

Alphas Bride 771

Chapter 771 Not a monster [Bonus chapter]

James returned to sit next to Cornelia on the sofa, and he absentmindedly poked a piece of sausage with a fork.

His hand froze mid-air when Cornelia asked, "Someone from your pack died?"

James released a long breath. He really didn't want to talk about it, but Cornelia overheard what Maddox said. He couldn't pretend like it was nothing. "My sister. She died last night."

Cornelia's eyes widened in slow motion when she understood that Maddox was talking about Marcy. Cornelia saw Marcy in the Dark Howlers pack. At that time, Marcy made a statement to a reporter in front of a camera about how she was giving up on the role of Damon's Luna so that she can travel the world.

Cornelia was confident that she will never hear about Marcy again, and it didn't cross her mind that Marcy will be here. Dead now.

"I went there last night," James spoke in a low voice. "I was hoping that she will be in the shelter, or maybe that she left this pack. But I found her in the forest, being beaten to death by rogues. There was a girl crying, yet I felt nothing. My biggest concern was to avoid exposure. If my father found out that Marcy was here, I would be in trouble. Alpha Damon and Alpha Maddox would also be blamed. I didn't care about Marcy."

Cornelia hugged him from the side. "I'm so sorry."

James snorted. "Why are you sorry? Didn't you hear what I said? I felt nothing. The female I considered to be my sister died, and I felt nothing. I am a monster."

Cornelia moved to look into his blue eyes which were like endless oceans as they reflected his internal struggle.

"Monsters don't feel, Jay. You are capable of love and care and anxiousness, and so many other emotions. I know. You are not a monster. You are just... broken."

James fisted her shirt, his fingers dug into the fabric, nearly ripping it but he didn't notice because he was staring into her dark brown eyes full of love as her words echoed in his mind.

"I am not a monster," he repeated.

"That is correct," Cornelia confirmed. "I know you are not a monster because you are my soulmate. You were forced to hide everything deep inside, so your father won't find it and use it against you. You hid your emotions so well that you couldn't recognize them anymore. I know you are scared. You are scared to look into the person your father molded, but I can tell you that I'm looking at him and he is not a monster. I am here for you and I'm not going anywhere. I won't force you to open up to me, but I hope that one day you will allow me to share your everything, pain included."

Cornelia raised her hands and wiped the moisture off his cheeks.

"See? I am right. Monsters don't cry. Monsters don't fear disappointing their other half. Your father broke you, but I know that my sweet Jay will feed me and put my needs first. My Jay will do everything he can to keep me safe, and he will rather harm himself than do something I might dislike. I love you, Jay. Together, we will get through everything."

James' shoulders shook and then he pulled her into him, and he sobbed silently.

Cornelia hugged him with all her might and patted his back. No matter how smart and how tall and how mature he was, in the end, he was still a sixteen years-old boy who was dealing with a lot.

His father was a horrible person, his mother didn't care, and he just saw his sister dying. He was surviving every day while fearing that his father will oust him due to the lack of Alpha aura, and there was also the point that James believed he was not strong enough to protect Cornelia, his mate. That was a lot of challenges for anyone to bear, and James was just one person.

At that moment, he looked like a fragile boy and Cornelia held him and let him cry it out because she knew that he needed it.

Part of her was glad that James broke down like that. He opened up and allowed her to see his vulnerable side. She knew that no one got to see that, and it made it special.

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Later that afternoon...

Maddox led the group to an isolated stone building.

By his side was Tatiana, and behind them were Damon, Talia, Caden, Maya, Kalina, and Tony.

When they entered the room, they found Grady, Varya, Cornelia, and James.

Cornelia drew a circle with chalk on the stone floor.

Cornelia confirmed that Grady removed most of the unnatural energies by washing the body paint from his body, and she performed a few spells to extract the rest.

Cornelia said that she will need to investigate the collected samples to confirm how the bodypaint actually worked.

James ensured that no one could see his chocolate-colored Goddess doing her magic, so guards and Varya had to stay outside, but unfortunately... Grady saw it. Cornelia was performing the spells on him, so Grady was necessary.

James was set on killing Grady at the smallest sign of betrayal. Actually, he might kill the guy just in case he reveals later how special Cornelia was.

Grady was overwhelmed by the hostility that was tangible. What the heck? Even that teen boy looked at him like he couldn't wait to end him.

No matter how Grady saw this, he disliked packs and whatever structure they were following. No one asked him his name, nor occupation; that one word "rogue" labeled him as a black sheep and it seemed that no amount of good deeds will help him appear clean. Maybe Tristan was right after all.

Grady's instincts told him that he was lucky to be alive. Somehow, the scout and observe mission that Tristan described escalated. He saw bodies of rogues being carried, and he recognized some.

For now, Grady decided to observe and cooperate. His priority was to survive, and he will find his exit later. Hopefully, with Varya by his side.

"The circle on the ground is to contain the flames, in case he spontaneously combusts," Cornelia explained when she finished.

They all stood facing Grady, and Kalina had to drag Varya away from the guy.

Seven more rogues were caught alive, currently held in the dungeon, but Maddox didn't think they will give him any useful information. Leaders of rogue groups were not Alphas, and they had no way to enforce loyalty other than with threats, money, and brainwashing how everyone was out to kill them (which was not necessarily a lie).

"Do you understand that if you talk about your rogue group, you might die?" Maddox asked.

Grady shrugged. "What are my options?" He didn't believe the burst-into-flames story. And didn't the brown chick say how the burning curse was removed?

"Will you cooperate?" Maddox asked his next question.

"Yes," Grady responded without missing a beat.

"Why should we believe you?" Damon asked.

Grady looked at Varya. "Because I want to be with my mate. I will do anything to be with her."

"Even lie?" Damon asked stiffly.

Grady was not sure how to respond to this. Would he lie? Of course, he would! But if he says that, it can backfire big time.

Chapter 772 Interrogation of a rogue

Grady looked at the werewolves around him and he cursed internally when he realized that the only one not looking at him with malice or disgust was Varya.

If he knew things would turn out like this, he would stay in the human town and not seek werewolves. But then... if he did that, he wouldn't be able to inhale the addictive scent of peanut butter and feel the goodness of the sparks that came with Varya's touch.

Grady didn't care about Tristan and he definitely didn't care about these people that surrounded him. The only person he cared about was the brunette he knew as Varya, and she wanted to be with him, but things got complicated and he needed to use his wits to come out of it alive and with his mate.

"How about you ask questions, and then you can decide if you will believe me or not?", Grady asked.

They all looked at Maddox who took this as his cue to start.

"Tell me about your mission. Why did you come here? When? How?"

Grady didn't delay with answering.

"A few days ago, Nick told us that we will be heading to the Blue River pack for a mission. They said it will be easy. Infiltration, scouting, nothing more than that. We heard that there will be a big party for Luna and it was not unusual for us to take advantage of people celebrating so that we can gather information. Two days back, we were preparing for departure when we received additional information. They said that we confirmed our target will be attending this event and that our mission will change slightly. There was a crate of cube-shaped devices we needed to hide. Nick said that if we are nearby one of those, Alphas won't be able to find us or harm us."

