Barren Luna 201

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & ONE

Nolan's POV

I returned to the party after changing, looking for Talia right away. The hall was filled with music and laughter, and the crowd grew louder as the night continued. I glanced at faces as I entered, thinking about how I would bring her back to my side for the rest of the celebration.

I did not see her.

I paused at the edge of the dance floor and checked the tables, the dais, and the paths between groups of guests. I noticed Della's scent nearby, along with Marco's, but not her signature rose scent.

Clara approached me with a tense expression. My wolf bristled and said, 'Something is wrong. I can't feel our mate here.'

"Clara," I said. "Where is Luna Talia?"

"Alpha Nolan, I've been looking for you. Luna Talia wanted me to inform you that she left to meet the rest pack members," Clara explained.

I frowned and said, "What do you mean?"

"Maggie said some members from the border district arrived and wanted to pay their respects. Luna Talia agreed to go meet them," Clara replied.

My wolf snarled, "That pup is up to no good. We should have disciplined her.'

"Did Maggie say who these people were?" I asked.

Clara shook her head quickly. “I do not know, Alpha. Maggie did not name them. Luna Talia only told me to inform you.”

My chest tightened. “Where did they go?” I asked.

Clara pointed down the corridor. “They left through the side doors that lead toward the garden paths.”

I turned and strode toward the exit without another word. As soon as I stepped into the night air, I headed for the gate guards stationed near the outer entry points. Two guards stood under the lights, both straightening when they saw me approach.

“Alpha,” one of them said. “Is everything all right?”

“Who did Maggie say was waiting outside?” I asked.

The guard blinked. “We do not know, Alpha.”

“What do you mean you do not know?” I snapped. “Maggie brought Luna Talia out, and you two didn’t stop them.”

“Yes, Alpha,” the second guard said carefully. “We tried, but Maggie insisted, and Luna Talia said she would return soon.”

None of this made sense, and the guards knew it. If border members had traveled that far, they would have announced themselves at the gate or sent word.

I turned back toward the hall, moving faster now, and found Della near the drinks table. Her posture changed the moment she saw my face.

“You haven’t found her?” Della asked.

“No. Clara said Maggie took her out to meet border members,” I replied. “The gate guards do not know who those members were.”

Della’s expression hardened, “I knew it. I knew Maggie couldn’t be trusted. You should have gotten rid of her as soon as she was disrespectful to Talia.”

“Where is Marco?” I asked.

Della pointed toward the far side of the hall. “He stepped outside to check the perimeter.”

“Marco. Come to me now,” I commanded through the mind link.

A second later, I felt his acknowledgement, and Marco rushed over to my side.

“What happened?” Marco asked.

“I can’t find Talia,” I said bluntly. “Maggie took her outside to meet pack members that do not exist. I want search teams now.”

“Understood,” Marco said.

“I need you to identify every member absent from this party. You will contact each one. I want names, locations, and their reasons for not being here,” I instructed.

Marco nodded once. “I will start with the guest list and the border roster.”

I looked at Della. “You stay near the hall. If she returns, or if anyone reports seeing her, you contact me immediately.”

Della’s eyes flashed. “I’m coming with you.”

“You are not,” I said. “If she’s brought back here, I need someone I trust in this room to keep her safe.”

Della pressed her lips together, but she did not argue again. She nodded once and then said, “Fine. But if Maggie shows her face, don’t blame me if I bust her nose.”

I stepped outside and called the nearest patrol leader over.

“Alpha,” he said, bowing his head.

I pointed toward the garden paths. “I want repeated searches across the party grounds. Use full teams. Check the garden, the hedges, the outer walkways, and the border trail that runs behind the residence wing. Do not assume Luna Talia is unharmed. Move.”

“Yes, Alpha,” he said, and he signaled to his warriors.

My wolf was constantly reaching out through our mate bond, but we felt nothing. It was as if Talia had vanished from existence. This absence made my wolf frantic.

‘You should have never allowed that woman near her again,’ my wolf whined.

‘Calm down. We don’t know if she is involved yet,’ I told him.

I couldn’t sit still, so I joined the search as well.

I moved through the outer gardens first, following the paths with guards spaced on both sides, checking behind hedges and stone walls while calling for her.

“Talia,” I said, my voice low, carrying. “Answer me.”

No one answered back.

We searched the garden twice. We searched the path toward the side gate once, and then again with a wider sweep. Then, my wolf fully took over, and I shifted. I needed his heightened senses.

We did not stop searching after the first team returned empty-handed, nor did we stop when the second team reported no scent trail beyond the garden.

By the time an hour had passed, the celebration inside had dulled into confusion. People noticed their Luna was not there, and pack members joined the search.

Marco returned with Della, both of them moving quickly. Marco's face was tight, and Della looked furious.

"I identified the absentees," Marco reported. "Most of them are elderly or frail. They stayed home. I contacted them directly. None of them left their homes, and none of them saw Luna Talia tonight."

Della folded her arms. "Maggie is also missing. She disappeared along with Talia."

I turned toward my warriors. "Lock down the borders," I ordered. "No one leaves. No one enters. I want search teams on every trail."

"Yes, Alpha," multiple voices answered at once.

I refused to accept that she could vanish inside my territory. My wolf paced inside me with relentless aggression, blaming me for everything, and I couldn't even defend myself.

At dawn, I was forced to face the unbearable truth that my mate, Talia, had disappeared after the Luna ceremony.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & TWO

Maggie's POV

The rogues moved faster than I expected.

Talia noticed something was wrong, but it was too late. A rogue came up behind her and pressed a needle into her neck. I watched as the sedative took effect. She gasped, her body stiffened, and her legs buckled.

Two rogues caught her before she hit the ground. They dragged her toward the border path as planned, her feet scraping the dirt. I felt a jolt of fear when one of the rogues leered at me, but I remained calm.

Viki stood a few steps away. “You did well, Maggie.”

