Barren Luna 251

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & FIFTY ONE

Talia's POV

Nolan had finished showering when I woke. He was getting dressed, trying not to wake me, while I was enjoying the view.

"Good morning," I yawned. "What's going on that has you up so early?"

"Nothing. Just getting a jump on the day. I don't want to spend the entire day in my office today," Nolan replied. He kissed me on my forehead before heading to the door. "Come to the office when you are ready."

"It may be a while," I responded. "I have something to confirm first."

Nolan paused in the doorway and turned around. "Everything alright?"

"Yes, nothing for you to worry about," I replied.

"When you say it like that, it makes me feel like I should worry," Nolan chuckled but I could tell he was concerned.

"I promise I will explain everything later," I reassured. Nolan hesitated for another second, nodded, and left.

'Why didn't you tell him?' my wolf asked.

'Because we could be wrong about Maggie,' I replied.

By the time I got to the dining room, breakfast was already laid out. Clara poured my tea as

I sat down. Maggie stood near the door to the kitchen, awaiting instructions.

Maggie met my eyes briefly and smiled. She didn't seem nervous, but that didn't mean she wasn't hiding anything.

"Maggie, I need you to do something for me," I stated.

"Yes, Luna?"

"Nolan rushed out this morning and I think he left the wall construction record in the study. You know, the bound one with the contractor notes. Can you go and fetch it for me?"

Maggie's eyes widened slightly before she composed herself. "Luna, I am not permitted in the study," she reminded me.

"I know," I said. "I am giving you permission now. It should be on the desk or on the shelf nearest the door. Go get it for me."

Maggie hesitated again, longer this time. Her hands moved slightly against each other.

"Maggie, is there something wrong?" I asked.

"No, of course not," Maggie said quickly. "I will get it." She bowed and then left the dining room.

'She's going to take that map,' my wolf huffed.

'We don't know that for sure,' I said.

‘What if she does? What are we going to do if the tunnel locations are leaked?’

‘I won’t let that happen. I plan to catch her in the act and not miss her entirely,’ I said.

‘And if she does not take the map?’

‘Then, we will chalk this up to an odd occurrence. We will continue to watch her until we have determined she is worthy of our trust again.’

I gave her two minutes. Then I set down my fork, told Clara I would be right back, and walked to the wing

The door to the study was ajar. I frowned. ‘Reckless,’ my wolf growled.

Maggie couldn’t even be bothered to close the door behind her. Anyone could have come in behind her. I pushed the door open slowly.

Maggie was standing at the couch with her back to the door. She had pulled the storage box out from behind the couch where I hid it the second time. The lid was on one of the cushions. She was holding the box and was actively taking the map out of the box.

“Maggie.”

She turned around quickly. The color left her face immediately. The box tilted in her hands. She caught it before it fell but the map dropped to the floor.

“Luna! I…um… I was…” Maggie stammered.

I walked in and picked up the map. “I asked for the construction record,” I told her. “Not this.”

Maggie's hands were shaking. She looked at the map in my hands, then at me, and then she went down to her knees.

"Luna, I am so sorry," she pleaded. "Please, I am so sorry."

"Get up, Maggie."

She did not move. She stayed on her knees with her head down and her hands pressed flat against her thighs.

"Get up," I growled. "I am not going to speak to you while you are on the floor."

She rose slowly. She stood in front of me, but she looked down, refusing to look me in the eye.

"Look at me," I ordered and Maggie did. "Tell me what you were doing."

Maggie said nothing. Her jaw flexed. My wolf paced within me, her patience wearing thin.

"Maggie, I do not want to repeat myself again."

Still, Maggie said nothing.

"I could have easily let Nolan execute you for what you did with the rogues," I continued. "I gave you an opportunity to regain my trust, and this is what you did with it. I don't believe you would squander your second chance for no reason. Are you being pressured again?"

'She is a traitor. Let's get rid of her. Our mate will understand,' my wolf urged.

“If you are working against this pack, you will be exiled, potentially executed as you are a repeat offender. I need you to understand how serious this is,” I said firmly.

“Luna, I swear to you I am not working against this pack. I am not a traitor. I would never do anything to hurt Bloodmoon,” Maggie exclaimed.

“Then explain this to me right now. This is your last chance.”

“It was my mate,” Maggie finally admitted. “He asked me to take it. He wanted to see where the tunnels were I told him I would not steal it. I said I would just bring it out and let him look at it and put it back before anyone noticed ”

‘Goddess, how foolish is she?’ my wolf scoffed as Maggie started crying.

“And you believed him?!” I asked.

“He said it was to keep us safe. He said ordinary pack members would not be allowed to use the tunnels first it something happened and he needed to know where they were. I did not think I was betraying anyone. I am so sorry, Luma. I am so sorry”

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & FIFTY TWO

Talia’s POV

Maggie wiped her face with the back of her hand. She took a breath before she spoke. “He saw what happened with the bear, what the mad rogue blood did to the bear. Mason has not been able to stop thinking about it since. He wanted to see the map because he wanted to know where the tunnels were. He said if something like that happened inside the pack, he needed to know how to get me out. Mason, my mate, is not a traitor, Luna.”

I swore under my breath. Clearly, we had not been careful enough with hiding what we were doing. Maggie thought Mason meant well, but I did not think that was his real reason for wanting her to get the map.

“I want you to hear me clearly, Maggie. If something happens in this pack, I will personally see to it that every pack member has access to those tunnels. I will not leave anyone behind. But I cannot disclose the location of those passages right now,” I finally responded.

“Why not?” she asked.

‘Who is she to question us?’ my wolf snarled and I pushed her down.

“If the wrong person finds out where those tunnels are, they become useless overnight,” I explained. “I will not risk that.”

“I understand what you are saying,” Maggie said. “But he is not a spy. He is a warrior who has served this pack for years. He just wanted reassurance.”

“Then he should have come to me himself,” I answered. “Or to Nolan.”