Grady looked at Talia. "We each got to see photos of the same woman. Our main mission was to bring Luna Talia to our camp. If we encounter her, we were to persuade her to come with us with the only limitation that she shouldn't be harmed. Nick showed us a map of this area and assigned us spots where we will hide. If we encounter patrols, we were to run and not cause a commotion."

As Grady spoke about Talia, people looked at her and Damon nervously, fearing that Damon will explode into violence. However, Talia and Damon were not surprised to hear that she was the target. They heard it before.

"What would you do with Talia after you get her?" Maddox asked.

"That is how much our group got to know," Grady responded honestly. "I was just a messenger. In the last few months, I collected a few packages in a human city. I would go to the address that was either a nightclub or a bar, and a package would be waiting for me. I never saw who left it there, or what was inside, and the bartender who was holding onto the package was just a human who did it for extra tips."

"Is that how you got those devices?" Maddox asked.

"As I said, I never looked inside packages. They told me to pick up whatever is there and bring it back without questions asked, and I was not allowed to look what was inside."

Maddox guessed that would be a dead end. Rogues don't have loyalty toward anyone. Whoever was pulling the strings would keep as much as possible to himself. Betrayal meant death, and most of the rogues hated packs so much that they would kill themselves when caught out of spite.

It's not that rogues were crazed fanatics out of choice, but the lack of a pack link changed them.

Wolves are social creatures, who live in packs with a strict hierarchy, and they see themselves as part of something bigger. When that is taken away from them, their wolves turn feral and they go... rogue.

Some wolves are born outside packs, and they accept individuality as normal, even though they always feel that something is lacking. However, when a werewolf is banished from a pack later in his life, the missing pack link is a hole he knows that shouldn't be there. There is a pain of rejection and the pack link breaking, and that wound festers and grows until they lose their compassion and empathy. The weak-minded ones succumb to it faster.

Banishing one from a pack is the death penalty for a werewolf.

Maddox was genuinely surprised that Grady knew that much, and he was collaborating.

Now, was he collaborating because of Varya, or because he was deceiving them, that was another thing Maddox needed to figure out.

"Who is Nick?" Maddox asked.

"That's Tristan's second in command."

"Who is Tristan?", Cornelia asked.

"It's a small-time rogue who causes us trouble occasionally," Caden responded.

"Are you saying that rogues we met last night belong to Tristan's group?" Maya asked. "There were hundreds of them."

Grady shook his head. "No, no. Tristan said that many groups came together for this. Some had a task to attack storages, some were to distract the patrols, and our group had Luna Talia as the target."

Talia thought of asking one thing that was bothering her from last night. "How did you know Luna Talia will attend this event?"

"We got information that Alpha Damon left with his Luna," Grady responded.

"From?" Talia continued probing.

Grady's brows came together. "I already told you all that I know, but I can tell you the rumor that's circulating."

Damon waved at Grady, indicating to keep talking.

"There is a woman by Tristan's side. I believe she is his mate. I'm not sure what her name is. The word is that she has access to confidential information from the Dark Howlers pack."

Maddox frowned. That was so vague. "Is that the rumor?"

"No. Those are facts. The rumor is that she grew up in the packhouse of the Dark Howlers pack and is very close to their Alpha. Her mother still works there or something like that, and that's how Tristan found out that Luna Talia left the packhouse. There was also something related to her telling Tristan about a scent-concealing potion and where it was made."

"Scent-concealing?" James asked. "Is that what you used last night?"

Grady nodded. "Tristan sent a group to the Dark Howlers pack and they got their hands on how to make it. I don't know if they bribed someone, stole it, or..."

Grady's voice trailed when he noticed that Talia, Damon, Maya, and Caden were staring at him like he was growing a second head. Or did he burst into flames? Grady quickly looked down to check himself. No, everything was normal.

"Did I say something wrong?" Grady asked apprehensively.

"You say you don't know the woman's name," Maya said. "Did you see her? What does she look like?"

"I caught a glimpse of her once. Dark brown hair, or maybe black." He gestured just below his shoulder level. "Not very tall, nor curvaceous, but not skinny either. I wouldn't say she stands out in any way, other than having Tristan's mark on her neck."

"Could you draw her?" Maya asked, desperately hoping that it was not Lisa.

Grady made a face. "My drawing skills are horrible. The female will look no better than a stick figure. If you have a picture, I can identify her."

Unfortunately, no one had Lisa's photo handy, but considering the information Grady told them, they all suspected that Tristan's mysterious mate was Lisa. Now what?

Chapter 773 Accepting a rogue

"Did we ever confirm who is Lisa's mate?" Caden's question broke the silence.

Maya shook her head. "I will ask Steph."

"Be careful what you say," Damon warned Maya as his insides churned at the possibility of... "We don't know if Steph is the one who leaked information."

"You don't think that she would..."

Damon raised his hand, interrupting Maya. "I don't think anything. But this sounds like Lisa, and she got the information somehow. Only a few people in the pack knew that Talia came with me, so the list of suspects who would put my Luna in danger is not long. And about the potion..." Damon jabbed his hand into his hair. He heard there was a breach in one of their labs, but nothing was missing, so they assumed it was warriors pranking each other. But now it seems rogues stole the formula.

At this point, Damon was fairly certain that Lisa got information from Stephanie. No one else was in contact with Lisa, how much he knew. Stephanie was either part of this, or she disclosed sensitive information without knowing that Lisa would give it to rogues so they could cause this mess.

Going after Lisa was one thing, but how could he go after Stephanie? She had been like his mother for the last decade, and Damon couldn't see himself pointing fingers at the woman who supported him when everyone else was confident he would fail.

Talia looked at Damon, feeling his anger and confusion. She knew that his emotions were amplified by the memory of his parents dying because someone from their inner circle betrayed them.

And this was about him and his people targeting his mate. How could he be OK with that?

Maya and Caden were aware that Lisa could do petty things, but betrayal? That was a new low.

Damon punished Lisa lightly for what she did because of their history and because of Stephanie. Instead of appreciating what Damon did, it turned out that Lisa backstabbed him.

This was not just about Lisa being jealous of Talia. It was about endangering others, Damon included. After all, if anything happened to Talia, Damon would be weakened, which meant the whole Dark Howlers pack would be in danger, and that was not a forgivable offense.

Maddox continued interrogating Grady, and Grady told them that he grew up among humans and that he joined Tristan's group only a few months back.

Other than, "I can show you where Tristan's hideouts and package pickup spots are," Grady didn't have anything else that would be usable.

Maddox ran out of questions, so they needed to decide.

"What should we do with him?" Maddox asked Tatiana.

Tatiana looked at Varya standing next to Grady and clinging to his arm, and Tatiana had no idea how to answer this.

Grady was a rogue, a part of the group that caused them so much grief and turned her luxurious wedding into a day for mourning, but there was her younger sister, pleading silently for her mate to be spared.

"We are yet to confirm if what he said was the truth," Tatiana said.

"I believe he spoke truthfully," Talia chimed in. Liseli told her that the guy was not lying. There might be a chance he was concealing things, but whatever he said was the truth.

Maddox frowned at Talia's words. If Grady lied, it would be easy to deal with him. However, if he told the truth, it meant he collaborated, and... what next? Should they just release a rogue? That wouldn't end well.

