sever this bond and give you the freedom you so wish for."

"Do you know what you are saying!?"

"Do you know what you are doing?", she snapped back at him. "How would you feel if guys come at me and talk trash about you and I let it happen? Oh, but you can't expect me to tell them to scram just because they want to get frisky with me. Surely, as my mate, you will trust me that we won't go beyond talking smack about you.", Mindy said sarcastically.

Gideon cursed under his breath. All this drama was just because of a few seconds in his delay to respond to Nina?

In the last few days, there were so many stressful things happening, that Gideon was confident he will get a stomach ulcer. But maybe that was the problem. He was focused on things he needed to do, and he forgot to think about Mindy. She left her pack, her family, and her life underwent a drastic change, yet he didn't do much to assure her that she was not downgrading. Or maybe all this was a big downgrade, and he couldn't match what Mindy was used to having.

Chapter 567 The pack run (4)

Gideon refused to give in to negativity. Surely, the Moon Goddess paired them up for a reason. He waited for his mate for decades, and even though he didn't live like a monk, he was not a womanizer either. But no matter how many women passed through his hands, he was left feeling empty, until Mindy showed up, his pumpkin-infused beauty.

"Princess", Gideon called pleadingly and lifted Mindy's hand to press his lips against her knuckles as he opened up his emotions for her to feel his sincerity. "Allow me to fix my wrongs."

Mindy didn't respond, but the lack of her fighting back was a silent agreement.

He held her hand firmly and his other arm circled around her shoulders as he guided her back to the clearing where the crowd was gathered.

Mindy and Gideon reached the podium to see Nina sorting the herbs that Mindy had previously thrown down.

"Leave those.", Gideon said stiffly and when Nina looked at him questionably, Gideon repeated, "You heard me. Leave those. I don't need your help."



After a second of delay, Nina left the herbs back on the floor of the podium and walked to the side. She was not sure what happened, but Gideon was obviously in a bad mood, and she didn't want to provoke him.

Gideon led Mindy up to the podium and they stood in front of the altar to face the crowd.

"Can I have your attention?", Gideon called. His voice was not loud, but nearby people heard him, and they quieted down to turn toward him and everyone else followed suit, waiting to see what Gideon will say.

"Before tonight's ceremony starts, I want to introduce a very important person.", Gideon said and turned to look at Mindy. "The Moon Goddess blessed me with a mate, and that's Mindy River from the Blue River pack. I hope you will all welcome her to our pack and make her feel that by coming here she didn't lose her family, but she expanded it."

The crowd cheered, and Gideon inched closer to Mindy to ask, "Was this OK for a start?"

Mindy's chin shivered. "Why didn't you do this right away?"

"I am old and some think of me as wise, but I am not all-knowing.", Gideon said. "I will rely on you to remind me when I forget to do something important." He reached for his necklace which was made out of beads, teeth, and feathers, and placed it around Mindy's neck. "Will you be my assistant tonight, Mindy? Will you be my mate for life?"

Mindy was moved. Every necklace used for these ceremonies was personally made by the person wearing it, and the gesture of Gideon giving her his necklace meant that what was his was hers to have. And he did it in front of the whole pack to see.

"I am not asking you to trust me right away.", Gideon said to Mindy. "I am asking you for a chance. I might mess up again and hurt you unintentionally, but if I repeat the same mistake, I will personally help you pack if that's what you want. Among all women in the Dark Howlers pack, among all women in the world, there is only one Mindy River, and she is my mate, and I promise to cherish her as long as there is breath in me."

Mindy looked into Gideon's eyes that silently pleaded for her to accept his longwinded apology. How can she say no to that?

Seeing that Mindy's lips lifted into a smile, Gideon was quick to move to place a kiss on her lips, and use that proximity and sparks of their bond to prevent her from changing her mind.

"You won't regret this, princess", he murmured against her lips, and then he kissed her again.

Among cheers and whistles, Gideon inched away from Mindy and grinned at the crowd. His hand was firmly around Mindy's waist, telling everyone that the young woman by Gideon's side was taken.

Mindy released a shaky breath before saying, "I, Mindy River, denounce my pack, the Blue River pack." She felt a pang in her chest as the connection between her and the Blue River pack was severed, and she was confident that her brother felt it also. Maybe he didn't know it was Mindy, but every Alpha can feel when someone leaves or joins their pack. Of course, joining a pack is not as simple as saying a few words as it required a ceremony and Alpha's acceptance.

