

Alphas Bride 71

Chapter 71 - A Big, Hard Rock

Talia woke up with a soft whimper, refusing to open her eyes while trying to get comfortable.

She was lying on something hard and bumpy, and she wondered how she found herself in the forest because the scent around her was definitely forest and... there was dark chocolate as well. Was Damon nearby? Probably.

Something heavy was on Talia's back, preventing her from getting up or rolling to the side, and a rock pressing on her belly was uncomfortable.

She squirmed a bit and reached with her hand in an attempt to move that protruding thing before it leaves a bruise on her stomach.

"Ugh...", a muffled groan sounded from just above Talia and her eyes snapped open.

She was awake in an instant, and the moment she met Alpha Damon's questionable gaze, Talia wished that this was not real.

A dream. Definitely a dream.

Why else would she be sprawled on top of Alpha Damon?

The hard and bumpy surface she slept on was his body, and that rock under her belly... the one she tried to move away... and the same one she was still holding onto... is NOT a rock!

Frantically, Talia tried to push herself away from Damon, but he was holding her in place, and with every move she made it felt like his hold tightened.

"Please, let me go...", Talia pleaded in a small voice.

"Why?" It's not that he didn't know why, but he wanted to hear Talia's answer.

'So that I can find a secluded spot and die of embarrassment!'

Talia whimpered softly. "Please. I want to leave."

There was no way Damon will let Talia leave like that.

Damon was aware that Talia did that in the haze of her sleep, because he watched her as she stirred awake for the last few minutes, and he wished that she didn't remove her hand from down there.

Damon could already imagine Talia curling up into a corner in a desire to be invisible, or worse... running away and leaving for good, and he felt the urgency to flip the situation around.

Damon exhaled loudly and he made his best pitiful expression. "I see. After what you have done, you will abandon me."

Talia thought that some things don't add up. "What?"

"That's fine. I understand."

Talia's confusion only increased, and she lifted her head to look at Damon. "What do you understand?"

Damon pressed his lips into a line and shook his head faintly. "I will be fine. Go on..." He released his hold on Talia. "You don't need to take responsibility."

Talia didn't move. "Responsibility for what?"

"You slept the whole night on top of me, and then you groped me, and now you want to pretend like it didn't happen."

Oh, God! He said 'grobe', and that made it more real!

She groped scary Alpha Damon!

She molested him!

Talia really wished to disappear.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. It was an accident.", Talia said with urgency.

"Which part was an accident? Do you think that changes the fact it happened?"

At the thought of what happened, Talia realized that she was still on top of Damon.

Clumsily, she pushed herself off him, but she didn't leave the bed. She wanted to explain even though her face was on fire.

"First of all, you are the one who brought me here to sleep, so you can't blame me for sleeping here. Second, me climbing on top of you happened in my sleep. It was not intentional. And third..." Talia inhaled with difficulty. "Me groping... was an accident. It was big and hard, and I thought it was a rock."

Damon cocked an eyebrow. Big? Hard? A rock? He approved Talia's description of his erection.

He turned to the side, to face Talia and propped his head on his elbow before asking, "So, none of that is your fault?"

"No.", Talia said with confidence.

"But it's just the two of us, so if it is not your fault, is it mine?"

"Well, no.", Talia had to admit. Other than him bringing her to his room to sleep, which is not a big offense, the rest was on her. Accidentally.

Damon grinned. "Alright, Mrs. Blake, since it was no one's fault, we can pretend that it didn't happen. What do you say to that?"

"Sounds good.", Talia agreed immediately. If they can pretend it didn't happen, that would be for the best. "Let's not mention this again. And can you stop calling me Mrs. Blake?"

"I must call you like that because you are talking back to me, Talia.", Damon said matter-of-factly. "Did you forget that only Luna gets to talk back to her Alpha?"

Talia was exasperated. "So, what should I do? Just stay quiet and agree with whatever you say?"

"Don't change in order to please me or anyone else. Blindly agreeing with Alpha is for weak wolves."

Talia wanted to say that she is weak, one of the weakest ones. Even Omegas bullied her!

But before she could say anything, Talia was trapped in Damon's embrace again.

"What are you doing?", Talia asked in disbelief.

"Don't deny me this, my dear wife. There is not much time until I need to start my day, and every second with you is precious. Besides, I'm just holding you innocently, it doesn't compare to what you did to me before."

Talia let out a slow breath. He was talking nonsense again. Didn't they agree to pretend that the unfortunate incident didn't happen?

"You have a busy day ahead of you?", Talia asked while trying to stir the topic to something less uncomfortable.

"Mhm...", Damon hummed in confirmation. "During breakfast, I will check with Caden and Maya if there is anything urgent that they need my inputs on, and then I'm taking my wife out."

Damon gave Talia a knowing look, and it took her a moment to realize that she is 'the wife'. Oh, right! Yesterday, after her appointment with Doctor Travis, Damon asked her to accompany him... somewhere.

"Out? Where?"

Damon inched closer and his breath splashed on her ear, "Se-cret."

Talia was not sure if she can handle any surprises from Alpha Damon. He was too much to handle even when he was not trying to surprise her.

"Can you at least give me some hints? How long will we stay? Is there any dress code?"

Damon thought for a moment before responding. "We will stay as long as we are having fun. A couple of hours, but not overnight. As for the clothing... wear something comfortable. Anything is fine as long as it's not kittens and rainbows that make you look like twelve years-old. I don't want people to wonder if you are my little sister or if I'm a pedophile, because you will accompany me as my wife."

Talia's lips pressed into a line. There was that 'wife' word again. For a guy who is taking his time to get his Luna, he likes to use that 'wife' word.

Talia liked that he said she should dress comfortably, and her heart swelled with excitement while thinking about the mystery of where they will go.

Her mind flashed images related to their walk in the park, and the flavor of the cotton candy, and the restaurant, but she quickly pushed those thoughts away because Alpha Damon is a busy man, and he definitely wouldn't take her somewhere to dawdle for hours.

"We should get ready.", Talia said.

"We should.", Damon confirmed, but he didn't move.

He looked into her honeyed eyes that were clear after a good night of sleep and his sight moved to her lips.

He really wanted to kiss her.

Damon put his hand on Talia's cheek, and he saw her shrinking. He cursed internally at the realization that even though they are in the bed, holding each other, there is still an invisible wall between them.

"Do you want to shower in my bathroom?", he asked.

Talia's eyes widened as his words sank in. "What?"

"You slept in my bed, do you want to get ready in my bathroom? We can take turns or to save time...", his voice trailed, and Talia's face turned red again.

Talia knows that for werewolves nudity is not a big deal, but she never shifted into her wolf form or mingled with others, so she was not used to those things.

Talia remembered that on the previous night Damon slept in her bed, and then in the morning, she saw him getting out of her bathroom. Did he treat this as a sleepover? Maybe.

"No need. My bathroom is fine."

"OK.", he said and reluctantly released his hold on Talia. "I will see you at breakfast."

Talia scooted out of the bed and froze when Damon chuckled.

"Blue. It fits you."

Talia's face fell when she realized that the only blue thing she had on herself was panties. Ah! The tank top hitched higher and exposed her buttocks!

Talia swiftly tugged the tank top lower and dashed out of Damon's room, followed by his hearty laughter.

She closed the door of her room and leaned on it while telling herself not to overthink it because Damon definitely saw much more than a female panty-covered behind. Besides, if they are on the beach, she would be exposed more than that. The fact that she was this flustered, only served for his amusement.

Chapter 72 - Damon's Unclear Intentions

In the hallway...

Caden stood frozen and blinked a few times while confirming that he saw what he saw: Talia dashing from Damon's room into hers.

He normally doesn't come to the third floor, but now Caden climbed there because he wanted to confirm that Damon is awake since Damon told him that he will be out after breakfast, so they had an early start.

Of course, Caden would use mind-link, but Damon shut down his side.

Caden was not sure why would Damon be unreachable, but now that he saw Talia scarcely dressed coming out of Damon's room, Caden understood what's going on.

Caden turned on his heel and went down the stairs with the spring in his step.

He opened the door of his room and sashayed toward Maya who was fixing her hair.

"Is Damon awake?", Maya asked.

"Mhm", Caden responded with a hum.

Maya eyed Caden and she could see that he was nearly bursting from saying something, seemingly important.

"What happened?"

"I won the bet."

Maya didn't get it. "What bet?"

"When Talia came here, I said that Damon will get her into his bed within a week."

Maya frowned. "What?"

"Don't try to deny it. I said, one week, and you said, no way. I just saw Talia escaping from Damon's room into hers and based on her appearance, she slept in his room."

"Poor girl. He is fast."

Caden didn't understand Maya's reaction. "Why, poor girl? They are mates. Actually, I was wondering what took him so long. It's obvious that the bond was driving him crazy because whenever Talia was not with him, he was distracted. She was just across the hallway and considering that our Alpha has no concept of patience and self-restraint, it's a miracle that he didn't drag her into his room on the first night she came here. Now that they are together, Damon should be more... normal."

Maya thought that some things don't add up. "If they are together, why did she leave his room? We both know that mates have difficulty staying away from each other, especially while the bond is forming because the initial flow of emotions is fueling up insecurities. And if they are sharing a bed, why is Talia trying to leave the packhouse?"

