Barren Luna 281

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & EIGHTY ONE

Talia's POV

Nolan was still asleep when I woke. We had spent hours making love until we fell asleep from exhaustion. Even so, I did not sleep soundly. My thoughts kept returning to what if scenarios causing me to wake up early.

I took Solon's dagger from the table and hid it in my left pant leg. I kissed Nolan on the forehead before leaving, making sure not to wake him.

When I arrived in Fangvale, shops were just beginning to open. On a normal occasion, I would have gone to my favorite coffee shop and got a latte, but all I think about was meeting with Jason and how the last time I was here he tried to force me back as his mate.

'We won't let him do that again. We will drink and eat nothing,' my wolf said and I agreed. I decided to go to the park in the middle of Fangvale and wait. I sat on a bench and people watched. That was where Jason found me.

He stepped out from where he had been waiting with his hands in his pockets. He was dressed in a green T-shirt and grey sweatpants and tennis shoes. It was unlike anything he had worn before. Jason always cared about his appearance, but it seemed that no longer mattered now that he was a rogue.

'Look at his neck. He wears the mark of the Rogue King,' my wolf growled and there it was: confirmation that Jason had gone to the darkside. The red pendant around his neck looked like an ugly version of the Lonefur ember. Where the ember brought healing, the Rogue King brought death at the hands of hundreds of rogues.

"You came alone," Jason said. "I am almost impressed by that."

"You said to come alone," I replied flatly.

“Good that you’re taking this seriously. Your father does not have long I guess,” he said casually as if he was discussing the weather. “A week? Less? Even the Frostmoon potion may not save him at this stage.”

“Did you really come here to taunt me?” I asked.

“If so, what are you going to do about it?” Jason replied smugly.

“I never thought I would have seen you like this. You were so proud to be a warrior for my father. And now look at you, you’re an errand boy for the Rogue King. You traded one abuser for another,” I shot back and Jason frowned.

“Don’t talk about my father. That is one thing I will not allow,” Jason warned through gritted teeth.

“What do you want for the potion?” I asked.

“Nothing,” Jason answered.

“Stop playing games. What do you want?” I demanded.

Jason smirked and he spread his hands in an open gesture. “I have no conditions. I only want to ease the tension between us. We have history, Talia. It does not have to end in all this. We were something once’

“Correct. We were something once,” I agreed. “And then I found out what you actually were anything Jason always wanted something and it norinally was for me to be his Lunta again,

I did not bebeve he didn’t want

“I can give you territory,” I negotiated. “I can give you border access that connects Bloodmoon and Siberiang Thane rade agreements with three packs that Bloodmoon controls directly

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“Talia, I can access that anytime now. That means nothing to me,” Lasonët suklid

“Natue what you want in exchange for the potion, and I will tell you what is possible and what is just

“It is a shame that I didn’t really know how well you negotiated. You worse the risk & been wai

“Enough of the compliments, Jason. What do you want from me or I’m leaving?” I pressed.

Jason pulled a small container out of the backpack he was carrying. He played around with it in his hand, steadily grinning at me. Jason looked completely unhinged as he faked like he was going to drop it to get a rise out of me.

‘He is stalling,’ my wolf growled. “There are rogues here. I can smell them. He is waiting for something before he strikes. We need to contact our mate!’

‘Not yet. I need to at least get the box from him first,’ I told her.

“Then, you need to make a move soon. I will not allow him to harm us again,’ my wolf responded.

Jason beckoned me forward with two fingers. “Come here, Talia. You’re too far away.”

‘Don’t,’ my wolf warned, but I ignored her. I stood and walked over to him. When I was close enough to see the detail carved into the red stone at his throat, Jason held out the sealed container. I could see the Lonefur seal on the wax. It was the right container. I reached for it, but he pulled it out of reach.

“Jason, what are you doing?”

“I need to know you truly came alone,” he pressed. “That you have no allies waiting nearby.”

“I already told you I came alone. I would not risk my father’s life by breaking that condition!”

“Then let us make a wager. If Nolan does not appear in the next few minutes, the potion is yours. No further conditions. You

take it and walk away.”

“What the hell is this, Jason? I already agreed to your terms and came here. Now, this?”

“I have no intention of harming you, Talia. I have never wanted that. I only want to know whether you kept your word.

Then, Jason lifted his hand, and the rogues came out of the trees. They had ropes and they moved fast. I reached for Solon’s dagger and slashed a few of the rogues before I was overwhelmed.

“Get off me!” I snarled as a hand closed around my wrist. It was wrenched backwards and I dropped the dagger in pain. The ropes went around my wrists and were knotted tightly.

“You swore no harm,” I snapped through my teeth.

“And you weren’t,” Jason replied. He stood in front of me while his rogues retreated back up. “Perhaps your pride was wou but no physical harm has come to you.”

I glanced at the dagger lying on the ground where I had dropped it.

“Damn you,” I cursed.

Jason bent down, snatched the dagger, and pressed it to my neck. His whisper was icy, mocking “Now, be a good girl and stay still. I know they’re coming.”

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & EIGHTY TWO

Talia's POV

"This is not a game, Jason!" I growled.

Jason scoffed and said, "I know that, but do you?"

That was when it hit me. There was never going to be a trade. Jason was going to keep stringing this

along.

"You bastard," I growled.

"Language, Princess," Jason teased.