“He did not think he would be taken seriously,” Maggie argued.

“That is not a reason to send you into a restricted room to take something that belongs to neither of you,” I countered.

“Please Luna. I just need it for the night and I’ll return it,” Maggie begged.

“Did you not hear what I just said?” I asked.

“I know, I know, but he’s not a traitor. He’s not a spy. This would ease his mind,” Maggie continued to beg.

‘She is still begging for it to appease her mate. This feels wrong,’ my wolf huffed.

“Maggie, I need to meet him immediately,” I said firmly.

“What? Why? I planned on introducing you to him after he marks me,” Maggie said.

“That is my condition. You want me to consider giving you access to the map. Bring him to me first. If he is as trustworthy as you say, then this should not be an issue and I will happily show him the map,” I said.

Maggie hesitated for a long moment before she looked at me with desperation. “Luna, please,” she said. “I am not asking you to give it to us permanently. I am asking for one night. He looks at it, we will return it tomorrow morning, and no one has to know it moved. I swear to you we mean no harm to this pack.”

“I understand that you believe that,” I said. “But my answer is still the same. Bring him to me or no map.”

Maggie hesitated. I watched her and I could see that she understood what the hesitation meant.

“He will not like that,” she murmured.

“And why would he not like it?” I asked. “It is a reasonable request unlike what he asked of you.”

“What do you mean?”

“He asked you to walk into a restricted study and take a classified document. He knew what you were risking and he asked you to risk it anyway,” I explained. “If Nolan had found you here instead of me, you would not be standing here right now. You would

be facing banishment. At best.”

For a split second, I saw shame in her eyes before she dropped her head. Maggie knew this was wrong, but what I couldn’t figure out was why she was still going through with it. Was Mason blackmailing her?

“A man who loves you does not put you in danger like that,” I continued. “He finds another way. To me, what he asked of you is not the action of someone who loves you enough.”

“That is not fair,” Maggie shot back. “He did it because he loves me. He wanted to protect us. You cannot hold that against him.”

“I am not holding it against him. I am telling you what I see. You nearly lost everything this morning because of a request he made. Would you have done that to him if you were in his position?”

“You are wrong. He loves me,” Maggie retorted but her voice came out weak and shaky. “I know he does. I will not stand here and let you tell me otherwise. You do not know him, and you do not know us.”

“Then let me know about him,” I pressed. “Bring him to me. Prove me wrong about him.”

“Fine. I’ll…” Maggie stopped midsentence. She put one hand against the wall behind her.

“Maggie,” I said, noticing how pale she had become. “Are you okay?”

She did not answer. Her eyes went unfocused and her knees gave way. I caught her arm as she went limp. I laid her back on the couch as Maggie was completely unconscious.

“I need someone now!” I called.

Two guards entered the study within seconds. “Luna, what’s wrong?”

“Maggie collapsed. Take her to the infirmary now.”

The guards lifted Maggie up carefully and quickly walked out of the study. I followed them to the infirmary. When Maggie was being seen by the doctor, I turned to the guards and said, “Do not speak of this to anyone.”

“Yes, Luna.”

One guard left and the other stayed with me. After about ten minutes, I told him he could go. It was not a long wait after that.

The doctor met me in the waiting room with a serious expression.

“Is she alright?” I asked.

“She is stable, but…” he said and paused before leaning forward to whisper. “Lana, Maggie is pregnant.”

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & FIFTY THREE

Maggie’s POV

I woke up dizzy. The ceiling above me was unfamiliar and it took me a moment to understand where I was or how I had got there.

The first thing I heard was Nolan’s voice. He was speaking quickly and his tone was tight in the way it got when he was worried about something he could not control.

“What happened to her? Why did she collapse?”

“Her body is under a lot of stress. She needs rest and time,” another voice responded.

“Stress does not cause someone to collapse like that, doctor. It has to be more than that,” Nolan responded.

I lay still and listened and tried to work out what was wrong with me. My head ached and my mouth was dry. I felt weak and just did not feel right. Maybe Nolan was right. Did I pick up a cold? Was the mad rogue infection airborne?

‘Stop,’ my wolf hushed. ‘You are overthinking. You are fine.’ I was not entirely sure I believed her, but I did not have the energy

to argue.

Then I heard Talia’s voice. “Nolan, calm down. The doctor said she is fine. He wouldn’t lie to you.”

I did not know what had caused me to collapse. I remembered I had been so angry with Talia for saying Mason wasn’t right for me. Then, suddenly everything went dark without warning. That was all I could remember.

I turned my head. Talia was on the other side of the room speaking quietly with Nolan. She noticed me move and broke off the conversation. She came over and pulled a chair beside the bed and sat down.

“You’re awake. How do you feel?” she asked.

“Confused,” I said honestly. “And weird, I guess, Luna.”

“I have something I need to tell you, Maggie. I want you to stay calm, but you are going to be a mother,” Talia said.

“What?”

“You’re pregnant, Maggie.”

I gaped at Talia. I didn’t know what to say. I felt excited and frightened at the same time and I could not decide which was

stronger.

Nolan walked over and all the excitement faded away when I saw his expression. He looked disappointed and I understood why.

By our tradition, a mate mark comes before anything else. It tells the pack who a she-wolf belongs to, and it tells her who is responsible for her. To be pregnant and unmarked meant one of two things. Either the she-wolf stepped out on the mate bond, or the male had not done right by her. Nolan would be thinking about the latter.

“Who is he?” Nolan asked grimly.

I felt uneasy and I could not tell how much of it was about Mason and how much of it was about not knowing what Talia had or had not told him about what happened in the study. I looked at her quickly. Her expression gave me nothing back. I did not know if that meant she had stayed quiet or if she was simply waiting to see how I handled this first.

Nolan pulled up the second chair and sat down across from me. “How could you allow this to happen?”

“Nolan, calm down,” Talia interjected.