Caden didn't have answers to Maya's questions. "You should talk to her again and see if she changed her mind about leaving."

"I will."

After breakfast...

Maya was frustrated that she didn't get a chance to talk to Talia.

Damon was hovering around Talia, putting food on her plate and feeding her, and as soon as they finished with breakfast, they headed out.

Damon didn't even tell them where they are going or how long they will stay, but based on the instructions he gave, they will be back later in the day, in the evening probably.

"It seems that our Alpha wants to disconnect with his mate.", Caden said to Maya when it was just the two of them. "That's what I would do."

"Don't you think it's too soon to celebrate?", Maya asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Talia didn't reject his pampering, but she didn't look like an enamored girl who spent the night with her mate.", Maya voiced her observation. "Is it possible that she doesn't know what Damon's intentions are?"

Caden burst into a hearty laugh.

"Maya... my sweetie pie...", he said while catching his breath. "I don't think that even our Alpha knows what his intentions are."

Caden saw that Maya was not amused, so he cleared his throat before continuing, "What I was trying to say is, if Damon wants Talia to be our Luna, he should just announce it to everyone. With that, the pack would be aware of her existence and protect her while she takes the place that belongs to her. And if he wants to reject the bond, he should have done that a long time ago and not let her stick around."

"You are saying that Damon is toying with Talia."

"Well, not exactly toying, but maybe he has a plan and he is making the situation ambiguous until he figures out... yeah, toying is the right term."

Maya made a face. "What happened with you messing with Damon until he spills that Talia is his mate?"

Caden spread his arms, palms up, showing her that he has nothing. "Come on, sugarplum. It's been only a few days, and I didn't get a chance to work on that." He saw that Maya pursed her lips and there was a familiar spark in her eyes, so he asked, "Are you going to interfere?"

Maya didn't respond, but Caden took her silence as a 'yes'.

Ah, he loves when Maya makes a move. His brilliant mate always knows which strings to tug on and how hard in order to get the desired result.

"Did you call Alpha Edward?"

Caden's question pulled Maya out of her thoughts, and she frowned.

"Not yet. I guess I should get that out of the way first..."

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Damon enjoyed the sight of Talia who looked at everything with her eyes open wide and a big smile on her face, unable to conceal her excitement.

Talia's eyes sparkled. There was loud music, colors, lots of people, laughter, cheers, and the scent of delicious food, and she never would have guessed that Damon will bring her to an amusement park.

During the hour-long drive, she was guessing if they are going to the human town where she went to the hospital, but she recognized the scenery as they zoomed past that area and drove further away.

A gentle squeeze of Talia's hand got her attention and she looked questionably at Damon.

"What ride do you want to try first?", Damon asked. "Or do you want to try candied corn? Chocolate-dipped pretzels?"

Talia shrugged and shook her head at the same time. "Everything sounds great, but I've never been to a place like this, so I have no idea from where to start. I want to try them all."

Damon chuckled. "Alright. Let's start with the closest one." And he led the way toward the merry-go-round that had seats shaped as carriages.

"My lady..."

He gave her his hand to hold while climbing on the ride and he even bowed a little, and Talia giggled while thinking how Damon looks like a prince from her Cinderella book.

Damon was pleased with Talia's reaction. He was contemplating where to take her, but he knew that a romantic spot would freak her out, so he decided on an amusement park.

Talia can experience something new, and he will get closer to her without her suspecting anything.

Damon has no idea how to woo a girl, and everything he read online was confusing, so he kept his plan simple. He will stick to Talia and make sure she has fun and she will get used to his presence until she realizes that he became an essential part of her life, and then he won't fear her reaction when she finds out that they are mates because she will already be in love with him.

Damon was confident that this will work.

It was Sunday, so the place was lively. There was food, and games, and rides, and people crowding the space made their hand-holding a necessity, and more than once, Damon held Talia's shoulder, pulling her to walk close to him so that they don't get separated. Perfect.

As they walked by the stalls, Damon noticed Talia looking curiously at the headbands that had animal ears on top. He grabbed one with brown kitty ears and put it on her head.

"A kitty. It suits you.", he said with a smile.

She wanted to remove it and he grabbed her hand before she could reach the headband.

"Do you not approve of cats? Should I get you the one with bunny ears, or would you rather be a mouse?"

"There is nothing wrong with cats." The problem was that she didn't have any money, and she was uncomfortable that Damon was paying for everything.

"Then, keep it on. I want you to have a souvenir, something to remember by our first visit here."

He paid for the headband and pulled her to the next stall that offered face painting. Damon took the brush and after two seconds, the tip of Talia's nose was black, and she had three whiskers on each cheek.

Damon looked at his handiwork and nodded in approval. "Now you are a kitty. My kitty."

Talia was not sure how to respond to this, but somehow, it confirmed that she is not only Damon's pet project, but he actually sees her as a pet. That would explain why wants her to sleep in the same bed.

Damon and Talia took a number of rides that rotated, shook, went up and down, and by the time they stopped for a snack, Talia's legs were wobbly.

Damon was happy to hold Talia around her waist and support her until they reached a bench to sit on.

The nearby stall sold bacon-wrapped corndogs, and they enjoyed them with soda that washed down the greasy food.

"Are you having fun?", Damon asked Talia.

"Yes. Lots.", she responded enthusiastically. "Is this your first time here?"

"It feels like it.", Damon said ambiguously before explaining. "I had a group of friends and unless something else was going on, we would come here on the weekend."

Talia noticed that he spoke in the past tense. "What happened? Why did you stop coming?"

"I became the Alpha of the Dark Howlers pack."

"As Alpha, you couldn't come here?"

Damon shook his head. "I was busy and they... became my subordinates. You can't have fun with people who bow their head to you whenever you raise your voice."

Talia nodded in understanding and continued munching on her corndog while her heart tightened.

She realized that ten years ago Damon didn't lose only his parents, but his friends as well.

From the stories Stephanie told her, Talia imagined teenage Damon at the center of every party, surrounded by his peers who admired him and girls who hoped to catch his eye.

Overnight, Damon turned from a carefree boy who was loved and admired into a scary Alpha everyone obeyed. Yes, he has a lot of people around him, but they are either serving him or trying to get something from him.

So far, Talia thought of Damon as moody, scary, indifferent, powerful, caring... but she never saw him as lonely. Until now.

This was another side of Damon, and it made Talia's heart ache.

Chapter 73 - The Amusement Park (1)

"What's wrong?"

Damon's question pulled Talia out of her thoughts, and she realized that she didn't control her expression.

"Nothing."

"Tell me.", he insisted. "I see that something got you upset. You can't say that it's nothing."

The sincerity in his voice urged her to speak.

"I'm sad that you are lonely."

Damon cracked a smile. "I'm not lonely. I have you."

Talia paused while looking into his icy-blue eyes that spoke volumes she didn't understand and she tried to decipher hidden messages.

Is it possible...? Maybe...? What if...?

Talia shook her head and dispelled any ambiguous thoughts. Alpha Damon will probably bring the 'wife' joke again, or maybe this time she will be a pet.

"That's not what I meant."

"What did you mean?" He really wanted to know what's going on in her mind.

Talia thought for a moment before responding, "I hope that one day you find someone who will be your equal, without hidden agenda."

"What if I already found her?"

Talia smiled sadly.

'If you found her, you wouldn't be here with me. And when you do find her, I will become non-important. You will spend time with her, and tease her, and laugh with her and forget about me as I fade in your memory as your previous pet project...'

Talia would never say those words aloud, but she couldn't stop a small flame in her heart that tried to resurface under his intense gaze that was directed at her.

She exhaled a shaky breath while telling herself that playful Damon is here, and she shouldn't get her hopes up because Damon is looking for entertainment, and right now that was her role.

Talia chided herself internally. Why did she think he was talking about her as someone important? That's impossible and she shouldn't delude herself.

The bitterness swelled inside her and she didn't want Damon to see it. If he asks what's going on, she wouldn't know how to explain because saying the truth was not an option. He would just laugh at her, and she won't allow herself to stoop so low.

Talia was sick and tired of people bullying her because she can't fight back, and if Damon mocks her and joins that group, she will be devastated.

Talia wrapped the leftover corndog in a napkin and stood up. "I need to use the restroom. I saw one not far away from here."

"Wait!", Damon called while scrambling to collect napkins and other mess from the bench, and by the time he turned in the direction where Talia went, she was lost in the crowd.

He didn't get it. What happened?

Damon decided not to tell Talia that she is his mate until her wolf awakens. Her wolf will not only tell her the truth but also boost her strength and courage which she will need as Damon's mate.

Until that happens, Damon was determined to show Talia that she is important. And he thought he was doing great, but then, she left.

Damon hesitated. Should he go after her, or wait on the bench?

Damn it! All women are eager to stick to him, yet Talia didn't waver to leave him behind. Now what?

Damon told himself to calm down. Talia said that she is going to the restroom, and she will be back in a few minutes. It's not a big deal. Girls go to the restroom all the time. She will be back. She has to.

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Talia entered the female side of the restrooms and halted at the sight of women who waited in line for their turn to use the toilet.