"There was never going to be trade, was there? You designed this entire thing so I would stand here and watch you destroy the only thing keeping my father alive."

Jason stayed silent. He simply waited, and that silence only fueled my anger.

"Say something! Say something, you bastard!"

That's when I saw them and my heart sank. Nolan and Solon were running towards me.

'What did you do? Did you reach out to them?' I snapped at my wolf.

'No, I didn't say anything to them,' my wolf answered.

That meant they followed me here.

They didn't trust me.

"Looks like you're not as good of a liar as you used to be," Jason said.

"Release her!" Nolan's roar split the air before he had fully crossed the distance between us. The sound rolled through the park. His Alpha aura slammed into everyone. Every rogue behind Jason shifted back a step and reset their stance.

"NOW!"

Jason finally acknowledged Nolan. "No need for yelling. This is a peaceful park."

"Don't play with me, Jason," Nolan growled.

Slowly, almost lazily, Jason sliced through the rope binding my wrists in a single motion. I stumbled forward as the tension gave way. Jason caught my arm to keep me from falling.

Nolan and Solon surged past me toward him. The rogues rushed forward to intercept them, and the park

exploded into motion. Bodies collided. Fists flew. Two rogues took on Nolan and Nolan tore them apart while Solon kept the rest off Nolan to take on Jason.

"Stop!" I threw myself between them, both arms outstretched. "Everyone stop now!"

"You heard the lady," Jason chimed in and snapped his fingers causing the rogues to back off.

Nolan halted in front of me, breathing hard, blood running from a cut above his brow that he didn't seem to notice. Behind him, Solon had a rogue by the throat only seconds from crushing his neck. The rogue froze beneath his hand, eyes wide in fear.

“What are you doing?” Nolan asked, glaring at me. “Move aside, Talia.”

“No. Not until I get what I came for,” I told him.

“Why are you defending him?” Nolan demanded.

“Have you forgotten what I came here for? I am trying to stop this escalation and you’re making this worse!” I shot back.

Jason laughed softly. “Do you really think you’re going to get them now? I told you my terms, Talia.”

“I had no idea that they followed me,” I said in exasperation. “This is not my fault. I didn’t trick you,

Jason.”

“But the conditions were clear, Talia. What to do, what to do,” Jason stated as he played with the container. He turned his attention to Nolan and Solon. “Is this how you trust your sister and your Luna?

Disgraceful.”

Nolan’s anger flared and Solon tossed the rogue away from him. I knew they were about to lunge, so I

quickly blurted out, “Name your conditions, Jason. Territory. Safe passage. A guarantee that every pack

stops hunting you. I can make that happen. I will personally ensure no Alpha harms you.”

“Talia, what are you doing? He’s a murderer,” Solon’s voice sharpened. “He killed innocent warriors. You can’t continue to negotiate with him like this.”

“What I am trying to do is fix the mess you made,” I said through gritted teeth. “I’m trying to make sure you didn’t squander the last chance to save our father. So shut up!”

“Doesn’t matter what happens today. You won’t be able to catch me and bring me to “justice”, Solon,” Jason added calmly, as if stating a fact that he had already proven.

“Stop hiding behind your rogues and let’s put that to the test,” Solon retorted.

Jason ignored Solon’s taunt and turned his attention back to me. “Since technically you didn’t break the conditions, I’ll give you one more chance.”

“What is it? Whatever it is, I’ll consider it,” I told him.

“Accept my mark again.”

“Excuse me?”

“Let the bond reform. Do that, and the potion is yours,” Jason offered and held his hand out to me.

Silence followed. No one spoke. No one moved. All eyes were on me. That’s when I realized this was the trap. He had planned all along to give me an ultimatum that he knew I wouldn’t accept.

“Damn you, Jason!”

“Come on, Talia. It’s yes or no,” Jason said.

Behind me, Nolan surged forward. Solon caught him around the waist, keeping him in place. “Get off me!”

Nolan snarled.

Solon tightened his grip. “Don’t. He already knows her answer.”

“He’s right, you know.” Jason’s focus never left me. “You should listen to him, Nolan. Now, Talia, what is

your answer?”

“You can’t be serious. Isn’t there anything else you want?” I said.

“That’s the only condition.” Jason dismissed Solon without even glancing at him. “I told you I’m not interested in territory or safe passage. I already have both.”

My wolf snarled within me, pushing to break free to maul Jason. My hands were balled into fists so tight that my nails cut into my hands. I finally forced myself to speak, knowing that this was dooming my father.

“I will not accept your mark, Jason,” I finally said.

“A shame. I thought you cared about your father more than that,” Jason taunted. He lifted the sealed container high up in the air.

“You don’t have to do this,” I pleaded.

“Prepare for your father’s funeral, Talia.”

I lunged for Jason, but I was seconds too late.

Jason slammed them against the stone at his feet. Glass shattered across the ground. Dark liquid spread through the cracks in the stone before disappearing completely.

“No!”

I dropped to my knees, reaching for the shattered remains as if I could somehow gather the liquid back together. But there was nothing left. It had already soaked into the stone.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & EIGHTY THREE

Nolan’s POV

“Don’t be so upset, Talia. The potions probably wouldn’t have helped anyway,” Jason told Talia. He smirked down at her, clearly enjoying her anguish. It made my blood boil.

