Barren Luna 261

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & SIXTY ONE

Talia's POV

My father looked past me at Solon, who was standing near the door with Leslie. He frowned slightly and said, "You told her."

"Yes, I did," Solon replied without hesitating.

"I gave you explicit instructions not to."

"I know," Solon replied, "but I couldn't keep this from Talia. She needed to know."

My father made a sound that was almost a laugh, but more bitter. It surprised me. He looked back at me and said, "You should have told me yourself the moment it started, not days later through Leslie accidentally letting it slip to Della."

"You had enough to deal with," he answered.

"And you still should've told me," I insisted. "There is no version of this where it was okay for you to keep that from me." I stopped. I was not going to spend the time we had arguing about what should or shouldn't have happened. "I am not here only to be with you. I think you were poisoned. Nolan and I came back to find the antidote."

Father was quiet for a moment. He looked at Nolan, who was standing on the other side of the bed.

"I thought the same thing once," he admitted. "In the beginning. I believed we would find the source quickly, but there was nothing. Leslie examined everything she could examine. There's nothing that points to sabotage. I am just sick."

something you missed."

My father shook his head. “My wolf has been weakening since the marks appeared. I can still feel him, but he is distant in a way he has never been before. It is as if he is being pulled away.”

When my wolf was gone, it was like a piece of me missing. I couldn’t imagine what it would feel like with my wolf still there, but just out of reach. This couldn’t be an illness.

“I have had time to accept that my time is limited, Talia. I have made my peace with it,” Father continued.

“No,” I said. “I can’t accept this.”

“I need to speak about arrangements. About what should happen to Silverfang after I am gone, about who takes responsibility for…”

“No!” I snapped, my voice breaking as I fought back the tears. “Do not talk to me about arrangements. We are not there yet.”

Nolan walked over and placed his hand on my back. He did not say anything, but I could feel his support through the mate bond. His touch was enough to help me hold myself together.

Father watched us for a second before saying, “Nolan, do you remember what you promised me?”

“Of course I do, Alpha,” Nolan replied.

“You will protect her,” my father said.

“With my life,” Nolan answered.

“You made a vow when you took her as your mate.”

“A vow that I never forgot.”

“Whatever happens to me, she does not face what comes alone. Do you understand me?”

“I understand,” Nolan affirmed. “And I give you my word on it.”

“Please stop talking like this. You’re acting like you’re going to die tomorrow,” I interjected.

Father turned his attention back to me and said, “Talia, this is serious. You are his Luna. You must stand with him. You can’t make decisions on your own anymore.”

I frowned. Did he really think that I ran off to see him without Nolan’s input? I wasn’t that reckless.

Before I could respond, Nolan said, “We made the decision to come here together. You do not need to worry about us, my king.”

‘Don’t take it to heart, Talia. He is just concerned,’ Nolan said through our mind link.

“Good,” my father said. “Solon, Leslie, come here.”

He called toward the door. “Solon. Leslie. Come in.”

They walked up to the foot of the bed. Leslie stood with her arms at her sides and her expression carefully neutral. Solon had his arms crossed. The slight frown on his face meant he already knew what was coming and had already decided how he felt about it.

“I have been thinking carefully about succession,” my father started.

“No,” Solon and I said immediately.

“Talia is right. You can’t give up,” Solon added.

“I have not finished.”

“You do not need to,” Solon retorted. “I am not taking the title, not while you are still here and not until we have exhausted all options. I am not going to accept the title while you are still breathing. So, you can finish your sentence, but my answer is no and

it will stay no.”

“Announcing a successor now, while you are still Alpha King, will create instability. Other packs will read it as a collapse of leadership. It will invite challenges and interference that we do not need while we are trying to focus on this,” Nolan added.

“You are not wrong,” Father conceded. “But time is short and I will not pretend otherwise.”

“We know,” I sighed. “We are not ignoring the seriousness of the situation. Let Nolan and I try to find a solution. With fresh eyes on the situation, we may be able to see something that you missed. If it comes to the point where succession cannot wait, we will face that then.”

Father nodded and said, “Then, we have no time to waste.” He pushed back the sleeve of his hospital gown and held out his

arm.

The marks had spread much further than Solon had described. They ran from his wrist all the way up past his elbow in branching dark lines. They were dense in some places and thin in others, covering the inside of his forearm completely.

“Goddess, they are worse than I thought,” I gasped.

Nolan went rigid beside me. I felt his hand on my back tighten on my shirt. “Nolan, what’s wrong?” I asked.

“Black spots?” Nolan murmured softly. His voice trembled slightly, which was unnerving. His eyes narrowed as he was trying to put a puzzle together.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & SIXTY TWO

Nolan’s POV

Seeing the black marks felt like someone had poured cold water on me. They brought back memories I had buried because it made me think of my father’s death. But this wasn’t the mad rogue disease. This was something else.

“Have you seen them before?” Talia asked, bringing me out of my thoughts.

“Do you know what they are?” Solon demanded when I didn’t immediately respond.

“No,” I replied. “But Gideon once told me about a man who died from something that sounded like this. Marks on the skin. Loss of wolf strength. He described it the same way.”

“Gideon? Who the hell is Gideon?” Solon questioned. Leslie smacked him on his back, causing him to flinch.

“Calm down,” she hissed.

“He was my father’s servant,” I answered. “He has been at Silverfang for some years now.”

Rudolf’s expression shifted from confusion to awareness. “Oh, the rogue you asked me to release from the dungeon before you left Silverfang.”

“Yes,” I confirmed.

Rudolf opened his mouth, but Solon was already moving.

“I will have him brought here,” Solon said before Rudolf could give the order.

It took an hour. I spent most of it thinking about what Gideon had told me. It had been a passing remark that I had not pressed him for more. I regretted not asking for more information.

‘None of this is your fault,’ my wolf said.

‘Easy to say that now because we don’t know what Gideon knows,’ I argued.

‘Whether you asked then or now would not have changed this outcome,’ my wolf retorted.