“Thank you. Where are you taking her?” I responded.

“That is none of your concern,” Viki said. “Just know that now you will have no more obstacles as long as you keep your mouth shut.”

I nodded and said, “I will. I won’t tell a soul.”

Viki nodded once before turning away to follow the rogues who dragged Talia away. Another remained watching me with a smirk.

I knew what would happen next.

He lunged forward and punched me in the face, snapping my head to the side. Pain shot through my cheek and jaw. I barely had time to react before he hit me again, this time in the stomach. I gasped for air. I doubled over.

He grabbed my clothes and tore the fabric down my side. The sound was loud in the quiet. He punched me again, harder, and I stumbled backward before collapsing. Pain shot through my ribs as I landed awkwardly, knocking the breath from my lungs.

I curled inward instinctively as the rogue proceeded to kick me. My vision blurred at the edge. I forced myself to stay where I was and not to fight back.

'He is going to kill us. We need to fight back,' my wolf urged, but I ignored her. Viki wouldn't kill us. She just needed it to look convincing, or Nolan would assume I was responsible.

Footsteps approached in the distance. I heard voices calling out, and the rogue fled. All of this was worth it. Once Talia was gone, everything would finally fall back into place, and I would become Nolan's Luna.

The warriors reached me moments later.

"What happened?" one of them demanded as he dropped to a knee beside me.

I tried to speak and failed. I shook my head weakly, pressing a hand to my stomach as another wave of pain hit me.

"Rogues," I managed to choke out. "They took her. Luna Talia,"

That was all they needed.

Chaos followed. Someone shouted for reinforcements. Another warrior ran back to the pack house, Marco and Nolan arrived quickly.

Nolan reached me first. He dropped to his knees and pulled me into his arms without hesitation. His grip was tight and protective.

"Maggie," he said urgently. "Where is Talia?"

Hearing her name, I broke down. I sobbed, clutching his shirt.

"They took her," I said. "The rogues took Luna Talia. I tried to stop them, but I couldn't."

My voice cracked. Pain shot through my ribs as I shook. Nolan held me closer, murmuring reassurances. “How did this happen?” Marco asked. “Why would you lead her out here? You know that was dangerous!” “Pocket…look in my pocket,” I replied. Nolan reached into my pocket and pulled out the folded paper Viki had given me earlier. “There was a letter,” I said through tears. “Border pack members invited her to meet them outside the hall. She saw it and wanted to go. I went with her. We were ambushed.”

Nolan unfolded the letter quickly and scanned it. He frowned before muttering, “This doesn’t make sense.”

“We tried to get back,” I continued. “We did not make it. They came out of nowhere. I failed her.”

I lowered my head and sobbed harder. It was not difficult to sob. The pain made it easy to do so.

Nolan’s jaw clenched. I felt the tension radiating from him as his grip tightened briefly. For a moment, I thought he didn’t believe me. Before I could panic, Nolan’s grip loosened.

“This is not your fault,” he said, his voice thick with fury. “Tell me where they went. Did you see?”

I pointed to the left. “Mobilize the warriors. Track the rogues. Now,” Nolan ordered.

Marco nodded and immediately began issuing orders.

“I can help,” I said as I tried to stand, but collapsed again.

Nolan looked at me, brushing my hair back. “No, you’re hurt. Take her to the infirmary. Keep her under watch.”

I did not resist as two warriors lifted me carefully to my feet. Every movement sent pain through my body. Nolan watched me for a moment longer, conflict flashing in his eyes, before turning away to track the rogues.

When no one was watching, I wiped away my tears. My face throbbed. My ribs ached. My clothes were torn and filthy against my skin, but I was smiling.

They were going the wrong way. I pointed them exactly where Viki said I should. By the time they realized they were going in the wrong direction, it would be too late.

'You better hope they don't find her, or that will be the end of us,' my wolf growled.

She was right, so I prayed to the Moon Goddess.

Please let Talia die,

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & THREE

Maggie's POV

Two days.

Talia had been gone for two full days, and every hour she stayed missing it felt like life was returning to normal.

I had not contacted Viki for updates. Well, first, because Viki told me not to and second, I know Viki would not let Talia go. Viki deserved her revenge.

However, there was a small part of me wishing that Talia would hurry up and die.

If Talia were dead, I would not have to keep looking behind my shoulder. I'd have no fear of her returning and ruining everything again.

"That is your conscience nagging at you because you know this is wrong,' my wolf growled.

‘No, this was the right decision. Look at what she’s doing to Nolan,’ I snapped.

Nolan barely ate or slept. He was obsessed with her. Nolan moved through the halls a shell of himself.

‘He is concerned about his mate,’ my wolf argued. “There would be something wrong with him if he didn’t respond.’

Yes, there was something wrong with him. He was still ignoring me. I was right here and have always been there for him. And yet, he didn’t pay me a second glance after he found me and sent me to the infirmary.

Tonight, I decided I would not wait for him anymore.

I returned to my room. I went to my dresser and pulled out the first shelf. Folded carefully inside was the lingerie I had prepared long ago. I had told myself I would wear it when Nolan finally saw me the way I had always wanted him to.

“This is a mistake,’ my wolf warned me. ‘You are being impatient.’

‘He is exhausted,’ I responded. ‘He needs comfort. I am the only one who understands him.’

My wolf huffed but she did not argue with me.

I dressed slowly. There was nothing for me to worry about. I was not doing anything wrong. All I was doing was reminding

Nolan of what he already had.

The Alpha’s study was dimly lit when I entered. Nolan sat at his desk, with one hand braced against his temple, the other clenched around a stack of reports.

“Leave. I do not want any visitors right now,” Nolan said firmly.

“Are you having one of your migraines?” I asked.

He looked up when I closed the door,

“Maggie,” he said. He sounded very tired. “What are you doing here?”

“I was worried about you,” I replied softly. “You have not rested at all.”