“You bastard! What have you done?” I roared.

Jason looked up and smirked at me. He turned and strode away while Talia was frantically trying to pick up the pieces of the broken potions.

“This is on you, Nolan. If you had trusted Talia, she would have gotten the potions.” Jason called the words over his shoulder as the rogues closed ranks around him. “Now it is gone. The Alpha King’s death

will be on your head.”

I knew what Jason was doing. He was attempting to place doubt in Talia’s mind about me. It wasn’t going to work. Talia knew my heart and she knew that the real culprit in all this was him and his putrid father.

My wolf surged forward, and this time I didn’t try to restrain him. I felt the shift starting, but Solon

stepped directly into my path. His Alpha aura slammed into me as he caught me with both arms. The

force of my momentum drove him back two full steps before he planted himself and held firm.

“Don’t,” Solon warned.

“Get off me, Solon. I am not letting him get away,” I snarled as I flailed against him. My wolf roared inside me, demanding that I rip Jason’s throat out.

“This is what he wants. He wants you to chase him,” Solon advised as his grip tightened. “We don’t know how many rogues he has in waiting. You’re strong, Nolan, but not strong enough to take on dozens of rogues and Jason.”

I stayed rigid in Solon’s grip and forced myself to stop. “Damn it!” I cursed. I knew he was right, but I still wanted to try my luck.

Jason never looked back. He disappeared into the trees with his rogues. Their footsteps faded away.

Then there was only the park, the dark stains on the stone, and Talia’s sobs.

Solon released me and stepped back. I glared at him as I took a calming breath. I turned to look at Talia who was still kneeling in the dirt.

‘Go to our mate,’ my wolf urged. ‘She needs us.’

I raced over to Talia. She hadn’t moved from where she had fallen beside the broken containers. Her hands were pressed flat against the stone where the potion had soaked away. Tears were rolling down

her face, but she was no longer sobbing.

I knelt beside her. Aside from the marks around her wrists from where she was bound, she wasn’t hurt. Talia continued to stare at the stain on the rock as if I wasn’t even there.

“Talia, look at me.”

Her head snapped toward me. Her expression stopped me cold. It was a mixture of anger, grief, and resentment. Seeing her like this made my heart twist.

I rested my hands on her shoulders. Talia let me for exactly one second before stepping back out of reach as if my touch had burned her. Her hand struck me across the face.

“Explain yourself,” she demanded. Her voice was calm, which worried me more than the slap she gave

“I know what this looks like and we do trust you. You have to believe that,” I told her.

“If that was the case, you wouldn’t be here. Do you think saying that to me is going to make me feel better? The potions are gone, Nolan. Do you understand that?”

“We weren’t here because we doubted you. We were here because Jason had already ambushed six Lonefur warriors and killed five of them. We couldn’t let you walk into that without making sure you

were safe,” I explained.

“You don’t have to keep telling me that!” Talia finally exclaimed. “You told me that you trusted me last

night. Was that all a lie?”

“We weren’t going to approach if Jason hadn’t restrained you. We just wanted to be near in case things

went south,” Solon added.

“You didn’t think he planned for that? He had his rogues hidden everywhere,” Talia countered.

“We used Leslie’s suppressive scent spray to hide our approach completely. It should have made us impossible to detect,” Solon explained. “We didn’t know that Jason had a counter to that.”

Talia studied him for a moment before turning back to me. “You should have told me the plan. Remember what Della said. Keeping everyone out of the loop would cause mistakes we couldn’t afford,” Talia said. ” This was a mistake. If you had told me, I could have warned you through the mind link what Jason was planning.”

“By then, it could’ve been too late. We didn’t want to take that risk,” I said and Solon nodded.

Talia looked between Solon and I. The anger remained, but now exhaustion and defeat were written all over her face.

“It doesn’t matter now. You went against my wishes, and everything is messed up now,” Talia sighed. Her eyes drifted to the dark stain on the stone. “That was our only chance.”

“I’m sorry, Talia. I really am,” I told her. I didn’t think this would turn out like this, but I was never going to apologize for wanting to keep her safe.

“Good but I am still angry with you. You should’ve listened to me.”

“I know.”

Talia exhaled and finally let me pull her into my arms. She was still upset with me, but she didn’t hate me. That was something I could work with. I would rebuild the trust in time.

When Talia stepped back again, her expression was composed. That was what I loved about her. She would refocus for the greater good.

“What do we do now?” she asked.

“I already sent word to Alpha Landon. Before we left this morning, I warned him about what we might be walking into. I asked him to search for alternatives. Anything that might buy us time while we figure out how to find Jason again,” I explained.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & EIGHTY FOUR

Jason's POV

The look on her face when the container shattered against the stone was exhilarating.

Talia dropped to her knees the instant the liquid spread across the ground. She pressed both palms against the cracks in the rock. Then she screamed. The sound tore out of her throat raw and exposed in a way I had never heard from her.

'It is what she deserved for getting our father killed,' my wolf huffed.

Talia had always mastered herself, especially under pressure. Even when everything between us collapsed beyond repair, she kept her composure. I never saw her cry, not once.

But in that park, with her hands scraping uselessly across wet stone, I saw the end of that composure I grinned as I remembered her tear streaked face. Now, she understood how I felt when she abandoned me. And Nolan had to stand there and watch every second of it. My father would be proud of what I did

today.