"How about we take him to the Dark Howlers pack?" Damon asked, surprising everyone. He knew that Talia wouldn't say the guy was truthful without confidence.

"What do you mean?" Varya asked Damon suspiciously.

"So far, your mate showed goodwill. Considering that he was with Tristan only for a short time, and he didn't harm anyone himself, we will give him a chance as long as he agrees to join the Dark Howlers pack."

"Join the pack?" Grady asked, unsure if he was relieved or horrified by this.

Damon confirmed. "You said that you are a scout and quick on your feet. If you join the Dark Howlers pack, we will test your abilities. If you do well, you can become a warrior."

"A warrior?" Grady echoed Damon's last words, unsure if Damon was giving him a way out or tricking him.

Talia looked at Damon questionably, and she asked him through their private mind-link, 'You will take in a rogue?'

Damon didn't think it was a big deal. 'The Dark Howlers pack takes in anyone who needs a place to stay and doesn't mean harm to the pack. I told you that when we met. Didn't I?'

He did, but... 'Why do I have a feeling you have another reason?'

'He saw you using your powers. If he joins our pack, I will have more control over him.'

Talia was still not convinced. 'Isn't he a liability?'

'It is clear that no one wants him dead, and keeping him in the dungeon is not an option either. I will have people assigned to watch over him. Becoming a warrior can be a lengthy training, and we can prolong it until he slips or convinces us in his sincerity.'

Talia realized that Damon's words made sense, and she admired how he could think logically in this situation. He already had a plan, and it turned her on a bit. Smart Damon was sexy. How could she lag behind him?

"My Alpha has spoken," Talia said to Varya and Grady. "If I understood correctly, neither of you lived as part of a pack before. Other than joining the Dark Howlers pack, you will need to learn about the rules we follow and accept guidance from people we assign as your counselors. Based on your abilities and interests, we expect that you will perform specific duties. Since you are a mated couple, you will get a dwelling where you can live together, and you will never go hungry. What do you say? Do you agree to this?"

"We agree!", Varya and Grady said in unison, both relieved that there was a way out for them which didn't include a dungeon or worse.

Talia was already planning to conceal Grady's identity as a rogue. Only a selected few will know in order to avoid any unnecessary complications. And there was also one more benefit.

'We can ask Grady to let us know if he recognizes anyone,' Talia spoke to Damon through their mind link. 'He worked as a messenger for rogues, and I'm sure that he saw some spies.'

Damon nodded in response. He liked that Talia was thinking about how to use this situation to their advantage.

Kalina and Tatiana looked at Talia gratefully. They wanted Varya to be happy with her mate, but they didn't know how to make it happen, considering that Grady was a rogue. However, with Talia keeping an eye on the couple, Tatiana and Kalina were confident that Varya won't be bullied. If it was Talia and Damon, they could do anything.

Sisters were also happy that all five of them would be staying in the US. What luck!

Chapter 774 Plans for Grady (1)

Tatiana's smile fell when she saw that Varya and Grady were about to kiss.

"What are you doing!?" Tatiana snapped. "Until you become members of the Dark Howlers pack and pledge loyalty to Alpha Damon and Luna Talia, you are not allowed to mate."

"Or kiss!" Kalina was quick to add.

Varya looked at her sisters helplessly. Why were they treating her like a baby? Kalina was younger than Varya! But she knew Grady's background was a problem, and she didn't want to make things worse.

"Alright," Varya agreed. "We will do that if you promise not to give us a hard time after it. Do we have a deal?"

Kalina and Tatiana frowned, and Varya pointed an angry finger at her sisters. "I accepted your mates without questions asked. How would you feel if I stuck my nose into your relationships? I know you are worried about me, but I am fine. I know Grady is not a bad person. You need to believe me."

Varya wrapped her arms around Grady's waist, and he was quick to put his arms around her, happy to see that his mate was fighting for them.

Varya didn't know much about Grady, but she believed in him. The scene warmed his heart.

Varya was still glaring at her sisters. "We endured a lot in the last few hours, and we agree not to get physical until we join the Dark Howlers pack. In return, I want you to at least be open-minded about this and stop treating my mate like he is the biggest villain alive. Can you do that much?"

Kalina and Tatiana nodded stiffly.

Varya grinned and tightened her hold on Grady. "Hugging is fine, right?"

Tatiana snorted. "Why ask when you are already clinging to him?"

"I am afraid that if I let go, you will harm him," Varya responded.

"We agreed to be open-minded," Kalina said. "We won't harm him unless he does something bad."

"Why are you assuming he will do anything bad? What if someone provokes him? Do you expect him to keep quiet?"

Three Wilkow sisters bickered, and everyone wondered how much louder it would get if Lidia and Daria were also present. They all had fiery personalities, and Varya held her own in front of Kalina and Tatiana even though she was not marked by an Alpha.

"When are we heading to our new pack?" Grady asked Damon and Talia. He was eager to leave this place.

"We have a few matters to settle," Damon responded. "Until then, do your best to cooperate."

Grady forced a smile while wondering, how did he end up relying on two people who wanted to kill him first? Was this April Fool's Day? Or maybe all this was one of those reality shows where people with cameras will jump out and tell him how it was all one big prank, and he will be famous. Or was it a dream? He would take anything, as long as it was not real.

Grady jolted when he felt a palm on his cheek. Varya's hand was cold and slightly sweaty, telling him she was nervous. The electrifying sparks that prickled his skin were soothing, and he wanted more of them. All over his body, if possible.

"It will be alright," Varya said. "I won't let them hurt you."

Grady had never felt so useless in his life. All this was new and overwhelming, but the oddest thing was that a petite female said she will protect him. And the ridiculous part was that it was the truth. If Varya didn't step in, he would be dead. At least once.

"Maya," Damon called. "Can you check with Gideon to see when it's convenient to do the ceremony for joining the pack? If we can wrap that up before heading back, that would be great."

Maya agreed. "I'm sure Varya and Grady will be eager to do the ceremony as soon as possible."

Maddox was grateful that Damon and Talia were taking custody of Grady, but he knew it wouldn't be simple. Grady was a rogue whose group was responsible for killing many, including a warrior from the Dark Howlers pack. How will Damon and Talia explain that to the members of their pack? What a mess!

Maddox thought that Talia and Damon would leave to talk privately, but then he heard Damon ask, "James, can we have a word?"

Maddox raised his eyebrows at the scene of Damon, Talia, James, and Cornelia walking out, and Maya and Caden observing the scene like it was a totally normal thing. Since when were they that close?

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James had a hunch what Damon wanted to talk about. It was about Grady. James wanted to talk about him also.

The fact was that Grady saw Cornelia performing magic, and James was not comfortable with the thought that the rogue will be alive and able to talk about it. What if the rogue exposes James' chocolate-colored Goddess?

The four of them went into the packhouse and used one of the empty rooms on the first floor for their discussion.

James was pleasantly surprised that his father didn't contact him so far. It was unusual that Alpha Edward didn't request a report on the situation, but James welcomed this silence. Was it possible that Alpha Edward was aware of what was going on? James wouldn't be surprised if his father had his spies. Heck, James wouldn't be surprised if his father had something to do with last night's attack.