“I’m fine,” Nolan said. “It’s late. You should be resting.”

“You’re not fine,” I stated. “You need to sleep or at least eat something.”

“I need to find my mate,” Nolan snapped. I flinched at his tone. He never yelled at me, but I know this was just the mate bond talking. Once Talia was dead, he’d be back to normal.

I stepped closer. “I know. And I am so sorry about Luna Talia. I really am.”

Nolan didn’t respond.

Encouraged, I lowered myself into the chair across from him. I leaned forward slightly, letting the neckline fall just enough to draw attention.

“You have been carrying everything alone,” I continued. “You do not have to.”

He looked at me then, really looked at me, and something cold settled in his eyes.

“This is not appropriate,” he said.

“I just want to help,” I insisted. “You saved me once. Let me be here for you now.’

Nolan pushed back from the desk and stood. “You are not helping.”

I rose as well and closed the distance between us. “You have barely spoken to me since she arrived,” I said, unable to stop the bitterness creeping into my voice. “I stayed by your side for years. I watched you work yourself into exhaustion. I learned everything you liked and everything you hated. And then she appeared, and suddenly I did not exist.”

Nolan’s eyes narrowed. “If you know me so well, you should understand.”

“You changed. You abandoned me,” I continued.

“Enough,” Nolan growled.

“She is gone,” I said, the words tumbling out before I could stop them. “Maybe she left on her own. She did not fight that hard when the rogues took her, did she?”

I regretted it as soon as the words left my mouth. My wolf growled in warning and then Nolan’s Alpha aura slammed into me, causing me to stumble backwards.

Then he spoke, his voice low and controlled. “Get out. Get out RIGHT NOW.”

“I did everything for you,” I said, tears burning in my eyes. “And you feel nothing? Tell me the truth. Do you really feel nothing for me?” I reached for him and Nolan slapped my hand away.

“Do not touch me,” Nolan growled.

The rejection snapped something inside me.

I tore open my robe and allowed it to drop to the ground.

“Look at me,” I pleaded. “I am right here. Tell me that you don’t want me.”

Nolan didn’t look at me with love, not even with lust. He looked at me in disgust as he put more space between us

“Guards!” Nolan called.

Panic surged through me.

“No,” I gasped, scrambling to cover myself as footsteps echoed outside the door. “Please, Nolan. I was wrong.

The guards entered. They averted their eyes as I attempted to pull my robe back on, Nolan did not look at me at all.

“This is the last time I will tolerate this behavior,” he said. “Do not make me regret saving you.

I wrapped my arms around myself. My face flushed in embarrassment. The guards hauled me to my feet.

I had lost.

And I hated Talia even more.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & FOUR

Nolan’s POV

Maggie broke down the moment the guards took hold of her arms.

“I’m sorry,” she sobbed. “I didn’t mean it. I swear I didn’t mean any harm.”

‘She is only sorry because she is being punished,’ my wolf snarled. ‘You’ve been too lenient with this pup.’

I felt no regret. I only felt exhausted. I did not need this right now.

“Enough,” I said. “Escort her back to her room. She is not to leave it unless under guard.”

“Yes, Alpha,” the guards replied.

Maggie’s eyes widened and she began to flail against the guards, but they held her tightly. “Please,” she begged. “I was only upset. I would never betray you.”

I did not answer.

Marco and Della arrived while the guards were dragging her out. Della stopped short when she saw Maggie. She glared at her and scoffed, “Shameful.”

“What happened?” Marco asked.

“She crossed a line,” I replied. “That is all you need to know.”

Della did not look satisfied. She watched Maggie disappear around the corner before turning back to me. “She threw herself at you, didn’t she?”

I didn’t answer and Della sneered. “I knew it. I knew she was going to act without Talia around. She is responsible. I’m telling you.”

Marco shook his head. “Della, slow down. Just because she wants to be with Nolan, does not make her a traitor.”

“It is not just some girl taking advantage of the situation,” Della snapped. “She has been hostile since the moment Talia arrived.”

Marco frowned. “What do you mean hostile? She’s just a maid. She hates rogues. She wouldn’t be involved with them.”

“You don’t know that,” Della shot back. “And neither do you know what she’s been doing behind your back.”

“Enough,” I snapped. “If all you two are going to do is bicker, leave.” My head was throbbing from their loud voices making my headache worse.

Della gave Marco a look as if telling him that their conversation wasn’t over and then turned toward me. “Did Talia ever mention Maggie to you?”

“Other than not wanting Maggie to clean our room anymore and that Maggie had a crush on me, no. What am I missing?” I responded.

Della rolled her eyes. “Of course she didn’t. Goddess, why is she so damn stubborn?”

“Della, what are you talking about?” I asked.

“Talia wouldn’t complain unless it wasn’t avoidable. She wanted to make the best impression,” Della explained. “She has been targeted by Maggie since she arrived here, and she tried to handle it quietly.”

My chest tightened. “Explain.”

“Maggie disobeyed her instructions, questioned her authority, and once, she blocked her from entering your garden, claiming it

was the Alpha’s private space and that outsiders were forbidden,” Della said..

Marco stiffened. “That garden is private. Maggie…”

Della turned on him. “Talia is not an outsider!” she snarled. “And Maggie made a point of reminding her that she was not the formal Luna yet.”

Why didn’t Talia say anything? I could have resolved this small issue. My wolf scoffed, ‘You keep forgetting what our mate has been through. She evaluated the situation and needed to determine if you were loyal to her. Remember her previous mate betrayed her for another she-wolf.’

‘I am NOT him,’ I growled.

Della continued, “I am disappointed in you both. How could you not see Maggie as a problem? She went from disrespecting Talia to sucking up to her and neither one of you thought something was off?”

Her words made me remember how Maggie cursed Talia. I had dismissed it then as a petty crush.

“We’ve known Maggie for years. She would never do something like this,” Marco argued.