Gideon reached for the knife that was on the altar, and he gave it to Mindy.

Mindy accepted a long white knife that was made out of a bone, and the handle had intricate designs etched into it.

Mindy looked into Gideon's eyes and winced when the white blade cut into her palm.

A few drops of blood trickled, and Gideon collected them in a chalice.

"Do you accept the Dark Howlers pack as your own?", Gideon asked.

"I, Mindy River, am willing to accept the Dark Howlers pack as my own.", Mindy confirmed.

Gideon glanced at Damon who was standing on the side.

Damon responded with a nod and, "Mindy River, I, Alpha Damon Blake, accept you as the member of the Dark Howlers pack."

Gideon murmured unintelligible chants while pouring those few drops of blood into the fire that was crackling on the altar, and the moment the flames licked the blood, Mindy felt another pang in her chest, and this one Damon felt as well.

"Welcome to the Dark Howlers pack, Mindy", Damon said, and the crowd cheered.

Nina stood on the side, and now she understood Gideon's strange behavior. He found his mate. Who knew? She couldn't prevent the jealousy that swelled within her at the sight of Gideon who was licking Mindy's palm to help her heal while gazing at the young woman lovingly.

It was obvious that the Shaman was smitten by his mate, and Nina clearly saw that Mindy threw a fit only a few minutes ago. Nina wondered, why did the Moon Goddess pair up Gideon with someone as young and impulsive as Mindy? Wasn't a mature woman like Nina a better match?

Nina knew Gideon for a long time. She served as his assistant on many occasions and they were friends with benefits. She was confident that Gideon was blinded by Mindy's youthful appearance and that he will eventually get bored of Mindy's snappy personality, and then he will return to normal and to Nina.

Back in the crowd, Lisa stood with Ester and a few other friends.

"Isn't that nice?", Ester asked excitedly while elbowing her girlfriends. "Finally, our Shaman found his mate. And that is Mindy from the Blue River pack. She is famous!" Ester was hoping to get close to Mindy, and maybe Mindy could introduce Ester to some of those high-ranking males that were not mated. Who knows, maybe her mate was among them? That would be a dream come true!

Lisa was not enthusiastic about Gideon and Mindy. Her gaze was on Damon who was standing on the side. "Why is our Alpha on his own? Shouldn't he lead the run with his mate?"

Lisa heard that Marcy left, that was not a secret, and Lisa wondered if Talia will be there or maybe some other she-wolf will fill in that spot. Lisa had difficulty believing that Talia would rise from a no-name

Omega, a wolf-less she-wolf, to be the Luna of the largest pack in North America. Damon was there with Caden and Maya by his side, and part of Lisa was happy that Talia was not in the visible range.

"Didn't you hear?", Ester responded. "Our Luna went ahead, and Alpha will hunt for her. Exciting!"

Lisa thought that something was off. "Hunt can start after the ceremony. Why was our Luna willing to skip on the blessing from the Moon Goddess?" She gave Ester a knowing look. "Would YOU skip on the blessing from the Moon Goddess on your first pack run as the Luna?"

"You think that something is not right?", Ester asked.

"Something is definitely off.", Lisa said confidently, and then she quickly lowered her voice when she remembered her mother's warnings about not causing trouble. "Don't take my word for it. I'm just guessing. Let's wait and see what will happen."

Chapter 568 The pack run (5)

Talia followed her instincts without looking in which direction she was going. But she could feel the incline, and the lack of noise from behind made her wonder if the ceremony started. Her steps halted and she looked up to see the full moon. It was not completely up, did Gideon start the ceremony early? The cheers erupted, and she understood that there was some speech going on.

Talia released a breath of relief. She still had time, but it was running short, and she needed to hurry. Luckily, the pull was strong, and she knew she was close.

Talia emerged to a clearing and was greeted by the clamor of water in the distance.

She paused to observe the surroundings and her breath hitched when she recognized where she was. It was the clearing where Alpha Jacob and Luna Violet were buried.

Talia smiled a little at the thought that Damon's parents will get to observe the ritual that will remove dark magic from their son.