Talia sat with Rudolf while we waited and I gave them their privacy by moving away to stand near the window. She held his hand and they talked quietly. If I had been told a year ago that I would be friendly with the Alpha King and mate with his daughter, I would have laughed in that person’s face.

Solon popped his head into the room and said, “He’s here.”

I left the room and saw Gideon standing down the hall. The moment he saw me, his eyes softened. Gideon approached me and then bowed low.

“That’s not needed, Gideon,” I said.

“Alpha Nolan, it is. It is good to see you,” Gideon greeted as he straightened.”

“Are you well?” I asked, noticing how he still seemed pale but there was life in his eyes, not like when I met him in the dungeon. He had his will to live back.

“Better than I was,” he answered. “You kept your word. I did not know if you would be able to.”

“I told you I would,” I said.

“Honorable, just like your father. He would be proud,” Gideon answered.

I couldn’t help but smile at the compliment. “Thank you.”

“What did you call me here for? Is everything okay?” Gideon asked.

“We need to ask you some questions. What you see in this room, you can not speak about this to anyone else,” I replied

“Of course, Alpha,” Gideon said and then I ushered him into the room. Gideon paused when he saw the Alpha King

“Come and sit,” I told him.

He sat in the chair near the door. I pulled one across from him and leaned forward with my elbows on my knees.

“You told me once about a friend who died,” I said. “He had marks on his skin. Dark marks that spread. You said he lost his connection with his wolf.”

Gideon’s face changed at that. The grief that came onto it was of someone who was remembering a painful memory that had been long buried.

“Yes,” he said quietly.

“Tell me everything you remember about it.”

“After the old Alpha was killed, after everything that followed, there was complete chaos. Many of us fled. We did not know where it was safe.” He looked at his hands. “Some of the servants were taken in by a man from Shadowclaw. He told them it was a refuge. That they would be protected and housed until things settled.”

My wolf snarled within me. ‘I know what you’re thinking. Let us hear him out,’ I told him as I pushed down his anger. I felt the flare of anger from Solon as he gave me a knowing look.

Leslie cursed under her breath. “Of course, it wasn’t a refuge,” she said and Gideon shook his head.

“My friend escaped from there after two weeks and found me. He told me they were being used. Tested on, he said, though he could not tell me exactly what was being done to them,” Gideon continued.

“But they had already injected him with something,” I said.

“Yes. He looked fine at first. A little pale, but he seemed alright. Then a few weeks later the marks appeared on his arms first. Then, they began to spread toward his shoulders. He said it felt like something was pulling him and his wolf apart and he could not stop it no matter what he did,” Gideon stated.

“What happened to him?” I asked.

“He died,” Gideon replied. I offered him a tissue, and he wiped tears from his face. “He died within three months of the marks first appearing. There was nothing anyone could do. No healer knew what it was or what caused it.”

“Michael,” Solon growled. “He did this.”

Rudolf didn’t look surprised.

“We looked at Shadowclaw after Alpha Ryker died. There were serious questions about Michael’s involvement in what led to that attack, but we found no evidence that we could act on,” he explained.

That explained the tension I felt between Rudolt and Michael. Rudolf suspected him and just couldn't prove it.

"Of course there wasn't. Michael was in his prime at the time. He had everything at his disposal to ensure there was no evidence," Solon said in disgust.

Rudolf did not disagree. "I want you to look at something," he said as pushed back his sleeve and held out his arm for Gideon to see. "Are the marks the same as the ones that were on your friend?"

Upon seeing the marks, the color drained from Gideon's face. He stared without speaking.

"Gideon," I said and he jumped as if I pulled him out of his thoughts.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & SIXTY THREE

Nolan's POV

After swearing his loyalty and secrecy, Gideon left the room. The air was thick with frustration and anger. Talia's brow was furrowed. Leslie was rubbing Solon's back as Solon was taking deep breaths to calm down. We were all thinking the same thing and waiting for someone to say it first.

"I think we can all agree that none of this is surprising," I finally said. "I knew Michael would not take the embarrassment of exile lightly, but this is insanity."

"When you told us what happened, I figured it was Michael that saved Jason. No rogue would risk their neck for Jason," Solon said. "It made sense to attack Bloodmoon, but what does he get out of poisoning our father?"

"Because Bloodmoon wasn't the main target. When things didn't go to plan, he moved on to his main goal: Getting rid of the Alpha King," I explained.

"But why?" Talia asked.

“If the Alpha King dies without a clear successor, the entire region becomes unstable. Every pack within range starts calculating on making a bid for the throne. It is exactly the kind of chaos he would want,” I replied.

“The palace has been under heavy guard since the Alpha King became sick,” Leslie added. “I can tell you with certainty that Michael has not set foot in Silverfang territory. I would stake my reputation on it.”

“Then, it is what I feared,” Talia said. “Someone loyal to Michael has been hiding in Silverfang, maybe for a long time.”

“No way. Everyone loves our father,” Solon said.

“That is the only thing that makes sense, Solon. We have a traitor here. It has to be someone already inside and established with access to our father that would not raise suspicion.”

“But who would that be? No one would dare to hurt him,” Solon asked.

“You’d be surprised what people would do when misguided,” I replied and saw Talia flinch at my words. She was thinking the same thing as I was: Maggie. She was the perfect example of someone with good intentions being misguided and leading to a lot

of harm.

“Right now, we are at an advantage,” Talia said.

“What do you mean?” Solon asked.

“Whoever the mole is does not what Gideon told us and how we have connected the marks back to Shadowclaw. As far as they are aware, the Alpha King’s condition is worsening,” I replied.

Leslie smirked and said, “Oh, I get what you’re saying. Very smart, Nolan.”

“Can you clue us in?” Solon asked impatiently.

“We’ll spread the word that the Alpha King’s health is improving. The mole will report back to Michael. Michael will not accept that. He will order them to try again, and he will want it done immediately,” Leslie answered.

Solon nodded. “And we’ll be waiting to catch them.”

“That is a huge risk to take. Maybe too much of a risk,” Talia said as she looked at her father.