'Savor this victory,' my wolf urged. We have finally got the first taste of our revenge.'

'Now, you're onboard with this?' I questioned.

'Of course,' my wolf huffed. That fool really thought he could fool me.'

Nolan and Solon used a scent suppressant. The moment they were about twenty feet away, I caught Nolan's scent beneath the chemical masking agent. It was faint, but unmistakable.

I kept my expression neutral and let the scene unfold exactly as I intended. I wanted to show Talia that the man she chose didn't trust her. I needed her to see how her choice would inevitably kill her father.

'I recognized him the instant he was twenty feet away,' my wolf said. 'He could bury himself in mud and I would still know his putrid scent.'

There was no way we would forget him. Nolan killed our father. He deserved more than just to lose Talia.

'He will not walk away from this,' my wolf said.

'First, he will watch everything crumble around him. First Talia. Then the pack,' I continued.

'And after that?'

I smiled faintly and took a sip of my wine. Then, we will take his life.'

Nolan would not die quickly. I decided that long before I sent the letter. He would watch Talia unravel first. He would watch his life split apart piece by piece until every loss pointed back to the moment he murdered my father. Only when nothing meaningful remained would I kill him.

Robin waited at the edge of camp when I returned.

The moment he noticed me. He stiffened as if he sensed a monster nearby. When I approached, his eyes dropped immediately to the ground.

'He fears us more now, my wolf observed.

'He should,' I responded.

'But not like this,' my wolf added.

Ever since I tracked Robin and his daughter down, fear clung to him like a second skin. The way he didn't meet my eyes, and the careful control of his breathing. He understood exactly what refusal to work for me would cost him, and whatever allegiance he once felt toward Silverfang died the moment he realized he could not protect her from me.

Fear made a man obedient, but too much of it could make him a pawn. A Beta should not tremble at his Alpha's footsteps and yet, Robin was.

'He is not Henry,' my wolf said. 'He will never be Beta like Henry.'

Hearing his name made me growl low in my throat. That was still a sore spot for me. I still could not believe Henry turned on me the way he did to save his own hide. 'At least he's not a traitor,' I retorted.

Robin cleared his voice and said, "The Alpha King's condition has worsened. His hair has started turning gray, and the dark marks are spreading faster now."

I nodded. "Good. Only a matter of time now."

Robin did not respond well. He shifted on his feet as he flexed and unflexed his hands. 'Reassure him. His fidgeting is annoying,' my wolf huffed.

"You have served me well," I continued. "When I take the Alpha King's seat, you will stand beside me as Beta. I reward loyalty, Robin."

"Yes, Alpha," Robin said.

Since my father's death, I had pledged myself to the Rogue King and tied my operations to his network. The arrangement demanded compromises, but the advantages outweighed them. His reach extended across territories in ways legitimate packs could never manage. He provided armies, intelligence, and unrestricted movement across borders.

In return, I gave him loyalty and usefulness. And now I would be giving him the Alpha King's corpse.

The Harvest Gathering approached quickly.

Every year, the Alpha King hosted the ruling Alphas and their Lunas to negotiate territory disputes, resource distribution, and pack alliances. Rudolf had presided over the Gathering without fail throughout his reign. If he failed to appear now, every Alpha in attendance would know that Silverfang was weakening and the seat for the Alpha King would be up for grabs.

“I have an order for you,” I said.

“Yes, Alpha.”

“I want you to continue spreading the truth about the Alpha King’s illness. I want every pack to know about it. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Alpha.”

Rumors had already spread that he was sick, but I needed more. I needed Alphas, thinking he would not attend. I needed them plotting and vying for the throne, not like they would get it. The chaos is what I needed to give the Rogue King the opportunity to gain more territory.

If the Alpha King stayed hidden, panic and political opportunism would spread before the event even ended. If he attended, the strain would drive the poison deeper into his body. Either outcome I win and I intended to witness it personally.

“The Harvest Gathering,” I added. “I intend to attend.”

“Is…is that wise? You’re…”

“That wasn’t a question, Robin,” I responded firmly. Robin quickly closed his mouth and nodded.

A slow smile pulled at my mouth.

“What gift do you think the Alpha King deserves?”

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & EIGHTY FIVE

Talia’s POV

Father was awake when I arrived.

Solon fluffed his pillows and my father pulled himself upright in the hospital bed, which alone marked an improvement from the last time I saw him conscious. Unfortunately, that was where the improvements ended.

His hair was now streaked with gray and once thick and black was now thinning in areas. The black marks on his skin had spread beyond his arms and now crawled across his collarbone.

‘Keep it together Talia. Do not let him see you worried. He doesn’t need any more stress on him,‘ my wolf warned and I took a deep breath. I fixed my expression as I continued to observe him as he hadn’t seen

me yet.

I could see the slight tremble in his body as my father held himself rigidly upright. His jaw flexed as every breath seemed to be painful. My father was putting on a brave front to not show how much pain he was in. Leslie’s words echoed through my mind.

“He hid it for so long,” Leslie told me when we were alone one night. “Solon didn’t want to tell you this. He thought you’d feel guilty.”

“I need to hear it. How long has he been poisoned?” I responded.

“Months and it is not like this poison just makes him weak. That would be merciful, but no. The pain is debilitating. We don’t even understand how he could have gone through meetings and made sound judgments while being in so much pain,” Leslie explained.