Talia looked in the direction of the packhouse that was lower compared to the clearing where she was, and she could see torches with dancing flames marking the area around the raised platform where

Gideon was with Mindy by his side. The tree canopies obstructed the view of the crowd, including the area where Damon was with Caden, Maya, and other guests, but Talia knew they were there.

She could feel the pride that swelled in Damon's chest as he fed on the energy from his pack members and Talia regretted that she was not by his side right there, for everyone to see. Somehow, again she ended up in the background, away from everyone's eyes. Normally, that would be the preferred spot for her, the one that didn't attract attention, but this time she wanted to be by Damon's side.

Talia forced herself to look away. This was temporary. After this, she will be with Damon and not hide ever again, hopefully. And for now, she needed to focus.

Talia could feel that she was at the right spot, and she reached into the small pouch to get the chalk and crystals. It was time to draw the diagram and to place energy-attracting objects on their right places.

"Can we help?", Keith asked when he saw that Talia was getting busy.

"Spread around and make sure no one disturbs me.", Talia responded, hoping that it sounded important enough. It was a silly request because no one would come here. Damon told Talia that this was one of the restricted areas in his territory, and she knew that they were able to come here only because the guards saw her, and they let them pass.

"Zina? What's the status?", Talia asked.

Zina's eyes lost focus for a moment and then she responded, "Shaman introduced Mindy as his mate, and she is officially a member of our pack. The Ceremony is about to begin."

Talia hummed in acknowledgment and continued pushing the grass to the side so that the chalk can make marks on the ground. When she was planning for this in her mind, Talia was doing the drawing on the flat ground, and she totally forgot that out here there will be grass and other foliage in the way. Luckily, it was in the clearing; if she needed to work around a tree, she would be in trouble.

...

James and Cornelia stood on the side and Cornelia observed the ceremony with interest.

Gideon addressed the crowd and then he raised his hands toward the moon as he chanted unintelligibly words she didn't understand, but Cornelia could clearly see that, little by little, the moon's energy was amplifying energy from the surroundings, and everything was converging toward the platform where Gideon and Mindy were standing with the altar in its center.

Cornelia wondered what will happen next.

After some time, Cornelia's attention was drawn to the black mist that appeared out of nowhere. It was difficult to see it in the dark, but Cornelia was sensitive to energies, and it took her a few seconds to identify Damon as the source.

She gave James' hand a squeeze.

"I think we might have a problem.", Cornelia said in a low voice.

"What?", James asked.

"The Shaman is gathering positive energy, and I think it's weakening the defenses that Damon has against black runes.", Cornelia explained to James, and then she reached to touch Maya's shoulder and get her attention.

"I think that black runes are getting active on your Alpha.", Cornelia told Maya.

Maya looked at Damon nervously. "Are you sure? What can we do?"

Cornelia was not sure. Even if the black runes were breaking through, it didn't mean that Damon was not remembering Talia or their plan. There was the potion to suppress the black runes, but if Damon remembered things, then he didn't need it, and if he forgot, then the problem was if they can make Damon drink it now in front of everyone. There was definitely no time to give him the potion sneakily, and forcing it on him was a suicidal mission. On the other side, Talia should be ready with the ritual any minute.

"Can you check on Talia's status? As long as we get Damon there, things should be fine.", Cornelia said.

'Zina? Where are you? Is Talia ready?', Maya asked Zina through the mind-link.

'Talia is still drawing, as for where we are... I'm not sure.', Zina responded. 'I was never here before. We are somewhere up, and I can see the torches that were set up for the ceremony.'

'Do you see any landmark?', Maya continued probing.

'It's dark. What do you expect me to see?'

Maya puffed her cheeks in frustration. That was not useful.

"What's going on?", Dawn asked in a whisper. She saw the exchange between Maya and Cornelia and even though she didn't hear what they were saying, she figured out that something was off.

...

Up at the clearing, Talia finished drawing the diagram and placing the crystals in their designated places.

After double-checking that everything looks in order, she kept things on the side and glanced in the distance toward the area that was illuminated by torches.

'Damon, I'm ready for you.', Talia spoke to Damon through their mind-link.

Silence.

'Damon?', Talia tried again.

She opened up her emotions in an attempt to reach him, only to hit a wall.

"Zina? What's the status at the ceremony?", Talia asked with haste.

"Ceremony is in progress. Cornelia says that she noticed negative energy radiating from Damon. Maya and Dawn are talking to Caden and trying to figure out what to do.", Zina responded after a few seconds.

