Barren Luna 121

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & TWENTY ONE

Talia's POV

"How in the hell is he able to keep up with anything in this mess?" I muttered as I filed away a stack of papers into a filing cabinet. It barely looked like I made a dent in the messy pile still on Solon's desk.

I had been at this for two hours. First, I had to organize the filing cabinet which was the hardest part. Now, I could deal with the reports on his desk.

It was about an hour later when Solon walked into his office. He still managed to smile even though he looked exhausted.

"You really made yourself at home," he said, dropping another pile of files on his desk. "I turned my back for a few days, and you've already taken over my work."

"I have to make up for time lost while I was recovering," I responded. "And someone has to make sure you don't drown in work. You were getting real close."

"You'd think after you were poisoned, you'd take it easy for a while," Solon said as he leaned against a wall as he watched me

work.

"I am taking it easy," I said, holding up a file. "This is easy compared to fighting rogues."

"You know, I've been so busy with pack affairs lately that I almost forgot we're supposed to have guests tonight."

"Guests?" I asked, glancing up.

“Father is hosting a dinner,” Solon explained. “Jason’s father, Michael, arrived this morning. Apparently, he wanted to come before the Sacrifice Ceremony to discuss something with the Alpha King.””

“Michael?” I repeated, making sure I’d heard him right.

“Yes, Elder Michael of Shadowclaw,” Solon said with a nod.

“I didn’t know they were on good terms,” I said.

“They used to be,” Solon said. “Before all the politics between the packs got messy, but that was a long time ago.”

The thought of that man being in Silverfang again bothered me. There was no need for him to be here early unless he had something planned. With Jason warning me about Nolan and now Michael was here early, this felt like more of a coincidence.

“He’s planning something,” I warned. “We need to warn Father.”

Solon gave a short laugh. “Talia, not everyone who visits Silverfang is part of some conspiracy.”

“I’m not kidding, Solon. You don’t know that man like I do,” I said. “Michael’s timing is too convenient. The Sacrifice Ceremony hasn’t even started. Why come now?”

“Maybe he just wants to see his son,” Solon shrugged.

“You know that’s not true,” I countered. “That man barely likes Jason.”

Solon sighed, walking to the window. “I’m not saying you’re wrong, but Father knows him better than both of us. I think it’ll be

ok."

I closed the filing cabinet and fully turned to face Solon. "I'm serious, Solon. You and Father should be careful tonight."

"You really think that cold old man would try anything in the Alpha King's own house? He wouldn't dare. He's smart enough to know he wouldn't make it out alive," Solon reassured.

"That's what worries me," I said again, standing from the chair. "If he's here, he has something planned. He's too calculating to take risks without something to gain."

The smile on Solon's face faded slightly the more I explained. "Don't worry. We'll be careful," he said.

I gave him a look that made it clear I didn't believe him. "Who else is invited?"

"The usual council members," Solon answered. "And Michael asked specifically for Alpha Nolan to attend."

"Why?" I asked.

"He said he wanted to meet the Bloodmoon Alpha in person," Solon explained. "You know how these old men like to measure each other up before they talk politics."

"Or he wants to manipulate him," I said under my breath.

Solon raised an eyebrow and asked, "You really don't trust anyone outside Silverfang, do you?"

"Would you?" I asked.

He tilted his head slightly. "Not particularly."

“Exactly,” I said. “You know how dangerous men like Michael can be.”

Solon gave me a wry smile. “And yet you want to attend this dinner, don’t you?”

I hesitated but nodded. “Yes. I need to see him myself.”

He frowned. “As the princess?”

I smiled faintly and shook my head. “No. As your maid.”

Solon stared at me for a long moment before sighing. “You’re serious.”

“Completely.”

He walked back to the desk and sat in his chair, rubbing his forehead. “You know, there are easier ways to get information than sneaking into a private dinner disguised as a servant.”

“Maybe,” I said, “but this way, no one will notice I’m listening.

“You’ve lost your mind,” he muttered.

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“Probably,” I replied, gathering the rest of the sorted files. “But tell me you’re not concerned. This doesn’t feel right.”

Solon didn’t argue right away. I could see the hesitation in his expression. Finally, he said, “If Father finds out, he’ll be furious.”

“Then we won’t let him find out,” I said simply.

He groaned softly. “You sound more like Mother every day.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Solon sighed again, though this time it was less frustrated and more resigned. “Alright,” he said. “If you’re going to do this, at least let me handle the arrangements. I’ll make sure you’re added to the servant rotation for the event.”

“Thank you,” I said.

Solon pointed a finger at me and said, “But you stay out of trouble.”

“Of course.”

“I mean it, Talia. No spying, no provoking, and no eavesdropping that gets you caught.”

“I’ll just serve wine and look invisible,” I promised.

“You’re terrible at being invisible,” Solon muttered.

“Then I’ll practice,” I said.

He shook his head, half amused, half exasperated. “You’re impossible.”

“I’ll be gone before dinner starts. If you change your mind, let me know,” I told him as I was leaving his office.

He called after me, “I won’t!”

I glanced over my shoulder. “You will.”

Michael’s sudden appearance, his request for Nolan, and the timing before the ceremony did not feel coincidental.

He had something planned and I needed to be there to stop him.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & TWENTY TWO

Talia’s POV

I had worked hard to make sure no one noticed me tonight. I adjusted the plain apron over my maid’s uniform and joined the line of omegas standing near the kitchen doors. I lowered my head like the others. I had hoped to blend in, but unfortunately, that hope vanished the moment Solon spotted me from across the room.

He was standing beside Father, greeting guests near the entrance. When his eyes landed on me, a grin spread across his face. I shook my head slightly, warning him not to draw attention.

Jason and his father, Michael, entered soon after. Both looked smug and arrogant, which wasn’t a good sign. Father greeted them warmly, clasping Michael’s hand like an old friend.

“It is always a pleasure to see you, Michael,” Father said. “Thank you for volunteering to assist with preparations.”

“Of course,” Michael replied, his tone smooth. “It is what I should do for an old friend after your unfortunate run in with rogues.”

Their conversations seemed friendly to those who were not familiar with my father and Michael, but Solon and I knew better. There was tension between them. Solon’s jaw clenched as I knew he was regretting not listening to my warning about Michael.

A few moments later, Nolan arrived. His presence commanded attention even without trying. I felt my heart skip, but I forced myself to keep my focus on the tray in my hands.