“Then who do you trust?” Della demanded. “Your history with Maggie, or me the closest person to Talia?”

‘Perhaps there is more to this than just Maggie acting on her own,’ my wolf suggested.

Maggie alone might not have been capable of orchestrating something like this, but that did not mean she was innocent. And things were not adding up. Why would the rogues only capture Talia and not Maggie?

“Whether Maggie is responsible or not does not change the facts,” I finally said. “Someone targeted Talia. Someone exploited access within this pack.”

Della nodded. “Yes, and I wholeheartedly believe it was Maggie.”

Marco exhaled slowly. “Then what do you want me to do?”

“You will watch Maggie. From now on, she does nothing without supervision,” I instructed.

Marco hesitated. “You think she’s being used.”

“Yes,” I said. “Even if she is not the mastermind, she is young and gullible. Someone could have taken advantage of that.” Della’s expression softened slightly. “Thank Goddess you’re listening to me.”

Marco inclined his head. “I’ll see it done.”

They turned to leave, but before Della stepped away, she paused. “For what it’s worth,” she said quietly, “Talia hid it from you because she trusts you. She wanted to keep the peace as she knew you cared about Maggie. She did not want to burden you.”

“I know,” I said.

Whoever had taken her had planned carefully.

And I would not stop until I found Talia even if it meant tearing this pack apart piece by piece.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & FIVE

Talia’s POV

I woke up with a splitting headache. I bit my lip to keep from groaning aloud in pain.

My vision swam as I forced my eyes open. The ceiling above me was low and rough, streaked with moisture that caught the dim light. The air smelled of damp stone and old rot. I will never forget that smell.

I still sometimes had vivid nightmares of when I had been kidnapped and tortured by the rogues. The memory woke me up fully. When I tried to move, it felt like the hardest thing to do.

What is wrong with me?

I flexed against the rope, but the rope did not give. The rope wasn't soaked in silver, so why wasn't I able to break free?

'Sedatives,' my wolf said. Her voice was sluggish and dull. 'A heavy dose. This is why we cannot break free.'

I could feel the panic building in me, but I took a few calming breaths. Panic would not help me. I tested the ropes again. My ankles were bound to the chair legs. My arms were secured behind my back. The chair itself was bolted to the stone floor.

'How long do you think it'll take for you to neutralize the sedative?' I asked.

'I don't know. I'm trying,' my wolf replied.

I assessed the room. It was a small rundown cell with one door. The door creaked open. A woman entered.

She wore dark jeans and a tight long sleeved black shirt. A half mask covered the left side of her face. Her hair hung loose and uneven around her shoulders. Her scent reached me a second later. She smelled like a rogue, the dirty dog scent, but underneath it, there was something else that was familiar.

"Untie me," I said coldly, "You have made a serious mistake."

The woman laughed. “Mistake?” she repeated. “No. This time, everything went exactly as it should.”

“I am the Luna of the Bloodmoon and daughter of the Alpha King,” I said. “If you touch me, you will die when they find you.’

She stepped closer and smirked. “Luna indeed and yet, you didn’t even ask about that little omega that was with you.”

My eyes widened as I remembered telling Maggie to run and then everything had gone dark.

“Where is Maggie? You better have not hurt her!” I growled.

The woman laughed again. “How sweet. You actually care about that useless little thing. But don’t worry, she was only bait.”

“What do you…”

Before I could finish, a whip cracked across my shoulder. Pain flared hot through me causing me to yelp in pain. The chair rocked violently as I tried to break free.

“Little Maggie really thought I cared about her,” the woman said calmly. “She betrayed her own pack just to get you to me.”

She struck me again, lower this time, the lash biting into my side.

I forced myself to breathe through the pain. My wolf growled weakly but could do nothing else.

“You will not escape this,” I said, my voice shaking despite my effort. “Nolan will tear this land apart to find me.”

Her eyes gleamed. “That is exactly what I want. I want him to drive himself crazy before I deliver your corpse to him.”

I stared at her face, at the way she held herself, at the hatred that burned so openly now. I knew that look.

“Viki,” I said.

The woman’s smirk slowly turned into a psychotic grin.

“I honestly thought it would’ve taken you longer to figure it out,” she said. “You’re not completely stupid.”

Viki circled me, dragging the whip along the floor. “Do you regret it?” she asked. “Do you regret not killing me back then?”

“I never wanted to kill you. I…”

Viki struck me again. This time on my legs and I couldn’t help but snarl at her. I didn’t want to kill her before, but I was starting to rethink that.

Viki stopped in front of me. “Everything I am now,” she said, tapping the mask, “exists because of you and him.”

“Nolan spared your life,” I said. “You are alive because he chose mercy.”

Viki scoffed, “Mercy? You call this mercy?” She reached up and tore the mask away.

I gasped before I could stop myself.

The scar was worse than I had imagined. The skin was twisted and uneven, carved deep and jagged across her cheek and jaw. One side of her mouth pulled downward, distorting her expression.

“Is this mercy?” Viki demanded. “He ruined my face! He turned me into a monster!”

“You could have rebuilt your life. You could’ve started your own life,” I reasoned.

“There is no life left for me, don’t you understand?” she snapped. “I am a rogue now. That is all I will ever be.”

Viki leaned closer and declared, “And my only purpose as a rogue is revenge.”

I swallowed. “You do not have to do this. You could settle in Bloodmoon. Live quietly. I can help you if you want.”

Her eyes widened with disbelief before she burst into laughter again. “You think I want peace? No!”

Viki turned toward a table along the wall. When she came back, she held a dagger. She dipped the blade into a vial and lifted it so I could see the liquid coating the metal.

‘Wolfsbane,’ my wolf warned.

My heart spiked with panic.

“I will make you look worse than me,” she said calmly as she closed the distance. “I will carve my pain into your body!”

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & SIX

Talia’s POV

There was a loud knock.