I didn’t know what was worse: him in pain or him trying to hide it from me.

I knocked on the door before entering. He looked up at me and smiled as if seeing me took all the pain

away.

“Hello, pumpkin,” my father said as I walked over to take a seat next to his bed. I kissed his forehead and

took his hand.

“How long have you been awake? How are you feeling today?” I asked.

A faint smile touched his mouth. “I’m doing okay. It seems that I have missed a lot while I was out.”

I looked at Solon briefly and said through the mind link. ‘What all does he know?‘

‘Everything,‘ Solon responded. ‘He didn’t let me sugar coat anything.‘

I knew Solon probably tried to lighten the blow that our father didn’t have much time left, but I had to own up to that. It was my fault. I should have never attempted it without talking it through with everyone else first.

“Dad, I…”

“No need to apologize, Talia. I know you were doing your best to help. You made a decision as the Princess. It didn’t work out but we still have time. Don’t let it distract you,” my father said, cutting me off

I nodded and pulled myself together again. “We lost the two potions sent by Alpha Landon. We’ve already contacted Alpha Landon for replacements. He is working on getting replacements. If he succeeds, Leslie can place you in. The poison will stop advancing while you sleep and give Leslie more time to come up

with an antidote.”

Father nodded. His brow furrowed as he thought it over. “I had heard the stories about the Frostmoon vine. That is a smart plan.”

I smiled slightly. “It is the only one we have so far.”

“And you’re certain this will work?” he asked.

“Alpha Landon vouches that it will work, so yes I am certain,” I answered.

His fingers tightened weakly around mine. “I trust you.”

I wanted to ask him how he could trust me after all it was my blood that caused the poison to spread faster. ‘It wasn’t your fault and he knows that. The fault lies with Michael and Jason not you. You and Leslie wouldn’t have attempted that remedy if Michael hadn’t poisoned him. So, stop blaming yourself,‘ my wolf scolded.

My father shifted slightly against the pillows and looked toward Solon near the window.

“The Harvest Gathering is in a week,” Father said. “Have preparations begun?”

There was a flicker of hesitation that crossed his face before Solon nodded and said, “With everything happening, we had a delayed start, but preparation has started today. I will oversee everything personally. We should have everything ready by Friday.”

Until now, the Gathering had barely crossed my mind. Everything else had become an afterthought once Father had become sick. However, the Harvest Gathering was not an event to be forgotten.

Every year the Alphas arrived at Silverfang carrying gifts, grievances, requests, and political ambitions. Father, as the Alpha King, settled disputes, distributed resources, and reinforced alliances. He was the foundation holding the territory together.

Then, it clicked. Michael had poisoned my father with the main purpose of causing chaos during the Harvest Gathering. The timing could not be a coincidence.

'If they see him sick, they will think Silverfang is weak. We could be at risk of a war,' my wolf added. 'He should not go.'

"I think you should not attend this year. Solon and I will handle everything," I said. "You need to focus on recovering."

"I appreciate that," Father replied. "But I will attend."

"You cannot take on any unnecessary stress," I argued. "And if the other Alphas think you are weak, they may try to challenge you on the spot."

Father frowned. "You assume that rumors haven't already been spread. Seeing me they wouldn't dare, but if they don't see me, there are Alphas who would tear Silverfang apart right then and there."

"Then you will attend briefly," Solon compromised. "The other Alphas only need to see you. I will manage the disputes and negotiations personally. You appear, greet the packs, and return here to rest."

His gaze hardened despite the exhaustion beneath it. He closed his eyes as he leaned further into the pillows.

"Fine," he agreed. "No matter what, it cannot be revealed that I am ill. Even if it means violence, we must maintain our image and status."

“Yes, Father,” Solon and I said together.

Chapter 286

Talia's POV

Nolan stood outside of Father's room waiting for Solon and I. Solon excused himself

to start the preparations for the Harvest Gathering. Nolan and I stood in silence while healers moved quietly around us carrying fresh bandages, trays of

instruments, and steaming cups of herbal mixtures Leslie had ordered throughout

the morning.

"How's he doing?" Nolan asked.

"Not good," I replied honestly. "The gray and the marks are spreading."

"He'll pull through, Talia,” Nolan attempted to reassure me.

"I have to accept that he may not, Nolan, even with the antidote," I responded. I couldn't get the image of my father sitting upright in that bed, visibly weaker despite his efforts to conceal it. My father was deteriorating faster now, and although he continued to act like he was not in pain, his façade wasn't as solid as he thought.

A nurse approached us and said, “Alpha Nolan, there is a call for you."

Nolan and I quickly went to the receptionist's desk. "Alpha Nolan speaking." His calm expression fell away. His jaw flexing in agitation.

"What do you mean destroyed?" Nolan asked.

My stomach dropped almost immediately.

Nolan turned slightly away from me while the voice on the other end continued speaking, though I still caught enough to understand that something had gone catastrophically wrong.

"How many rogues?" he asked sharply. A pause followed before his expression darkened further. "Were they followed after the attack?"

Silence stretched between each answer.

Finally, Nolan exhaled slowly through his nose. "Understood. Stay where you are. We'll send men immediately."

He hung up and for a moment Nolan simply stared at the phone as if it would come to life and bite him.

“Nolan,” I said quietly. "Who was that on the phone?”