Michael turned toward him immediately. “Alpha Nolan,” he greeted. “It’s been years since I last saw you. You look just like your father. You have his cold eyes and all.”

Nolan’s neutral expression did not change. “I will take that as a compliment,” he said evenly.

Michael chuckled before continuing. “As you should. He was a remarkable man even though he was a bit too trusting for his own good.”

I could tell from Nolan’s posture that he didn’t appreciate the remark, but he didn’t respond further.

The dinner began, and I moved quietly among the tables, refilling glasses and replacing plates. Every time I passed Solon, he looked like he was fighting not to laugh. Father was too focused on conversation to notice, thankfully.

I was halfway through pouring wine when Jason’s voice stopped me. “Well, well,” he said, leaning slightly toward me. “The maid outfit suits you.”

I forced a smile before anyone else noticed. “Thank you, Alpha Jason,” I said under my breath.

He chuckled, clearly enjoying my discomfort. “Is this your way of paying off your debt to the Alpha King? Humility looks good on you.”

Before I could reply, Michael’s amused voice joined in. “Ah, former Luna, now a lowly servant, quite fitting.”

I straightened carefully and gave a polite bow. “Elder Michael.”

I could tell Michael was annoyed because I didn’t react in fear at his presence, so he continued, “I didn’t realize the Alpha King was so generous to let a rogue wolf work in his palace. How noble.”

My throat tightened. Father's voice came from across the table, calm but firm. "Not all rogues left by choice, Michael. Some were victims of circumstance." I tried to stay as calm as possible. This meant Father knew I was sneaking around. So much for being invisible.

Michael gave a small nod. "Of course," he said, clearly unconvinced.

I stepped back to continue pouring drinks, moving toward Nolan's seat. He hadn't said a word since he sat down. When I reached him, he lifted his glass slightly without looking at me.

Our hands brushed as I refilled his drink, and the faint scent of his pine and smoke hit me like a spark. My chest tightened. He avoided my eyes completely.

"Tell me, Alpha King," Michael said, turning toward Father. "Are you still hunting that beast the warriors used to talk about? You know the one with red eyes? I think the warriors called it the mad rogue."

The room grew quiet.

Father shook his head. "The creature hasn't been seen in years," he said. "We assume it was killed. The rogue dungeon has been empty for a long time."

At his words, a memory flashed through my mind. I remembered the cold darkness of that abandoned dungeon where Viki had chained me up. A cold chill ran up my spine as I remembered her mocking laughter as the rogues assaulted me.

Jason's chuckle snapped me out of my thoughts. "Maybe Alpha Nolan could tell us where the beast went," he suggested, swirling his wine. "He seems to know more about rogues than anyone else."

I kept from glaring at Jason. What did he mean by that? Everyone knew that Nolan hated rogues to death because they were relevant with his father's death.

Michael raised an eyebrow and asked, "Oh? Is that so?"

Nolan’s gaze hardened and he growled, “If you have something to say, say it now.”

Jason smiled, pretending to be innocent. “No need to be defensive, Alpha Nolan. We’re just curious. You did spend quite a lot of time outside your pack before coming here, didn’t you?”.

Father frowned. He looked between him and Nolan before warning, “Jason, this is not the time for baseless accusations.” “Not baseless,” Jason replied. “I have proof.”

All at once, I realized that Jason was setting Nolan up. This was why Michael was here. And because I had not revealed who I was yet, there was nothing I could do but let this play out.

“Proof of what exactly?” Solon asked.

“Alpha Nolan conspired with the mad rogues to poison the Alpha King.”

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & TWENTY THREE

Nolan’s POV

Jason took a folder from his jacket and slid a report across the table to the Alpha King. I understood then why I had been asked here. This was not welcome. It was a setup.

“Before the Hunting Rite, I saw Alpha Nolan pour the King’s wine. It looked wrong, so I knocked the glass over and had the liquid tested. Henry ran the analysis. The sample contains the same compound identified in the late Alpha’s blood,” Jason explained.

Jason spoke confidently as if he had practiced in the mirror. Marco had been right. I should have never attempted to manipulate him. I would make sure that I got even with Jason at the end of all of this.

The Alpha King’s hands gripped the report tightly. He looked up and his gaze was fixed on me. “Alpha Nolan,” he said, his voice cold, “explain this.”

At this point, there was no point in denying it. I stood. “I poisoned your wine,” I said. Gasps followed.

Solon’s chair scraped back as he stood. “You’ve lost your mind!” he snarled. “We should have killed you the moment you stepped foot in this territory.”

Jason leaned back with a smug smile and said, “At least he admits it. Guess he finally decided to drop the act.”

“Some of us own up to our actions instead of hiding behind lies and their father,” I shot back.

Jason stiffened, but before he could answer, the Alpha King slammed his hand against the table. “Enough! You poisoned me, Nolan. Why?”

I faced him directly. “To confirm a suspicion,” I said. “I needed to see your wolf. I needed to know if you were the wolf that killed my father.”

The Alpha King’s expression hardened. “You expect me to believe that? You poisoned me to ‘confirm a suspicion’?” he spat.

“It wasn’t meant to kill you,” I said evenly.

“Listen to him, your Majesty,” Jason interjected, attempting to bait the Alpha King into a blind rage. “He’s saying he thought you might have been the murderer even though the council proved you were innocent back then.”

“Your Majesty, there’s more you should know,” Michael chimed in. I grit my teeth. What else did he have planned?

“The results in this report match almost exactly with the records from the investigation into his father’s death. That can’t be a coincidence,”

“Are you saying he used the same poison that killed his father?” the Alpha King questioned.

“That’s what it looks like,” Michael said. “Which means this isn’t some random poison,”

Jason added, “Maybe Alpha Nolan has been working with mad rogues over the years.”

“Ridiculous!” I said sharply. “Their blood led to my father’s madness, and I’ve hunted mad rogues since the day I became Alpha. I’ve lost men to them. I would never work with them!”

Michael turned his gaze on me. He couldn’t hide his smirk as he said, “And yet you used their blood on the Alpha King. You expect us to think that’s just coincidence? Sounds like you’ve had access to them for a long time.”

The Alpha King’s aura flared, thick and suffocating. “You brought rogue corruption into my court,” he snarled. His voice was almost deafening. “You poisoned me with it. Give me one reason why I shouldn’t execute you now.”

“I’m not working with them,” I said firmly. “I kept their blood to make you shift in public. Again, I was not attempting to kill you.”