At first, I thought I misheard it and then there was another knock.

Viki had stopped moving at the first knock. The tip of the dagger was barely touching my face. When the second knock came, her eyes narrowed.

“Perfect timing,” she cursed.

Someone was here. Someone had found this place. There was a chance for me to be rescued.

As if she saw what I was thinking, Viki grabbed my jaw and shoved a gag into my mouth.

The cloth tasted like it had been stored in dirt. I jerked my head away, but she was stronger, and my body did not respond the way I wanted it to. She tied the gag behind my head and yanked the knot tight enough to make my eyes water.

“You sit there and be quiet,” Viki ordered. She exited the room quickly but left the door open. I could hear male voices.

“Ma’am,” a voice said. I recognized it so clearly. It was Marco.

I tried to call out, but the gag muffled my voice. I twisted in the chair and yanked my wrists against the ropes, but the ropes didn’t budge.

I tried the pack link. I reached for it the way I always did when I needed Solon or Father. No one answered. There was only silence.

“The sedatives are blocking us,” my wolf warned. “We won’t be able to reach out until it’s out of our system.”

I refused to accept that. I refused to just wait and allow Viki to torture me.

Marco was here. That meant Nolan had to be close by. I had to alert him somehow.

I twisted again. This time I focused on my legs. The ropes around my ankles were not as tight as my wrists.

I dragged my heel along the chair leg and forced the rope to rub against the rough wood. My ankle burned. I kept going.

Upstairs, Marco spoke again. “We are collecting statements. We need to know if you saw Luna Talia tonight, or if you noticed anything unusual during the ceremony.”

How did he not know he was talking to Viki?

I had to alert him.

I flailed hard and the ropes gave way around my ankles. The chair rattled on the stone floor. The sound echoed in the basement, but I could not tell if I was making enough noise. I slammed both heels down into the stone repeatedly, trying to make the noise as ugly and obvious as possible.

Please hear me!

Please!

“I saw nothing,” Viki said smoothly. “I stayed in my cabin. I heard the celebration from a distance, but I was not there. I felt sick that night.”

Marco’s tone stayed polite. “Then we will need your name and residence recorded. There is an effort to track who was present and who was not.”

There was a pause.

Had he heard that?

Marco said, “Thank you. We appreciate your cooperation.”

No.

The footsteps moved away.

A few seconds later, Viki came back down the stairs. Her expression was smug, like she had just watched me lose a game she had already rigged.

“Did you enjoy that?” Viki asked softly. “Did you think he would save you?”

I tried to spit at her. The gag made it impossible. All I managed was a choked sound.

Viki laughed. “Nolan’s Beta found this place,” she said, as if she was sharing something amusing. “And he did nothing. Do you know why? Because he was too stupid to suspect anything. Being a rogue has its perk. He couldn’t even tell it was me. Idiot.”

My eyes narrowed. Rage pushed through the sedative in small bursts.

Viki made a mock sympathetic expression. “Doesn’t seem like Nolan really cares about you. He couldn’t even be bothered to

inform his Beta to conduct a search.”

Viki stepped back toward the stairs. “I am going to pass a message to Nolan, so he thinks he is getting closer.”

I flailed against the restraints. My wolf snarled inside me and said, ‘I am doing the best that I can, Talia. I will get this sedative out of our system and then we will maul her.’

Viki watched me struggle and looked pleased. “Do not rush,” she said. “Both of you will die in due time.”

She reached toward the table and picked up the dagger again, turning it in her fingers like she was deciding whether to use it before leaving.

Then she paused and looked toward the far wall.

“But first, I need to provide information to help Alpha Nolan. He’s not as clever as I thought. Don’t worry. I won’t leave you alone,” she said, “I arranged something for you.”

Viki crossed the basement to the darkest corner. I had assumed there was only one way to enter the basement. I was wrong.

Viki crouched and pressed her fingers along a seam. A hidden side door opened with a quiet scrape.

Viki stood and looked back at me, a satisfied smile on her face. “I wanted to make sure you weren’t lonely.”

Viki lifted two fingers to her mouth and whistled. Three rogues crawled in through the hidden door. They moved low, like animals. Their clothes were filthy. Their hair was matted. One of them smiled when he saw me, and his eyes dragged over my body.

Panic rose up in me as I had flashbacks of the last time I encountered rogues due to Viki.

Viki pointed toward me. “Keep her company, my friends,” she said, voice casual. “Oh, but don’t kill her.”

Viki shut the hidden door and exited the basement without a second look.

I struggled against the ropes again and finally, I felt them loosen around my wrists. I glared at the rogues while my claws lengthened and then they lunged.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & SEVEN

Talia's POV

I panted hard as I stared at the three bodies on the basement floor.

Blood slicked the cracked concrete beneath them. The ropes that had been around my wrists lay in frayed coils near my feet. My arms were trembling so badly that I had to press my palms against my thighs to steady them.

I had killed them.

For a moment, my mind kept trying to push the truth away, as if I could deny it by refusing to look directly at what I had done. The sedative still dulled my senses, but the adrenaline pumping through my veins had cleared the haze.

'You are not a murderer,' my wolf reassured me. 'They attacked you. You defended yourself.'

My throat tightened. I swallowed, then swallowed again, because my mouth had gone dry.

"I can still feel it," I whispered. My voice sounded small in the basement. "Their hands. Their breath. I can still feel them."

"They are dead,' my wolf replied. 'You did what you had to do, and you lived. No one will fault you for it.'

I looked down at my hands covered with rogues' blood.

My claws had been out during the fight. They were longer than they had ever been before, driven by fear, rage and a power I had never fully used. I forced them back, breathing through the sting as they retracted.

My wolf nudged me hard. ‘We need to leave before Viki returns.’

That snapped me into motion.

I wiped my hands on the side of my torn dress. I turned toward the wall where the hidden side door was. I ran my hands against the wall until it opened. Then I quickly entered the passage.