“It is a risk worth taking,” I countered. “This gives us a path to Michael, and he is the only person who can provide us with the antidote.” I understood her hesitancy. We could be wrong or worse not catch the culprit and her father dies, but we were running out of options. This was our best option of getting the antidote as soon as possible.

“But what if…”

“Do it,” Rudolf said, cutting off Talia.

“Father, let’s talk about this.”

“It is my decision to make,” Rudolf said firmly. Talia’s jaw flexed as she wanted to say more, but even in his weakened state, his Alpha aura rolled off him, letting us know his word was final. Talia relented and nodded.

“Then, let’s get a plan together,” Talia sighed.

It was well into the night before we left the hospital. Talia said nothing, but I could tell she was still upset about the situation.’ Give her space for now,’ my wolf suggested and I agreed.

Marco and Della were waiting for us outside the hospital. Della looked expectant but her expression became serious when she

saw Talia.

Before Della could ask any questions, I said, “I need you two to spread information. Speak to the guards, the maids, anyone who’ll listen and tell them that the Alpha King’s illness has been identified, and he is responding well to the treatment. He is expected to make a full recovery.

Marco nodded immediately, but Della looked between Talia and I. “Is that true?” Della asked, her eyes hopeful.

Talia shook her head and whispered, “We believe someone has been feeding information to whoever is responsible for father’s condition. If we spread word that he is recovering, it’ll get back to the culprit. They will order another assassination attempt, and we’ll be ready to intercept.”

“So, we’re setting a trap.”

“Yes.”

“And the bait is the Alpha King,” Della said before exclaiming, “Have you lost your mind? What are you thinking? Do you know how bad that will be if we make a mistake? Wait, Nolan, was this your idea?!”

“Calm down, Della,” Talia said.

“No, this is wrong!”

“Father agreed to the plan. He understands the risk. There is no point in arguing about it now,” Talia said firmly.

Della looked between us for a moment. She looked conflicted. I didn’t blame her for thinking I planned this. It was something I would have done before, disregarding others’ safety.

‘Still, we are not that wolf anymore,’ my wolf huffed.

“My apologies, Alpha, Luna,” Della finally said. “We will have it done before midnight.” She glanced at Marco, who was already moving toward the palace gates and went after him.

Talia stood beside me as we watched them go. I could tell she was worried no matter how she tried to hide it. Her mind was a jumbled mess of worry and what ifs.

‘Reassure her,’ my wolf urged, but I couldn’t. There was nothing I could say to make this easier. Her worry was understandable and valid. And now we were using her father as bait. I was amazed that she wasn’t hysterical.

I kissed her forehead and pulled her into a side hug.

“This will work,” I said.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & SIXTY FOUR

Talia’s POV

Solon brought Ryan to us that same evening.

Ryan was a trusted guard that had served Silverfang since we were children. He was not a large man, but he made up for it with speed and strength.

“Who is this?” Nolan asked.

“This is Ryan. He is one of our senior guards. He can be trusted,” Solon answered. “Tell him what you need.”

“Someone inside the palace has betrayed our father,” I said and Ryan’s eyes widened. I saw anger flash in his eyes before he composed himself. He did not say a word, waiting for me to continue. “We did not know who. We need you in my father’s room, positioned where you will not be seen from the doorway. We need you to wait until you see the traitor.”

“What should I do when I catch the person?” Ryan asked.

“Restrain them,” I replied. “Do not let them leave and do not let them destroy whatever they brought in. I need to know what it

was.”

“Understood,” he said.

We positioned him that night, behind the curtain near the far wall. The room’s layout worked in our favor. Anyone entering to tend to my father would have to come far enough inside before they would see him. By then, it would have been too late.

The next morning, I arrived at the hospital wing as I always did. Two maids were already inside changing the linens. I greeted them by name and sat beside my father and took his hand.

“Did you get some rest?” Father asked.

“A little.”

“Good. You look better than you did yesterday. Tell me what is happening at Bloodmoon. Solon does not tell me anything useful. He keeps telling me to rest. It is boring being in this room day in and day out.”

“The wall is finished,” I said as I peeled an orange for him. “Walden has the border patrols running on a new rotation every day, so no one can learn the patterns.”

Father nodded and said, “Smart, very smart. You paid attention to the books I gave you when you were a child.”

“I really did not have a choice. You made it mandatory reading,” I huffed. I hated reading those books, but I could see now how beneficial they were.

“What about Jason? Has he been found yet?” Father asked.

“Still no word. Nolan has every Alpha in the region watching for him,” I replied.

“He will surface. Men like him will not stay hidden for long,” Father said.

One of the maids moved to the far side of the bed to tuck in the sheet. I kept my eyes on my father, but I watched her out of my peripheral.

“The doctors are saying that you will only have to be here for three more days,” I said to no one in particular. “Then, you will be

back to normal.”

“Thank the Moon Goddess,” Father replied, playing along. “Now, go on. I know you have things to do. I will see you tomorrow.”

Neither maid looked up for more than a moment. I noted it and walked out.

For the next two days, nothing happened.

On the third night, Solon’s voice filled my mind, jerking me out of sleep. “We have someone. Come to the dungeon.” “Nolan, wake up. Ryan caught the traitor,” I said, shaking Nolan awake. We arrived at the dungeon in a matter of minutes. Leslie was waiting for us. She looked angrier than usual.

“Who is it?” I asked.

“Your father’s personal servant, Robin,” Leslie answered.

“What?” I exclaimed. Robin had been one of my father’s personal servants for eleven years. He had traveled with my father and held the responsibility of holding pack secrets. Robin was the last person I would have thought would betray us.

Solon approached us. His sleeves were rolled up. His hands were stained with blood. “Two hours,” he growled. “I have had him for two hours and he has said nothing useful. Nothing.”

“Let Nolan and I take over,” I offered.

“Can you really do this?” Solon asked.

“He attempted to kill our father. There are a lot of things I can do,” I replied. “And Nolan can do what I cannot.”

Solon looked at me. The frustration on his face was barely held back. Then he nodded once, stepped past me, and walked away without looking back.