James sat on the sofa next to Cornelia and held her hand in his. As much as the whole night was a mess, he enjoyed this situation where he could be with Cornelia openly. His mark on her neck was concealed under a layer of makeup, but James knew it was there, hiding... just how he was hiding how important Cornelia was.

"I wanted to talk about how to handle Grady," Damon's words snapped James out of his thoughts. "He is an asset, but also a liability. I'm sure you thought of some ways where we can take him with us, and he can be useful without endangering my pack."

"How are you going to assure that he doesn't talk about what he saw here?" James asked.

"Blood oath," Damon responded right away.

"Make sure to include concealing the existence of witches."

Damon's eyes darted to Cornelia as he understood why James was asking. "Alright."

"You might want to work with Alpha Maddox to stage Grady's death before you leave."

Damon didn't get it. "His death?"

James hummed in confirmation. "Tristan is not a fool, and the fact that he was not here last night proves it. Don't underestimate him or the ability of rogues to get information. Many eyes saw that rogue sitting

in front of the packhouse with a Wilkow sister clinging onto him, and that would mean only one thing... mates. What do you think Tristan will do when he finds out about it?"

Damon nodded as he understood where James was going with this. "He will look for Grady."

James raised his finger in the air that slowly fell to point at Damon as James spoke, "Tristan will look for Grady until he finds him, and then he will use him against you."

Chapter 775 Plans for Grady (2)

"How can rogues use Grady against us?" Talia asked. "He was seen here, and we will take him to the Dark Howlers pack secretly."

James released a long breath. "No offense, Talia, but you are too naive."

Talia frowned. What did he mean by, no offense? It was offensive, alright?

Talia would ask for moral support from Damon, but Damon told her more than once that she was too soft, so she guessed that Damon would probably just agree with James. And even if Damon defended her, he would do it because she is his mate and not because he believed it.

She decided to show some backbone. "What does my personality have to do with Grady?"

"Nothing," James said. "But because you are so kind and inexperienced, you can't see how dirty people can be. Your best quality is also your biggest flaw."

"I am not sure if you are complimenting or insulting me," Talia shared her thoughts.

"Oh, it's a compliment. Trust me," James said. "Consider yourself lucky that Alpha Damon is your mate. If it's any other Alpha..." James shook his head and decided to get back to the topic they discussed. Grady, the rogue.

"When Grady met Tristan and their group, he was stupid enough to believe that rogues are good guys. He was probably so happy that he spilled everything about his life in the human city. Grady said that his mother had passed, but what about his friends? Ex-girlfriends? There are so many ways to blackmail Grady into obedience, and if you think that the blood oath will protect you, I can tell you that you are wrong because there is always a way to go around an obstacle you are aware of."

"That still doesn't explain how rogues can use Grady. Don't they need to approach him first? How will they approach him if they don't know where he is?" Talia asked, feeling proud of herself for thinking of this.

"And that's how we are getting to the point of the Wilkow sister, Varya," James said with a smug smirk like he was waiting for that question.

"What about her?" It was Cornelia who asked. She loved when James displayed his smarts.

James' expression softened as he looked at his chocolate-colored Goddess. "No matter how much they hide Grady, they can't hide a Wilkow sister. Kalina and Tatiana are Lunas and too high profile. After last night's live stream, everyone saw Varya standing among the bridesmaids. And there were also

numerous photos taken by reporters. Do you think that she can go into public and not be recognized? Once Tristan hears how a Wilkow sister was clinging onto his man, it won't be difficult to find Grady."

Talia's mood dropped at James' words. She knew he was right, and now that he said it, it sounded logical. Why didn't she think of that herself?

Damon didn't like this. "Are you saying we must stage Grady's death and then hide them? Or should we ask them to wear disguises wherever they go?" If it's for a limited time, it would be feasible. But what if it takes forever? Damon regretted offering Grady to come to the Dark Howlers pack. Killing him would be simpler. Maybe he can make it look like an accident, preferably before Grady and Varya mate.

'Mate won't approve,' Sapa spoke into Damon's mind.

'She won't approve only if she finds out about it.'

'More lies?'

Damon was exasperated. Why was Sapa coming out only to scold him? Praise or two would be nice!

'I have no intention of lying,' Damon grumbled at the ancient wolf spirit. 'I am only trying to keep Talia safe. In case you missed it, the last night's mess was because someone wanted to get his hands on Talia, and we have no idea who that is. What do you suggest I do?'

'Use your position and power to solve the problem without upsetting mate,' Sapa said sternly.

"There is another way," James said mysteriously, pulling Damon out of his mental chat with Sapa.

"What way?" Damon asked.

"Use Grady to your advantage."

Damon didn't get it. "We can use Grady to send misinformation, but I don't see how that would help. Now that we know where Tristan's hideout is, we can just wipe them off."

James shook his head, indicating how that was not what he meant. "It's obvious that a small rogue like Tristan couldn't be behind last night's attack. Someone else organized them, but Grady is too low in the hierarchy of rogues to know anything useful."

Damon thought how that makes sense, but... "Rogues don't keep databases we can hack into, and they don't share their secrets either. What can a newbie like Grady do?"

James thought for a moment before responding. "It's a long shot, but... if Grady could help us get to that Lisa person, he would be useful. As someone who has access to the information from your pack, she is a valuable resource to Tristan, and he will not let her leave his sight."

Damon rubbed his chin while thinking about James' words. If Tristan won't leave Lisa out of his sight, the probability was high that... "Lisa should know who was behind this."

James' eyes flashed in agreement. "If I understood the situation correctly, Lisa still belongs to your pack. Even among rogues, Tristan has a nasty reputation. He has a way with words and a short fuse. The rumors about him involve crippling people, and he doesn't use tools or weapons to achieve that." James lifted his fist, indicating that Tristan beats up people who disobey him. "I am confident that Lisa is not

having an easy time there. You can mind-link her, but in order to make her submit, she needs to come to you. Grady is one of them, and he can help her escape Tristan."

Talia shook her head. "Even if we find a way to get Grady to cooperate, you assume that Lisa wants to escape Tristan. Lisa is a tantrum-throwing person, unable to hold back her grudges, and her mother adores her. The last thing I heard, Stephanie was happily talking about how Lisa finding her mate. Assuming that it's Tristan and he is mistreating Lisa, Lisa is set on hiding it, otherwise, Stephanie would go ballistic."

It was James' turn to pause. "It doesn't matter if Lisa won't or can't escape her abuser. What matters is that her mother won't approve after finding the truth."

Talia's eyes widened. "You want us to use Stephanie to get Lisa out of there?"

James spread his hands, palms up. "I am only telling you that you found the information you can use to get an advantage. How will you use it, it's up to you. Considering Lisa's unique position, if I were you, I would make a solid effort in getting her out of there and into my custody."

Damon ran his hand through his hair. Many things James said made sense, but everything was risky.

"We can storm that place and extract Lisa," Damon said.

James disapproved. "If Tristan knows that Lisa was close to you, and he probably does, he will use her as a hostage. Another thing is that he will know that Lisa is a double-edged sword, and he might eliminate her at the first sign of your attack. In either case, you won't win."

Damon cursed under his breath. James was right. Those were rogues, and they won't flinch when killing.