“No, Talia. She needs to hear this,” Nolan said. “Maggie, you have not been marked, and you are pregnant. I need to know who this man is. I think of you as a sister. I have been responsible for you over a long time. And I need to know he is treating you the way you deserve before I can let this go.”

I felt my throat tighten. The way he said it, without anger, made the situation worse. I couldn’t believe that i almost betrayed his trust again.

“His name is Mason,” I finally said. “He is a warrior and he has been with the pack for some time. He intends to mark me. It has just not happened yet.”

“I want to meet him today,” Nolan said firmly.

“He plans on marking me on…”

“No, Maggie. This is not a request,” Nolan interrupted. “Bring him to the pack house this evening.”

“Or we can go to them,” Talia suggested. “I think ordering him to the pack house may come off as a threat, don’t you think?”

Nolan frowned. “If he cared about Maggie properly, he would not be scared to meet with me.” Talia raised an eyebrow and Nolan sighed, “Fine. What did you suggest?”

“Maggie, will go home early today,” Talia said. “Rest this afternoon. We will come to you for dinner tonight, Maggie, and we will bring gifts with us.” She held my gaze. “I think you will be pleased.”

Talia was watching me carefully and I understood what she was trying to imply. She had not told Nolan about the map, and she still intended to give it to me once she met Mason. I reached forward and took her hand in both of mine.

“Luna,” I managed. My voice came out smaller than I intended. My eyes were filling and I stopped trying to hold back the tears.

“Why are you crying? Did you think I was going to run him out of the pack?” Nolan questioned.

“No, I just…”

“Nolan, every small thing is going to make a woman cry for the next several months. It rains, cry. A flower wilts, cry. That is just pregnancy,” Talia interrupted and I laughed despite myself.

Nolan stood and put his hand briefly on the top of my head, the way an older brother would. I leaned into his touch. “Clara will handle your tasks today,” he said. “You are to go straight home and not to overexert yourself.”

“I understand. I will prepare a proper dinner, and I will have everything ready before you arrive.”

“Good,” he said. “We will see you tonight.”

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & FIFTY FOUR

Maggie's POV

The doctor handed me a small bundle of herbs when he signed my discharge papers.

"Brew these into a tea before bed," he said. "Stay off your feet for the rest of the day."

"I will do my best," I told him.

The doctor gave me a long look that said he had heard that before and did not believe it. "I mean it, Maggie. You are in early pregnancy. Your body is already working harder than usual. You need rest tonight."

"I promise I will rest," I told him again.

The doctor nodded and handed me a printed sheet with detailed care instructions.

"Come back in two weeks for a follow-up. If your condition is worse, I'll request Alpha to order you to stay here," he warned.

Back in my room I sat on the edge of the bed and put the pregnancy report on the bedside table. I had been thinking about how to tell Mason since Talia told me I was pregnant. Mason had talked about children before in the way people do when they want something badly enough, but too afraid to admit it.

'He will be happy when you tell him. Any mate would be,' my wolf said. 1

I pressed my hand over my stomach once and then I got up, went to the kitchen, and started on dinner.

I started with his favorite soup and worked outward from there. Halfway through the second dish I felt dizzy, and I sat down at the kitchen table and waited for it to pass.

‘Perhaps we inform Luna that we need to rest or get Clara to help,’ my wolf suggested.

‘No, we need to do this on our own. I just need a moment,’ I told her.

I got up again when it passed and kept cooking. By the time six o’clock came the table was set. It took longer than I should have, I was exhausted, but I was pleased with myself.

My wolf spoke up while I was folding the napkins. ‘You should tell him Talia and Nolan are coming,’ she said.

‘No, he will be upset about the change in plans,’ I disagreed.

‘He will understand,’ she replied. ‘Receiving blessings and gifts from the Alpha and the Luna on the night of your marking is the highest honor this pack can offer. Most wolves go their whole lives without it.’

I folded the last napkin and set it down. ‘You are right,’ I told her. ‘I will tell him when he arrives.’

But when I thought about how that conversation would go, I changed my mind. I did not want to spend the first minutes of his evening managing his reaction. It was easier to let him see them at the door and explain after. He would understand once they were standing in front of him with gifts in their hands.

Mason arrived thirty minutes later. He came through the door and stopped when he saw the table.

“You have been busy for a wonderful dinner,” Mason said as he took off his shoes at the door.

“I wanted tonight to be perfect,” I told him.

Mason smirked. “You’re very eager to be marked, aren’t you?” He chuckled as he came over to kiss me.

I blushed and playfully pushed him back with one hand against his chest. “You act like that’s a bad thing. Are you not excited?”

Mason leaned forward and said huskily, “I cannot wait, my love. I have been thinking about nothing else all day.” He nipped and kissed my neck causing pleasure to erupt and flow down my body. I pushed away from him before we forgot the meal and went

straight to marking.

“Hold your horses,” I said. “We eat first.”

“Fine,” Mason fake pouted. He pulled out a chair and sat down. He looked around at the full spread on the table and then back at me with amazement. “You did all of this today? I must say you are the best mate in the world!”

His words warmed me, and I nodded softly. “I’m glad you like it.”

Mason smiled at that. “So… this was your surprise?”

“There is not the only surprise tonight,” I said. “There’s something else I think you will be thrilled about.”

Mason’s expression became serious. He set the glass down and leaned forward in his chair. “Is it the map?” he asked.

Before I could answer there was a knock at the door.

Mason looked at the door and then at me. “Guests?”

“It’s part of the surprise,” I said, grinning.

I hurried to the door and pulled it open. “Welcome!”

Talia stood on the other side with Nolan just behind her. She was holding a cake and Nolan held two boxes, one in each hand. They were both smiling when I opened the door.

“Come in,” I said quickly, stepping aside, excited for them to finally meet my mate.

But the moment they stepped inside and saw Mason, something shifted.

Talia’s smile dropped and the color drained from her face. Behind her, Nolan went still, like he’d just come face to face with someone he hated.