Talia didn't really feel like going, but she hoped for the privacy that a restroom stall will provide. No matter where she looked, there were people everywhere, and Talia needed space.

She was used to solitude and silence, and even though she did her best to adjust to her new social environment, whenever she felt distressed, her urge was to find a spot for herself.

Talia headed for the only free sink. The mirror was smudged, but Talia could still see her reflection. Other than a black dot on her nose and ridiculous whiskers on her cheeks, she was normal. The cat ears were kind of cute, but that was just an accessory.

How she saw it, there was nothing outstanding in her appearance and she shouldn't think for a moment that Alpha Damon would be attracted to her.

She started the water to wash away the makeup. She refused to be his pet because even when he treated her as a pet, Damon managed to make her forget about what's important and that can't be good.

What's the use of getting attached to a man who will discard her when the next Cassie or Marcy makes an appearance?

It's only a matter of time before such a woman waltzes in and Talia didn't want to end up in a situation where she will be accused of stealing food, or worse... stealing Alpha Damon.

Her heart tightened at the thought of Alpha Damon spending his time like this with someone else, but Talia didn't see herself as worthy, and having him for herself was absolutely impossible. If beauties with outstanding backgrounds like Marcy and Cassie failed, Talia was confident that she has negative chances of capturing (and keeping) Damon.

The only wise thing would be to stay away from Alpha Damon and focus on learning skills that will be useful for her future instead of doing whatever this is.

Outside...

Damon remembered that the restrooms were not far away, but he was not sure if that's the place where Talia went and the path was packed with people, so Damon didn't dare move too far away from the bench.

Damon looked anxiously at his phone to check the time. What's taking her so long? Should he go and search for Talia?

What if something happened? Did someone attack her? What if the floor is slippery, and Talia slipped and hit her head?

No. There are many people and if anything happened, there would be a commotion and as much as the atmosphere is lively, nothing is alarming other than the fact that Talia didn't return! Where could she be?

Damon regretted not getting her a cell phone or maybe one of those GPS locators so that he knows where she is at any given time.

"Excuse me...", a sweet voice reached Damon and he saw two women smiling at him.

They were in their early twenties, dressed in tight tops and hot pants that didn't leave much to the imagination. Sure, their makeup was spot on, and their figures were alluring, but Damon didn't think they compare to Talia.

No woman compares to Talia. His mate.

"Can you tell me the time?", the blonde asked while leaning closer than necessary.

"I don't have a watch.", Damon responded dryly.

"But you have a phone, right?", she said while gesturing toward his left hand which held the phone.

Damon smirked. "So do you." He didn't see the woman with a phone, but she smelled human, and all humans have cell phones.

He thought that was enough to deter them, so he continued looking toward the restrooms, hoping to see Talia.

Unfortunately, the two women were not willing to give up easily.

"OK. OK.", the brunette said. "We saw that you are on your own and thought of having a conversation. There is no need to ignore us. We won't bite."

"Are you waiting for a friend?", the blonde asked.

...

Talia got out of the restroom and headed toward the bench where she left Damon.

She paused at the sight of Damon and two beautiful women flanking him, each with hearts in her eyes. Damon's expression was stern, but the two women acted very friendly, leaning in closer as they spoke, and the blonde even put her hand on his shoulder. He didn't remove her hand or shoo them away.

Is this one more of his games? Did he find different entertainment?

Well, knowing Damon, he probably didn't need to find women because he is a magnet for the opposite sex.

Talia wondered, why did he bring her here? She was confident that many others would love to come here with him. Why her? Is it because he loves to tease her? Or is it because he feels guilty that she got a slap from Cassie on his watch?

Talia was not sure what to do. If she goes there, she will interrupt them. Will Alpha Damon mind? What if he gets angry?

Those two women looked ready to kidnap him. Would Damon resist?

Maybe he forgot about Talia already.

Her chest hurt and she wanted it to stop.

Without realizing, Talia took a step back... and another, and another... and then she turned away and walked into the crowd without any destination on her mind.

Chapter 74 - The Amusement Park (2)

Damon was irritated. Those two women didn't show any intention of leaving his side even after he told them that he was waiting for someone.

It's not that their presence really bothered him, but their chatter distracted him from looking out for Talia. He saw them like two flies who refused to take a hint and leave.

Suddenly, Damon felt uneasy. Actually, he felt uneasy since Talia left him on that bench, but this was serious, like something was really wrong.

Damon looked in the direction of the restrooms, where Talia went, and through the crowd, he saw a pair of brown cat ears.

He didn't get a good look at the person, but he had a strong feeling that was Talia.

"Talia!", Damon shouted and moved in that direction, leaving two bewildered women behind him.

"Talia!" He continued calling, frustrated that the crowd obstructed his view and slowed down his movements.

Why was Talia walking away from him? Why can't he find her? Was that her?

What if Talia is still in the restroom? Or what if she went to the bench and he was not there?

She left a while ago, and with every passing second, his anxiety swelled.

'Calm down boy.', his wolf said.

'Calm down? How can I calm down? Talia is missing and how the fuck am I supposed to find her in this crowd!?'

There was a throng of scents in the air and even without them, Damon had difficulty tracking Talia's delicate scent of freesia if she was not close to him.

'Use the bond.', his wolf said.

Damon didn't get it. 'How?'

'Over the last few days, the mate bond strengthened. The discomfort you are feeling is from the mate.'

Damon's panic increased. 'What? Is she hurt?'

'This is not the time to chat. You need to find her.'

'How am I going to find her by using something I don't understand? Explain! And make it quick.', Damon demanded.

'As you spend more time with mate, your bond strengthens. The discomfort you are experiencing is a reflection of her feelings toward the mate bond.'

Damon couldn't identify the sensation clearly, but he knew that it was unpleasant.

'She doesn't know I'm her mate. How can she dislike the bond if she is not aware of its existence?'

'No matter if she is aware of the bond or not, the bond exists. And right now, mate doesn't want it. We can talk about this later, but right now you need to find her. Focus on the source of discomfort and follow your instincts...'

Damon couldn't believe this. How is it possible that Talia has these negative feelings toward the bond? Isn't that the same as negative feelings toward him? What did he do? They were talking and eating corndogs and then she left.

But his wolf was right. Damon's first priority should be to find Talia, and everything else can wait.

Damon closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths, and then he dashed into the crowd.

...

The amusement park has tree lines along the paths that connect rides and other entertainment areas. The trees provide separation between various theme-based sections and there are several spots surrounded by trees and other foliage that are like a natural oasis in the middle of the bustle of the amusement park with play structures for the kids, benches, and picnic tables.

Visitors come to these areas to take a break, rest, and snack before going back to the rides.

In one of those resting areas...

Talia sat on the ground, with her back facing a big tree that was further away from the people who sat at the picnic tables. She hugged her knees and stared blankly at the grass in front of her.

She had no idea how far she walked. Her intention was to distance herself from the situation and to not interrupt Alpha Damon and two women who were trying to seduce him, but now it seems that she caused trouble.

Will Alpha Damon be upset when he realizes that she is missing? Will he even notice her absence?

Talia was dejected. If Damon wanted to flirt with women, why did he bring her along?

She told herself not to get attached, yet the attachment was already there. With every minute she spent with Alpha Damon, she was getting used to his presence, and attention, and becoming more dependent on him.

Pathetic. Is this why she escaped the Red Moon pack?

Instead of spending time with an unstable Alpha who teases her whenever he gets a chance, she should focus on things that matter.

Talia already decided to learn cooking and how to fight, and if she can get a job to help in the hospital, that will be a huge bonus. But instead of studying, she ended up following Alpha Damon here.

Why are they here? Alpha Damon is a busy man with no time to dawdle in the amusement park, and he definitely didn't come here so that she can have fun.

If she was focused, she would not come here and waste time. She would study and help in the kitchen, or even just reading news articles is better than this.

Yes, it should be fun, but it's not.

When they arrived at the amusement park, Talia was carried away by the noise and colors and the good mood and she forgot who she is. How can she enjoy here when her next meal and a place where she will sleep depend on the mood of someone else? How is this different from how she lived at the Red Moon pack? Sure, her room is better and she has fancy clothes, but she is still weak and useless. This won't do.

A man clearing his throat got Talia's attention, and she realized that three men were standing in front of her.

All three of them looked like they are in their early thirties, with neat hairstyles, polo t-shirts, and jeans. Overall, they looked tidy, but their smiles made Talia uncomfortable.

From her personal experience, when someone comes sneakily that close and smiles... it can't be good.

Talia scrambled to her feet and her back was glued to the trunk of the tree as she eyed them suspiciously.

The man in the middle spoke, "Don't be afraid. We came here to check if you are OK."

The man on the left continued, "Yeah. You look distressed and alone. Are you alone?"

"She is with me.", a gruff voice came from Talia's left and her heart skipped a beat when she saw Damon's icy-blue eyes directed at her.

Damon extended his hand toward Talia. "Come here, love."

Talia bit her lower lip nervously. She left Alpha Damon, yet he came to find her, and he even called her love to put a show for these three men.

Was Alpha Damon angry?

Yes, he was angry, but at the moment their eyes met, the uneasiness in Damon's chest disappeared and he knew that Talia was relieved to see him.