“He’s trying to twist this when really, he’s covering for his allies,” Jason added.

“Wouldn’t that be you, Jason? What was it that you were planning to do here?” I asked.

Jason paled and quickly yelled out, “I trusted you before Alpha Nolan, but now I want nothing to do with you. You are a traitor for poisoning the Alpha King.”

My wolf snarled at his cowardice. Oh, I would get even with Jason. I would make sure to torture him before the end.

“You expect me to believe that excuse?” the Alpha King snarled. I turned to look back at him.

“I don’t care what you believe,” I shot back. “I did what I had to do. If you are the murderer, I will avenge my father.”

I heard Talia’s gasps but I didn’t care at this moment.

The Alpha King’s wolf pushed close to the surface. His aura pressed down on everyone at the table. I didn’t submit to it. I would not act guilty for something that I didn’t do.

“Your Majesty, you can’t let this go unanswered. If you tolerate this, every Alpha will see it as weakness. He must be punished,” Michael urged.

“It’s not just about the insult. If he’s truly in contact with mad rogues, we’re all at risk,” Jason added.

The Alpha King didn’t respond immediately. His gaze stayed fixed on me, calculating, as if he were weighing the cost of his next move. His fists clenched at his sides, but he knew that if we fought, he wouldn’t come out of it unscathed.

Then Solon snapped. He shoved his chair back and lunged across the table toward me. “You treacherous bastard!”

I stepped to my right, drew my dagger, and brought the blade to his throat. The tip settled under his jaw. My left hand stayed open, palm out, in an attempt to keep him from closing the gap.

“Stop,” I said. “Do not push this further.”

Solon’s breath was fast, but he held still. His eyes were wide. My blade was steady. Around us, the guards shifted, ready to spring if either of us moved again.

“Nolan, stop!” the Alpha King roared, “put the weapon away.”

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & TWENTY FOUR

Talia’s POV

Nolan's grip on the dagger tightened but he did not have the murderous glint in his eyes like he did with the rogues. Nolan really didn't want to harm Solon if he didn't have to.

"I said, put it away!" my father's voice boomed, causing me to flinch.

Nolan slowly lowered the blade and backed away from Solon. He sheathed it and stepped back. The guards quickly surrounded him.

"You have crossed every line tonight, Nolan. Until I know what truly happened, you are no longer free to walk this pack's grounds," Father said.

"Are you ordering me to the dungeon?" Nolan asked. His voice was low and cold. His body was tense as if he was ready to fight. His aura flared throughout the room, almost as oppressive as my father's.

"Yes," Father said firmly. "Beta Logan will escort you there. You'll stay until I decide what to do with you."

"You think that dungeon will stop me?" Nolan scoffed. Then, he smirked. It wasn't the type that would have made my heart flutter, but it made a chill come up his spine. It was a smirk of a man that spilled blood and enjoyed it. "If I choose to leave, nothing will stop me."

My father's eyes flashed with anger, but he kept his tone calm even though his claws were digging into the table. "If you were innocent, you wouldn't make threats. You would wait for the investigation to run its course," Father responded.

"I'm not threatening," Nolan replied. "I'm giving you a warning. If you don't find the truth to clear my name by tomorrow, I will handle it myself."

Solon, still fuming, growled, "Is that another threat?"

"It's a promise, Prince," Nolan answered.

“Enough. Beta Logan, take him,” Father ordered.

Logan approached, motioning for two guards to follow. Nolan didn’t move at first. I began to panic. What if he actually challenged my father? Would I have to pick a side? I couldn’t allow him to harm my father, but I also knew that Jason and Michael had set him up.

Thankfully, Nolan finally relaxed. He shot one glance toward me before walking out of the dining hall. I felt a mixture of relief and sadness.

Michael turned to Father first. “Your Majesty, this cannot stand. His defiance endangers every pack in the alliance. If he walks free again, he’ll drag Silverfang into ruin.”

Jason added, “He’s already been seen with rogues. If he’s truly working with them, then the Bloodmoon pack itself is compromised.”

Father rubbed his forehead, looking weary. “We will investigate this matter carefully. No decision will be made tonight.”

“With all respect,” Michael said, his tone firm, “hesitation will be seen as weakness. The other alphas will not ignore an attack on their King.”

“And yet, acting without proof could start a war,” Father countered. “I will not condemn an Alpha until I know the full truth.”

Jason leaned closer to his father and muttered something, but I couldn’t catch the words. Michael gave him a small nod before turning back to Father. “Of course, Your Majesty. You’ve always been wise. I only hope your trust won’t come back to haunt you.”

“I have one more matter to raise before we go,” Michael added.

“Go on,” Father said. His tone was now guarded. Of course, Michael would request something right after causing chaos.

“My son,” Michael said, nodding toward Jason, “has spoken often about the princess. He admires her greatly. It would be an honor for our families to unite. I thought perhaps we could discuss the possibility of a marriage especially since that was what Jason wanted as his reward for winning the Hunting Rite.”

I froze, keeping my eyes focused on filling wine glasses. Solon looked as if he was more word from exploding. I wonder if Father was going to reveal that I was the Princess yet.

Father gave a polite smile, but the smile didn’t reach his eyes. “I appreciate the respect. I can arrange an introduction, but marriage is not mine to decide.”

“But the Hunting Rite tradition clearly…”

“We have moved past offering daughters as rewards,” Father cut in. “The Elders already agreed that the she-wolf would make the final decision, so the Princess will determine if Alpha Jason is worthy of her.”

Jason smiled confidently and said, “Of course. I only ask for the opportunity.”

“You will have it. Perhaps after the investigation is complete,” Father suggested.

Michael seemed satisfied with Father’s response. “Good. I look forward to it,” he said.

As they left the hall, their smug expressions made my blood boil. Jason paused at the door just long enough to flash me a quick, knowing grin before following his father out. I wanted to throw the tray at his head. The rest of the guests excused themselves from the dining hall only leaving Father, Solon, and I.

“They’re using this situation to get what they want. Jason doesn’t care about me. He just wants the title,” I blurted out as I slammed the tray down on the table.

“That’s obvious. But right now, we have bigger problems,” Solon added.

“Nolan’s words trouble me. He sounded sincere but his actions can’t be ignored,” Father said.

“Then we put him on trial,” Solon recommended. “If he’s guilty, we punish him publicly. That will show the other packs that we won’t tolerate betrayal.”

“Wait, no,” I said quickly. Both of them turned to look at me in surprise.