‘Weird. It’s like they already knew each other,’ my wolf muttered.

“Luna, what’s wrong?” I asked quietly.

Talia didn’t respond, her body went rigid. The cake slipped from her hands and hit the floor with a dull thud. I reached for it, but I

was too late.

When I looked back up, her gaze had locked past me, burning with pure hatred at Mason.

“Jason! Why are you here?!” Talia hissed.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & FIFTY FIVE

Talia’s POV

I knew his face before my mind caught up with what I was seeing.

Jason.

He had changed his appearance but not enough. The moment our eyes met I felt rage build up in me. I had been right the first time I saw him when the wall was being built, but I had doubted myself.

“Jason, why are you here?!” I hissed.

Maggie stood up and looked between Jason and I. “Luna, you’re mistaken. His name is Mason,” she said.

The confusion in her voice was genuine, and it made my chest hurt. Maggie did not know about Jason’s past and the horrible things he had done in the name of ‘love’. ‘She’s not going to listen to us. We need our mate to command her to us,’ my wolf advised.

‘Order Maggie to come to us right now,’ I told Nolan through our bond.

“Maggie, come to me right now,” Nolan ordered.

“He is my mate. I think you have mistaken him for someone else, Luna, Alpha, please,” Maggie continued as she began walking

towards us.

Jason pushed away from the table and Nolan dropped the gifts. He lunged forward to subdue Jason, but Jason moved faster than I expected. His hand closed around Maggie’s throat, and he pulled her back against him before Nolan reached him. Nolan stopped.

“Back,” Jason growled. “Both of you. Step back or I will kill her!”

“Mason, what are you doing?” Maggie’s hands came up to his forearm. “Mason, please. Calm down. Whatever this is, we can talk about it. You are hurting me. Please calm down.”

“You are so stupid. Everything would have been fine if you hadn’t invited them,” Jason growled. “Just shut up!”

“Mason, please…”

He squeezed her throat. Maggie choked and went silent. Her eyes found mine and what I saw in them made my chest ache. Confusion. Pain. She had trusted the wrong person again and she was just now realizing it.

Nolan’s Alpha aura was rolling off him. His eyes were fixed on Jason with pure hatred and the veins in his neck stood out from the effort of holding himself back.

“You had the opportunity to move on and do better, but you just couldn’t help yourself. I should have killed you when I had the chance,” Nolan snarled.

“You should have,” Jason agreed. His grip on Maggie tightened. She made a small sound.

“She’s carrying your child!” I blurted out.

Jason froze. For a moment, he looked conflicted and his grip on Maggie’s neck loosened for a second. Then, Jason’s face hardened. “That is a trick,” he said flatly. “You would say anything right now.”

“The doctor confirmed it today,” I said. “Ask Maggie yourself if you don’t believe me.”

“I do not care,” Jason growled.

Maggie flinched as though she had been struck. Her eyes were still locked on mine. I saw as the tears began to slide down her

face.

‘He needs to be killed. He hurts anyone he touches,’ my wolf growled.

I agreed. I could not let Maggie be harmed any further for his obsession with me.

“Take me instead,” I offered. “Let Maggie go. I am the one you came for.”

Nolan’s head snapped toward me. “Talia, no!”

‘Don’t worry,’ I told him through our mate’s link. ‘I know what I am doing.’

Jason studied me for a long moment before saying, “Walk to me. No sudden movements.”

I did so. He grabbed my arm with his free arm before releasing Maggie and kicking her toward Nolan. Nolan caught Maggie as she stumbled forward.

“Get out of my way or I’ll snap her neck,” Jason growled and Nolan and Maggie stepped out of our way.

Jason pulled me toward the door and out into the corridor. At the border gate the guards looked at Nolan. Nolan gave a short nod and they stepped aside. We went through and out onto the road beyond the pack border.

“You do not have to do this,” I said. Jason kept his grip on me. He kept walking, and I kept pace with him. “It is over. Whatever you came here to do, it is finished. Surrender now and this ends without anyone else getting hurt.”

“I don’t think so. You have no control right now,” Jason responded.

“Maggie loved you,” I continued. “Whatever you told her, she believed every word of it. She risked everything she had built in this pack for you. Does none of that mean anything to you?”

“I do not love Maggie,” Jason snapped. “I loved you, but you didn’t love me.”

“I did at one time, but you cheated on our mate bond because you thought I was an omega. You never loved me Jason,” I argued.

“I told you I was tricked! And you still chose Nolan over me!” Jason retorted. “I have only ever loved you and you betrayed me!”

Jason’s delusion was not flattering. It was chilling because I was sure Jason was insane. He had everything he ever wanted, a child, but he couldn’t believe it.

Behind us, Nolan said, “You are outside our territory now, Jason. Release her.”

“No, she and I are going to die here together,” Jason said as he pulled me closer like crazy.

Then, Jason cried out in pain and his grip on my neck went slack. An arrow had caught him in the shoulder. He stumbled back and I stepped away from him.

Nolan reached me in seconds. His hands moved over my face and my arms checking for injury.

“I am fine,” I told him. “I am fine.”

Jason was on one knee on the road ahead of us. I pulled free of Nolan’s hands and moved toward him.

“Luna Talia!” Maggie’s voice came from behind me. She had followed us through the gate. “Please. Don’t kill him.”

I stopped.

Jason looked up at me and lunged. He had a dagger in his uninjured hand. I did not step back fast enough.

Maggie stepped in front of me to stop Jason. The dagger sank into her chest the next second. Maggie tell back into my arms and

I lowered her to the ground. Blood began pouring from the wound and she began to choke.

“Maggie, NOOO!” I said as I pressed both hands against the wound.

“You bastard!” Nolan snarled as he lunged for Jason.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & FIFTY SIX

Talia’s POV

Maggie’s breath was shallow and wet. I pressed harder on her wound, but she was losing blood faster than I could stop it.

“Stay with me,” I told her. “Maggie. Please stay with me.”