Damon wiggled his fingers, reminding Talia that he was still waiting, and she put her hand into his without further delay.

Damon's fingers wrapped around Talia's hand, and he pulled her to stand behind him.

"Do we have a problem?", Damon asked three men.

The middle one raised his hands. "No problem. We saw a girl here, she looked in distress, and we came to check if she was OK. There is no more to it."

The man on the left added. "She is a beautiful girl. You shouldn't leave her on her own. There are all kinds of scoundrels in the area."

Damon didn't buy their story. The three of them looked like scoundrels. But he didn't want to cause a commotion here in open, so he responded with a stiff nod. "I will keep that in mind."

As three men walked away, Damon turned to Talia.

Talia met Damon's stare reluctantly, unsure what to say. His chest heaved and she was confident that he was angry. Should she apologize?

Before she could say anything, Talia found herself in Damon's embrace and his lips landed on her forehead.

This time, she was confident that Damon kissed her there. Why would he do that?

Talia was not sure what to do, so she just stood stiffly.

Damon wanted to kiss her everywhere and to squeeze her until they merge into one so that they are always together, but he knew that would be too much and Talia would probably freak out.

For a moment, he really thought that she was gone, and he was on the verge of losing his mind, but then he saw her sitting under the tree and he stood on the side and observed her while trying to guess what's going on in that pretty head of hers.

He also stayed on the side for a reason that he was mentally unstable and if he went to Talia he would probably say things he would regret forever, so he gave himself some time to calm down.

But then those three guys approached Talia, and Damon couldn't just stand on the side.

Damon thought that he will explode in anger, but the moment she placed her hand in his, all fury was replaced with helplessness at the realization that his other half thinks he is not good enough. Were those her feelings or his? Damon was not sure.

Why did she run away? Why did she leave him alone?

"Don't leave me, Talia...", Damon murmured, and her heart cracked under the weight of emotions that washed over her.

Chapter 75 - The Amusement Park (3)

"Don't leave me, Talia...", Damon murmured. "Don't leave."

Damon's words touched Talia's soul in a way she couldn't explain, and the world around them faded. There was no amusement park, no loud music, no cheers nor screams from people taking the rides, no packs and no responsibilities, it was just the two of them, Damon and Talia.

Talia remembered their talk on the bench. Damon lost his parents and his friends, and he said that even with that, he was not lonely because she was by his side, and... she left.

Talia knows very well how it feels to be alone, without anyone to share good or bad things in life. She remembered how much happiness Olivia brought into her life just by being there and treating her kindly, and how hollow Talia felt when Olivia left the pack.

Talia thought that maybe, just maybe, if it's about holding hands and giving company, she can be that someone who will relieve Damon's loneliness, until he finds his Luna.

She knew that the more time she spends with Damon, the more it will hurt when he moves on, but she saw this as her chance to repay him for his kindness. After all, Alpha Damon gave her a second lease on life, and if she can be a person who makes him less lonely by holding his hand, she will do it.

Talia's arms snaked around Damon, and she rested her head on his chest.

"As long as you need me, I won't leave, Damon." Her words were just above a whisper, but Damon heard her very well.

Damon's wolf wagged his tail at this. Talia said that she will not leave and that was a big deal. Damon was happy as well, but he needed more.

Damon touched Talia's chin to lift her head so that he can see her face.

He observed her keenly for a few long seconds before asking, "What if I need you forever?"

Talia wanted to say how there is no such thing. Sooner or later (sooner than later), he will find his Luna or his next pet project, and he will forget all about Talia, but she didn't want to nitpick.

"Then, I will stay by your side forever."

Damon's breath hitched. She said it. Forever.

"Remember your words, Talia."

"This is not about words, but about actions.", Talia responded. "When you don't need me anymore, I will know, and I will leave. There will be no need for you to say anything."

Damon understood that as long as he treats Talia right, she will stay by his side. That sounded good because he had no intention of harming her, but what if he does it accidentally?

"Promise me one thing.", he demanded. "Promise that no matter what happens, you won't leave without an explanation."

Talia thought how that was acceptable. After all, when he finds his Luna or whatever girl he decides to tease next, there will be no need for lengthy explanations, and he will not care about Talia's reason for leaving.

"Alright.", Talia agreed.

Damon tightened his hug around Talia, and a second later, he sat on the ground and pulled Talia to sit on his lap.

He cradled her in his arms and buried his face in the crook of her neck, enjoying the sweet citrusy scent of freesia and delightful sparks that tingled wherever they touched.

The clingier Damon was, the more guilty Talia felt. She was supposed to return to the bench and not act out like a child running away from home. She wanted to apologize, and she hoped that he won't ask for an explanation, because she didn't have one to give.

"I'm sorry for..."

"Shh...", he interrupted her. "There is no need for apologies. If you are truly sorry, don't do it again."

"OK", she said softly and leaned her forehead on his shoulder.

'We almost lost her, damnit!', Damon said to his wolf while tightening his hold on Talia.

'But we didn't.', his wolf stated the fact. 'You can feel that she is enjoying our proximity. Keep going like this, and she will accept us fully.'

Damon agreed. Instead of discomfort, there was a warm and fuzzy feeling and he really hoped those are Talia's emotions.

Talia felt Damon's fingers making small circles on her back and she thought how it's silly that the scary Alpha was so clingy, but Damon wanted to cuddle, and she let him have it.

She hoped that no one important will see them like this, but with the way they were sitting, both of their faces were hidden, so it was fine.

"Is this OK?", Damon's words splashed on her neck.

"Yes.", she responded in a whisper, surprised that she didn't have the strength to talk properly.

"Are you comfortable?"

"Yes." She really was.

Just like every time before, Damon's hold was warm and solid, and she loved his scent.

And she loved the most that they can sit in silence, and it was not awkward at all.

Talia wondered, why did she leave? Was it because Damon was talking with those two women?

Now that she calmed down, Talia thought how that was silly. Even if there were five women, they are not Talia's competition because she is not competing. She was not sure if she can even call Damon a friend and she had no idea what she is to him, and she was afraid to find out. If he said that he sees her as his friend, she wouldn't believe him, and if he calls her his pet or a temporary source of amusement, she would be saddened, so she decided not to ask.

"Damon?", Talia called after an unknown measure of time.

"Hmm?"

"When are we going back home?"

"Never.", he responded without missing a beat. He liked that she called it 'home'.

Talia couldn't believe this. "We need to go back eventually."

Damon lifted his head to see her face, and Talia blushed in an instant because they were super close. Their noses nearly touched!

"You don't like it here, with me, kitty?", Damon asked.

It took her a moment to realize that he called her 'kitty' because of the headband she was wearing.

"It's not that I don't like it, but both of us have things to do and..." She was not sure how to finish this.

Damon gave her a half-smile. "You like it, I like it, and that's all that matters. We can stay here until one of us doesn't like it anymore."

Talia wondered, how can he be so easygoing? "Tomorrow is the Summer Solstice, and everyone is busy with preparations. It doesn't seem right that we are here relaxing."

Damon knew that Talia was right, but he was not willing to go back. It's been ages since he took a day off, and it was him and Talia and no one else, and he wanted to prolong this as much as possible. It was barely lunchtime, damnit!

"There are still many rides for us to try."

"We can try them next time."

"Next time." He liked that.

So far, he always had a cramp in his chest out of fear that Talia will disappear, and he won't be able to find her, yet now she said, 'next time', which means that she will stay longer. Forever, hopefully.

Damon was planning to spend the whole day here and to end it with a magnificent view of the sunset from the Ferris Wheel, and if the things look promising, he would go for the kiss on the lips, but 'next time' sounded good also. He will take it. Maybe next time they do more than just holding hands. Who knows?

Damon lowered his head and nudged her neck with his nose, making her hairs stand on ends.

"Mmm", he hummed, and she could feel his lips moving against the skin of her neck as he spoke, his every word sent jolts of electricity through her body, "I enjoy holding you like this, kitty. Give me a few more minutes."

Talia fisted Damon's shirt to steady herself.

She was sitting on Damon's lap, with his solid arms holding her against his chest, and her mind was spinning. She thought that she might faint, but she didn't.

The sensation was new and totally out of her comfort zone, yet she didn't want it to stop and part of her regretted that she brought up going back home because for a reason unknown to Talia, right there in Damon's arms, she felt a sense of belonging that made her loneliness disappear and she wished that they can stay like that forever.

Chapter 76 - Preparations For The Festival

~ The Dark Howlers pack ~

During their drive home, Talia was in a daze.

She couldn't believe that Alpha Damon held her so gently. It was something that she would never imagine as possible, but it happened.

The only indicator that they arrived back home was the loss of heat when he let go of her hand to open the door.

Talia watched Damon as he walked around the car to reach her side. She placed her hand into his when she exited the car, and just as his heat seeped into her palm, he let go, reminding her again that the magic was gone.

Something was stuck in Talia's throat, and she couldn't speak.

The sound of Stephanie's voice from the kitchen got Talia's attention, and she moved in that direction robotically.

Damon said that he will be working from his office, but she didn't respond. She couldn't.