Robin was in poor condition. One of his eyes was blackened and his lip was busted. The whipping had left marks across his back and shoulders visible even from the doorway. He was slumped forward in the chair with his wrists bound behind him. But his eyes were open and when I entered, he looked at me directly.

Nolan stepped forward.

“You are going to tell us who you are working with,” Nolan said. “You can do that now or you can do it after another few hours in this room. Either way the outcome is the same. The only thing that changes is how long you spend here first.”

Robin said nothing.

“Protecting whoever sent you does not protect you,” Nolan continued. “You are already in this dungeon. Staying silent does not improve your situation.”

Robin looked at the wall behind Nolan and did not speak. I pulled a chair across from him and sat down.

“Robin, talk to me. Why would you do this?” I asked. He looked at me with a blank expression before staring at the floor.

“My father trusted you,” I continued. “He brought you into his household because he believed you were someone he did not have to think twice about. He told me that himself.”

Robin still said nothing. I felt Nolan’s Alpha aura rolling off him. He began to growl low in his throat. This would be so much easier if he was the Alpha of Silverfang; then we could just Alpha command Robin into compliance.

‘He is listening. Maybe talking to him will work since torture is not working,’ my wolf recommended.

“When my father dies, Silverfang loses its Alpha, but that means the packs of this region lose their Alpha King without a named successor. Alphas who have been waiting for exactly this kind of opening will use it. The pack you have served your whole lite gets pulled apart. People you care about will more than likely die in the chaos. Innocent people will die because of you. Are you okay with that?”

Robin did not move. The silence stretched and I let it. Right when it felt like Nolan was going to snap, Robin raised his head. For a moment, he looked conflicted before his expression changed to a blank expression.

“I betrayed the Alpha King. I betrayed Silverfang,” he finally said. “That is all I have to say.”

“This does not feel right,’ my wolf said.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & SIXTY FIVE

Talia’s POV

“My wolf thinks he was coerced,” I told Nolan once we were outside in the corridor.

“It would also explain why torture did not work,” Nolan said. “He is afraid of what Michael will do to whoever he is protecting, which is scarier than anything we could do to him.”

“We need to figure out who he could be protecting,” I replied.

“Does he have a mate?” Nolan asked.

“To be honest, I am not sure. I never took the opportunity to get to know him as he was my father’s personal confidante,” I explained. It felt odd saying that now. I would make it a point to get to know all pack members moving forward.

“Then we should review the servant records. If Robin has family, we will find it there,” Nolan recommended.

“Yes,” I agreed. “Let’s go. We don’t have any time to waste.”

The archive entrance was in the east wing of the palace, past a set of heavy doors with two guards posted at either side. One of them stepped forward when he saw Nolan approach. The other gripped his shoulder to pull him back, but he shrugged him off.

“I am sorry, Alpha,” the guard said, stepping in front of Nolan to block his path. “But you are not permitted here.”

The guard looked up at Nolan, matching his gaze. He was young and foolish for defying Nolan, but he was brave and loyal.

“It is of utmost importance that I access the archive,” Nolan responded.

“The Alpha King’s standing order is that the archive is restricted to senior Silverfang members only. I cannot permit entry to anyone outside that designation,” the guard said firmly.

Nolan said nothing. I half expected him to toss the guard away from him, but he turned his head to look at me with a raised eyebrow. I stepped forward and said, “With everything going on, I am glad you’re taking your job seriously. However, this is Nolan, the Alpha of Bloodmoon and my mate. Seeing him is like seeing me and he has my father’s full trust. I am asking you to extend the same courtesy.”

The guard looked between us. Then he stepped aside. “Of course, Luna Talia,” he said. “My apologies for the delay.”

We went inside. The archive was long and low-ceilinged, lined on both sides with shelved records organized by year and department. It smelled of old paper and lamp oil. Nolan found my hand in the dim light and stopped walking.

“Nolan?”

Nolan leaned forward and kissed me passionately. I had to push him back to catch my breath. “What are you doing?” I asked.

“What you said out there about trusting me,” he said quietly. “It means a lot to me.”

“You are my mate, Nolan. Of course I trust you,” I told him and kissed him on his cheek.

“Do you remember the last time we were in the archive?” Nolan asked.

I blushed and turned away. I remembered how I was all over him, begging him to mark me. I cleared my throat and said, “Focus, Nolan.”

We found the servant records in the third row. Robin’s file was not difficult to locate. It was thick from eleven years of service, and the personal information was near the front. His mate had died four years ago. They had a daughter named Annie. She was one year old when her mother died, which made her five now.

“Robin has a five-year-old daughter,” I said.

“Let’s see what else we can find. Check incident reports,” Nolan suggested.

I went through the secondary file. Three pages in I found it.

‘Michael took his daughter,” I said, passing the report to Nolan. Annie had not been seen at the servants’ quarters in over a week. Robin had told the guard she was staying with a relative in the outer district. The guard had followed up once and accepted the explanation.

Then we have what we need to get him to talk,” Nolan replied.

We went back to the dungeon. Robin had not moved from the chair. I sat down across from him.

“I told you everything I am going to say,” Robin said. “You’re wasting your time. Just kill me.”

“Annie,” I said.

Robin’s head snapped up. His eyes filled with tears, and he turned his face away from me again.

“We know she is missing,” I continued. “We know what Michael told you would happen to her if you did not cooperate. Robin, look at me.”

It took him a moment, but he did it. Tears were now rolling down his face.

“I am going to get her back. That is not something I am telling you to make you cooperate. It is a promise as your Princess, but I need you to help me find Michael because if we cannot find him, finding her becomes much harder.”

Robin didn’t respond and Nolan walked up. He squatted next to Robin and said, “Do you really think Michael would keep his

word?”

“He swore on it,” Robin muttered.

“Do not fool yourself into believing that Michael will keep his word. You are an omega and to him you are less than the dirt under his shoe,” Nolan argued. “What do you think he is doing to your daughter while he has her?”