The passage opened behind thick. I crouched low in an attempt to listen for anyone around, but my heart was beating so loud that it was all I could hear.

‘Run. This is our chance,’ my wolf urged.

I ran through the trees, not caring about the branches that tore at my arms or the stones that cut into the soles of my feet. My lungs burned. My ribs ached. The sedative dragged at my body like weights, but I kept moving.

After what felt like forever, I stumbled across a small cave opening hidden behind large trees. It was not deep, but it was enough to conceal me from anyone walking past.

I slipped inside and sank to the ground, pressing my back to the cold rock.

For a long minute, I did nothing but sit and breathe.

When my heartbeat finally slowed down, I wiped sweat from my forehead and looked down at my wrists. The rope burns were angry and red, with faint swelling around them. Dried blood had crusted in the grooves.

‘We are safe for the moment,’ my wolf advised.

“For the moment,” I repeated under my breath.

I carefully crawled closer to the cave entrance and pushed aside a curtain of leaves. From this angle, I could see a stretch of forest path beyond trees. I saw movement. It was a Bloodmoon patrol.

I had not crossed the border.

I was still in Bloodmoon’s northern territory.

My wolf’s anger surged, hot and bitter. ‘She dared to do it here,’ she snarled. ‘She dared to bring rogues into our land, into our pack.’

‘How could she do that without anyone noticing?’ I asked.

My wolf did not answer, but she pushed a thought forward, Maggie.

Viki told me that Maggie was the reason I had been caught by her. Was she telling the truth? I thought back on how insistent Maggie was about getting me away to meet the pack members. Her story didn’t add up, but I didn’t think she would betray me like that.

‘She did this. It has to be her,’ my wolf growled. ‘She delivered you right to her.’

I watched the patrol pass, and I stayed silent.

If I went back now, Viki would run again and I would always be looking over my shoulder until she attacked me again. Worse, I could lead Nolan and Marco straight into whatever plan Viki had prepared next. If Maggie was involved, she could twist my return into another lie before I even reached the pack house.

‘Our mate would never believe her lies,’ my wolf said.

“That doesn’t mean the pack wouldn’t,’ I retorted and I wasn’t going to take the chance.

As Luna, it was my responsibility to deal with this. I could not ignore that Viki was operating inside Bloodmoon territory and had rogues under her control.

‘At least let our mate know we are okay,’ my wolf urged.

I closed my eyes and reached for the pack link. Again, no one answered.

My wolf hissed in frustration. “Try harder.”

‘I cannot get through,’ I told her.

I opened my eyes and stared at the trees. ‘Maybe it is good that we can’t reach him. If Viki is alerted, she will know I escaped and change plans.’

‘You cannot stay hidden forever,’ my wolf argued.

“I know,” I replied quietly, “but I need to figure out who’s backing her, and most importantly, what her next move is.”

I stayed crouched at the cave entrance, listening.

Minutes passed.

Then I heard it.

Viki’s harsh and furious scream cut through the forest from the direction I had run from.

“Where the hell is that damned Talia?!”

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & EIGHT

Nolan’s POV

There was a knock at my door.

“Not now,” I called out.

I sat at my desk with a map spread out in front of me. The circles and cross outs on it had stopped feeling like information and more of a sick joke. Why couldn’t I find her?

Two days of searching my own territory and I have yet to find Talia or the rogues that took her. Something wasn’t adding up. I had Della swear not to tell Silverfang, but I couldn’t keep this up for too long before the Alpha King and Prince Solon began to ask questions.

The knock came again. I stood and opened the door a few inches. It was Maggie. As soon as I saw her, my wolf began to snarl within me.

Maggie’s eyes were red and swollen. She held a folder against her chest with both hands. I looked past her and noticed there were no guards escorting her which only irritated me more.

“What do you want?” I demanded.

“Alpha Nolan,” she said quietly. “I need to speak with you.”

“You need to go back to your room and stay there,” I told her.

“I know you hate me right now,” she said. “I know you have every reason to.” I stared at her. Was I supposed to praise her for owning up to her mistakes?

Maggie swallowed under my gaze and continued, “Marco sent me. He told me to deliver the investigation forms and the new registration documents. He said you needed them immediately.”

I didn’t believe her.

Marco knew I told her to stay in her room. It was more like she snuck out and told a guard, unaware of the situation, that she would bring the folder to me. There was no point in calling her out as she would lie.

I stepped back from the doorway. “Come in.”

Maggie moved quickly, keeping her eyes down. She crossed to the edge of my desk, placed the folder in the corner, and then retreated.

I stayed standing. “I am only giving you this one chance, Maggie. Say what you need to say and then leave.”

I opened the folder. Inside were witness statements, patrol reports, and lists of names. The handwriting was organized and familiar. Maggie had always been careful with paperwork. That was part of what made all of this worse.

I flipped through the first set of forms. I noticed that Maggie had yet to say anything. I looked up at her. “Weren’t you trying to apologize?”

“I am,” she said. Her voice shook slightly. “I cannot undo what I did. I can only accept the consequences and try to correct what I can.”

“You want me to forgive you.”

“Yes,” she said quickly.

“Throw her out. She’s not sincere. She only wants to stay close to us,’ my wolf growled. We couldn’t just throw her out right now. Maggie was our only clue as to what happened to Talia.

“You will put the past behind you,” I told her. “You will focus on your work. If you do that, you will eventually find your own mate and you will build a life that does not depend on mine.”

“Yes, Alpha.”

“Do you understand what I said?”

“Yes,” she repeated. “I understand.”

“Good. You may leave,” I said.

I returned to the paperwork. I scanned the top sheet, and then the next. Then I reached a section of newly registered names, and I stopped.

Several names were unfamiliar. They were not on any of the older Bloodmoon rosters.

“Wait,” I said before Maggie could reach the door. I held up the form and tapped the page with a finger. “Where did these names come from?”