Talia reminded herself that she knew it will be like this. She signed up to hold his hand and give him company, but it's not convenient to do that in front of others so... she needs to suck it up and focus on what's important. Kitchen. Stephanie. Learning things. Independence.

Yes, independence, because only like that she can be her own person and not rely on others for roof over her head, and food on the table, and even for holding hands.

Before entering the kitchen, Talia took a deep breath and schooled her features.

"Make sure there are extra towels. The bed sheets need to be ironed before you put them on...", Stephanie spoke to three Omegas and then she noticed Talia.

"Hi, dear..." Stephanie's sight moved to the top of Talia's head. "I see you had fun."

It took Talia a moment to realize that she was still wearing the headband with kitty ears on it. She swiftly removed it.

"Uhm, sorry about that. I didn't mean to interrupt."

Talia hoped that Stephanie won't ask from where the headband came, because Talia wouldn't know how to explain other than the truth, and she knew that it wouldn't be appropriate to say that she went to an amusement park with Alpha Damon. Well, maybe Stephanie wouldn't think much about it, but those three Omegas were new faces, and knowing how popular Alpha Damon is, Talia didn't want to antagonize them.

Stephanie stifled a laugh at the sight of Talia who clumsily tried to hide the headband behind her.

"There is nothing to apologize for."

"I heard you talking about some work. Can I help?", Talia asked while her sight darted toward the three Omegas who stood in attention.

Talia had a bad experience in the Red Moon pack, but this is a new beginning and Talia hoped to start on a good note.

To Talia's surprise, Stephanie rejected Talia's offer.

"The work is almost done. They can handle it. You can go and rest until it's time to start dinner preparations. We will have a few extra hands tonight because guests are coming." Stephanie glanced at Omegas. "Any questions? If not, go and do the work. Let me know when you finish."

Three young women scurried out of the kitchen, leaving Stephanie and Talia behind.

Talia craned her neck, to make sure the Omegas are out of the earshot before asking, "Guests are coming for dinner?"

Stephanie confirmed. "A total of six people, so we are preparing four rooms for tonight. First guests will be here in about three hours."

Talia's heart raced and she hoped that Stephanie won't notice her anxiousness.

Part of her feared that someone from the Red Moon pack will come and recognize her. But she thought that if that's the case, Alpha Damon, Maya, or Caden would warn her. Right?

However, even if the guests are not from the Red Moon pack, Talia was still uneasy. She didn't know how to deal with new faces in the packhouse. What will she say if they ask who she is and what she's doing there? Talia herself was not sure why she was lingering in the packhouse. Because Alpha Damon

asked her to stay? That didn't sound convincing, and Talia wouldn't dare to say that she was sharing a bed with him for the last two nights.

Talia's instinct was to hide in her room until the guests leave, but she really wanted to see the fair and that meant she needs to step out of her room.

"How come they are coming today?", Talia asked. "I thought that guests are arriving tomorrow, for the Summer Solstice."

"Most of them will be here tomorrow, but some are coming in advance so that they can rest properly before tomorrow.", Stephanie clarified to Talia. "Two teams that have games in the morning are here, and two more are on their way. They are staying in the common buildings. No one knows if they came early to rest or party, but that's normal. After all, chances to spend time in another pack are not common, and they probably treat it like a vacation."

"I see.", Talia said. She was not worried about the teams. Her concern was related to the high-ranking werewolves who will be staying in the packhouse. "Stephanie, is there advice you can give me about these guests? I mean... these people who will be in the packhouse... should I stay out of their way or something?"

Stephanie was surprised by this question, and she understood that Talia doesn't feel like she belongs here. Well, Talia arrived just a few days ago, and considering that Cassie already created drama, it was no wonder that Talia was insecure about having guests.

Stephanie didn't understand why Damon didn't listen and give Talia accommodation with other Omegas.

"They are normal people, just like everyone else. You are with us now and this is your home. I know that it can be overwhelming because you are new, but no one should give you a hard time. Those who come earlier are hoping to spend more time with Alpha Damon. Managing a pack is a lot of politics and without collaborating with others, no one would go far."

Talia relaxed a bit at these words. Of course, they all want to have a good relationship with Alpha Damon, and that means they will behave and not bully anyone (Talia in particular).

With nothing much to do, Talia went to her room. She was on a mission to read the book that Doctor Travis gave her.

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~ town square, Darkbourne ~

'Maya, how soon can you come to my office?', Damon's voice sounded in Maya's head through the mind-link.

'I'm in the town square. I will be there in ten minutes', Maya responded.

She was supervising the decorations for the Summer Solstice festival which will be held on the next day.

Maya checked the time, and she was surprised that Damon and Talia returned already. Considering the sync-up they had in the morning, Maya assumed that they will be away for the day.

Sure, guests are about to arrive in a few hours, but Damon was never the one to welcome them at the doorstep. The guests would trickle in during the day, and Stephanie (or Maya) would welcome them and show them to their rooms, and Damon would join them for dinner.

Unless there was a meeting scheduled, Damon doesn't bother with entertaining guests, no matter who they are.

Maya wondered why Damon called her to come to his office. Why didn't he say what he wanted through the mind-link?

...

In Damon's office...

"Yes, Alpha?", Maya asked as soon as she arrived.

"Any updates?", Damon asked.

"Everything is per schedule."

Damon made a face. He knew that festival preparations are on track. "You know that I'm asking about Marcy."

If Maya didn't manage to postpone Marcy's visit, the bride-to-be would arrive tomorrow morning, and Damon hoped that Maya managed to pull a miracle out of somewhere.

Maya smirked. "You know that you can rely on me, Alpha."

Damon released the breath he was holding. "How long?"

"Nine days."

"Great!", Damon exclaimed, feeling like a big burden fell off his chest. "When this festival is over, you and Caden can take a few days off. Pick a location and I will book a hotel for you."

Maya felt like the sun became brighter by a few notches. She loves to travel. "Alright. I will talk to Caden and let you know the location by tomorrow evening."

Chapter 77 - Bad Mate

Damon was about to dismiss Maya from his study, but then he thought of something. "I have a favor to ask."

"Shoot!", Maya responded enthusiastically. Damon promised a vacation, and she was prepared to do any chore or risk him changing his mind.

"I was hoping that tomorrow you can take care of Talia. Show her around the fair, make sure she has a good time."

Maya paused. Her first impulse was to verify if Damon and Talia spent the night together, how Caden told her that morning, but instead, she asked, "Didn't you take her out for the morning?"

Damon didn't deny it. "What does that have to do with tomorrow?"

Everything! "Nothing. But I hope you can clarify one thing. Why are you asking me to show Talia around? Out of everyone in this pack, you are the one spending the most time with her." And you are her mate, bozo!

Damon understood that Maya is implying how he should be the one showing Talia around. "I will be busy with events and delegations from other packs. Talia will be uncomfortable if I drag her around with me. When I get time, I will make sure to check on her."

Damon is set to watch competitions and give awards in the morning. He will probably have some breaks here and there, but with delegations from other packs present, Damon was not sure if he will be able to leave and spend time with Talia. In the afternoon, Damon has a meeting with other Alphas, but his evening is free, and he thought of finding Talia at that time.

While he is busy, he wanted to make sure that Talia is having a good time. Who would be better for that task than Maya?

Damon noticed that Maya's expression was not good. "Is that a problem? If not, I can ask someone else..."

"No.", Maya cut him off. "Not a problem. I will do it. Talia will have a good time. Anything else, Alpha?" That last word sounded more like a curse.

"That will be all.", Damon said while wondering what was the cause of Maya's drastic mood swing.

'Why was Maya pissed? Did I do something wrong?', Damon asked his wolf. He really didn't get it.

'You will find out tomorrow.', his wolf responded.

Damon had a bad feeling about this.

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Maya stood in the hallway and thought about what to do.

Her blood boiled at the thought of Damon sleeping with Talia and spending time with her only when it fits his schedule. What about Talia? Does Damon expect that Talia will sit on the side and wait for him?

If they are mates, he needs to do his best for her and with her.

Maya grew up in a patriarchal pack where only males were warriors and decision-makers while females were expected to take care of the house and give birth to pups, and Maya hated it. Her mother was the smartest woman Maya ever knew, yet she was reduced to a housewife because her mate, Maya's

father, didn't approve of Maya's mother getting a job and doing something other than cooking, cleaning, and laundry.

Since she was a teen, Maya went the extra mile to train secretly, and only after meeting Caden and joining the Dark Howlers pack, Maya was able to show her prowess as a warrior.

Maya clearly remembers how Caden ditched work and responsibilities only to spend a few more minutes with Maya, and this... just what is this?

No matter how timid and kindhearted Talia is, this treatment will hurt her feelings. It's not fair.

Maya cursed Alpha Damon under her breath. He was obviously taking advantage of Talia's docile nature.

Maya will not allow Damon to hold Talia under his thumb. That won't happen. Not on her watch.

Maya never meddled in Damon's private affairs, but she couldn't sit this one out.

Talia is a kind girl who suffered a lot and Maya didn't want to allow Damon to hurt her. Of course, Damon wouldn't harm Talia on purpose because she is his mate, but his ignorance can hurt Talia.