Maggie opened her mouth to speak but only more blood bubbled up. She coughed hard and I felt it warm against my hands. ” Don’t try to speak.”

“I am sorry,” she said. Her voice was barely there. “I am so sorry, Luna. I let them deceive me again. I hurt you again.”

“Stop,” I said. “You did not hurt me. You saved me. Do you understand that? You saved me!”

Maggie attempted to speak again, but she began to gasp. She strained as she tried to get air in. Maggie’s eyes were glassy, but she was still looking at me.

‘No, no, she couldn’t die, not like this!’ I thought.

“The baby,” I pleaded. “Maggie, you have to hold on for the baby. Help is on the way.”

Behind me I heard Nolan yelling. “Where is the healer? What is taking so long?”

“You’re going to be okay. You have to keep breathing. Think about the baby,” I told Maggie.

“I’m…sorry,” Maggie muttered.

“You don’t have to keep telling me you’re sorry. You have to stay alive. Stay alive! That’s how I will forgive you,” I yelled at her. Maggie nodded. Maggie’s hand came up slowly and found my wrist. Her grip was weak, but she held onto me.

‘She is strong. She won’t give up,’ my wolf reassured me.

A few minutes passed and I felt Maggie’s grip loosening. “Maggie! Maggie, stay awake!” I said, “Nolan! Help me!”

“Hey, Maggie. Come on, Maggie. Open your eyes, it’s me, Nolan,” Nolan said, dropping down next to me. He tapped Maggie’s face and her eyes fluttered open. She focused on him smiling. “Stay awake. The healer is on the way.”

Maggie smiled faintly. Her eyes began to flutter. “Come on, Maggie, stay with us,” Nolan said before standing up to wave over

the healer.

Maggie’s eyes closed. Her chest rose once more and then it did not rise again. “Maggie, Maggie wake up!” I wailed. Nolan pulled me up from the ground and held me and I let him.

The healer arrived and knelt beside her, and I already knew there was nothing to be done. I turned into Nolan’s chest and cried. Nolan held me and I could tell from his trembling breaths that he was crying too.

We buried her the next day.

Nolan told the pack her funeral would be at noon. Della immediately volunteered to help Clara with the arrangements. I couldn't work. All I could think about was Maggie's blood on my hands.

"Luna, you don't have to do this," Clara said when I showed up to help.

"No, I have to…I need to do this," I told her. "Just tell me what to do and I'll do it."

Clara nodded and began giving out instructions. All three of us moved quietly through the preparation. At one point she stopped and pressed her hand flat against the table and stood there without moving for a few minutes.

"Clara, are you okay?" I asked.

"I have done this for dozens of our pack members," Clara replied. "I didn't expect it to be this hard for her."

I didn't know what to say. Only those close to us knew what Maggie had done. Even though I was giving her a chance, there were some that saw her as unredeemable and it seemed Clara had been one of those people.

"She was hard on me when I first came to this pack house," Clara continued. "She had high standards that she did not change for anyone. I used to think she was unkind." She paused. "I think now she just wanted to be loved. Maggie did not deserve to die like this."

"No, she didn't," Della added.

Clara looked at Della in surprise. "You really believe that?" she asked. Everyone knew how much Della hated Maggie from her past betrayal, so hearing her agree was shocking.

“She died protecting Luna Talia,” Della explained. “Maggie made things right and she paid the ultimate price. So, no, she didn’t deserve to die like this.”

“Della…” I started.

“Come on. Preparations are complete. We need to welcome people in,” Della said and I nodded.

I was surprised to see so many pack members show up for Maggie’s funeral. Warriors, kitchen staff she had trained, and the majority of rogues that she saved. They paid their respect, grieved for her, and told stories about her. The elders led the funeral. Nolan kept his composure, only speaking to tell everyone how she died bravely protecting me.

When the last of them had gone home, it was just Nolan and I at her grave. He finally allowed the tears to fall. I gripped his hand tightly.

“Maggie, thank you. You didn’t have to do what you did and I’ll be forever grateful,” I said. It still made me sick to my stomach that I doubted her. If I had known it was Jason, all this could have been avoided. I could have saved her.

“I am sorry, Maggie,” Nolan said quietly. “I didn’t protect you.”

I closed my eyes and clasped my hands together. “Moon Goddess, please give her peace and in the next life, let her find the love she couldn’t find in this lifetime.”

Nolan and I walked back to the pack house. Grief was now gone and replaced with anger. How did Jason get into the pack without us knowing?

“We should be happy,” I finally said.

“What?”

“We should be happy, celebrating her pregnancy, not this. This is all Jason’s fault. Everything he touches, he ruins,” 1 growled.

Nolan was quiet for a long time. “I know,” he said.

“He even tried to convince Maggie to steal the map. Thankfully, he never got it,” I continued. “From that to the burned supply point, it was all him from the very beginning.”

Nolan exhaled slowly. “I was foolish.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I was lenient with him, and it cost me my little sister.”

“Nolan, this was not your….”

“I will never make that mistake again,” Nolan said, cutting me off. “If he comes back, nothing will stop me from killing him!”

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & FIFTY SEVEN

Jason’s POV

Maggie was kneeling in front of me with a dagger buried in her chest. She was looking up at me with her hands pressed over the wound. Her mouth was moving, but I could not hear what she was saying. The blood continued to pour from her chest. It pooled around her knees and kept spreading.

Then I could hear her.

“Save me,” she said. “Please, Mason. Save me.”

“Maggie!”

Pain radiated from my shoulder as I jerked awake. I gasped in pain and automatically reached for my shoulder. It was bandaged with blood seeping through. I turned my head and found my father in the chair beside the bed with his arms folded.

“You’re finally awake,” Father said. “Don’t try to move too quickly or you’ll rip your stitches. I put in a lot of work to keep you alive.”

“How long?” I asked. “How long have I been out?”