Chapter 786: A gloomy breakfast

Nora spent the night in one of the side houses, and she had no idea why the whole packhouse was busy so early in the morning. She thought about sneaking in before breakfast or at least making it low-key, but she underestimated how early these people woke up.

"Did something happen?" Nora asked one Omega.

"We had a minor incident, but nothing that should concern you," Omega responded as Luna Tatiana instructed.

They still didn't know the extent of damage and casualties, and until they prepared an official statement, the story for guests was that nothing major happened.

The Blue River pack returned to their regular routine as people were emerging from shelters. On the outside, things looked normal, and only the warriors who were in the middle of it knew how bad it was.

There was one soul that suffered a heavy blow. Jane couldn't stop sobbing, no matter how much Mindy comforted her. Only after Gideon fired up the calming incense did Jane fall asleep.

Beta Oliver returned, and he immediately relieved Maya and Caden from the burden of watching over Grady.

Warriors escorted Grady to the shared bathroom that soldiers used. It was a big space with dozens of showerheads, so Grady could clean up while being watched. Of course, Varya followed Grady. She didn't want to leave him out of sight, fearing someone might attack him just because he was a rogue.

Varya didn't get it. She was also a wolf without a pack. Would they look down on her also if her sister was not the Luna here?

Varya grew up in a diverse environment, with more humans than werewolves, and she learned to judge everyone by how they treated her. Based on that criteria, Grady was definitely a good guy. Why can't they leave them alone?

Damon and Talia worked with a few smaller units of warriors to identify the cube-shaped devices. After finding a few, Damon suggested they return to the packhouse, but Talia wanted to keep going.

"You won't achieve anything if you work yourself into collapsing, kitten," Damon said. He knew that she was staying busy so that she didn't think about Lulu's death. "You didn't sleep the whole night."

"You didn't sleep either," Talia retorted. "And neither did these warriors. I'm just doing what I can."

"You should listen to me when I say that doing this is only postponing the inevitable. We have a lot to do and some things only we can do, and this is not one of them."

Talia gave in grudgingly. Staying distracted was not working anyway. Whenever she saw a cube-shaped device, Lulu's face resurfaced in Talia's memory, and Talia's heart ached. It wouldn't hurt that badly if Lulu didn't die while protecting Talia, and it would hurt even less if Talia didn't suspect Lulu of being a traitor. Talia believed she wronged Lulu, and it was too late to say sorry and fix things.

Breakfast was gloomy.

People who knew what happened last night didn't want to talk about it. There was a danger that casualties from last night could be labeled as Maddox's and Tatiana's incompetence, so no relevant information left their inner circle, especially because they had press members in attendance.

Talia was unsure if she wanted to reveal that she was marked, but she had no intention of applying makeup, so she tied a silk scarf around her neck.

Damon was wearing a polo t-shirt, and he lifted the collar. It made him look cool, and it also concealed Talia's mark there.

They were all sitting in the same positions as they did for dinner on the previous night, with the difference that about one-half of the seats were empty.

Even with that, there were more than a hundred people present, and guests were coming to Beta Oliver to inquire about Maddox and Tatiana. Everyone hoped to hear from Alpha and Luna of the Blue River pack about last night's disturbance.

After the third group came to Beta Oliver, he went to the stage and took the microphone.

"I would ask for your attention, please," Beta Oliver said. "Last night, we had an intrusion of rogues into our territory that caused everyone inconvenience. Reports are still coming in, and once we know the details, we will share them with you. Until then, we can assure you that the situation is resolved. We will

proceed with our schedule for today as planned, with the difference that our Alpha and Luna might be absent for some time while they catch up on their sleep. Thank you for your understanding."

Of course, Maddox and Tatiana were not resting. They were working from their room while having their meal there because they knew that people would disturb them. After last night's events, Maddox and Tatiana didn't have the capacity to smile and entertain their guests, and they had many things to handle. Guests will need to wait.

"I don't see James and Cornelia here," Talia said.

"They asked for food to be delivered to their room," Maya responded. "After they are done, Cornelia will see Grady to deal with his fiery problem."

"I want to be there also," Talia demanded.

Maya glanced nervously at Damon, who was frowning in disapproval.

"I thought you would rest," Damon said to Talia.

"Can you rest in these circumstances?"

When Damon didn't respond, Talia turned to Maya. "What happened to Lulu?"

Maya lowered her gaze. "We found her a good place for now and cleaned her."

Talia turned to Damon. "I know we said we will stay for three days, but..."

"We can return whenever you want," Damon said.

Talia was grateful for his understanding. She wanted to return to the Dark Howlers pack with Lulu and talk to her father in person, but first... "As soon as we figure out things with Grady and hear what he has to say, we can go."

...

In the room on the second floor...

James absentmindedly fed Cornelia.

"You should eat also," she said while offering him a forkful of scrambled eggs. When he opened his mouth to accept her offerings, Cornelia asked, "Will you tell me what's going on?"

He was unusually quiet and clingy. They were sitting on the sofa next to each other, connected at the hips. Any closer and she would sit on his lap.

James shook his head. "It's been a long night." His arm snaked around her shoulders, and he pulled her to lean on him. "I'm glad you are here."

Cornelia exhaled helplessly. She couldn't do anything if he was unwilling to talk.

A knock on the door disturbed the silence, and James opened the door to see Maddox.

"Alpha Maddox, what brings you here?" James asked.

"Sorry to interrupt, but I have a question," Maddox said and gestured toward the room, indicating that they should talk inside.

Maddox closed the door behind him. "This is about... you know who. Do you have instructions on how to deal with her body?"

James didn't expect that. "Do whatever you normally do."

"We normally bury them in our cemetery unless they previously expressed a desire for a different location or to be cremated, in which case we will try to fulfill their final wishes. I thought, considering her identity..."

James raised his hand, interrupting whatever Maddox was about to say next. "The Red Moon pack was never her home. If you want to ask about any special requests, I suggest you ask that female child who was crying over her."

Maddox nodded in understanding. "I apologize for interrupting and... I'm sorry for your loss."

With that, Maddox left the room.

Chapter 787: Not a monster [Bonus chapter]

James returned to sit next to Cornelia on the sofa, and he absentmindedly poked a piece of sausage with a fork.

His hand froze mid-air when Cornelia asked, "Someone from your pack died?"

James released a long breath. He really didn't want to talk about it, but Cornelia overheard what Maddox said. He couldn't pretend like it was nothing. "My sister. She died last night."

Cornelia's eyes widened in slow motion when she understood that Maddox was talking about Marcy. Cornelia saw Marcy in the Dark Howlers pack. At that time, Marcy made a statement to a reporter in front of a camera about how she was giving up on the role of Damon's Luna so that she can travel the world.

Cornelia was confident that she will never hear about Marcy again, and it didn't cross her mind that Marcy will be here. Dead now.

"I went there last night," James spoke in a low voice. "I was hoping that she will be in the shelter, or maybe that she left this pack. But I found her in the forest, being beaten to death by rogues. There was a girl crying, yet I felt nothing. My biggest concern was to avoid exposure. If my father found out that Marcy was here, I would be in trouble. Alpha Damon and Alpha Maddox would also be blamed. I didn't care about Marcy."

Cornelia hugged him from the side. "I'm so sorry."