Talia groaned in frustration. What timing! She needed to get Damon to where she was, but how can she do that? And assuming that she succeeds, how can she guarantee that Damon will stand in the magic circle obediently?

'You can reach him without the mind-link', Liseli spoke in Talia's mind. 'Remember? You were opening the portal and...'

'I remember.', Talia confirmed.

She closed her eyes and started feeling her surroundings. Little by little, outlines formed in her mind and she reached the clearing where the ceremony was held, and she could see in her mind the platform and Gideon and Mindy, and the flames, and there was Damon, shrouded in a dark mist.

"Damon", Talia called, and she could see that he jerked at the sound of her voice. "I am waiting for you."

"Who are you?", Damon asked, and Talia felt her heart tightening. He didn't remember her. Damn it!

"I am the girl you introduced to your parents.", Talia responded. "Maybe you don't remember me, but I remember. I know that you feel the emptiness because something important is missing. If you don't come here, you will regret it."

"Are you threatening me?"



"No. I am begging you not to repeat the same mistake of abandoning me and then kicking yourself when you remember."

She could see that Damon hesitated for a second, but then he moved in quick steps. Maybe he remembered, at least a little bit.

"Zina", Talia called. "Ask James, Cornelia, George, and Dawn to come here. We might need them."

Talia squeezed her hands into fists nervously while looking in the direction of the torches. Damon will reach her in a few minutes and for the first time, she really didn't know what to expect.

Chapter 569 The pack run (6) [Bonus chapter]

Damon dashed into the forest, and Maya turned to look at Dawn, George, Cornelia, and James. "Talia needs us." She just got a mind-link from Zina. "We need to prepare for the worst-case scenario where we will need to fight against Damon. Cornelia, you can help Talia with the spell, and George and Dawn can help suppress him." James didn't have any role in particular, but it was obvious that he won't let Cornelia go there without him.

"Where are they?", Cornelia asked.

Maya shrugged. "Zina doesn't know how to explain. They are on some high hill that has a view of this area."

James rolled his eyes. "How many hills with a view do you have in that direction?"

"More than you know.", Maya said sourly.

George got an idea. "Zina doesn't know, but what about Talia's guards? They should be with her."

Maya thought how that made sense. Everything happened so quickly that she didn't think about Keith, Liam, Caleb, Pierce, Sandy, and Lulu.

After a second, Maya confirmed, "It's a restricted area where previous Alpha and Luna are buried." She was never there, but Maya was familiar with areas that were off-limits, so she knew where that was.

Caden wanted to come also, but Maya stopped him with, "Someone should stay here for crowd control. They are guests, so no one will be suspicious about their absence, and you can say that I went ahead so you will hunt for me after the ceremony."

Caden didn't like this, but they didn't have time to argue. "Damon didn't shift, so you can catch up to him in wolf form." He gave the bottle with the potion to suppress the black runes to Cornelia. "We need our Alpha back. If the ritual doesn't work, make him drink this."

Maya gave Caden a quick kiss and led the group of four into the nearby trees.

Maya shifted into a dark chocolate wolf before dashing into the darkness and George and Dawn followed, leaving behind their ceremonial garments.

With a thought, James' form changed into a massive golden-brown wolf, and he tugged on Cornelia's skirt with his fangs.

It took Cornelia a moment to understand. "You want me to ride you?"

The wolf nodded and his low growl told her that they didn't have time to delay.

James got down on his belly and waited patiently.

Cornelia grabbed the garment that fell off James' body when he shifted into the wolf form, and then she reluctantly sat on his back.

James' whole body shook. No panties!

Damn! He would give anything to be in his human form and to turn around so she can ride him properly!

James stood on all four and Cornelia's thighs tightened around him as she laid on him completely to hug his neck.

James whimpered. Now he could feel her breasts on his shoulder blades!

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"Are you OK?", Cornelia asked. "I am not squeezing too tight, am I?"

James snorted and started moving. Cornelia clung onto him tightly and he didn't know if that was the best or the worst thing ever, but he was sure that after this he will need to rub it off or have a serious case of blue balls. And damn it, they didn't even kiss yet!

...

Talia held her breath as the familiar form appeared in her line of sight.