“I know he saved your life, but this is serious Talia,” Solon started.

“That’s not why I am saying no. I think this is part of Jason and Michael’s plan,” I said, cutting him off.

“What do you mean?” Father asked.

“You can’t put him on trial yet. There’s no proof. All you have is a report that Jason and Michael could have fabricated,” I replied. “You’ll just make the Blood Moon pack an enemy. They won’t stand by if their Alpha is accused without real evidence.”

“You’ve been defending him a lot lately,” Father said flatly.

“I’m not defending him! I’m saying this could be another trap. We can’t rush to conclusions,” I said.

Solon folded his arms. “So, what do you suggest? Let him go?”

“No,” I said. “Just give him a chance to speak. That’s the least we can do since he saved me twice.”

Father was silent a moment before saying, “I know one thing about Nolan. He hates rogues. This was not an assassination attempt. Nolan does resent me. I can see it every time he looks at me. But even so, he would not work with rogues.”

“Then let me speak to him,” I suggested. “He’ll be honest with me.”

Father considered my words for a long moment. Then he finally nodded. “Very well. I’ll allow it. But you’ll go with guards, and

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & TWENTY FIVE

Talia’s POV

I went to the dungeon not long after speaking with my father and Solon. When I reached the lower cells, two guards stood by the heavy door. They stepped aside when I approached, clearly father had told them in advance to let me in.

Inside, Nolan sat on a bench with his back against the wall. He had leaned back on the stone wall. His eyes were closed, but I knew he wasn’t sleeping.

“I thought you’d be the last person to visit,” he said. He opened his eyes and met my gaze.

“Just because I think you’re a jerk doesn’t mean I want you imprisoned unjustly,” I stated.

“Well then, what do I owe the pleasure of your presence, Princess?” Nolan asked.

“I came because I wanted to talk to you and ask you what the hell you were doing,” I replied. My voice is much louder than I intended.

Nolan studied me quietly, surprised by the sudden outburst. “Do you believe Jason and Michael?”

“I believe in evidence,” I replied.

Nolan stared at me before scoffing. He let out a humorless laugh. “Of course you believe them,” he muttered.

“I didn’t say I believed them. I said I believe in evidence,” I snapped. Nolan didn’t say anything else, but I could tell that he didn’t believe me. “I am being serious, Nolan.”

“Do you really think that evidence matters here? Evidence can’t punish me, and it can’t clear your father either. It’s just words on paper,” Nolan finally said.

“That’s not true,” I said firmly. “If you’re innocent, evidence will protect you. If you’re guilty, it will condemn you.”

“Then maybe you should ask yourself which outcome your father prefers,” Nolan said. “You know as well as I do that, he already made up his mind.”

His defiance tested my patience. “No, that’s not true. If he did, I wouldn’t be down here talking to you.”

“Or he is just appeasing you,” Nolan argued.

“Nolan, just focus. Tell me why you did it. What were you trying to do?”

“There is nothing more to say, Princess,” Nolan stated.

His tone was detached, almost mocking even. It was this tone that erased every ounce of patience I had left. “You sound as if you don’t even care,” I snapped. “You could have killed him.”

“I didn’t,” he said. “You already made up your mind, so what’s the point?”

“The point is telling me why of all options, why did you do that?” I asked.

“Leave, Princess. I already said what I needed to say.” He closed his eyes again.

I fumed. It was as if he was dismissing me. “Then, there’s nothing left to discuss,” I said and turned on my heel before he could respond.

Outside, Della and Marco were waiting near the stairwell. Marco had been pacing, and Della was chewing on her nails nervously.

“Well, what did he say?” Della asked.

“He admitted poisoning my father, but he wouldn’t explain why. He said evidence didn’t matter. It would not protect him,” I replied.

Marco looked concerned. His brow furrowed and I asked, “What’s wrong, Marco?”

“If this isn’t resolved by tomorrow, I’ll have to summon the Bloodmoon warriors with Alpha Nolan’s order,” Marco answered.

My pulse jumped. “Summon them for what?”

“To intervene,” Marco replied. “If the Alpha King doesn’t clear Alpha Nolan’s name, Blood Moon will have no choice but to attack Silverfang. We will not stand around and watch him be persecuted for something he didn’t do.”

“That’s madness! Blood Moon would start a war?!” Della exclaimed.

“No,” Marco said quickly. “I don’t want bloodshed. I don’t want anyone to be hurt over this. That is why I came to Princess Talia. And please believe Nolan doesn’t want it to come to that either.”

I stepped closer, anger sharpening my voice. “Do you even know what really happened, Marco? Tell me the truth. Was Nolan working with the mad rogues?” I questioned.

“No,” Marco said without hesitation. “He never worked with them. He ordered me to neutralize the toxin before it could be used. We killed a mad rogue years ago at Blood Moon and kept some blood with us.”

“Then why keep it secret?” Della asked.

“Because the King would never allow it,” Marco said. “He forbade all research into that toxin. Nolan disobeyed only because he suspected that the Alpha King was the murderer.”

“That’s ridiculous. The Alpha King would never murder anyone,” Della said.

I crossed my arms, my chest tightening. So that’s it-this was all because Nolan still believed my father had killed his. He had even tried to poison him, to force him to shift in public. The thought made my stomach twist. Humiliation, anger, and worry all tangled together.

“So he was trying to force my father to shift… What does the killer look like in his wolf form?” I asked, my voice sharp.

Marco hesitated. “A pure black wolf… with a white claw mark on its forehead.”

Della exhaled, pressing a hand to her chest. “Thank the Goddess,” she said, “The Alpha King looks nothing like that.”

Relief washed over me too, slow and heavy. I didn’t know how I would have endured it if it had been my father.

Marco looked between us, eyes searching. “You believe me?”

I nodded and said, “I believe you. My father’s wolf is silver and gray. You need to believe me too. So, really, Nolan was just testing to prove he wasn’t the murderer. If Nolan meant to kill him, he would have just done it.”

Marco’s shoulders relaxed, a quiet sigh escaping him. “Then… what do we do now?”

“You’re going to prepare another sample of the detoxified blood, the same kind Nolan used. I want it ready by morning,” I told him.

“Why?” Della asked.

“Because I have a plan,” I said.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & TWENTY SIX

Jason’s POV

Lunch with Father was usually quiet, but today he seemed almost pleased. It unnerved me how happy he was.

‘Enjoy the moment while it lasts,’ my wolf said, and I couldn’t help but agree.