“He said he would never hurt a child and especially not a little girl,” Robin countered.

“Michael hates weak wolves. He once hurt me when I was his son’s mate. He did it because he believed I was an omega,” I retorted. “Once you are no longer useful, he will not keep her alive.”

“No!” Robin’s hands trembled violently. “I didn’t know what else to do,” he said, voice cracking under the strain. “He told me that if I helped him, he’d give her a better life… that she wouldn’t have to live as an omega.”

“He is a liar, Robin. You’re not the first person he’s lied to get what he wanted,” Nolan told him. “You want what is best for her, right?”

“Yes, of course I do,” Robin said.

“Then help us get her back,” I said. “Tell us where Michael is. I will make sure she is safe. Every day you stay silent is another day she suffers from him.”

Robin didn’t say anything. For a moment, I thought we hadn’t gotten through to him. I stood up and motioned to Nolan to leave. Nolan stood, scoffing in disgust.

Before we exited the cell, Robin said, “Fine! I will take you to him.”

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & SIXTY SIX

Jason’s POV

Three days passed and there was still no word from Robin.

My father was not concerned while I was all nervous. I chewed on my nails while fidgeting in my chair. My father slammed his book down on the table and snapped, “Stop with that annoying tapping of your feet. You’re giving me a headache.”

“How can you be so calm?” I asked.

“Because I know Robin will not betray us. We have his daughter. He’d be even more of a fool if he believed I would not harm that girl if he disobeyed,” Father replied.

“But he has not reported whether the second attempt was a success. Something could’ve gone wrong,” I argued.

“He is being careful,” my father stated. “The palace will be on alert after the first attempt. He cannot afford to move quickly.”

“Or he has been caught.”

“Enough of your delusions,” my father snapped. “Robin will do what needs to be done.”

The following day Robin arrived. Robin looked like a man who had barely escaped death. He was thinner than the last time I had seen him and there was a bruise along the left side of his jaw that had gone yellow at the edges.

“What happened to you?” I asked.

“I was interrogated,” Robin replied. “I told them nothing.”

“Good,” Father said. “Now, did everything go to plan?”

“The Alpha King is dead,” Robin answered. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a ring that he offered to my father. “His ring. I took it from his hand myself.”

My father took the ring and examined it. He turned it in the light and went still. His serious expression morphed into a cruel

smile.

“Finally,” Robin said quietly as he closed his hand around the ring. He looked at Robin with something approaching warmth.” You have done well. I did not think you had it in you.”

“My daughter, where is she? You promised me. I have done everything you asked. I need to know she is safe and I need you to

release her,” Robin said.

My father glanced at me. The warmth that was there was not replaced with the usual cruelness. I felt my wolf tense within me.

“You have been enormously useful, Robin,” my father said as he leaned back in his chair. “But useful men become liabilities the moment their usefulness ends.”

‘Shit. Robin is dead meat,’ my wolf muttered,

“Kill him,” my father ordered.

I did not move. My father turned to look at me. “Did you hear what I said, boy?”

“Robin did what you asked him to do. Give him back his daughter and just let him go. He won’t betray us because it would implicate him too,” I argued.

My father snorted. “Your mercy will get us both killed. I should not have to explain to you that Robin is a liability. He is a thread that leads directly back to us.”

“He won’t betray us,” I said firmly.

“Enough! Your softness is what cost us Shadowclaw. It is what costs us every time we have come close and failed. I will not let it cost us again,” my father responded. “Kill him or I’ll kill you both.”

My wolf whined within me. “This is getting out of hand.’

As I moved toward Robin, the door went flying off the hinges. I dodged it as it slammed into the hall.

Nolan came through it first and Talia was directly behind him. Robin was between me and them. Before I could close the distance, Nolan had put himself in front of Robin. His punch landed square in the middle of my chest, sending me flying back. My father caught me before I hit the wall.

“I told you,” I snarled. “I told you something was wrong with this!” I had been right. It had been a trap from the beginning.

“Leave,” my father said to me as he pushed me away. His voice did not rise but the command was absolute. “Now. Go.”

“Father…”

“I will hold them off. Now, go!”

I ran through the back of the safehouse and into the tree line beyond it. I ran hard and kept to the shadows between the trees and let my wolf guide my footing in the dark. My shoulder ached as I had torn the stitches of my wound, but I let the pain drive me to

run faster.

Behind me I could hear nothing, which meant either my father had contained them or they were already past him and tracking me silently. Either way stopping was not an option.

I had covered perhaps a mile when my wolf made a sound, I had never heard from him before. It was not a howl. It was something lower and more broken, a sound of pure loss that I felt in my chest before I understood what it meant.

My father was dying.

Even though I feared my father, I still loved him. I turned around, ready to run back to save him when his voice filled my mind.

'Keep running, Jason!'

'Father, I…'

'Do not look back, Jason. Don't ever look back!'

Then, there was silence and I knew I would never hear my father's voice again. I bit into my arm to muffle my scream of anguish. I had lost the last person that truly cared about me.

'We have to go. They will be upon us soon,' my wolf urged. I didn't have to be told twice.

The Rogue King was expecting me, and I was going to finish what my father had started. I had a direction and I had a purpose and I had nothing left to lose.

That, at least, was something my father had always said made a truly dangerous man.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & SIXTY SEVEN

Talia's POV

Michael moved to put himself between us and the back of the safehouse with his arm raised. He was about to say something, but Nolan was on him in minutes. Michael slammed hard into his wall with an audible crunch. At least three of his ribs were broken.

Michael stood up slowly with one hand pressed to his side. His breathing labored through his gritted teeth. He tried to put on a brave face, but he was clearly in pain. No matter his experience, Michael was still an old man and could not withstand blows from Nolan who was in his prime.

'No, no, he deserves this. Don't take pity on him,' my wolf growled.

'I'm not, but if Nolan kills him before we get the antidote, that defeats the purpose of finding him,' I said.

"Give us the antidote, right now!" I demanded.