James snorted. "Why are you sorry? Didn't you hear what I said? I felt nothing. The female I considered to be my sister died, and I felt nothing. I am a monster."

Cornelia moved to look into his blue eyes which were like endless oceans as they reflected his internal struggle.

"Monsters don't feel, Jay. You are capable of love and care and anxiousness, and so many other emotions. I know. You are not a monster. You are just... broken."

James fisted her shirt, his fingers dug into the fabric, nearly ripping it but he didn't notice because he was staring into her dark brown eyes full of love as her words echoed in his mind.

"I am not a monster," he repeated.

"That is correct," Cornelia confirmed. "I know you are not a monster because you are my soulmate. You were forced to hide everything deep inside, so your father won't find it and use it against you. You hid your emotions so well that you couldn't recognize them anymore. I know you are scared. You are scared to look into the person your father molded, but I can tell you that I'm looking at him and he is not a monster. I am here for you and I'm not going anywhere. I won't force you to open up to me, but I hope that one day you will allow me to share your everything, pain included."

Cornelia raised her hands and wiped the moisture off his cheeks.

"See? I am right. Monsters don't cry. Monsters don't fear disappointing their other half. Your father broke you, but I know that my sweet Jay will feed me and put my needs first. My Jay will do everything he can to keep me safe, and he will rather harm himself than do something I might dislike. I love you, Jay. Together, we will get through everything."

James' shoulders shook and then he pulled her into him, and he sobbed silently.

Cornelia hugged him with all her might and patted his back. No matter how smart and how tall and how mature he was, in the end, he was still a sixteen years-old boy who was dealing with a lot.

His father was a horrible person, his mother didn't care, and he just saw his sister dying. He was surviving every day while fearing that his father will oust him due to the lack of Alpha aura, and there was also the point that James believed he was not strong enough to protect Cornelia, his mate. That was a lot of challenges for anyone to bear, and James was just one person.

At that moment, he looked like a fragile boy and Cornelia held him and let him cry it out because she knew that he needed it.

Part of her was glad that James broke down like that. He opened up and allowed her to see his vulnerable side. She knew that no one got to see that, and it made it special.

...

Later that afternoon...

Maddox led the group to an isolated stone building.

By his side was Tatiana, and behind them were Damon, Talia, Caden, Maya, Kalina, and Tony.

When they entered the room, they found Grady, Varya, Cornelia, and James.

Cornelia drew a circle with chalk on the stone floor.

Cornelia confirmed that Grady removed most of the unnatural energies by washing the body paint from his body, and she performed a few spells to extract the rest.

Cornelia said that she will need to investigate the collected samples to confirm how the bodypaint actually worked.

James ensured that no one could see his chocolate-colored Goddess doing her magic, so guards and Varya had to stay outside, but unfortunately... Grady saw it. Cornelia was performing the spells on him, so Grady was necessary.

James was set on killing Grady at the smallest sign of betrayal. Actually, he might kill the guy just in case he reveals later how special Cornelia was.

Grady was overwhelmed by the hostility that was tangible. What the heck? Even that teen boy looked at him like he couldn't wait to end him.

No matter how Grady saw this, he disliked packs and whatever structure they were following. No one asked him his name, nor occupation; that one word "rogue" labeled him as a black sheep and it seemed that no amount of good deeds will help him appear clean. Maybe Tristan was right after all.

Grady's instincts told him that he was lucky to be alive. Somehow, the scout and observe mission that Tristan described escalated. He saw bodies of rogues being carried, and he recognized some.

For now, Grady decided to observe and cooperate. His priority was to survive, and he will find his exit later. Hopefully, with Varya by his side.

"The circle on the ground is to contain the flames, in case he spontaneously combusts," Cornelia explained when she finished.

They all stood facing Grady, and Kalina had to drag Varya away from the guy.

Seven more rogues were caught alive, currently held in the dungeon, but Maddox didn't think they will give him any useful information. Leaders of rogue groups were not Alphas, and they had no way to enforce loyalty other than with threats, money, and brainwashing how everyone was out to kill them (which was not necessarily a lie).

"Do you understand that if you talk about your rogue group, you might die?" Maddox asked.

Grady shrugged. "What are my options?" He didn't believe the burst-into-flames story. And didn't the brown chick say how the burning curse was removed?

"Will you cooperate?" Maddox asked his next question.

"Yes," Grady responded without missing a beat.

"Why should we believe you?" Damon asked.

Grady looked at Varya. "Because I want to be with my mate. I will do anything to be with her."

"Even lie?" Damon asked stiffly.

Grady was not sure how to respond to this. Would he lie? Of course, he would! But if he says that, it can backfire big time.

Chapter 788: Interrogation of a rogue

Grady looked at the werewolves around him and he cursed internally when he realized that the only one not looking at him with malice or disgust was Varya.

If he knew things would turn out like this, he would stay in the human town and not seek werewolves. But then... if he did that, he wouldn't be able to inhale the addictive scent of peanut butter and feel the goodness of the sparks that came with Varya's touch.

Grady didn't care about Tristan and he definitely didn't care about these people that surrounded him. The only person he cared about was the brunette he knew as Varya, and she wanted to be with him, but things got complicated and he needed to use his wits to come out of it alive and with his mate.

"How about you ask questions, and then you can decide if you will believe me or not?", Grady asked.

They all looked at Maddox who took this as his cue to start.

"Tell me about your mission. Why did you come here? When? How?"

Grady didn't delay with answering.

"A few days ago, Nick told us that we will be heading to the Blue River pack for a mission. They said it will be easy. Infiltration, scouting, nothing more than that. We heard that there will be a big party for Luna and it was not unusual for us to take advantage of people celebrating so that we can gather information. Two days back, we were preparing for departure when we received additional information. They said that we confirmed our target will be attending this event and that our mission will change slightly. There was a crate of cube-shaped devices we needed to hide. Nick said that if we are nearby one of those, Alphas won't be able to find us or harm us."

Grady looked at Talia. "We each got to see photos of the same woman. Our main mission was to bring Luna Talia to our camp. If we encounter her, we were to persuade her to come with us with the only limitation that she shouldn't be harmed. Nick showed us a map of this area and assigned us spots where we will hide. If we encounter patrols, we were to run and not cause a commotion."

As Grady spoke about Talia, people looked at her and Damon nervously, fearing that Damon will explode into violence. However, Talia and Damon were not surprised to hear that she was the target. They heard it before.

"What would you do with Talia after you get her?" Maddox asked.

"That is how much our group got to know," Grady responded honestly. "I was just a messenger. In the last few months, I collected a few packages in a human city. I would go to the address that was either a nightclub or a bar, and a package would be waiting for me. I never saw who left it there, or what was inside, and the bartender who was holding onto the package was just a human who did it for extra tips."

"Is that how you got those devices?" Maddox asked.

"As I said, I never looked inside packages. They told me to pick up whatever is there and bring it back without questions asked, and I was not allowed to look what was inside."

Maddox guessed that would be a dead end. Rogues don't have loyalty toward anyone. Whoever was pulling the strings would keep as much as possible to himself. Betrayal meant death, and most of the rogues hated packs so much that they would kill themselves when caught out of spite.

It's not that rogues were crazed fanatics out of choice, but the lack of a pack link changed them.