“Twb days. The arrow was deeper than it looked and you pulled it out yourself which cut an artery. You were lucky that they were focused on that girl instead of tracking you down. You would’ve died from the blood loss if we couldn’t go straight back to the safe house,” Father replied.

“Thanks,” I said.

My father scoffed. “I should have let you die. Do you know the problems you’ve caused?”

I couldn’t help but sneer. That was the Father I knew. He never did anything kind unless it benefited him.

“You nearly died because of a plan that should never have been attempted in the first place,” my father said with disdain as leaned forward in his chair. “I told you that using the girl was too much of a risk. You assured me you had it under control. What do you have to say for yourself?”

“I did have it under control. I…”

“You did NOT have it under control, and the Rogue King is not a patient man,” my father snapped, interrupting me. “He wanted those tunnel locations, and you came back without them.”

“I got inside the pack, didn’t I?” I retorted.

“Watch your tone, boy,” my father growled.

“I had access that no external agent would have had. I was there for months without being detected. That is much more than what you have done in years.”

My father chuckled darkly. “And yet here you are empty handed and injured. You did not get the map. That was the only thing that mattered. It was better that you died than come back empty handed.”

“Then, why did you save me? You could’ve just left me there…”

“Because you’re more useful to me alive than dead.”

“The plan isn’t a complete failure. Maggie is in love with me. She’ll be upset with them for hurting me. She will get the map tor me,” I said.

My father laughed coldly and said, “That ship has sailed.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You killed that girl,” my father replied “Died in the dirt like the useless trash she was.”

‘He shouldn’t talk about her like that,’ my wolf growled. ‘She didn’t deserve this. I told you we shouldn’t have used her ‘

Hearing my father say Maggie died like it was an annoyance made me feel things that I had not expected. Anger. Grief. Regret. I had not loved Maggie, but I did like her. She had done everything I asked without question and took care of me in a way I had not felt since losing Talia. It was a shame that she had died.

“Don’t tell me you have gotten soft for that little stray,” my father taunted.

I bit my tongue and pushed down the emotions I was feeling. “What is next then?” I asked, ignoring his taunt.

“Since Bloodmoon was a colossal failure, we will move on to the next stage,” my father said as he stood and walked over to the window to peer out. “We are going after Silverfang.”

“Are you serious?” I asked.

“We will kill the Alpha King first,” my father replied.

My eyes widened. Had he lost his mind? Talia would have already reported to her father and Solon about what happened. There was no chance of infiltrating Silverfang either.

“I had been working on a project with our doctors. Before we were expelled from Shadowclaw, the project had been completed. They had created a poison as lethal as the mad rogue blood but more discreet,” my father said. “It is slower to kill, and it leaves no trace that a healer would recognize as anything other than organ failure.”

“You’re going to poison the Alpha King?”

“No, you are. When he dies, Solon loses his most powerful ally. The other packs will turn on him and Talia’s title as Princess will mean nothing.”

‘He is walking us to our death,’ my wolf whined. ‘He has gone insane.’

“There is a bounty on my head now. How would I even manage this?” I asked.

“You let me handle that,” my father replied.

“And if your plan fails? What then?”

“It will not fail. I allied myself with the Rogue King once before. I have never failed with him backing me.”

“You never told me that.”

“I provided the Rogue King with the intelligence he needed to kill Nolan’s father, but I had not accounted for that bastard Rudolf. He survived and became the Alpha King. That was my miscalculation,” my father explained. “I’ve taken years to get back to this point. I will not fail again.”

“But what about me? The Alpha King sent me out to kill his people. How could the Rogue King see me as an ally now?” I

exclaimed.

“The Rogue King has not forgotten that I helped him get revenge against Nolan’s father. He understands that we had to do things to not raise alarm with the Alpha King. An alliance with him still stands and with his backing you will have the leverage to take the throne.”

I thought about Talia’s face in Maggie’s doorway. The way she had looked at me with contempt. She looked at me like the years between us and everything I had done to try to get back to her meant nothing at all.

‘Why can’t you understand?! You betrayed her,’ my wolf snarled. ‘We did not deserve another chancel’

‘No! She betrayed us, tricked us. She should have given me another chance,’ I argued.

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CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & FIFTY EIGHT

Nolan's POV

Talia had not been sleeping well this past week. Every night she would only sleep for a few hours before waking to stare at the ceiling. Talia did not want to talk about it and I didn't pressure her.

At breakfast she sat across from me. Talia looked like a shell of her former self. She was pale with bags under her eyes.

'We will have to get the doctor involved. Our mate needs to sleep,' my wolf suggested.

Talia turned to the maid standing nearest to her and said, "Maggie, can you add sugar for my coffee?"

The maid did not move. Talia registered what she had said and the remaining color that was left on her face drained away.

"Leave us," I said as I stood and opened the door. They left without a word and I closed the door. I pulled my chair beside Talia's and put my arm around her. She turned into me and cried. She pressed her face against my shoulder, and I held her with my hand on the back of her head.

"She never got any of it," Talia said. "The marking. The child. Everything he promised her and told her she would have. She died on that road without a single one of those things."

“I know,” I said. I was still grieving Maggie as well. When alone, I allow myself to cry but I refuse to do it in front of Talia. Talia needed my support and one of us had to keep it together to keep the pack going.

“She was so happy in the infirmary when she found out,” Talia continued. “You saw her face. She was frightened and happy at the same time. Maggie should be here right now discussing the baby.”

“This is not your fault, Talia. You can’t keep torturing yourself like this.”

“How is it not my fault? He chose her because of me! He made her believe she was getting everything she had been waiting for and she was never anything to him except a way to reach me,” Talia exclaimed. “She deserved better than that. She deserved someone who actually wanted her.”

Talia wiped her face with her napkin and set her hands in her lap.

“I should have told you sooner,” she said. “When Maggie told me what Jason had asked her to do, I chose to handle it myself instead of coming to you. If I had brought you in immediately, we might have identified who he was before that dinner ever happened.”