“They are new registrations,” Maggie explained. “They settled near the northern border over the past month.”

“Explain.”

“Many of them are wolves who were abused in their former packs,” she said. “They ran and sought safety here.”

I stared at her. “And you approved this?”

“I helped them register,” she corrected carefully. “I only helped them settle in vacant cabins because they had nowhere else to go.”

My gaze hardened. “Did you bring them in as rogues?”

“They are not rogues,” Maggie said immediately. “They came to the boundary and asked for a chance. They were desperate. They were like me.”

‘She is the reason why the rogues felt secure to cross into our territory and take our Luna. Her sympathy will be the end of our pack,’ my wolf warned.

“Who gave you authority to do this without my permission?” I demanded.

“You did, Alpha,” Maggie said quickly. “I mentioned it weeks ago. You told me if they were not violent, I could handle it through the proper paperwork.”

I remembered. Not clearly at first, but enough. I had given approval without thinking deeply because I was busy planning how I would get rid of the Alpha King.

I stared at the page again. “You assured me there would be no issues.”

“There won’t be. There haven’t been,” Maggie said quickly. “They’ve been grateful and trying to stay out of the way.”

“Can you say that truly, Maggie?” I asked.

“What…what do you mean by that?” Maggie replied.

I moved the folder to slide it toward Maggie, but instead a single envelope slipped out. It was plain with no seal or signature.

“What is this?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Maggie replied.

I opened the envelope and read the letter inside.

‘I have Talia Come to forest clearing on the northern border at midnight. Come alone.’

I read it again, because my mind refused to accept it the first time. My hand tightened on the paper until it crumpled slightly. I slammed my fist onto the desk.

Maggie jerked back with a small gasp. “Alpha, what happened?”

I held the letter up. “Is this what you call no issues?” I threw the letter at her.

Maggie picked it up. Her eyes scanned the page, and the color drained from her face.

“This is a trap. You know it is, Alpha,” Maggie said. Her hands trembled as she reached for my hand, but I jerked away from her. “Please, do not go.”

‘She is right,’ my wolf spat as if it sickened him to agree with Maggie. ‘We would be walking straight into a trap.’

I could barely breathe. My pulse pounded in my ears, but my decision was already made the moment I read her name.

If there is even the slightest chance of finding Talia, I have to go.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & NINE

Maggie's POV

After leaving Nolan's office, I walked around aimlessly. My mind raced with questions. That letter had to have come from Viki, but how did she get it into the folder. Why did she need to meet Nolan? It's not the plan. I needed to ask her.

'No. You don't need to ask her anything. You need to tell Nolan the truth,' my wolf said.

'He will kill us if I do that. I just need to ask Viki what's going on,' I responded.

'During the day? You will get caught. Wait until night,' my wolf suggested.

'I can't wait that long. I have to make sure she's not trying to hurt Nolan,' I argued.

I left the pack house through the side door near the service entrance. I then used a secret path to get the vacant cabins. It took me a lot longer to get there, but no one would see me.

When I reached Viki's cabin, I knocked once and the door opened immediately.

"What is wrong with you?" Viki hissed. "Are you trying to get caught?"

Viki yanked me inside by my wrist so fast that I stumbled over the threshold and almost fell. The door slammed shut behind me.

"I had to come. I…"

"Did something happen? Did Nolan contact Silverfang?" Viki demanded, gripping my shoulders tightly.

"No. He received a letter today," I explained and Viki released me.

“You risked getting caught telling me about a stupid letter???”

“Someone demanded Nolan go to the northern border at midnight. They claimed they had Talia. Did you send it?”

Viki did not look surprised. She looked more annoyed than anything. “So, you thought to come here instead of doing what you were supposed to do.”

“Where is Talia? Is she here? Did you send that letter?” I asked.

Viki turned away from me and paced the small cabin. Her mask rested near the table instead of on her face.

“She is missing,” Viki responded.

“Missing? What do you mean, missing?”

“That is exactly what I said. She is missing,” Viki repeated furiously.

“You lost her,” I said, my voice rising before I could control it. “How could you lose her?”

Viki stopped and looked at me as if I had insulted her. The scars on her face stretched as her expression warped with rage, and for a second, she looked terrifying. I actually felt scared of her.

“You have a lot of nerve to talk to me in that tone,” Viki said firmly.

“I did everything you told me to do,” I said. “I led her out. I gave you the opportunity. And then you lost her. Do you know how bad this is going to be for me?”

Viki scoffed and said, “If you would just do what I tell you, this wouldn’t be an issue. I am trying to help you.”

“I wanted her gone,” I said. “And now she could appear at any moment and put my life in jeopardy!”

“Did you really think this would work out without any issues? Be realistic,” Viki said. She exhaled like I was exhausting her. “I

have already sent rogues to find her.”

My eyes widened. “You sent rogues after her?”

“Yes,” Viki said. “The moment I realized she had escaped.”

“To bring her back?” I asked quickly, because that was the only answer that made sense.

“Once they find her, they will kill her immediately,” Viki said. She talked about killing like she was discussing weather. It caused a shiver to run up my spine.

I froze at that. She did not say she would kill Talia but I noticed the scent of blood.

‘Maggie! We need to leave now. She’s unstable,’ my wolf warned.

“How can you command the rogues?” I demanded, suppressing my fear. “How do they listen to you?”

Viki’s mouth curved into a smile that did not soften her eyes. “Because I am one of them,” she said. “Or did you forget that?”

I swallowed hard. “What about the letter?”

“What about it?” Viki asked.

“Do you plan on hurting Nolan?” I asked.

“You ask too many questions, my dear.”

“This was not part of the plan,” I insisted. “If you harm him, I won’t let…”

Before I could finish, Viki’s hand clamped around my throat, and my words died instantly. The pressure was hard enough that my eyes watered. I clawed at her wrist, but she did not loosen her grip.