"Alpha Landon was ambushed on the way here.”

Cold spread through me almost instantly. "What? What do you mean ambushed?"

"He was attacked by rogues," Nolan explained.

"The medicine?" I asked.

"Destroyed."

It felt like the walls were closing in on me. I stumbled backwards but caught myself. "Okay, okay. We can handle this. There's no need to panic," I said more to myself than to Nolan.

"Lonefur was attacked at the same time Alpha Landon was ambushed," Nolan continued. "The rogues burned the Frostmoon vines. They burned the entire field."

For several seconds neither of us spoke. My wolf bristled and growled within me. 'Jason. Jason did this!'

Jason's warning about preparing Father's funeral had never been an empty threat meant to frighten me. He meant to remove every chance to save my father. Every move Jason made was to ensure that my father died.

Panic began to rise within me, but I forced myself to suppress it. Father could not know about this. If he saw fear on our faces, he would understand immediately that something had gone wrong, and stress alone could push the poison further through his body.

"We keep this from Father for now," I said firmly. "Until Leslie has time to reassess the situation."

"Right, right," Nolan muttered before turning to me and said firmly, "Agreed."

"No one discusses the attack anywhere near his room," I continued. "Not the guards, not the nurses, not anyone. If Father suspects the medicine is gone, he'll try

to involve himself, and he's already pushing his body too hard as is."

Before I could answer, Solon emerged from the stairwell carrying several files tucked beneath one arm. The moment he noticed our expressions, he became concerned.

"What happened?"

"Alpha Landon was attacked," Nolan answered. "The medicine was destroyed."

"And the Frostmoon Vine?"

"Gone."

Solon cursed under his breath before he dragged a hand down his face. I gripped his forearm in support. "Alpha Landon survived," I said. "We're going to bring him here. Perhaps we can salvage this somehow."

"Agreed," Solon finally said. "We have to keep it together."

I nodded. “Alpha Landon made it to Fangvale, so he is safe for now, but that doesn't mean we're safe. I want additional patrols sent to the northern border immediately, and I want escorts dispatched to bring Alpha Landon safely into Silverfang territory before nightfall."

Solon nodded without hesitation. "I'll organize it now."

“Nolan,” I said, turning toward him, "the visiting Alphas and their entourages will begin arriving within the next two days. Increase security at every border crossing and send warriors to escort each delegation personally once they enter our territory."

"I'll lead the escorts myself," Nolan replied.

"Thank you," I told him before kissing him. He was one of the few people I trusted and right now, nowhere felt secure anymore.

The rest of the afternoon dissolved into controlled chaos. Warriors patrolled the territory in force. Leslie and Della remained with Father at the hospital while Solon coordinated border security from his office, and everywhere I looked I could feel tension spreading through Silverfang like the calm before a storm.

Everyone sensed something was about to happen. They simply did not know what. By evening, I was exhausted, but I couldn't bring myself to sleep. I stood alone inside Father's office staring through the tall windows overlooking the dark forest surrounding Silverfang territory.

I sat down in my father's chair and reached out to Henry through the mind link. He answered almost immediately.

'Good evening, Luna Talia. Is everything ok?' Henry said.

'I need you to come to Silverfang immediately,' I told him.

'What happened? Are you okay?' Henry asked.

'There isn't enough time to explain everything,' I admitted. 'Can you leave tonight?'

'Yes, of course Luna. I will make sure someone that can be trusted is in control while I am away,' Henry explained.

Henry was true to his word as he arrived a day later. Nolan and I waited near Silverfang's southern border while Henry's convoy crossed through the winding forest road leading toward the main gates. Relief moved through me as soon as I saw him. I was so afraid that he would be ambushed as well.

Henry looked exhausted from travel but otherwise unharmed. The moment his eyes found mine, concern crossed his face immediately. "You look exhausted," he said.

I let out a tired laugh and said, “That's because I am. How is Shadowclaw?"

"Stable," he answered. "The borders are secure, and I left additional patrols in place before coming here."

"At least one territory still has functioning leadership," Nolan said.

Henry snorted softly before studying both of us more carefully. "You say that like Silverfang is falling apart.”

Neither Nolan nor I answered quickly enough. Henry's posture stiffened immediately. “How bad is it really?" he asked.

"I can feel something closing around us," I admitted quietly. "Every instinct I have

says this Harvest Gathering is going to turn dangerous."

Henry's jaw tightened. "Then we prepare for danger. I promise you I will protect Silverfang with my life."

"I trust you," I said, giving him a smile.

As I was about to leave with Nolan, Henry said, “Wait, Luna. There's something else

I need to report."

Chapter 287

Talia's POV

"What is it?" I asked, hoping that it was good news.

Henry hesitated briefly before answering, "Before I left, I found out that the Doomfur pack was attacked by rogues."

I frowned immediately. "How bad was it?"

"Severe enough that multiple perimeter defenses were breached," Henry replied.

"Why didn't you inform us? I told you to inform me if any of Shadowclaw's allies ran into any issues," I demanded.

"Well, that's where it gets strange."

Nolan's eyes narrowed slightly. "What do you mean?"

"I would have told you if it was an issue, but it doesn't seem to be anymore," Henry answered. “Alpha Kent refused assistance from Shadowclaw entirely and said he and his pack would handle the rogues."