Maya knew very well that talking to Damon won't do any good, even if Maya reveals that she is aware Talia is Damon's mate. Damon is too stubborn to listen, but Maya has her ways, and she was determined to stand up for Talia.

After all, this impacts not only Damon but the whole pack, because as Damon's mate, Talia is the best person to be their Luna. If the Moon Goddess paired them up, she must have her reasons.

With all that in mind, Maya headed to the third floor of the packhouse.

"Busy?", Maya asked when she peeked into Talia's room.

"Not really.", Talia responded while keeping the book on the side.

Maya walked into Talia's room and closed the door behind her, with the task to probe the situation.

"Did you have fun with Alpha Damon today?"

"Yes.", Talia responded with sparkles in her eyes. "We went to the amusement park. It was very lively."

"Aww...", Maya said with a dreamy smile. "Caden took me there once before I became Beta officially, and I wish to go again. Tell me about the rides you took."

Talia felt that something was off. Somehow, Maya's enthusiasm seemed forced. "Aren't you busy?"

"What do you mean?"

"When you came here, I thought that you need help with preparations for the festival. Are you done with work, and you came to chat?" Talia pursed her lips and responded to her questions before Maya could. "No. There is too much work. I thought that we are close enough and you don't need to beat around the bush. Tell me what you need, and I will help if I can."

Maya couldn't believe that Talia saw through her. OK. Talia was off the mark about the reason, but it was true that Maya had a hidden agenda.

"You are right. There is a lot of work, but it's mostly final touches and I delegated everything. They will contact me if there are any issues. I really wanted to hear how your day went with Alpha Damon. He can be overbearing and insensitive, so I was curious. That's it."

Talia eyed Maya suspiciously but still responded. "Alpha Damon was fine. He let me pick the rides and we stopped for snacks. We would probably stay longer if not for this festival, but he said that we will go again."

Talia skipped a few parts, but she didn't lie.

"I see. Well, that's fine.", Maya gave up, seeing that Talia was stingy on the details. She had another strategy. "About the festival, do you have a plan when and where you will go?"

Talia's troubled expression answered Maya's question.

Eventually, Talia spoke, "I want to go, but everyone I know will be busy. I was hoping you can tell me the locations and timings of events so that I can go on my own. I don't want to burden anyone."

Talia was embarrassed to bring up the point of not having any money, but she won't buy any knick-knacks and she will eat before leaving the packhouse, so there won't be a need for her to buy anything. Just seeing the festival should be enough.

"What about Alpha Damon?", Maya asked.

Talia didn't get it. "What about him?"

"Do you want to go with him?"

Talia's eyes widened for a moment and then she shook her head. "He will be busy and there will be guests. I will only be in the way. Don't worry about me, I will manage."

There was also the detail related to potential rumors if anyone sees her with Damon. Holding hands and hugging when no one is watching is one thing but sticking close to him in public will only bring disaster.

Talia's humility tugged on Maya's heartstrings and with every passing second, Maya's sadness morphed into anger. Damon was a bad mate!

It was obvious to Maya that Talia was not aware of her position. As Damon's mate, it was Damon's responsibility to make Talia feel comfortable with him and others and to encourage Talia to take her rightful spot, by his side, as his Luna.

That's what Caden did when he brought Maya to the Dark Howlers pack. Caden was sticking to Maya like a postage stamp and she never felt like an extra who will get in his way.

With this, Maya understood the situation more-or-less, and she decided to act.

"I assume you are free now.", Maya said.

Talia thought about her book with sadness. It seems she won't do any reading today either. "Yes. I have a few hours until dinner preparations start."

"Are you up for the tour I mentioned?"

Talia blinked. "Now?"

"We can start and see how much we cover until you need to report to the kitchen..."

Chapter 78 - Keith [Bonus]

With Maya not taking a 'no' for an answer, Talia followed her out of the packhouse.

They took a walk down the path that started on the left side of the driveway, and Maya was telling Talia about their destination.

"I will take you to the training center first. Since Doctor Travis said that you can exercise in moderation, I wanted you to see the options..."

In a few minutes, they passed several clearings which Maya explained are parts of the outdoor obstacle course. "Some training we take in our human form, and some are designed for our wolf form. Everyone

who wants to train can, but you need to achieve certain results in order to qualify to run patrols and to be recognized as a warrior..."

Talia listened attentively and she didn't realize at what point they reached in front of a long two-story-high building.

Talia and Maya stepped inside, and Maya started her tour.

"This is the training center. On the ground floor, if you take the hallway to the left, you will reach an Olympic-size swimming pool, on the right is the gym with mats, weights, and exercise machines, and straight ahead are dressing rooms. Normally, in wolf form, we prefer training outside, while as humans, the air-conditioned interior is better. Do you know how to swim?"

Talia's brows furrowed. "I think I do. But it's ages since I did it, so..."

Maya waved her hand, indicating that it's not important. "Don't worry about it. No one forgets how to swim. It will take you only a few seconds to remember. If you ever feel like it, I can lend you one of my swimsuits. Normally, I come for swimming once a week, but lately, we were busy. Maybe you can be my accountability partner and we can come together."

Seeing Maya's expectant gaze, Talia nodded in agreement.

"Great!", Maya exclaimed and continued her tour. "On the upper floor are offices and a lounge, and there is a bistro where you can get healthy snacks and protein shakes..."

At the end of Maya's speech about the training center, Talia and Maya were in the women's dressing room.

It was a big area with benches in the middle, and lockers along the walls. There was one door that led to the restrooms and another one with shower stalls.

In one corner, some clothes were neatly folded, and Maya grabbed shorts and a sports bra and stuffed them in Talia's hands. "Put these on."

"What about you?", Talia asked.

Maya grinned. "I will change also."

Talia wanted to check out the gym, but she didn't think she will get to use it so soon. Seeing that Maya was already undressing, Talia followed suit.

The gym area was massive, and it was how Maya described it. There was an area with weights, and various machines such as treadmills, elliptical, stationary bicycles, rowing machines... there was something for everyone. And all gadgets were arranged along walls, leaving a big open space in the middle that had a thick mat covering the floor.

Talia counted dozens of people in the gym. Mostly guys and a few women. Some exercised, and two men sparred on the mat. They were throwing punches at each other and dodging, and Talia's heart rate increased only by looking at them.

The music from the speakers was loud, but Talia could clearly hear the 'pow' and 'thunk' sounds as punches and kicks met their target. It was raw and violent, and Talia was unable to look away. She was not sure if she was breathing.

'Piiiiii!'

A loud whistle sounded when one of the two men who sparred was pinned to the mat, and only then Talia noticed the third person.

It was a tall man in his mid-twenties with slightly curled short brown hair and sun-kissed skin. He had a whistle on a lanyard around his neck, and he was talking to the two men who just sparred like he was giving instructions. Talia observed his toned physique that was not hidden by shorts and a t-shirt, and she paused when he turned to look straight at her.

Too embarrassed that she was caught staring, Talia glanced at Maya who gave her an encouraging smile while the man walked to them.

"Is this Talia?", he asked, and Talia understood that Maya already spoke to him. How else would he know her name?

"Yes. Talia, this is Keith. He has a degree in sports management, and he is an athletic trainer." Maya introduced Keith, and while Keith and Talia shook hands, Maya spoke to him. "Talia is new, and she wants to train. Travis told her that she can, but to take it easy and she needs to be supervised. Can you help her?"

Keith gave a boyish grin. "You have come to the right place. I am the best personal trainer in the pack."

Maya stifled a laugh. "He is the ONLY personal trainer in the pack."

Keith made a face at Maya and then he eyed Talia top-to-bottom. "I see you are dressed for work. How about we start with a treadmill, and I take initial data? Based on that, I will come up with a training program."

"OK.", Talia said nervously. She had no idea what to expect.

Keith dashed to the room on the side and a few seconds later came out with a tablet and an armband.

Keith put the armband on Talia's right arm and led the way toward the treadmills while explaining, "This will measure your heart rate, blood pressure, and oxygen levels."

"You can start. I will go and get some bottled water.", Maya said and made herself scarce.

"What are you trying to accomplish with exercise?", Keith asked Talia while starting the treadmill she was standing on.

"Doctor Travis said that I need more muscle. And I want to learn to fight."

Keith hummed while taking notes. "We will get you there. You have my word."

Talia blinked at Keith's friendly smile and she thought how he reminded her of Doctor Travis, and of Olivia. It was a comforting smile that made her feel things will be alright. Somehow, she liked Keith already.

From the second-floor lounge, Maya leaned on the rail while looking down.

She could see Talia walking on the treadmill, and Keith with the tablet next to her, and she smiled in satisfaction when two more people approached them. Maya recognized them, Liam and Pierce. Shortly after, Caleb, Sandy, and Lulu also gathered.

The music from the speakers didn't allow Maya to hear what they were saying, but based on the body language and gestures, Maya knew that they introduced themselves and were curious about Talia. They were all in their early twenties, and Talia fit in with them well.

Unmated werewolves (like Liam and Pierce) don't need much to hit on a girl, and Talia is new so it's normal that everyone is interested, females included.

People in the gym at this time are warriors, focused on training and camaraderie, and most of them are straightforward people who don't like scheming. They compete in skill, strength, and speed, and they all learned through their experience that the unit will rise and fall together as a team; that's why they are inclined to help the ones in need.