"Why would you…" Confusion and then genuine surprise crossed Michael's face before he frowned. "Alpha King is still alive, isn't he?! That bastard Robin dared to lie to me!"

"You have learned nothing from your decisions," I told him. "No one will ever be loyal to you if you always use pain and fear to control them."

"Shut up. You know nothing," Michael snapped.

"It is over, Michael. Give me the antidote," I demanded again.

Michael scoffed. "You think I would give you anything? After everything you have cost me?"

"I cost you nothing. If you had been a better person, raised a better son, you would be a well respected Elder now, but you allowed greed to taint everything you touched. All of this is your fault," I responded.

Michael looked at me with contempt and said, "I should have killed you when you were in Shadowclaw."

“And you would’ve failed. Just like you have failed now,” Nolan interjected. “Surrender. Give us the antidote and we will allow you to have an honorable death.”

Michael looked between Nolan and I before saying, “I will never give you that antidote. The King is already a dead man. He just does not know it yet.”

“Enough of your bullshit,” Nolan growled. He surged forward. Michael swung at him, but Nolan caught his wrist and snapped it like a twig before snatching him up in the air and back against the wall by his throat.

Michael’s face reddened and his hand came up to pull at Nolan’s wrist, but he could not loosen Nolan’s grasp. “The antidote,” Nolan growled. “Now.”

“No,” Michael spat. “It won’t change anything.”

“What do you mean?” Nolan asked.

“The poison has been working for months,” Michael explained, “Even if I gave you the antidote today, it would change nothing. “His lips pulled back into a sneer. “The damage has already been done. You are too late.”

Then Michael shifted for attack.

It happened in under a second. One moment Nolan had him by the throat and the next his wolf was tearing tree of his clothes. Nolan took a step back, unphased by Michael snarling at him. “If you think shifting will save you, you…”

Nolan stopped in midsentence and I felt his rage slam into me. It was so oppressive that it made me take a step back.

“Nolan, what’s wrong?” I asked and that’s when I noticed Michael.

As his wolf, Michael was large, black with grey streaks from age, and had a scar across the muzzle. I saw it then on his forehead, unmistakable against his black fur: three white streaks in the shape of claw marks.

It was him.

Michael was the wolf that killed Nolan's father.

Nolan shifted almost immediately. The roar that came out of him shook the walls.

Nolan drove straight into Michael. The impact sent them both crashing into the far wall hard enough to crack the plaster. They tussled, both trying to get the upper hand on the other as they growled and snarled at each other.

Finally, Nolan caught Michael by the scruff. Michael flailed, biting at Nolan's legs to get free but Nolan held on. Michael twisted and bit into Nolan's shoulder. This gave Nolan the opening he needed and released Michael's scruff. He clamped down on

Michael's neck instead.

"That's it. This is over!' My wolf said.

Nolan began to swing Michael around like a dog with a chew toy before I heard a sickening crunch. Michael's body went limp as Nolan ripped his neck open. He collapsed in a pool of his own blood with Nolan standing over him. Nolan watched coldly as the color drained from Michael's eyes.

Robin was on the opposite side of the room with his face completely white. He had not moved during the fight.

"Luna, I…"

Hearing his voice made Nolan whip around to look at him. Nolan snarled as he approached him, lowering down in a striking

position.

“Luna, please. I’m sorry,” Robin begged. “Please. Don’t let him kill me!”

I quickly stepped in between them before Nolan pounced. Robin deserved to be punished but I couldn’t allow Nolan to kill him in a blood rage.

“Nolan, stop!” I said firmly. Nolan tried to sidestep me, but I made sure to block him from Robin. I could feel the grief and rage through the mate bond. “Stop. This is over, Nolan. Just stop.”

Nolan glared at me, growling low in his throat, but he didn’t move again. I maintained eye contact and then pointed at the exit.

“Robin,” I said quietly without looking away from Nolan. “Find your daughter and leave.”

Robin didn’t need to be told twice. I heard him flee the room with the door slamming shut behind him.

I never took my eyes off Nolan. Eventually, he stopped growling and his shoulders slumped. Nolan shifted back and came up on one knee on the floor with his head bowed.

“I failed you,” he said finally with red eyes. His voice was rough and low. “I lost control and I let Michael provoke me. Now, we don’t have the antidote.”

I crouched in front of him.

“You have not failed me, Nolan,” I said as I placed my hands on the side of his face to force him to look at me. “You have never failed me.”

“He had the antidote… and I killed him,” Nolan replied, his voice laden with guilt.

“Jason was with him the entire time. I’m sure he has it,” I said softly. “You avenged your father… that matters. Now we’ll hunt Jason together, alright?”

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & SIXTY EIGHT

Talia’s POV

A week passed and Jason hadn’t been found yet.

Every morning I woke up expecting to hear that one of the regional Alphas had caught Jason, but every morning I was disappointed. Where had he gone? Why couldn’t we find him? Every day felt too fast and too long all at the same time. This time there was nothing my wolf could say to reassure me.

When I visited my father on the seventh day I noticed his hair. His hair, which had been dark for as long as I had known him, had begun to go white at the temples. Not grey, but a stark, drained white that was not there yesterday.

Nolan and my father were talking casually as if Nolan had not seen my father aging in real time. “Solon told me the wall you had built is something to see,” my father said.

“Yes, it was all Talia’s idea. They should hold for generations,” Nolan responded.

“I would like to see them,” my father stated.

“You will,” Nolan told him. “When you are out of this room and back on your feet, we will take you ourselves. Talia, will escort you around.”

My father smiled and settled back against the pillows. I bit my lip and fought back the tears. My father believed that he would come to Bloodmoon when he recovered. He really believed he would recover. I felt my heart twist because I felt like we had given him false hope.

‘Stop it,’ my wolf growled within me. ‘Leslie is still looking for an antidote and we will find Jason.’ I wanted to believe her, but 1 couldn’t help but second guess.

After composing myself, I walked in. Nolan stood up to give me his seat. “Hey, how are you feeling today?” I asked as I took my

father’s hand into mind.