We had barely started eating when a firm knock came at the door. Beta Logan entered and bowed. “Alpha Jason. Elder Michael. The Alpha King has requested your presence in his office at noon,” he said.

Father took a sip of his orange juice and asked, “For what reason?”

“The King said he’s reached a conclusion regarding Alpha Nolan’s poisoning case,” Logan explained.

“Understood,” Father said, his voice smooth. “You may tell the King we’ll be there.”

Logan nodded and said, “Of course.”

As soon as the door closed, Father smiled and said, “It seems the King finally came to his senses.”

“Honestly, I had expected the Alpha King to execute Nolan once we revealed the report. Better late than never,” I responded.

Father leaned back in his chair. “With Nolan gone, Blood Moon will be in chaos and will more than likely retaliate. The Alpha King will need loyal allies to fight against the Blood Moon pack. That’s where we come in.”

I nodded. “He’ll owe us for uncovering Nolan’s betrayal.”

“You handled this well, Jason. I’ll admit, I expected you to fail, and I would have to clean up your mess again,” Father said.

I looked up, surprised. “You’re… pleased?”

He smirked slightly. “Let’s not overstate it. You did your job. But yes, I’ll give credit where it’s due. You caught the boy’s mistake and secured the proof.”

For the first time, I felt the rare flicker of pride. “Thank you, Father.”

He waved a hand dismissively, but there was still approval in his tone. “Don’t let it go to your head. Nolan’s downfall is only one step. What comes next will determine whether this victory means anything.”

“I know,” I said. “Once the King executes him, that’s when I’ll make my move.”

Father looked curious. “And what move would that be?”

“The one you planned,” I reminded him. “I’ll marry the princess. The Alpha King will support it after this. He’ll see me as dependable, someone loyal enough to protect his daughter and the pack.”

“And what if the Princess says no?” Father asked.

“I won’t give her the option to say no,” I replied. I will take a page from Nolan’s book. A healthy dose of aphrodisiac and the Princess won’t be able to resist me.

Father gave a low chuckle. “Good. You finally understand how to use timing to your advantage. A political marriage will tie Silverfang to Shadowclaw permanently.”

“It will also silence anyone who doubts my loyalty,” I said. “Once I’m linked to the royal bloodline, no one will question my place.”

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. “And Solon?”

“Solon’s no threat. He’s predictable and too cautious to act without his father’s approval. He’ll grumble, but he won’t resist if the King supports the decision.”

Father nodded slowly, considering my words before scoffing. “You’re still too weak for my liking.”

“What?” I asked in confusion.

“Solon will always be a threat. Threats should be eliminated, but I do agree. He’s obedient, not ambitious. He won’t challenge you for a title.”

“And I will be mated to his sister. He wouldn’t dare challenge me if it meant his dear sister would be harmed,” I explained.

My father smirked. “Ah. That’s the angle you’re going. Very good.” He reached for the bottle and poured wine into both glasses. “Then we’re finally in agreement. I think this deserves a toast.”

I hesitated but then raised my glass. “To Shadowclaw,” I said.

He lifted his own. “To Shadowclaw and to my son, who finally understands the value of patience.”

We clinked glasses. For once, his tone wasn’t purely critical. I took a drink, feeling both flattered and cautious.

The rest of the meal passed in relative silence. For once, I felt at ease.

When the clock was near 12, Father rose from his chair and straightened his jacket. “Let’s not keep the King waiting,” he said. ” Appear calm, but not arrogant. Remember, he needs to think we are doing this for his best interest.”

I nodded, following his lead.

When we entered, I immediately noticed the number of people inside. Not only were the Alpha King and Prince Solon present, but Nolan was there as well. He was flanked by two guards. Nolan’s wrists were bound in silver cuffs, but beyond that he looked

well.

To my surprise, Talia was there too, sitting beside Healer Leslie. She kept stealing glances at Nolan which made my jaw tighten. Why was she so worried about Nolan? She needed to be looking at me.

Father and I stopped at the center of the room. The Alpha King stood behind his desk. “Elder Michael. Alpha Jason. Thank you for coming,” he said.

“Of course, my King,” Father replied smoothly.

“Let’s get down to business,” the Alpha King said. “As you both know, I’ve invited you two here to hear my verdict on the case against Alpha Nolan.”

“Yes, I applaud you with your swift action on this,” Father stated. “Handling this situation will show your strength to the packs.”

“Indeed, it would,” the Alpha King responded. “I’ve reviewed every statement and piece of evidence regarding the poisoning.”

Father folded his hands behind his back, confident. “And?”

The King's eyes moved briefly to Nolan. "The act of poisoning was real. That much is clear."

A flicker of satisfaction crossed Father's face. "Then justice will be served."

But the King wasn't finished. "However," he continued, his tone sharp, "the investigation found no evidence of collusion between Alpha Nolan and the mad rogues. The substance in question was traced to an isolated batch that had been neutralized."

I felt my chest tighten. "What?"

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & TWENTY SEVEN

Jason's POV

This was wrong.

I had Henry send the wine back to Shadowclaw for testing. It was the same toxin. How could it not be lethal?

Father, as stunned as I was, finally found his voice and said, "Your Majesty, there must be some misunderstanding. My son saw Alpha Nolan poison the wine himself. He wouldn't lie about that."

"It's true," I said. "The sample we sent confirmed that the wine contained traces of a toxin identical to what was found in the mad rogues' blood samples."

Nolan laughed and I narrowed my eyes at him. "Care to enlighten us on what is so funny?"

"Inadequacy must be an inherited trait," Nolan answered. I could feel my father's aura flare briefly before he composed himself.

"Your taunts won't save you, boy," Father said.

“I just find it interesting that you know so much about the rogues’ blood, perhaps you’ve spent more time with them than I ever did,” Nolan said.

“Watch your tongue, boy. It is you who is on trial,” Father snapped.

Before the argument could escalate, the Alpha King raised his hand. “That’s enough.” He turned toward Talia. “Talia, please bring the documents.”

She stood and crossed the room, handing over two folders: one blue and one red. Her movements were calm, but I knew Talia. I could tell she was angry.

“The blue folder holds the report you submitted,” the Alpha King said, looking at me. “The red folder holds the report of a previous analysis done on one of the mad rogue’s blood. When compared, there are similarities, but there are also key differences.”

I frowned. “Differences?”