Maya thought that this is the best bunch of people for Talia to mingle with. A supportive environment will help Talia gain confidence, and at the same time, she will get to interact with people who are not Damon.

Maya wondered, how will those six react when they find out that they are talking casually with Alpha Damon's mate, their future Luna?

Seeing that guys lingered more than necessary, an evil smile appeared on Maya's face.

Maya had no desire to hook up Talia with a random guy, but Alpha Damon could use some competition. Even if Talia scores a date, no harm will be done. After all, Damon is a second-hand item, and it wouldn't be fair if he gets all Talia's firsts.

The best part about the current situation was Talia's cute ignorance. Talia had no idea that she is Damon's mate, or that those guys are trying to leave a good impression.

Objectively, Talia is a beautiful girl. A bit skinny by werewolf standards, but other than that, there was nothing wrong with her. Any werewolf would be happy to feed her.

Talia was walking on the treadmill and she chatted with people who gathered around her. She didn't notice that Keith was gradually increasing the speed every few minutes.

'Don't push her too much', Maya sent Keith a message through the mind-link. 'Her wolf is hurt and at this point, Talia is no more than a human.'

'That explains a few things...', Keith mumbled back. He could already see that Talia was malnourished, and the bruise on her forearm spoke about violence. He felt sorry for Talia. 'Don't worry. I will keep that in mind.'

Maya was confident that Keith knew what he was doing. After all, he attended college in a human city, and he is used to interacting with humans.

In general, the Dark Howlers pack is open-minded in regard to other creatures, but there are still some who believe that werewolves are above others.

As part of the efforts to dispel discrimination, Damon's parents started sponsoring promising youth to attend education in human schools, and Damon continued that tradition.

That's how Keith got his education, just like Travis, and many others from the Dark Howlers pack.

See Keith's photo in the comments!

Chapter 79 - Booked For The Festival

Talia was huffing and puffing when Keith stopped the treadmill. "I think we are done for today. I collected necessary data."

Talia was embarrassed. She thought that she was running for hours, but the machine showed only 26 minutes. Talia started with a walk that gradually progressed into a jog, yet she felt like her soul will leave through her mouth and she was sweating profusely.

She was not aware that she was that flimsy. Talia didn't lazy around, but she never ran or did anything physically taxing; that combined with her poor diet and mostly hiding in the attic, led to the outcome that she could literally feel her energy draining once she started to jog.

Since Talia came to the Dark Howlers pack, things are better, but a few days are not enough to chip into years of neglect.

Talia stumbled off the treadmill and sat on the floor.

"Don't be discouraged.", Maya said while giving Talia a bottle of water. "We all started somewhere. You will see improvements as you practice, but it's important to continue and not overdo it because if you get injured, you will need to rest and heal and that's worse than taking it slow."

Talia nodded. She couldn't find the strength to respond with words.

"Let's hit the showers, and Keith will go through the data."

Keith agreed with Maya and pointed upstairs. "I will meet you ladies in the lounge when you are done. We can go over the results as I introduce you to my latest berry-bonanza protein shake." He ended with a big grin.

Talia wobbled to the dressing rooms and her shaky legs reminded her of that morning when Alpha Damon held her as they walked to the bench. His hold was solid, and she leaned on him, knowing that he won't let go. There was always a sense of security when she was close to Damon.

Talia dispelled those thoughts. Alpha Damon was not here, and he is a busy man.

What happened that morning was a one-time thing, and she shouldn't overthink it. Yes, Damon said that they will go again, but Talia didn't want to keep her hopes up because it will only lead to disappointment.

Her motto is to appreciate what she has and not have expectations. That's how she will save herself from heartbreak.

Talia moved after Maya and she wished for someone to support her now, or maybe to have a cane, because she felt like her legs will give up on her at any moment, and she will fall face first. She cheered internally when they entered the dressing room without an incident.

When they stepped into the area with showers, Talia hesitated.

There were no partitions. All walls, floor, and ceiling were covered in white tiles, there were vents on the ceiling, drains on the floor, and showerheads stuck out from the wall on the right that had several grooves which held toiletries and... no privacy.

"You should undress.", Maya reminded Talia and when she saw Talia's frozen face, Maya giggled. "I can assure you that we have the same parts, and I won't bite. Come on. Keith is waiting. Put the sweaty clothes in that hamper..."

Talia inhaled a shaky breath and started undressing while chanting to herself that this is normal and that she shouldn't be cautious about her body.

Talia did her best not to stare at Maya's naked form. Maya is not a curvaceous type, her body is lean and toned, showing that she leads an active lifestyle.

"How are you feeling?", Maya asked as they showered.

"I'm beat. I really want to rest now.", Talia admitted, and she realized something. "Why are you showering? You didn't exercise."

Maya shrugged. "I'm giving you company. Showering now means that I don't need to do it later, so I'm not losing anything. What do you think about Keith?"

"He seems nice."

"What about the others?"

Talia knew that Maya asked about three guys and two women who approached her while she exercised. "They seem nice also. Friendly."

"They are decent.", Maya said. "As you get to know more pack members, you will see that this is a good place to be."

"Thank you for bringing me here."

"No need to thank me, Talia. I'm glad this is working out for you."

Maya felt guilty for not telling Talia the real reason why they came here. But telling Talia will only freak her out, and it won't make sense unless she tells Talia that Damon is her mate, and that's Damon's secret to tell. Ah, what a mess.

Maya couldn't figure out why Damon didn't talk openly with Talia. The girl could obviously notice that Damon's behavior is odd, and without an explanation, who knows what Talia was thinking of him?

During the shower, Maya told Talia that Keith owns a brand of protein shakes and is selling them online. "He treats us as guinea pigs by giving us to taste them before they hit the market."

"Is that the berry-bonanza protein shake?"

Maya confirmed and started telling Talia about some not-so-successful flavor blends. "He is experimenting in his kitchen, and then poisoning us here. The banana chocolate was fine, but caramel mint was horrible, and I had an upset stomach after taking a few sips of bacon-infused lime..."

Talia laughed. Maya's expressions were comical.

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When Talia and Maya reached the lounge, they found that Keith was waiting for them with Liam, Pierce, Caleb, Lulu, and Sandy.

Keith had protein shakes ready for Maya and Talia. "I made them myself."

Talia took a sip reluctantly and she liked it. "This is good."

Keith grinned. "It seems I have a winner."

"What's in it?", Maya asked.

"Other than protein powder and oatmeal, there is a number of berries like strawberries, bilberries, blackberries, pineapple..."

"Pineapple?", Maya interrupted Keith. "How is that a berry?"

Keith lifted his chin smugly. "Just so you know, pineapple IS a berry."

Maya made a face. She really didn't know.

After collecting feedback on his new recipe for the protein shake, aka the berry-bonanza, Keith moved with Talia to the side, to discuss in privacy her results. They were just on the next sofa, so any privacy was an illusion because others were using their werewolf hearing to listen in to their conversation.

"I suggest that we start building your stamina. Once you can jog for fifteen minutes without feeling like you are going to pass out, we will add other exercises, and I will teach you some moves. I'm not much of a fighter, but if you learn everything I have to offer, you will be decent, and if you need more, you can ask one of those guys for pointers.", Keith gestured toward the sofa on their left where Maya was with Liam, Pierce, Caleb, Lulu, and Sandy.

Talia was excited about learning to fight.

"How often should I work out?"

"If you can do it every day, that would be perfect. Keep in mind that rest is equally important. Don't skip sleep. We can start with half an hour in the gym and then gradually increase time and intensity. I will keep an eye on you while you train, as your personal trainer. I'm here almost every day."

Talia had no objections. Keith was friendly and approachable, and she felt at ease talking to him. "When should I come tomorrow?"

Keith was surprised. "Tomorrow?"

"Is that a problem?"

"It's not a problem. I admire your dedication. It's just that with the festival, I thought that you will want to have fun there, but if you have free time, I will meet with you in the gym."

Talia realized that even though she has nothing planned, Keith probably does. "I don't know anyone, so I assumed..." She halted her explanation. It was not important. "That's fine. Let's meet in two days, or whenever you are free."

Keith cocked an eyebrow in displeasure. "Didn't I say, I can make it? I have duties in the morning at the sports fields, but my afternoon is free, and other than hanging out at the festival, I have no other plans. How about this... we will meet for your session here at three o'clock in the afternoon, and after that, we will go to the festival together. Hm? I'm quite good with ring tossing and I can secure you a stuffed animal. And no matter what everyone else says, deep-fried mini donuts dipped in chocolate syrup go great with chilled beer, you will see."

"That sounds perfect!", Maya chimed in, not trying to hide that she was eavesdropping. "Talia will be with me in the morning, and we will stop by to check out the games."

"Don't just stop by.", Keith said. "I will be happy to secure for you ladies the best seats in the house."

"Eh? What about best seats for us?", Sandy complained. She is a lady also.

Keith rolled his eyes. "You will be on the field, playing."

Pierce winked at Talia. "Cheer for us, OK?"

"So, can we hang out after the games? My father will have a stall with ramen noodles because he is in his Japanese phase. We can have lunch there, to give him some business. What do you say?", Lulu asked.