“Much better today. I don’t know what Leslie is putting in my IV, but I feel better than I have in months,” my father replied.

We talked about nothing important for about an hour until Leslie came to give him another painkiller. I kissed his forehead and left the room with Nolan and Leslie, so my father could rest. Leslie closed the door to my father’s room behind her. She then motioned us to go to an empty room three doors down.

“What’s going on?” I asked once we were in the room. “You’re making me anxious.”

“You’ve seen his hair,” Leslie replied and we nodded.

“Once his hair has turned completely white it will mean the poison has reached the final stage,” Leslie explained.

“Leslie, what are you saying? Just say it,” I snapped.

“At the rate it is progressing, he has approximately two months. I have been adjusting his treatments, but the progression is accelerating. Right now, all I can do is manage his pain,” Leslie explained.

Nolan wrapped his arm around me, pulling me close to him before I could comprehend what she was saying. I sat there, staring at her in a daze. “What can we do? Is there anything we can do without the antidote?” Nolan asked, but even though he was right next to me, he sounded like he was a mile away.

“I am doing everything that I can to stop the poison,” Leslie answered. “I just wanted to inform you both.”

“Thank you,” Nolan stated and Leslie left the room.

Two months.

I had known my father was dying from the moment Gideon confirmed the marks but hearing it from Leslie made it more real

now Two months was not enough time. There was barely enough time to do what we needed to do even if everything went well, and nothing had been going well.

“Talia, baby, breathe,” Nolan said, shaking me lightly.

“We cannot wait for Jason to surface on his own,” I said. “We are running out of time.”

“I agree. We need to change our plan today,” Nolan agreed.

I found Solon that evening. He was in the palace study with reports spread across the desk. Solon looked up when he noticed me. He had huge bags under his eyes. It was clear, just like me, he had not slept enough in the last week.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. “Is father okay?”

“Leslie gave me an updated timeline. Father only has two months now. When his hair is fully white, it’ll be over,” I replied.

Solon stared at me with a blank expression before he cursed and punched a hole into the table. He covered his face with his hands and took slow, deep breaths to calm himself. I let him sit with it. When he brought his hands down, I said, “I have a plan to flush Jason out faster.”

“What do you propose?” Solon asked.

“We make it official that Michael and Jason are traitors and name them responsible for crimes against Silverfang, against the Alpha King, and against the stability of the region. We inform everyone that Michael is dead and Jason is on the run. His allies will turn on him now that Michael is dead. Anyone who finds him must take him alive and bring him here for judgment,” I

continued.

Solon was quiet for a long moment.

“Okay, we can make this public, but we still need to cover that Father is in a weakened state to avoid chaos among the packs,” Solon said. “We have to hold that back to prevent panic. Other packs will see it as a weakness. There will be those who try to take advantage of it.”

“I know,” I agreed. “Jason has the antidote formula. He’s the only one who can save Father, and every day he stays hidden brings us closer to losing him. We need to let all the packs know about his crimes and find him now.”

“Alright,” Solon said as he stood. “I’ll send out the decree.”

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & SIXTY NINE

Jason’s POV

I had been moving for four days when I reached the edge of Moonbrook’s territory.

My father’s directions had been correct. The Rogue King’s stronghold lay northwest of Moonbrook, deep into terrain most wolves avoided. Cold, damp, difficult ground where the trees grew close. It was not a comfortable place to build a stronghold. That was exactly why the Rogue King had chosen it.

I had two routes. I could go the long way and skirt past Moonbrook entirely. It would add two additional days to the journey, but it was safer than the other route. The other route was to cut straight through Colin’s territory.

‘Through,’ my wolf suggested. “We go through his pack territory.’

‘Have you lost your mind? That is suicide if we get caught,’ I said.

‘We are wounded and slowing down. Two more days is two days we do not have,’ my wolf reasoned. He was right. My shoulder wound had reopened. It was not fatal, but it could become fatal if I didn’t take care of it soon.

‘Fine. We will go through,’ I reluctantly agreed. I adjusted the mask on my face and pulled my hood up before moving toward the border.

The walls were half-built, but they were already substantial. Guards were posted at the entrance points, two at each gap, and the gaps themselves had been positioned to funnel anyone entering into a narrow passage where they could be observed from multiple angles.

I cursed under my breath and hid behind a tree.

Damn you, Talia.

Talia, somehow, once again had screwed me over with her stupid ideas. Why couldn’t she understand that a Luna should stay in her place and not concern herself about pack safety? Because of the wall, it was going to make it harder for me to sneak through. On top of that, Solon had named me a traitor and every Alpha in the region was now looking for me. I couldn’t wait to kill him.

‘Still think cutting through was the best idea?’ I taunted.

‘Focus on the guards,’ my wolf huffed.

There were six at the entrance, but I knew there were more nearby. There were too many to avoid and too many to engage as a group. We had to think of a plan. I watched them from my place behind the tree. They weren’t paying too much attention. Perhaps I could just slip on through.

As soon as I stepped forward, one guard saw me immediately. He motioned for another to follow him as he approached me, the other one angling to the side to cut off my retreat.

“You are on Moonbrook territory. Identify yourself,” the first guard said.

I said nothing as I sized them up to see which one I would take first.

“Identify yourself,” he repeated. “You do not pass without…”

I moved before he finished the sentence. My hand closed on his throat. I slammed him into the stone frame of the gap. His neck snapped from the impact.

The second guard lunged at me with his dagger. I stepped into him before he could extend his arm fully and drove my elbow hard into his face. He yelped in pain and instinctively reached for his face, dropping his dagger.

“Pathetic,” I growled as I used his dagger to slice open his neck.

More guards came from the right. Four of them, moving fast and spreading out as they came so I could not take them one by

one. This was not good as I was already.

The first guard reached me, and I deflected him but not cleanly. His dagger split open my arm. The second caught me across the ribs with his fist and the pain from my side flared white and sharp, I kicked him back and away from me. The third guard swung hard for my head. I ducked under it and drove my elbow into his jaw, and he staggered into the wall.