Talia stepped forward again. “The report you provided shows…”

“Is it necessary for this omega to be speaking here? What expertise does she have in this area?” Father asked, cutting Talia off.

I could see Talia’s jaw flex. Before the Alpha King could respond, Talia said, “If you learned to keep your mouth shut for once, you would understand.”

Father looked at Talia then at Alpha King. When the Alpha King didn’t reprimand Talia, Father said, “Well then, explain.” I had to keep from cringing as I knew that tone. A beating always came later when Father used that tone.

“As I was saying, the report you provided, Alpha Jason, compared to the previous analysis, showed that the toxin was used but it missed key components that would be lethal,” Talia continued.

Father scowled. “That doesn’t prove anything. The toxin used was still dangerous. The intent remains.”

“There’s more. I had a third report. I had the blood tested that the toxin was pulled from to dose the Alpha King, thanks to Marco,” Talia countered, pulling out another report. She provided it to me and my father snatched it out of my hand to read.

Father looked impatient and asked, “And who is Marco?”

“He’s my Beta,” Nolan said flatly.

“So, you have a biased witness. He could’ve gotten that blood anywhere,” Father argued.

“Unlikely,” Healer Leslie interjected. “I checked the sample myself. Beta Marco’s batch of treated blood matches the one tested

from the wine sample, not the one from rogues. And before you say I’m biased, I honestly couldn’t give a damn about what is going on here.”

Father frowned and said, “That doesn’t mean anything. The toxin was still used.”

“Healer Leslie, would you explain this for everyone present?” Alpha King asked.

“With pleasure. If you turn to page 2 of the report, what you’re looking at is detoxified blood. Marco removed nearly all the lethal toxins, which is impressive for someone not in the medical field,” Leslie explained. “Anyway, only trace elements remained that could cause a temporary uncontrollable shift.”

Father’s brow furrowed. “A temporary uncontrollable shift?”

“Yes,” Leslie said. “If the Alpha King had drank the wine, he would have shifted on the spot, but he would not have gone mad.”

Father clenched his jaw. “That’s absurd. You’re saying this was some kind of experiment? I don’t believe that.”

“You don’t have a choice,” Nolan answered before Leslie could. “The blood used came from a mad rogue my warriors and I killed in Bloodmoon territory nearly two years ago. It had been preserved for testing. Over time, the toxins lose their strength.”

Leslie nodded in agreement. “That’s correct. Even without detoxifying, the toxin’s potency would begin to fade at time of death. Give it another year or so and the toxin would be no more.”

‘Did you know about this?’ my father’s voice boomed through our mind link.

‘No, I didn’t. L.’

‘I will have to clean up your mess once again. We will discuss this later,’ my father snarled before closing the mind link.

“You expect us to believe this nonsense? That a jar of old blood, conveniently detoxified, was used for a harmless test?” Father growled.

Leslie frowned and said, “I don’t know who you think you are, but I don’t appreciate you doubting my medical expertise. So, let me put this in terms that you’ll understand. Get your head out of your ass. It doesn’t matter whether you believe it or not. The lab results prove it. The blood from the rogue and the one found in the King’s wine don’t match exactly.”

Father took a step forward, his tone rising. “Then where did this treated blood come from? How do we know this isn’t fabricated?”

“Because,” Nolan said, his voice calm but cutting, “it was tested under the Alpha King’s direct supervision this morning. Ask him yourself.”

The room went silent again.

The Alpha King finally spoke, “He’s right. I had the samples tested by my own people this meeting. The results confirm Healer Leslie’s explanation. The toxin in question was diluted and nonlethal.”

Father’s face hardened. “So, you’re letting him go?”

The King’s tone grew firm. “No. I’m punishing him, but not for an assassination attempt. Alpha Nolan acted recklessly and put my safety at risk. That cannot go unaddressed.”

I wanted to breathe a sigh of relief, The situation was salvageable. Would the Alpha King banish him, take away his title? Either option would be workable. Then, my stomach dropped as I heard the Alpha King’s words,

“Alpha Nolan, you will temporarily be relinquished of Alpha duties and be a warrior for the nightly patrols along the northern border until the end of the Sacrifice Ceremony. Consider it a reminder of your place and responsibility,”

Nolan shrugged and said, “Understood, Your Majesty.”

I clenched my fists. “That’s it? He admits to poisoning the wine, and you send him on patrol duty?”

Father’s temper flared beside me. “Your Majesty, with all due respect, this leniency will only embolden him. You know what he’s capable of. You saw how he…”

“Enough, Elder Michael,” the Alpha King commanded. His Alpha aura filled the room, forcing us to submit to him. “You may consider the punishment light, but I consider it fair. Alpha Nolan’s intentions were misguided, but not treacherous. The matter is closed.”

The King turned to the guards. “Escort Elder Michael and Alpha Jason out. The rest of you are dismissed.”

We had no choice but to bow and step aside. As we turned to leave, I caught a glimpse of Nolan. He met my gaze. I paled as Nolan smirked. There was a murderous glint in his eyes as he mouthed “see you soon” as the door closed behind me.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & TWENTY EIGHT

Talia’s POV

Della and I trained on the south practice grounds after breakfast. We started with simple combinations to warm up and then moved into defensive drills. I focused on my footing and kept my guard up. Without my wolf, I had to rely on technique.

“Good,” she said, circling me. “Again. Elbow higher on the block. You drop it when you pivot.”

I adjusted and repeated the move. The strike landed square on the padded post. Della nodded with approval.

“You’re still a strong fighter,” she said. “You just have to work harder until your wolf returns.”

I caught my breath and rolled my wrists. “Harder is fine. I just need to get used to this being my new normal.”

“Don’t get too comfortable with it. Your wolf will be back in no time. If not before, then after the ceremony. Once you find your mate and complete the bond, she’ll come back. You know that,” Della said.

“I know, I know. That’s what the doctor keeps saying,” I said.

“We have records and elders who have lived through this,” Della added. “The bond restores balance. Your body knows it. Your wolf knows it too.”

I nodded, but I still felt uneasy about it. I wanted the mate given to me by the Moon Goddess, but perhaps having father choose for me was for the best. I returned to guard and signaled that I was ready to continue.

We moved through another series. Della feinted, and I countered. She grinned and said, “That’s it. You’re getting better at reading me.”

Footsteps approached from the path that led down from the armory. I looked over Della’s shoulder and saw Marco and Nolan crossing the edge of the field. Marco lifted a hand in greeting. Nolan wore a patrol jacket over a green shirt. His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows. I felt my heart flutter, and I looked away.