Nolan and I looked at each other before looking back at Henry. "Are you sure about that? How could he handle a rogue attack on his own, especially at that scale?" I repeated.

"When a scout reported to us what was happening, I offered support personally. Alpha Kent told us not to come, that it would be a challenge to his title as Alpha if we did," Henry explained.

I was dumbfounded. Alpha Kent had inherited leadership of Doomfur less than a year ago, after his father's death. Born without a wolf, he had always been

dismissed as weak by the neighboring packs and faced years of ridicule. Despite that, he managed to keep Doomfur safe and proved himself more capable than anyone expected. Still, Doomfur was a small, vulnerable pack, and even with Kent's determination, they were not strong enough to repel a major rogue attack on their

own.

"And what is the status of Doomfur?" Nolan asked.

"Fine. Alpha Kent said they were able to repel the rogues," Henry replied.

"That makes no sense," Nolan said flatly. "How is that even possible?"

“Let's say he did repel the rogues. The question would be how,” I said.

Henry lowered his voice slightly. "I don't know how, but I think Kent is hiding something."

"We need everyone together immediately," Nolan said after a long pause. "In Solon's office in one hour."

By the time everyone arrived, I could feel the tension in the air like a weighted blanket on my back. And it wasn't just me feeling it. No one looked relaxed.

Marco stood near the bookshelf with his arms crossed tightly over his chest while Leslie sorted absently through several medical reports, she clearly was no longer reading. Solon was sitting on his couch, twirling a pencil. Della remained beside the window watching the darkening sky outside, her expression unreadable beneath the dim light spilling across the room.

"So, are you going to tell us what is going on?" Della finally asked when Nolan and I entered the office.

"To summarize, the Doomfur pack was attacked by rogues. Shadowclaw attempted to provide reinforcements, but Alpha Kent refused reinforcements and advised that they successfully repelled the rogues," I said.

"Kent refused reinforcements?" Solon repeated incredulously.

Henry nodded.

"Alpha Kent? Wolfless Kent?" Marco questioned.

"He insisted Doomfur had the situation under control," Henry answered.

"That's bullshit," Solon blurted out.

“And suspicious,” Leslie added. “He most certainly does not have the situation under control."

"It is inconceivable," Nolan said. "Kent's own father openly considered him weak because he is wolfless. No matter how cunning he is, a wolfless Alpha leading one of the weaker packs in the region should have accepted help immediately after a rogue attack."

"What makes this even more suspicious is that Kent is not a stupid man. We all know that," I added. "It would be better if he was actually stupid."

While Kent lacked physical strength, he made up for it with intelligence. Even before he became Alpha of Doomfur, he quietly built alliances while others focused on displays of dominance. Why fight when he could destroy his opponent before they even realized what was going on? People underestimated him out of pity, but being overlooked only made him more dangerous.

"You think he aligned himself with the rogues," Della said carefully. "Or could he be held hostage by rogues?"

"I think it's more plausible that he sided with the rogues. Kent would have burned down Doomfur before he allowed rogues to take over," I replied.

"What would he gain from siding with them? This would be one hell of risk to take," Marco stated.

"Kent is still bitter and he probably still holds grudges against packs that ridiculed him," Nolan said.

Henry's expression darkened further. "Then, if he has sided with rogues, the attack on Doomfur may not have been an attack at all. It could have been a cover to get enough rogues under his command for something he has planned."

It made sense. It was a staged assault, a distraction large enough to conceal movements no one would question during the Harvest Gathering.

"Will Kent still attend the Harvest Gathering?" Leslie asked. “If he doesn't, maybe he is an issue we can deal with later for the time being."

"No luck there. He's attending," Solon responded as he stood. He walked over to his desk and picked up the folder resting on the edge of his desk. Solon handed it to Leslie and she opened it.

“His formal response arrived this morning," Solon continued. “Attendance confirmed for himself and select members from his pack."

Marco frowned slightly and said, "What is wrong with that? If he is telling the truth, then there's no reason that he wouldn't attend."

"I would have thought that if I hadn't found out about this and the note he sent along

with his confirmation only makes me even more telling," Solon said.

"What note?" I asked. "He sent a note?"

"Oh hell," Leslie muttered as she read a folded letter.

"What does it say, Leslie?" Della asked.

"He looks forward to unveiling a surprise worthy of this year's Harvest Gathering," Leslie replied.

Silence settled instantly across the room. Every instinct inside me tightened at once as a sense of thread swept through me.

The note read like a sweetly worded threat.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & EIGHTY EIGHT

Talia's POV

"I am starting to get a bad feeling about this, like Jason might come to Silverfang himself," Della said after Leslie folded the note and put it back in the folder.

The thought of seeing Jason again put my whole body on edge. My wolf bristled within me, snarling as the memory of seeing Jason shattering the last chance we had to save my father came to mind. Every instinct in me told me to hunt Jason down by any means necessary. If my father only had a month left, then Jason would have less than that.

Nolan's fingers laced through mine. He squeezed once and his Alpha aura washed over me, not to control me but to calm me down. Through the mate bond, he said, “Breathe, my love. You're getting worked up."

Solon's eyes flashed with anger and he said what I was feeling. “If that bastard dares set foot in our territory, I'll tear him apart myself."

"You'll do no such thing,” Leslie snapped, her voice cracking like a whip.

“Leslie, I will not have that bastard here,” Solon growled.