Damon was wearing only a black skirt-like garment that reached half of his thighs, and his muscular body was decorated with numerous patterns made with black paint. The necklace of white teeth was a contrast that gave an edge to his already dangerous vibe.

"Are you the one who called me here?", Damon asked in a gruff voice. "How did you get here?"

Talia swallowed a mouthful of air while reminding herself not to be afraid. Damon told her that he can sense fear. She was not afraid that he will attack her, but the possibility of him rejecting her was hanging above her head and growing by the second. But he was there, in front of her, and that meant something.

"I am here because you allowed it to happen.", Talia responded. "When you brought me here the first time, you told your guards that I can come here anytime. It's a permission only the two of us have."

Damon glanced around to see the darkness, but he knew there were others nearby. "There are more people present."

"Those are my guards. Guards that you assigned to protect me.", Talia responded. "I know you don't remember, but you can feel that something is missing, right?"

Damon narrowed his eyes at her. "And you are going to tell me what that is?"

Talia spread her hands, palm up. "There is too much to tell and not enough time. We've been through a lot in the last two months, Damon. I know you are aware of the gaps. I am the one who can fill them in."

Talia could see Damon eyeing her suspiciously and she was not sure what to say to make him believe her without making his temper implode. And she was also aware of their audience, so she didn't dare to talk about anything too intimate.

Maya, Dawn, George, James, and Cornelia were behind Damon now, and Talia understood that the guards let them pass because they assumed the five of them came with Damon, especially when they saw Maya.

Talia focused on Damon. She needed him to lower his guard and to believe her.

"You brought me home, Damon, and you told me that it's mine. You took me to a doctor and gave me food. You took me to the amusement park and to the fair. You watched me dance for the Moon Goddess, and you accepted my garland of flowers, and you said it was your first one. You stood up for me when people bullied me, and you taught me to fight."

"Did I?", he asked. "Show me."

Talia was confused. "Show you, what?"

"You said I taught you to fight. Come at me.", he waved at her to get closer.

"Are you serious?"

"It seems you expect me to believe that we were in some kind of a relationship. My woman would not be a burden. If I really taught you how to fight, prove it."

Talia hesitated. This was obviously not the Damon she knew. Her Damon would never call her a burden, even if she couldn't move a muscle, yet this Damon was full of himself and condescending.

Maya said that Damon before Talia was not pleasant, but Talia had difficulty believing that she really change him that much.

Damon didn't remember marking Talia which gave her a boost in speed and strength, but she didn't know if that would be enough to prove herself worthy in his eyes. On the other side, no matter how fast and strong she was, could she actually act against Damon?

"I don't want to hurt you." She really meant it.

"Those are some big words. Didn't you say that we are short on time? Are you going to come at me, or..."

Damon didn't finish his question because Talia dashed toward him. In a matter of seconds, they exchanged a dozen of blows.

Damon only defended and blocked, but the surprise on his face was obvious as Talia's speed was increasing with every next punch and kick.

Chapter 570 The pack run (7)

Talia's six guards and five friends watched the scene in disbelief. Both Damon and Talia moved at a speed that was difficult to follow.

Everyone from the Dark Howlers pack knew that Damon's physique was not just for show. He could easily overpower every warrior in their pack, like fighting against a child, and that was without using his Alpha aura. On top of sheer power, Damon's fighting skills were impressive, and they feared that Talia might get hurt because this didn't look like a friendly sparring match.

Damon and Talia moved in unison, but the slightest miscalculation would lead to injuries and Talia looked fragile compared to Damon.

Keith gritted his teeth while suppressing his urge to get in there and separate them. He understood that something was wrong with Damon and that Talia was trying to make him better, but did she need to put herself in danger like that? The only things that stopped Keith from interfering were the fact that this was his Alpha who could suppress him with a thought, and also, Talia and Damon were mates. Damn it! Keith really felt useless as Talia's guard. What was the point of being her shield if he needed to watch her fight like this?

"Who knew that our little Talia had this talent?"

Keith's attention was drawn toward Lulu who was on his right. She spoke softly, but he heard her clearly.

"Talia was always impressive.", Keith responded.

"Are you sure it's safe to talk about a mated she-wolf with so much admiration?", Lulu asked Keith in a whisper. "And she is mated to our Alpha. Are you tired of living?"

Keith snorted. "There is nothing wrong with my words, Lulu, but I'm not sure about yours."