“Good morning,” Marco called. “Did we interrupt?”

“No, we were just finishing up,” Della said as she passed me a bottle of water.

“What are you two doing?” I asked.

“I was just explaining to Alpha Nolan where he’ll be stationed for the next three nights,” Marco explained.

“Ah. How do you like being a subordinate?” Della teased.

Nolan frowned and said, “That Silverfang needs to do better with their defenses.”

“So, it is perfect that you will be patrolling. We can use your expertise,” I said sarcastically.

Marco glanced at Nolan and I, feeling our tension and quickly changing the subject. “So, you train every day now?”

“Trying to keep her from outpacing me,” Della said, bumping my shoulder. “She makes me look lazy.”

I rolled my eyes at her and said, “As if. You’re still running circles around me.”

Marco's attention moved to Della and asked, "Weren't you supposed to check stock?" Della gave Marco a confused expression before her eyes widened. She quickly looped arms with Marco and began walking away from us.

"You're absolutely right," Della said. "Come on, I'll walk you back. Talia, I'll see you later?"

"Later," I said.

They left together toward the path behind the sheds. I bent to coil the practice wrap and slung it over my shoulder. I noticed that Nolan hadn't left.

"I thought you had patrol assignments to review," I said without looking at Nolan.

"I do," he said.

"Border duty suits you," I said.

Nolan snorted. "Sure."

I turned to leave. "I was being serious earlier about using your expertise. If you see where we can improve, let Beta Logan know. Goodbye, Alpha Nolan."

"Wait," he said. "Before you go.

I stopped and faced him. He held my eyes, then looked past me for a second, as if he was working out what he wanted to say. I couldn't help but feel a little anxious.

"Why did you help me?" Nolan asked.

"Technically, I didn't. You were still punished," I replied.

“This isn’t a punishment. It’s a slap on the wrist,” Nolan stated.

I kept my tone flat. “It was not because of our bond, if that is what you want to ask.” For a brief second, I thought I saw a flicker of disappointment in his eyes.

“Then why did you do it?” Nolan asked.

“I am the Princess. It is my job to protect Silverfang,” I answered. “I will not let Silverfang be dragged into turmoil over a false accusation. I was protecting my pack, not you.”

“Then Marco has a bigger mouth than I thought,” he said under his breath.

“You should be glad that he did. If I had not intervened, would you have really brought your warriors to destroy my pack, my home?”

“If the Alpha King chose to listen to false accusations, he does not deserve the throne he sits on.”

“So that is a yes,” I said.

“Does it matter? It didn’t happen. There’s no point in discussing it,” Nolan responded.

“You don’t get to decide when the situation is over! You gave my father a reason to doubt you by dosing his wine. And now you say he does not deserve the throne if he believes the wrong man?” I snapped.

“I meant what I said, Princess,” he replied. “If the Alpha King cannot tell the truth from a trap, he does not deserve the power he holds.”

Something in me snapped. I saw him for what he had always been, He wasn’t the man holding my hand while I lay in the hospital bed. This was him. Nolan was an Alpha who would do anything to get what he wanted.

“The rumors were right about you,” I said. “You are ruthless and without morals.”

Nolan didn’t argue.

I took a breath and said, “After the ritual, we will reject each other. And I expect you’ll leave Silverfang and never come back.”

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & TWENTY NINE

Nolan’s POV

I watched Talia walk away. I rubbed a hand over my face. I should go back to my room and take more of the herbs. Maybe they could dull the noise in my head.

‘That won’t fix anything,’ my wolf growled. ‘You drove her away, and now you’re going to reject her? If you do, I’ll never forgive you.’

“I had to,” I muttered. “It’s better this way.”

‘Better for whom? You or her?’ my wolf growled.

I didn’t answer.

Even now, I could still feel the faint pulse of our bond. We were her second mates, but she was our only one. It must mean something, and yet, here I am trying to ignore it.

I thought about what would happen after the Sacrifice Ceremony. The Alpha King would stand before the gathered Alphas, praising the Moon Goddess, and then, he’d choose a mate for his daughter. He’d pick someone with a strong lineage, a political advantage. It would be someone to strengthen his alliances. The idea of another man touching her caused irrational rage.

‘You have no reason to be upset. You agreed to this,’ my wolf said quietly.

Before I could respond, a knock came from the door. “Come in,” I said.

Marco stepped inside, looking uneasy. “You called for me?” he asked.

“I did,” I said. “Sit.”

Marco didn’t move and said, “I’m fine standing.”

“We need to talk about what you told Talia,” I finally said.

Marco didn’t say anything as he waited for me to continue. I half expected him to apologize, but he maintained his composure. “You told her about my plan to attack Silverfang. You told her everything,” I said sharply.

“I couldn’t lie to my mate, and Talia needed to know,” Marco explained.

“It wasn’t your decision.”

“It was,” he shot back.

“What did you just say?” I asked as I looked up in surprise.

“Talia needed to know what was at stake and what you were prepared to do if the Alpha King didn’t see reason,” Marco explained. “I know you, Nolan. I’ve seen you make rash choices when you’re angry, and this was one of them. My job as your Beta isn’t to follow you blindly; it’s to stop you from destroying yourself when you stop thinking clearly.”

I stared at him for a long moment. Marco didn’t back down. It wasn’t like I expected him to do. Marco thought out everything he did.

Finally, I said, “You overstepped.”

“Maybe,” he admitted. “But I’d rather live with your anger than a pile of innocent bodies. I don’t want that, and I know you don’t want that blood on your hands.”

I didn’t say anything. I wasn’t going to argue with someone who believed they were wrong.

‘Well, he is right,’ my wolf huffed.

Marco let out a slow breath. “You know, I used to believe the Alpha King killed your father. Every sign pointed to him. His timing, his influence, and even his silence after the death. It all fits too well. But now, I’m not so sure.”

I raised an eyebrow and asked, “Is this due to Della?”

“It’s not just because of her,” Marco answered quickly. “Della and Talia told me that the Alpha King’s wolf is gray and silver. That is nothing like the murderer.”

That caught me off guard. I frowned. “You’re sure about this?”

“Yes,” Marco said firmly. “Talia confirmed it as well. And if the King is not the murderer, we’ve been chasing after the wrong person this entire time.”