“None of what you did was wrong, Talia. Why can’t you see that?” I argued. “You acted as a Luna should. You were protecting Maggie and you were right. I probably would have made the situation worse at the time.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do know that. Maggie betrayed us both and something like this I would not have been able to forgive, but you granted her mercy as a Luna should. You also told Maggie directly that a man who loved her would not put her in that kind of danger and you were right about that. The problem was that we did not know who we were actually dealing with.”

“I should have known better. All of this was too much of a coincidence,” Talia retorted.

“You can only say that now because of what we experienced. Jason spent months constructing a cover specifically so that no one would see through it until he was ready to act. You could not have identified him faster than you did and I would not have done better,” I argued.

Talia sighed and nodded. “You’re right,” she relented, “but Jason is not that smart nor creative. He didn’t do this alone I am sure his father helped him, but his father would not have the resources for something like that.”

“The smoke bomb smelled of rogue,” I said. “And I keep thinking about Viki. When she kidnapped you, she had enough rogues with her to carry it out.”

“I thought that was odd too,” Talia added. “Viki was not someone who commanded that kind of loyalty. She was reckless and she was not a leader Someone was supplying her with people and resources she had no way of building on her own.”

“Could it be the same person helping Jason and Michael?” I asked.

“Potentially. Both were aimed at the same target: me. That is not a coincidence I can ignore. Is there anyone who would have a grudge against you?” Talia replied.

“Not that I am aware. No one would dare go against me until now,” I answered. I had made sure my reputation was that of someone who was strict and merciless just so no one would dare do something like this. However, I had not gone out of my way to antagonize anyone.

“Either way, we need to be more careful moving forward until we find out the real culprit behind all of this,” Talia suggested.

“I have been thinking the same thing since the night Maggie died,” I agreed. “I have already expanded the search and put every Alpha in this region on notice. Jason’s name, his face, the name he was using inside this pack, and what he did here. The order is to take him alive. When we have him, we will find out who is behind all of this and make them pay for what they have done.”

Talia nodded and took a sip of her coffee. She regained some color in her face after talking. The food on her plate was untouched.

“Eat,” I said.

“I am not hungry.”

“I know, but you haven’t been eating or sleeping properly. You’re going to end up back in the infirmary like this. Eat something. Do it for me please.”

Talia picked up her fork without another word and made the effort. She had managed only a few bites before the door opened hard.

Della came through it with her face flushed and her breathing fast.

“Something has happened,” Della said.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & FIFTY NINE

Talia’s POV

Della was still in the doorway, catching her breath. She walked into the room and closed the door behind her Della looked around to see if anyone else was in the room.

“No one else is in here but us,” I said. “What happened?”

“Did we capture Jason?” Nolan asked.

“Goddess, I wish that was what I wanted to tell you,” Della said between gasps. Hearing that made a shiver run down my spine. “Della, you’re scaring me,” I said.

“I contacted Leslie to ask about how the research was going and whether she had made any progress,” Della began. “Leslie was telling me about it and then she mentioned that the Alpha King had been unwell. Then she stopped herself mid-sentence and asked me not to repeat it.”

“Unwell? Like sick? What do you mean unwell?” I asked. It was rare for our species to get sick. It didn’t make any sense.

“She didn’t tell me anything else. She told me to not tell you to keep you from worrying, but I thought you needed to know this,” Della replied.

Nolan frowned. I could feel his confusion from our mate bond. It was rare for us to get sick and now my father, the Alpha King, was sick. Had I angered the Moon Goddess somehow?

‘Perhaps it is not that serious,’ my wolf suggested. ‘Maybe he ate some bad meat.’

“How unwell?” I asked, wanting to believe my wolf was right.

“She did not say exactly,” Della explained. “But the way she stopped herself told me it was serious. She was choosing her words carefully and you know Leslie never chooses her words carefully.”

“How long ago did you call her?” Nolan asked.

“An hour ago,” Della said. “I came to you as soon as I could.”

“Thank you, Della,” I said. “You absolutely did the right thing by telling us.”

Della nodded and left, pulling the door closed behind her.

“Contact Solon, immediately,” Nolan said. He didn’t need to tell me twice. I was already reaching out through the mind link.

‘Solon, we need to talk.’

‘You know,’ Solon said, answering within seconds. He had probably been expecting it since the moment Leslie let it slip to Della

‘I don’t have all the details. Tell me what’s going on with our father.’

“Talia, it’s not a big deal.’

“Then, why did Leslie stop telling Della about it?’

‘Because she blows things out of proportion. You know this.’

‘Solon, you’re lying to me.’

‘You need to focus on Bloodmoon. I have it handled here.’

‘Do not talk to me like that. Do not tell me what to do. Even though I’m the Luna of Bloodmoon, I am still a Princess and your sister,’ I snapped. ‘Tell me what is happening with our father right now!’

There was a pause. It felt like minutes before he spoke, ‘Alright. He has been ill for a few days now.’

‘Days?! When were you going to tell me?’ I demanded.

‘We made the decision not to tell you while you were still dealing with everything that happened with Jason and Maggie. We didn’t want to add to your stress,’ Solon explained.

‘How many times am I going to have to tell you that I don’t need to be treated like a child? That was not your decision to make for me again,’ I snapped. ‘You should have told me as soon as you found out.’

‘You are right. I’m sorry,’ Solon replied.

“Tell me about the illness,’ I said.

‘Black marks appeared first on his arms, on the inside of his forearms, and they have been spreading since. Leslie has examined him thoroughly. It is not contagious. It does not appear to have originated from any known source of infection. But whatever it is, it is causing his body to deteriorate,’ Solon explained and I covered my mouth in horror. Nolan wrapped his arm around me to

support me.

“Talia?’

‘Has Leslie figured out what it is yet?’

‘Leslie has not been able to identify the source. She has tried every treatment she knows, and she has been working on it every single day since it appeared. She has herbal remedies that slow the progression, but she has not found a way to stop it or reverse

it,’ Solon continued.