Lulu frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing.", Keith scoffed. The envy in Lulu's voice was obvious, but he didn't want to argue with her.

Actually, it would be unusual if she-wolves didn't feel a dose of jealousy toward Talia. After all, this was Alpha Damon, the most eligible bachelor in their society, the fiercest Alpha, and with Talia being his fated mate, Damon was officially off the market.

It would be one thing to think of Talia as a weak she-wolf who got lucky, but Talia showed kindness, compassion, and selflessness, she contributed to their military with a mixture of herbs that can diminish their scent, and now she showed fighting skills that were beyond impressive. All this meant that Talia

was not just lucky, but Alpha Damon was lucky as well which reduced the chances that he will get bored of Talia and look for another woman. Of course, when mates are fated, the possibility of them getting bored of each other was close to nil, but ignorant she-wolves would always covet what was not theirs in hope that they had a chance.

Keith sucked in a sharp breath when Damon gripped Talia's ankle as she was mid-kick, and he yanked her toward him, but Talia's body bent elegantly, and she landed on her toes to spring up fluidly with her arm extended upward.

Damon grabbed Talia's wrist when her fist was only an inch away from his throat, and everything stilled.

"You taught me that move, Damon.", Talia said breathily. "You said that I shouldn't hesitate to punch you in the throat."

Damon stared at her fist before responding, "That sounds like something I might teach you." His eyes narrowed at Talia. "Did I also teach you to hold back?"

Talia didn't get it. "What?"

Damon was frustrated. Maybe others couldn't follow their movements, but he was certain that she didn't give it her all. Her hits lacked resolve and he was confident that she wouldn't injure him even if he didn't block her.

"Did you think I wouldn't notice that your punches are losing strength just before they land?", Damon asked through his teeth. He was angry now. "Do you think that I need you to go easy on me?"

Talia didn't want to go easy on him, but she couldn't hurt him either. Hurting Damon would mean hurting herself and no matter how much his attitude rubbed her the wrong way, that was still her Damon; a version of him she didn't like, but it was him. It was not his fault that black runes were affecting him.

Seeing that Talia's determination was wavering, Damon tugged her toward him, to the side, and she ended up falling on the grass with Damon on top of her.

Talia wiggled under him, but he was quick to block her legs with his and to hold her arms. Damon effortlessly gripped her wrists with his one hand above her head, and he smirked victoriously.

"Is this what you wanted?", Damon asked when Talia stopped struggling under him. "I admit. Your skills impressed me enough to acknowledge you as mine, for tonight."

Talia looked at him in confusion while wondering what did he mean by that.

Damon's grin widened as he settled between her legs, letting her feel his erection at the cradle of her thighs.

Talia couldn't believe this. "People are watching.", she spoke in an urgent whisper. Their ceremonial garments didn't provide much coverage, and now that he was on top of her, Talia felt exposed.

"Do you think it will be the first time for a woman to give herself to me in front of an audience?" He wanted to say that she was the same as the others, without scruples, only going after him because of his position and money, but the anguish in her eyes pierced deep into his heart and he couldn't say any of those words.

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'Let me bite his head off!', Liseli raged in Talia's mind. 'The bastard doesn't deserve you.'

'He doesn't remember me.', Talia responded.

'That doesn't give him the right to be an asshole! Was he acting like this before when Sapa was with him? I will remove the black runes just so that I can teach Sapa a lesson!'



Talia knew that Liseli was right. She didn't like this Damon. She wanted her Damon back. This Damon looked the same and smelled the same, but it was not the same person. Did she lose him forever?

'We are here to save him.', Talia reminded Liseli.

'The stinky boy is making it very difficult for me to want anything good to happen to him!', Liseli growled. 'It's better to be alone than with a mate who is an emotional degenerate!'

'It's not his fault.', Talia tried to reason with Liseli because Liseli's rage was spilling on Talia and Talia knew that if she loses her temper, she and Damon will fight, and she didn't want to fight with him.

Surely, there must be a better way to handle this situation than to knock him out or inject him with the concoction that will make him lose his memory. His head was already messed up and he was confused, and Talia felt that she was the one who can make him remember.

'There was no one to show him the right way.', Talia continued saying to Liseli and to herself. 'Women threw themselves at him, and he thought that was normal. Damon detached himself emotionally as a form of self-defense from people who wanted to take advantage of him...'