The idea that I had been holding a grudge against the Alpha King for so many years, only to find out I had been wrong, made my stomach twist. It would mean everything I had done up until now was all for nothing. “If you haven’t seen it yourself, then I don’t believe it. They’ll say and do anything to keep the Alpha King and Silverfang safe.”

“I don’t need to see it myself,” Marco said. “Think about it. If the Alpha King was truly guilty, would he spend years hunting the same rogues we’re after? Would he risk his men, his reputation, and his own life chasing shadows just to keep up an act?”

“You sound like you’re defending him,” I said coldly.

“I’m not defending him. I want you to think without your pride. You’re letting hate guide you,” Marco shot back. “If the Alpha King was the killer, you wouldn’t be standing here. He would’ve had you executed after the poisoning incident.”

He did have a point. This entire time I had been looking for something off with the Alpha King. There was nothing, not one blemish.

Marco took a step closer. “And if you really hated the King as much as you claim, you could’ve let Talia die. You didn’t. You risked your life to bring her back.”

“I did what I had to,” I said.

Marco snorted. “You can’t lie to me, Nolan. You always say things like that when you don’t want to admit the truth.”

I glared at him, but he didn’t flinch. “Enough, Marco.”

“No. You’re going to hear this,” Marco continued, “you can keep pretending this bond doesn’t matter. You can talk about rejecting her all you want. But the truth is, you’re torn because you know walking away means losing the only person who ever made you feel anything real since your father’s death.”

“Enough, Marco,” I snapped.

He nodded slightly, “Fine but you’re not going to have the luxury to live in denial soon.”

“What do you mean?”

“Other Alphas are coming to Silverfang for the Sacrifice Ceremony,” he said. “They’re coming for alliances, for power, and for the princess. Three days from now, she’ll belong to someone else. You have until then to decide whether you’ll reject her or fight for her.”

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & THIRTY

Talia’s POV

I spent the morning in Solon’s office helping him organize letters from the other packs. His desk was buried under envelopes. I opened them one by one, read the contents, and sorted them into neat piles according to arrival dates.

“How many so far?” Solon asked.

“Almost thirty,” I said. “Half of them will arrive the day of the Sacrifice Ceremony, and the rest will arrive the day before. Some of them sent gifts too. I don’t even know where we’re going to store all of this.”

“That happens every year. The wealthier the Alpha, usually the more generous the gift,” Solon stated.

“So, every year each pack tries to gain Father’s favor?” I asked.

“Yes,” Solon replied. “Every pack wants the same thing: an alliance through marriage if their Alpha hasn’t found their Luna yet. They come to the Sacrifice Ceremony to find mates or be provided with a chosen mate. It’s the fastest way to strengthen their position. The difference this time is that they’re trying to win the Alpha King’s daughter.”

I didn’t like the idea of this. It made me feel like I was going to be sold to the highest bidder. “And I have to meet all of them?” I

asked.

“That’s part of it,” Solon answered. “But remember, there’s nothing for you to do but be yourself. They’ll be the ones trying to impress you.”

“Jason used to complain about these ceremonies,” I said, almost absentmindedly. “He said they were dull and full of people pretending to like one another.”

Solon snorted and said, “That sounds like him. He never told the truth when it would paint him in a bad light.”

I smiled faintly. “No, he didn’t. He always found ways to make things about himself.”

I smiled at the memory, though it faded quickly. The only reason Jason never invited me was because he was ashamed of me. I didn’t realize how much he did until he betrayed me with Viki.

“This will be your first time participating in the Sacrifice Ceremony,” Solon said, bringing me out of my thoughts. “Don’t waste another thought on him. You should be thinking about how much fun it is going to be.

“I’m just nervous,” I admitted. “There will be so many eyes watching. So many expectations.” I still had the lingering feeling that I wasn’t good enough. How couldn’t I feel that way? Jason didn’t want me and now, Nolan.

Solon’s tone softened as he said, “You have nothing to be nervous about, Talia. You are the Alpha King’s daughter. You have more authority than any of the Alphas that’ll be there.”

“I’ll try,” I said. “Maybe I’ll feel more confident once Della helps me pick something to wear.”

“That sounds like something Della would say,” Solon said with a smirk. “She’s not wrong though.”

I smiled. “She’s been reminding me every hour. She said confidence starts with what you wear.”

“Just don’t let her talk you into anything too outrageous. Her last dress caused a bit of chaos,” Solon said, and it made me think of the night when Nolan and I caught Marco and Della making out. There’s no telling what else happened before Nolan and I

found them.

I laughed and said, “I promise I won’t.”

Solon nodded. “Remember to wear your Rosecrest necklace.”

“I won’t forget it,” I said. I wore it to attend every important and official event. Having it on would feel like Mom was right there

with me.

Before I could ask him about what Mom would normally wear to ceremonies, there was a knock at his door.

“Come in,” Solon called.

Della stepped inside, smiling brightly. “There you are! I’ve been looking all over for you.”

“What made you come here to look for me?” I asked.

“I assumed you’d be here since you weren’t in your usual spots,” she said cheerfully.

“Is everything okay?” I asked.

“Of course. I was coming to ask if you are ready to pick gowns,” Della replied.

Solon grinned. “Great minds think alike. We were just talking about that.”

“Exactly,” Della agreed with a wink. “Now come on, Talia. I’ve been waiting all morning. The seamstress has new fabrics that just arrived from Windpaw, and you have to see them.”

Solon’ rolled his eyes and groaned, “Della, you’re going to make us go bankrupt.”

“How dare you! For your information, the Alpha King requested new fabrics,” Della said with mock offense. “It’s not every day the Princess will choose her mate.”

“Don’t say it like that,” I groaned, rubbing a hand over my face. “You’re making this more serious than it should be.”

“Don’t tell me you’re nervous,” Della said, waving her hand. “Nothing to be nervous about. You’re going to have those Alphas drooling over you.”

Solon grimaced and Della laughed. “I don’t know why you’re not used to this kind of talk, Solon. I’m giving her confidence.”

“Sure,” Solon muttered, but he smiled.

“I suppose I can take a break,” I said.

Solon pretended to sigh dramatically. “Of course. Leave me with all the boring work.”

“You’ll survive,” I teased.

Della leaned toward his desk and said, “Before I forget, you’ll never guess who arrived just an hour ago.”

Solon raised an eyebrow. “Who?”

“Colin Ashford,” she said, her tone full of excitement. “The Alpha of Moonbrook. The guards saw him at the border, and apparently, he’s brought a whole truckload of gifts!”