“I have had enough of you, you stupid little girl,” she said, her voice low and cold.

Viki leaned in close enough that I could smell the blood on her breath.

“From now on,” she said. “You do what I tell you to do, when I tell you to do it. If you try to warn Nolan, or if you try to interfere again, I will kill you. Do you understand?”

My lungs burned from lack of oxygen. I nodded quickly as I still fought her grip. Viki released me. I stumbled backward, my hand flying to my neck as I gasped.

“Do you understand?” she demanded. “I want to hear you say it.”

“Yes,” I whispered, my voice shaking.

“Louder,” Viki ordered.

“I understand,” I said, forcing the words out.

My throat ached. Shame crawled up my spine. I stood there, breathing hard, regretting every choice that led me to this cabin.

‘We are trapped,’ my wolf said bitterly. ‘I told you not to trust her and now we’re going to pay for this.’

Tears filled my eyes as the truth hit me. I never should have trusted her, and now it was too late.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & TEN

Talia’s POV

When I no longer heard Viki yelling, I left my hiding space and climbed into a tree near the cabin where Viki had been keeping me. I chose a high branch and kept my weight close to the trunk so I would not snap anything and give myself away. I needed height because I did not want them catching my scent on the ground.

“This is risky,’ my wolf grumbled.

It was, but we needed to know what Viki was up to. We needed to get as much information as possible before we contacted Nolan.

Below me, the cabin door opened.

Three rogues dragged Maggie out.

I gripped the branch harder when I saw her. Her face was covered with bruises, and she attempted to fight against them, but they held her tightly. Her arms were tied awkwardly behind her back. One rogue was yanking her along by the hair while others shoved or kicked her forward.

Viki stepped out after them. “Shut her up. All that noise she’s making will bring attention.”

One of the rogues slapped Maggie hard causing her to yelp and silence her sobs.

“All that crying will save you. All you need to do is comply,” Viki said. “Everything will go smoothly.”

“You said you wouldn’t hurt me. You never said you’d hurt Nolan,” Maggie said.

Viki laughed. “And you believed me.”

My wolf huffed inside me, ‘Fool!’

So, Viki had been telling the truth. Maggie was the reason Viki could move around Bloodmoon territory and plan something like this without being noticed. Her desire to become Luna drove her to betray her pack and Nolan.

‘Pathetic fool,’ my wolf huffed again.

“I did what you asked,” Maggie pleaded.

“And now you will do something else,” Viki replied, still calm. “You will keep cooperating.”

One of the rogues yanked Maggie forward again. She cried out, then tried to pull back, but she could not fight three grown rogues at once.

I still did not understand why they were taking her into the woods. If Maggie was their helper, why drag her out like this?

Viki stepped closer and pressed two fingers under Maggie’s chin, forcing her to lift her face.

“You wanted him,” Viki said softly. “You wanted her gone. Now you will prove you deserve what you wanted.”

Maggie’s eyes widened. “I did not agree to…”

Viki’s hand moved fast. She slapped Maggie hard enough that Maggie’s head snapped to the side. “You do not get to change your mind now,” Viki said. “You already made your choice.”

The rogues began dragging Maggie toward the darker part of the forest. I did not come down, and I am glad I didn't.

'I told you not to trust her. We should have told our mate,' my wolf grumbled.

"There's no point in discussing this now. We're here now. We survived,' I responded.

I did not have the energy to argue. I finally climbed down from the tree and made my way back to my original hiding spot. I kept

my steps light and avoided dry leaves. The last thing I needed was one of those rogues doubling back because they heard me.

When I reached the cave, I crouched just inside and then I attempted to reach out through the mate bond. 'Nolan, can you hear me?'

The bond flared instantly, so strong it almost hurt. 'Talia? TALIA?' His voice hit my mind hard, causing me to flinch. 'Is that really you?'

'Yes, yes, it's me,' I said. 'I'm alive.'

There was a pause that felt like him trying to hold himself together.

'Tell me where you are. I'll come get you right now,' Nolan demanded.

'Near the northern border. I am hiding in a cave. I am safe for now.'

'I am coming. Don't move.'

I waited, listening for footsteps. My wolf stayed tense. She was ready to take over if we needed to fight. It only took a few minutes for Nolan to find me, but it felt like hours.

Nolan's scent reached the cave first and then he was there.

"Nolan," I whispered.

He ran to me and dropped to one knee in front of me. "You're covered in blood," he muttered. Nolan's hands moved over me

quickly. He checked my shoulders, my arms, my face.

"Are you hurt?" he asked. "Where are they? What did they do to you?"

"The blood isn't mine. Not all of it. I just have some bruises and cuts, but nothing is broken," I replied.

"This is my fault," Nolan said hoarsely. "I should have never left your side."

He pulled me into his arms before I could answer, holding me so tightly it made my ribs ache. I pressed my face into his shoulder and breathed him in until the shaking in my body eased.

When I was calmer, I pulled back enough to look at him. "Nolan, this is not your fault." I kissed him. He kissed back as if kissing me was breathing air into my lungs.

Nolan pulled back and said, "I need to get you home. I received a ransom letter after you were kidnapped but I think it's fake

now."

"It was probably from Viki," I said.

Nolan frowned in confusion. “Viki? Viki is in Bloodmoon territory?”

“Yes,” I said. “She ordered the rogues to take me.”

Nolan’s expression morphed into pure rage. “I should have killed her, and I plan to rectify that tonight. I will meet her and put

an end to this.”

“No,” I said immediately. “It is a trap. Do not go.”

“I know it is, but that doesn’t mean she will be able to beat me,” Nolan said.

“We don’t know that,” I countered. “We have underestimated her too many times.”

Through the mate bond, I could feel Nolan fighting with his wolf to go and snap Viki’s neck right now. He exhaled slowly as he forced his wolf to calm down.

“Don’t worry. I will play along and find out what she is planning.”