Wolves are social creatures, who live in packs with a strict hierarchy, and they see themselves as part of something bigger. When that is taken away from them, their wolves turn feral and they go... rogue.

Some wolves are born outside packs, and they accept individuality as normal, even though they always feel that something is lacking. However, when a werewolf is banished from a pack later in his life, the missing pack link is a hole he knows that shouldn't be there. There is a pain of rejection and the pack link breaking, and that wound festers and grows until they lose their compassion and empathy. The weak-minded ones succumb to it faster.

Banishing one from a pack is the death penalty for a werewolf.

Maddox was genuinely surprised that Grady knew that much, and he was collaborating.

Now, was he collaborating because of Varya, or because he was deceiving them, that was another thing Maddox needed to figure out.

"Who is Nick?" Maddox asked.

"That's Tristan's second in command."

"Who is Tristan?", Cornelia asked.

"It's a small-time rogue who causes us trouble occasionally," Caden responded.

"Are you saying that rogues we met last night belong to Tristan's group?" Maya asked. "There were hundreds of them."

Grady shook his head. "No, no. Tristan said that many groups came together for this. Some had a task to attack storages, some were to distract the patrols, and our group had Luna Talia as the target."

Talia thought of asking one thing that was bothering her from last night. "How did you know Luna Talia will attend this event?"

"We got information that Alpha Damon left with his Luna," Grady responded.

"From?" Talia continued probing.

Grady's brows came together. "I already told you all that I know, but I can tell you the rumor that's circulating."

Damon waved at Grady, indicating to keep talking.

"There is a woman by Tristan's side. I believe she is his mate. I'm not sure what her name is. The word is that she has access to confidential information from the Dark Howlers pack."

Maddox frowned. That was so vague. "Is that the rumor?"

"No. Those are facts. The rumor is that she grew up in the packhouse of the Dark Howlers pack and is very close to their Alpha. Her mother still works there or something like that, and that's how Tristan found out that Luna Talia left the packhouse. There was also something related to her telling Tristan about a scent-concealing potion and where it was made."

"Scent-concealing?" James asked. "Is that what you used last night?"

Grady nodded. "Tristan sent a group to the Dark Howlers pack and they got their hands on how to make it. I don't know if they bribed someone, stole it, or..."

Grady's voice trailed when he noticed that Talia, Damon, Maya, and Caden were staring at him like he was growing a second head. Or did he burst into flames? Grady quickly looked down to check himself. No, everything was normal.

"Did I say something wrong?" Grady asked apprehensively.

"You say you don't know the woman's name," Maya said. "Did you see her? What does she look like?"

"I caught a glimpse of her once. Dark brown hair, or maybe black." He gestured just below his shoulder level. "Not very tall, nor curvaceous, but not skinny either. I wouldn't say she stands out in any way, other than having Tristan's mark on her neck."

"Could you draw her?" Maya asked, desperately hoping that it was not Lisa.

Grady made a face. "My drawing skills are horrible. The female will look no better than a stick figure. If you have a picture, I can identify her."

Unfortunately, no one had Lisa's photo handy, but considering the information Grady told them, they all suspected that Tristan's mysterious mate was Lisa. Now what?

Chapter 789: Accepting a rogue

"Did we ever confirm who is Lisa's mate?" Caden's question broke the silence.

Maya shook her head. "I will ask Steph."

"Be careful what you say," Damon warned Maya as his insides churned at the possibility of... "We don't know if Steph is the one who leaked information."

"You don't think that she would..."

Damon raised his hand, interrupting Maya. "I don't think anything. But this sounds like Lisa, and she got the information somehow. Only a few people in the pack knew that Talia came with me, so the list of suspects who would put my Luna in danger is not long. And about the potion..." Damon jabbed his hand into his hair. He heard there was a breach in one of their labs, but nothing was missing, so they assumed it was warriors pranking each other. But now it seems rogues stole the formula.

At this point, Damon was fairly certain that Lisa got information from Stephanie. No one else was in contact with Lisa, how much he knew. Stephanie was either part of this, or she disclosed sensitive information without knowing that Lisa would give it to rogues so they could cause this mess.

Going after Lisa was one thing, but how could he go after Stephanie? She had been like his mother for the last decade, and Damon couldn't see himself pointing fingers at the woman who supported him when everyone else was confident he would fail.

Talia looked at Damon, feeling his anger and confusion. She knew that his emotions were amplified by the memory of his parents dying because someone from their inner circle betrayed them.

And this was about him and his people targeting his mate. How could he be OK with that?

Maya and Caden were aware that Lisa could do petty things, but betrayal? That was a new low.

Damon punished Lisa lightly for what she did because of their history and because of Stephanie. Instead of appreciating what Damon did, it turned out that Lisa backstabbed him.

This was not just about Lisa being jealous of Talia. It was about endangering others, Damon included. After all, if anything happened to Talia, Damon would be weakened, which meant the whole Dark Howlers pack would be in danger, and that was not a forgivable offense.

Maddox continued interrogating Grady, and Grady told them that he grew up among humans and that he joined Tristan's group only a few months back.

Other than, "I can show you where Tristan's hideouts and package pickup spots are," Grady didn't have anything else that would be usable.

Maddox ran out of questions, so they needed to decide.

"What should we do with him?" Maddox asked Tatiana.

Tatiana looked at Varya standing next to Grady and clinging to his arm, and Tatiana had no idea how to answer this.

Grady was a rogue, a part of the group that caused them so much grief and turned her luxurious wedding into a day for mourning, but there was her younger sister, pleading silently for her mate to be spared.

"We are yet to confirm if what he said was the truth," Tatiana said.

"I believe he spoke truthfully," Talia chimed in. Liseli told her that the guy was not lying. There might be a chance he was concealing things, but whatever he said was the truth.

Maddox frowned at Talia's words. If Grady lied, it would be easy to deal with him. However, if he told the truth, it meant he collaborated, and... what next? Should they just release a rogue? That wouldn't end well.

"How about we take him to the Dark Howlers pack?" Damon asked, surprising everyone. He knew that Talia wouldn't say the guy was truthful without confidence.

"What do you mean?" Varya asked Damon suspiciously.

"So far, your mate showed goodwill. Considering that he was with Tristan only for a short time, and he didn't harm anyone himself, we will give him a chance as long as he agrees to join the Dark Howlers pack."

"Join the pack?" Grady asked, unsure if he was relieved or horrified by this.

Damon confirmed. "You said that you are a scout and quick on your feet. If you join the Dark Howlers pack, we will test your abilities. If you do well, you can become a warrior."

"A warrior?" Grady echoed Damon's last words, unsure if Damon was giving him a way out or tricking him.

Talia looked at Damon questionably, and she asked him through their private mind-link, 'You will take in a rogue?'

Damon didn't think it was a big deal. 'The Dark Howlers pack takes in anyone who needs a place to stay and doesn't mean harm to the pack. I told you that when we met. Didn't I?'

He did, but... 'Why do I have a feeling you have another reason?'

'He saw you using your powers. If he joins our pack, I will have more control over him.'

Talia was still not convinced. 'Isn't he a liability?'

'It is clear that no one wants him dead, and keeping him in the dungeon is not an option either. I will have people assigned to watch over him. Becoming a warrior can be a lengthy training, and we can prolong it until he slips or convinces us in his sincerity.'