I covered my face with my hands as I choked back a sob. How could he have gotten sick? Was it a poison? Was he allergic to something? Nothing was making sense.

‘How long does he have?’ I asked.

‘Leslie estimated roughly three months. She has been monitoring him closely and adjusting his treatment as the illness progresses. She is not giving up, and neither is he. But three months is where we are right now,’ Solon replied.

I did not say anything for a long moment. I thought about the way my father carried himself, the way every room he walked into felt different because he was in it. I had grown up watching him stand at the head of every meeting, every gathering, every difficult conversation, and I had never once seen him look like he did not know what to do next. I had never once thought about what it would look like to lose him because it had never felt like something that could actually happen.

‘We are going to do everything we can to cure him, Talia. You have my word. You don’t have to worry,’ Solon said after I had responded for a while.

‘I am coming,’ I finally said. ‘We will be there before evening. Have someone ready to meet us at the border.’

“Talia, please listen…’

‘I am coming, Solon. Have someone waiting at the border!’

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & SIXTY

Talia’s POV

Nolan had been watching my face the entire time as I spoke to Solon.

“It’s serious,” he said flatly. It wasn’t a question. He knew me enough to know.

“My father only has three months left,” I said.

Nolan cupped my face and said, “Talia, I’m so sorry.”

“It is a progressive illness. Leslie has not found a cure yet,” I continued.

“We’re going today,” Nolan declared.

“Right now? You’re with me?”

“Yes. Right now. I will call the pack meeting, you will speak to them, and then we will leave. Can you do that?”

“Yes.”

Nolan kissed my forehead. His eyes flashed and I heard his order through the pack link. The pack gathered quickly in the courtyard. By the time I stepped out to face them the word had already spread that something was wrong. No one spoke. All eyes

were on us.

“The Alpha King is ill,” I announced and there were murmurs of alarm amongst the pack. “It is serious. I need to go to him, and I do not know how long I will be away.”

A warrior near the front spoke up. “My condolences, Luna.”

Another asked, “Is there anything we can do, Luna?”

“Continue protecting this pack,” I replied. “That is what I need from you.”

“Chief Warrior Walden will oversee Bloodmoon while we are gone. You answer to him the same way you answer to me,” Nolon

announced.

“Yes, Alpha,” the pack responded.

“Dismissed,” Nolon said and the pack began to disperse.

Walden walked up to us and bowed slightly. “You can trust that I will make sure Bloodmoon is protected, Alpha and Luna. With the wall completed and the border secured, I do not anticipate any emergencies,” Walden assured us. “You have my word that Bloodmoon will be in order when you return.”

“Be vigilante, Walden,” Nolan cautioned. “Anything that arises, no matter how small, you contact us immediately.”

“Understood, Alpha,” Walden acknowledged.

As we were walking back to the pack house, Della and Marco approached us. Before they could speak, Nolon instructed, “One hour. We are leaving in one hour.”

“We will make the preparations,” Della confirmed.

We were at the border gate in under an hour. It was still morning when we left.

The road to Silverfang was long and it was giving me too much time to think. I kept running the numbers. Three months. Twelve weeks. Ninety days. It wasn’t enough time no matter how I looked at it.

‘Stop,’ my wolf growled.

‘I can’t help it.’

‘Yes, you can. He is still alive. It is not over yet,’ my wolf scolded.

‘I know, I know. You don’t have to yell at me.’

“Then, act like a Luna instead of a whimpering pup. Our father is strong!’ my wolf huffed.

I pulled my thoughts back and focused on the road in front of us. Nolan reached over at some point and took my hand. I held it until we reached the border.

We reached the border by early evening. The guards recognized me and stepped forward smiling.

“Luna Talia,” one of them called out. “We did not know you were coming. We would have prepared.”

For a moment, I looked at them in confusion before composing myself. Solon had not told them yet. I kept my expression easy and my voice even. “I wanted it to be a surprise,” I replied. “It has been too long.”

“Of course, Luna. We will send word ahead to prepare your room,” the guard said as he waved us through. Now that we were in Silverfang’s territory, I was becoming even more antsy. Marco and Della stayed behind to bring our belongings to our rooms. Nolan wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me close to him as we walked to the hospital.

“He is still alive,” Nolan murmured, low enough for only me to hear. “Three months is a lot. A lot of time for Leslie to find a cure. Do not think about the end. Think about the time you do have.”

I nodded. Of all the people who would understand what I was going through right now would be Nolan. He didn’t have time with

his father.

Solon and Leslie were waiting at the hospital entrance. Solon walked over and hugged me as soon as he saw me. He held on longer than he usually did. I could feel the tension in his body and held him tighter.

“How are you?” I asked when he released me.

“Better now that you’re here,” Solon replied with a weak smile.

I swallowed hard and finally asked, “How is father?”

“Resting,” Solon reported. “It has been a difficult few days, but he is stable this afternoon.”

“He knows you are coming,” Leslie added. “He has been asking about you since Solon told him this morning.”

“More like yelling at me for telling you,” Solon muttered.

She led us through the corridors to the VIP ward. Solon pushed open the door to my father’s room and stepped back to let me through first.

I stopped in the doorway.

My father was lying in the bed with tubes running from his arms and a monitor tracking his pulse beside him. His arms rested on top of the blanket and the black marks ran along the inside of both forearms in thin dark lines that had spread toward his wrists and up toward his elbows. He looked smaller than I had ever seen him.

“Breathe. It’s okay,” Nolon said, rubbing my back.

I walked over and sat in the chair beside his bed. I took his hand in both of mine. His eyes opened immediately at my touch and looked up at me with a smile.

“Talia? You are here.” He looked at me the way he always had, checking me over, making sure I was alright.

I could not stop my tears. I did not try to hold them back. He reached up with his other hand to cup my face, and I leaned into his touch.