Talia saw that Liam, Pierce, Caleb, and Sandy were looking at her expectantly, and Maya gave her a thumbs up.

Suddenly, Talia found her schedule for the festival full. She was not sure how she felt about it, but she didn't dislike it. Not even a little bit.

Chapter 80 - Scandalous Girl Talk

Talia rushed into the kitchen.

After her exercise, she chatted with Maya, Keith, and with others in the lounge of the training center, and it was fun, but now she was running late.

"Sorry, sorry...", Talia said breathily while entering the kitchen. She went straight to the pantry door which had a hook on the inside with aprons hanging.

Talia started tying the apron around her and asked Stephanie, "Where should I start?"

Talia paused at the sight of Stephanie who was cutting meat, and two Omegas. In her hurry, Talia didn't notice two other women in the kitchen.

"Good that you are here, Talia. We could use extra hands.", Stephanie said and gestured with her chin toward Omegas.

"That's Dawn."

The young woman with the blonde pixie haircut who was peeling potatoes nodded.

"That's Zina", Stephanie said, and the redhead with her hair pulled into a bun, who was at the sink washing vegetables, glanced at Talia, and nodded.

Stephanie pointed with her chin toward the serving plate that was on the kitchen's island.

"Talía, can you take this to the living room before you get messy?"

Talía grabbed the serving plate that had crackers, cheese, and several different types of dried meats arranged around grapes.

"Remove your apron. Just in case guests are there."

Talía paused at Stephanie's words.

"Someone is there?"

Stephanie was not sure. "Alpha Maddox and future Alpha Axel arrived. Caden will meet with them in the living room, but I don't know if they got down already."

Talía removed the apron and took a moment to compose herself before heading to the living room.

'Even if someone is there, I can do this. I only need to put this on the coffee table and leave... I can do this...', Talía chanted internally.

Talía's steps halted for a moment at the door of the living room. Two people were inside, a man and a woman.

The man was burly with short dark hair and a goatee. His sportish suit didn't make him less intimidating.

The woman had shiny brown hair reaching just below her shoulders, and she wore a white top and dark blue suit pants that ended with black stilettos.

The duo was sitting in silence, each with a phone in their hands.

Talia didn't want to attract attention. She lowered her head and made a beeline toward the coffee table.

"Tch...", the young woman tched as Talia lowered the tray on the table, and on an instinct, Talia's gaze met the woman's golden-brown eyes who scrutinized her.

"I didn't expect that the biggest pack in North America is employing child labor.", the woman said.

"Mindy!", the man exclaimed in a reprimanding tone.

"What?", she asked innocently.

"Be quiet."

Talia's eyes darted between two people, and she wondered if the woman was talking about her. Well, she might be skinny and smaller than werewolves of her age, but she doesn't look like a child. At least that's what Talia thought.

Seeing that no one said anything else, Talia left the room in hurried steps.

'Why did you raise your voice at me, Max? Don't embarrass me in front of kids.', Mindy asked her brother Maddox through the mind-link.

Maddox rolled his eyes. 'She is not a child. That girl is obviously an adult, but malnourished and abused.'

He saw the bruise on her arm (aka Cassie's handprint), and that Talia is skinny. That combined with Talia's timid behavior created the image of Talia's past.

Mindy made a face. 'I didn't know.'

'That much was obvious.', Maddox responded curtly, and a second later continued in a calmer tone. 'I know that you are proud of our pack, but don't try to antagonize the Dark Howlers pack. If Alpha Damon heard this, he wouldn't like it.'

Mindy rolled her eyes. 'Alpha Damon this, Alpha Damon that. If I don't know better, I would think that you are in love with him.'

Maddox grunted in disapproval. If that was said by anyone other than his sister, heads would be flying.

'Control your mouth, Mindy. Especially in front of Alpha Damon.' With that, he returned his attention to the phone in his hand.

Alpha Maddox is the Alpha of the Blue River pack. They are neighbors to the Dark Howlers pack.

In terms of size, the Blue River pack is about tenth in North America, but they are first in terms of taking care of werewolves who don't have a place to go. That includes orphans, homeless, disabled, victims of abuse, and werewolves who have mental issues.

Maddox has a good heart but taking care of those people costs a lot of money, and Damon is his biggest financial supporter.

Alpha Maddox came here with an intention to discuss several new initiatives and to improve their relationship further, and if he knew that his willful sister would cause problems the moment they arrived, he would leave her at home.

Since she was fourteen years old, Mindy traveled across North America, visiting other packs, and finding stranded werewolves. She is the biggest ambassador for sheltering vulnerable werewolves, but the amount of pride she takes in her work and the Blue River pack sometimes make her appear unpleasant.

In the kitchen...

Talia pushed the incident from the living room to the back of her mind and focused on tasks that Stephanie assigned to her.

They had things roasting and baking, and this was the first time for Talia to see all four ovens working simultaneously. The pots and pans on the stove were frying and simmering, while four women worked on sauces, dressings, stuffings, and the whole kitchen smelled delicious.

Talia loved that Stephanie played some pop music, so they were humming and swaying while working. It was harmonious.

Suddenly, Stephanie wiped her hands with haste and reached for her back pocket. She glanced at her phone. "I need to take this... Zina, watch the sauce so it doesn't burn. It needs to be stirred on every minute or so. Dawn, keep an eye on the pastry. It's almost done. Talia, finish the salad..." And with that, Stephanie left.

"Do you think we will get a chance to bring food to the dining room?", Dawn asked in a half-whisper when Stephanie was out of the earshot.

Zina rolled her eyes. "You are still hopeful?"

Dawn shrugged. "There is nothing wrong with hoping."

"What are you hoping for?", Talia asked reluctantly. She wanted to be part of the conversation.

Dawn glanced in the direction where Stephanie left before inching closer to Talia and speaking in a low voice, "This is one of the rare occasions when high-ranking members of other packs are here. What if one of them is my mate?"

"Dream on.", Zina said teasingly.

"I am dreaming, my dear.", Dawn responded to Zina in a singing voice. "But keep in mind that sometimes, dreams come true." She turned to Talia. "Don't listen to Zina. She is a grumpy one because she is twenty-five years old and still searching for true love. I'm only twenty, so there is still plenty of hope for me. A lot of people coming from other packs are unmated because other than for fun, games, and pack business, they are also hoping to find their mate. Imagine if that's you. I mean... one day you are mixing the salad, and the next day you are a Luna. Hmm? And it's more than just being a Luna. All

those guys are hunkalicious. I would kill to have one of them dote on me." Dawn said while waggling her eyebrows at Talia.

"Good luck.", Talia responded with an awkward smile.

"See? Talia also doesn't believe in your nonsense.", Zina said with a smirk, and she leaned on the kitchen island with her arms crossed over her chest, silently challenging Dawn.

"Oh, no, no...", Talia said with haste. "It's not that I don't believe in it, it's just that... the chances for something like that are very slim, and I'm dealing with so many things that romance is the last on my mind."

Dawn gave Talia a knowing look. "Well, if one of those manly men is your mate, many of the things you are dealing with would just disappear. Powerful guys can do that. And who said anything about romance? I don't need dinner and flowers. For that, I can cook myself or pluck a few blooms from the garden. I'm talking here about raw and unrestrained sex. Pure carnal pleasures with endless orgasms without apologizing. All night long, baby!"

Dawn moved her hips in a humping motion, and Zina burst into giggles.

A moment later, Talia also started laughing.

Talia never had these scandalous girl-talks, but more than paying heed to her discomfort, Talia was glad that the mood in the kitchen was good.

Dawn and Zina talked to her in a friendly way and joked, and Talia hoped that she made two more friends. Combined with Keith and five other people from the training center, that makes it eight. Talia was pleased with his progress.

Dawn was goofing around while hugging her invisible lover made out of the air, and Talia remembered the man from the living room (aka Alpha Maddox).

What if he announced that Talia is his mate when she brought the tray with snacks? He was big and intimidating, and he even raised his voice at the woman who accompanied him (aka Mindy).

Talia couldn't imagine her reaction if Alpha Maddox claimed her as his mate. Would she collapse and pee her pants, or stand rooted in the spot? Maybe her survival instincts would kick in and she manages to run away. Scary. She decided to avoid them at any cost.

"Hey...", Zina called Talia. "Is it true that you are staying in the packhouse?"

Talia paused, unsure if that's a good thing or not, but she didn't want to lie. "How do you know?"

"Rita told us.", Zina said. "She is cleaning the rooms and she saw you a few times, and we know that no new Omega appeared in the common buildings, so I guessed. This pack is huge, but we who come to the packhouse are few in numbers and we all know each other. You are a new face, so we got curious."

Talia saw that both Zina and Dawn were looking at her expectantly, and she feared what question will come next. She didn't expect it will come from behind.

"Did the sauce burn?", Stephanie asked when she entered the kitchen, and Zina swiftly moved to the stove and started stirring the pot in question.

Dawn was already checking the pastry that was baking in the oven, and Talia was mixing already over-mixed salad.

Zina released a breath of relief before responding, "The sauce is fine."

Stephanie definitely saw them chatting and if anything burned, Stephanie would scold them.