Talia realized that Damon's words made sense, and she admired how he could think logically in this situation. He already had a plan, and it turned her on a bit. Smart Damon was sexy. How could she lag behind him?

"My Alpha has spoken," Talia said to Varya and Grady. "If I understood correctly, neither of you lived as part of a pack before. Other than joining the Dark Howlers pack, you will need to learn about the rules we follow and accept guidance from people we assign as your counselors. Based on your abilities and interests, we expect that you will perform specific duties. Since you are a mated couple, you will get a dwelling where you can live together, and you will never go hungry. What do you say? Do you agree to this?"

"We agree!", Varya and Grady said in unison, both relieved that there was a way out for them which didn't include a dungeon or worse.

Talia was already planning to conceal Grady's identity as a rogue. Only a selected few will know in order to avoid any unnecessary complications. And there was also one more benefit.

'We can ask Grady to let us know if he recognizes anyone,' Talia spoke to Damon through their mind link. 'He worked as a messenger for rogues, and I'm sure that he saw some spies.'

Damon nodded in response. He liked that Talia was thinking about how to use this situation to their advantage.

Kalina and Tatiana looked at Talia gratefully. They wanted Varya to be happy with her mate, but they didn't know how to make it happen, considering that Grady was a rogue. However, with Talia keeping an eye on the couple, Tatiana and Kalina were confident that Varya won't be bullied. If it was Talia and Damon, they could do anything.

Sisters were also happy that all five of them would be staying in the US. What luck!

Chapter 790: Plans for Grady (1)

Tatiana's smile fell when she saw that Varya and Grady were about to kiss.

"What are you doing!?" Tatiana snapped. "Until you become members of the Dark Howlers pack and pledge loyalty to Alpha Damon and Luna Talia, you are not allowed to mate."

"Or kiss!" Kalina was quick to add.

Varya looked at her sisters helplessly. Why were they treating her like a baby? Kalina was younger than Varya! But she knew Grady's background was a problem, and she didn't want to make things worse.

"Alright," Varya agreed. "We will do that if you promise not to give us a hard time after it. Do we have a deal?"

Kalina and Tatiana frowned, and Varya pointed an angry finger at her sisters. "I accepted your mates without questions asked. How would you feel if I stuck my nose into your relationships? I know you are worried about me, but I am fine. I know Grady is not a bad person. You need to believe me."

Varya wrapped her arms around Grady's waist, and he was quick to put his arms around her, happy to see that his mate was fighting for them.

Varya didn't know much about Grady, but she believed in him. The scene warmed his heart.

Varya was still glaring at her sisters. "We endured a lot in the last few hours, and we agree not to get physical until we join the Dark Howlers pack. In return, I want you to at least be open-minded about this and stop treating my mate like he is the biggest villain alive. Can you do that much?"

Kalina and Tatiana nodded stiffly.

Varya grinned and tightened her hold on Grady. "Hugging is fine, right?"

Tatiana snorted. "Why ask when you are already clinging to him?"

"I am afraid that if I let go, you will harm him," Varya responded.

"We agreed to be open-minded," Kalina said. "We won't harm him unless he does something bad."

"Why are you assuming he will do anything bad? What if someone provokes him? Do you expect him to keep quiet?"

Three Wilkow sisters bickered, and everyone wondered how much louder it would get if Lidia and Daria were also present. They all had fiery personalities, and Varya held her own in front of Kalina and Tatiana even though she was not marked by an Alpha.

"When are we heading to our new pack?" Grady asked Damon and Talia. He was eager to leave this place.

"We have a few matters to settle," Damon responded. "Until then, do your best to cooperate."

Grady forced a smile while wondering, how did he end up relying on two people who wanted to kill him first? Was this April Fool's Day? Or maybe all this was one of those reality shows where people with cameras will jump out and tell him how it was all one big prank, and he will be famous. Or was it a dream? He would take anything, as long as it was not real.

Grady jolted when he felt a palm on his cheek. Varya's hand was cold and slightly sweaty, telling him she was nervous. The electrifying sparks that prickled his skin were soothing, and he wanted more of them. All over his body, if possible.

"It will be alright," Varya said. "I won't let them hurt you."

Grady had never felt so useless in his life. All this was new and overwhelming, but the oddest thing was that a petite female said she will protect him. And the ridiculous part was that it was the truth. If Varya didn't step in, he would be dead. At least once.

"Maya," Damon called. "Can you check with Gideon to see when it's convenient to do the ceremony for joining the pack? If we can wrap that up before heading back, that would be great."

Maya agreed. "I'm sure Varya and Grady will be eager to do the ceremony as soon as possible."

Maddox was grateful that Damon and Talia were taking custody of Grady, but he knew it wouldn't be simple. Grady was a rogue whose group was responsible for killing many, including a warrior from the Dark Howlers pack. How will Damon and Talia explain that to the members of their pack? What a mess!

Maddox thought that Talia and Damon would leave to talk privately, but then he heard Damon ask, "James, can we have a word?"

Maddox raised his eyebrows at the scene of Damon, Talia, James, and Cornelia walking out, and Maya and Caden observing the scene like it was a totally normal thing. Since when were they that close?

...

James had a hunch what Damon wanted to talk about. It was about Grady. James wanted to talk about him also.

The fact was that Grady saw Cornelia performing magic, and James was not comfortable with the thought that the rogue will be alive and able to talk about it. What if the rogue exposes James' chocolate-colored Goddess?

The four of them went into the packhouse and used one of the empty rooms on the first floor for their discussion.

James was pleasantly surprised that his father didn't contact him so far. It was unusual that Alpha Edward didn't request a report on the situation, but James welcomed this silence. Was it possible that Alpha Edward was aware of what was going on? James wouldn't be surprised if his father had his spies. Heck, James wouldn't be surprised if his father had something to do with last night's attack.

James sat on the sofa next to Cornelia and held her hand in his. As much as the whole night was a mess, he enjoyed this situation where he could be with Cornelia openly. His mark on her neck was concealed under a layer of makeup, but James knew it was there, hiding... just how he was hiding how important Cornelia was.

"I wanted to talk about how to handle Grady," Damon's words snapped James out of his thoughts. "He is an asset, but also a liability. I'm sure you thought of some ways where we can take him with us, and he can be useful without endangering my pack."

"How are you going to assure that he doesn't talk about what he saw here?" James asked.

"Blood oath," Damon responded right away.

"Make sure to include concealing the existence of witches."

Damon's eyes darted to Cornelia as he understood why James was asking. "Alright."

"You might want to work with Alpha Maddox to stage Grady's death before you leave."

Damon didn't get it. "His death?"

James hummed in confirmation. "Tristan is not a fool, and the fact that he was not here last night proves it. Don't underestimate him or the ability of rogues to get information. Many eyes saw that rogue sitting in front of the packhouse with a Wilkow sister clinging onto him, and that would mean only one thing... mates. What do you think Tristan will do when he finds out about it?"

Damon nodded as he understood where James was going with this. "He will look for Grady."

James raised his finger in the air that slowly fell to point at Damon as James spoke, "Tristan will look for Grady until he finds him, and then he will use him against you."