The first guard punched me on the side of my head causing my mask to fly off. I felt the cold air on my face before I could catch it. The guard directly in front of me stopped moving.

“You! It’s Alpha Jas…”

The moment his mouth formed my name I drove the heel of my palm hard into his throat. He gripped his throat, choking, as he collapsed to the ground.

The remaining guards scattered immediately. I heard one of them shouting my name into the interior of the territory, but I was already running.

I went through the nearest gap and dodged the guards. I could feel my wolf adding to my strength. ‘Keep running. Do not stop,’ he urged. He didn’t have to tell me that. I refused to be caught when I was so close to getting to the Rogue King.

I did not slow until Moonbrook’s border was well behind me and it felt as if my heart was going to come out of my chest. I took a moment to rest before I continued to move northwest. ‘I will never listen to your suggestions again,’ I said.

‘If you had listened to my suggestions in the first place, we wouldn’t be in this situation,’ my wolf grumbled.

‘Get over it. You’re stuck with me until death. We will get back to our former glory. I promise you,’ I told him. My wolf huffed

and went silent.

I knew I was getting close as it was becoming harder to navigate as the trees were not closer together. There was a musty mildew scent in the air. I stopped in a hollow between two large roots and pressed my back against the trunk. It was a good enough spot to rest for the night.

‘Get ready,’ my wolf growled. ‘Rogues. Very close.’

Not a moment later, I smelled them. Faint but unmistakable, the putrid stench that would make any pack wolf rigid. They were downwind of me, which meant they had not caught my scent yet. That would not last.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & SEVENTY

Jason's POV

The scent of them became stronger as I knew they had found me. Green eyes became visible one by one as they approached from the shadows. There were seven of them stalking towards me.

'Stay on your guard,' my wolf warned.

"What is a former Alpha like you doing out here?" one of them taunted.

"Stay out of my way," I said firmly and they only laughed.

"Silverfang's most wanted," another taunted. He was stocky, had a crooked nose, and was missing part of his left ear. I knew him instantly from one of the rogues I had repelled. "Word travels fast. There is a reward out for you. Enough to keep a wolf comfortable for a long time."

Another one laughed. "Comfortable. He means enough to buy a territory."

"Hand yourself over," the first one ordered. "Make it easy and we will not rough you up too badly before we deliver you."

I felt my fury building inside of me. It had been building for weeks now. Being hunted was one thing. Allowing rogues to laugh about the price on my head was another.

I let my wolf take over. What happened next was him venting every frustration and resentment he had toward me. When it was over, six of the seven were dead and dismembered while the seventh was on his knees in the dirt with his hands up in fear.

"Please, please, don't kill me," he pleaded.

“You know where the Rogue King is,” I growled

I clawed him across the face, cutting his eye. He screamed out in pain. “Yes, yes, I know!”

“Take me to the Rogue King and I won’t rip your head from your body,” I snarled.

“I’ll do it, I’ll do it,” the rogue said as he got to his feet.

We walked for two hours. The trees thickened until the canopy blocked most of the moonlight. “You better not be leading me into a trap or you’ll be the first one to die,” I warned.

“No, no, I’m not,” the rogue stammered. “Look, it’s not too far now.”

We reached a small mountain. There were two guards who watched as we approached. The rogue stopped and said, “See, it’s right here. I…”

I didn’t let him finish and drove my elbow into the back of his skull, cracking his skull. The rogue fell and convulsed on the

ground. I stepped over him and approached.

The guards tensed but I spoke before they did, “I am Jason, son of Elder Michael of Shadowclaw.”

They looked at each other before one of them said, “Welcome Alpha Jason of Shadowclaw. The king has been expecting you t will escort you.”

The underground palace was a series of chambers carved from rock and reinforced with timber so old it had gone black Torches burned at irregular intervals and the shadows cast eerie shadows against the wall. Nothing about the place had been built tor

comfort or welcome.

The Rogue King was in the deepest chamber. He was seated in a chair closer to a throne than anything else in the room The Rogue King was a large man, larger than I had expected. He looked like more of a mountain than a man. Scars ran from his hairline across his left cheek and down toward his jaw. His eyes were pale blue, flat, and entirely without warmth.

The Rogue King did not speak immediately. He assessed me before gesturing for me to sit down.

“Michael is dead,” he said as he lit his cigar.

My eyes widened slightly. How had he known? My wolf growled, He probably has eyes everywhere. Do not anger him’

“Yes,” I confirmed as I sat down.

“A shame,” the Rogue King said as he took a long pull from his cigar. “You should be mourning and yet, here you are. What do you want from me?”

“I want to finish what my father started. I want to be the new Alpha King,” I answered. “I want Silverfang’s throne and I want the resources to take it. In exchange I am offering two pack territories. Bloodmoon and Silverfang both, once I have consolidated control.” 1

The Rogue King gave out a hearty laugh. “You are like your father. Straight to the point. That’s what I liked about him,” he said.

“Is it a deal?” I asked.

“I want three,” he countered.

“That is asking a lot.”

“And you are asking me to give you resources that would be more valuable with me than on the odds that you become the Alpha King.”

My jaw flexed at the insult. I grit my teeth from growling. ‘He is goading you. Do not…’

‘I know!’ I snapped at him.

“Three packs or no deal, boy,” the Rogue King stated.

“Fine. Three,” I said and reached out to shake his hand. The Rogue King smiled and shook my hand. On a different face it would have been a pleasant sight, but on his, it made the hair on the back of my neck rise.

The Rogue King reached into his pocket and produced a pendant on a cord, blood-red and roughly the size of my palm and placed it on the table between us. “Every rogue you encounter will recognize that. Show it and they will obey you.”

“Thank you,” I told him.

“What is your plan? What do you think you can do that your father couldn’t?” The Rogue King asked.

“My father failed to see Talia and Nolan as a unit. I am going to turn them against each other,” I explained as I picked up the pendant and placed it into my pocket.

The Rogue King leaned back in his chair. He smirked and said, “Welcome to the other side, boy. Do not disappoint me the way your father did. Now, get out.”