"No one likes the idea of that, but you will have to deal and think about others instead of your own feelings," Leslie scolded. "This is the worst place to start a war with a pawn of the Rogue King. Too many innocent people would be harmed by that. Use your head, Solon. We're all upset about this but do not let your anger consume you and make the situation worse."

Solon's jaw clenched so hard I could hear his teeth grinding. "I'll make sure Silverfang is safe," he bit out. "I'll do whatever it takes to protect our people. But if Jason shows himself...I'll do the best that I can to maintain the peace."

"I'll reinforce the patrols along our borders," Marco advised. "The guards have already been doubled at the entrance. We'll know Jason is coming before he even gets close enough to cause problems."

"The other Alphas also know that Jason is wanted. He would be a fool to show up here. If he does, he underestimates how many packs hate rogues," Henry added.

"But we also shouldn't underestimate him. We've done enough of that already," Leslie pointed out. "I will

make sure the hospital is on full alert."

Della nodded, her fingers drumming on the table. "I'll coordinate with the warriors, make sure everyone is on high alert and ready for anything. We can't afford a single mistake. Thank you for looping us in Talia."

"What you said a few days ago was correct Della. We all have to be on the same page," I told her. Vigilance is our only defense now. The other Alphas will start arriving soon for the Harvest Gathering, and we cannot show a single crack."

"Is the Alpha King going to be on board with this? You know how he is about appearances," Della said.

"We spoke with Father this morning. He's agreed to make only a brief appearance at the opening ceremony tomorrow before retreating to rest. I'll handle the rest of the event. We will say it is good practice for the day I take his place as Alpha King," Solon explained.

Leslie frowned and said, "I wish you had told me about this ahead of time. Your father making an appearance may be too much for him."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Without that medicine, he can only manage an hour outside the hospital, maybe less. We'll need to plan the entire ceremony around that limit, down to the minute," Leslie stated.

I tightened my grip on Nolan's hand until my knuckles ached. "Then that's exactly what we'll do. We will give Father as much as painkillers to numb him enough to make his appearance."

By the time Nolan and I finally made it back to our room, exhaustion was weighing on me. Every step was a struggle. I left my clothes on the floor before slumping down onto the edge of the bed. I ran my hands through my hair and sighed.

'Rest, Talia. We will take it one day at a time,' my wolf whispered. Even she sounded tired.

'I am trying. I just feel like we are not ready for this,' I told her.

'You will have to trust and believe that this will work out. Worrying about it will only make yourself sick,' my wolf said.

The mattress dipped as Nolan got into bed and settled beside me. “What are you thinking?" he asked.

"How everything got so bad so fast," I replied.

Nolan pulled me into his arms and held me against his chest. I listened to the steady drum of his heart. I was still upset with him for not listening to me, but I couldn't ignore the mate bond and how having him this close was comforting.

"Don't push yourself past your limits, Talia," he murmured, his lips brushing against my forehead. "You're no good to anyone if you collapse. Least of all yourself."

I turned my face into the warm curve of his throat, breathing him in. "I know. I know. Things are moving so fast I am barely keeping up. I just...I can't fail him, Nolan. I can't fail any of them, especially not now"

Nolan's arms tightened around me. "You won't," he said. "We won't. We'll find a way to get through this together."

"And you will trust me this time," I said.

"Yes, I will. And when it's over, when your father is back on his feet and Jason and

the Rogue King are nothing but bad memories, we're taking a vacation, just you and me. Somewhere no one can find us."

Despite the fear and the exhaustion, a smile tugged at the corners of my mouth. "I'm going to hold you to that, you know."

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & EIGHTY NINE

Talia's POV

Despite the rain, the morning of the Harvest Gathering was pleasant. Music drifted through Silverfang's streets. Omegas were rushing around making the final touches. Anyone from outside looking in would have thought everything was normal and that was exactly the way we wanted it to be.

'Keep breathing and stay calm. We will only show them what we want them to see,' my wolf said and I agreed. We only had to get through today without incident.

I stood at the gates in a heavy red cloak, showcasing Bloodmoon pack's colors. My eyes stung from lack of sleep as I watched the road, my breath curling in the air. Colin's pack was the first to arrive.

"Always trying to show off," Nolan muttered.

"I thought you two had gotten over your little squabble," I teased and Nolan rolled

his eyes.

"Welcome, Alpha Colin. We are happy that you could make it," Nolan greeted Colin. He held his hand out to shake it.

Colin looked at his hand and snorted, "Are you really going to try to keep it this formal after we fought a mad bear together?"

Before Nolan could respond, Colin pulled him into a hug. I could feel Nolan's confusion through the mate bond and the slight feeling of satisfaction that Colin treated him like a friend. Nolan shoved Colin off of him and Colin teased, "Don't be like that big guy. We're practically brothers now."

"Don't push your luck," Nolan huffed and then glared at me as I was failing miserably to contain my laughter.

Colin pulled me into a quick hug and said, "Sorry for the delay. I had to make sure Moonbrook's new wall was finished before I left. I won't risk my pack's safety, not with rogues getting bolder by the day."

I gave a short nod. It was a relief to hear that Colin took things seriously and got the wall completed." Congratulations. Moonbrook must be well defended now," I told him.

Colin scanned the crowd behind me. "Where is your father? I need to speak with him before the ceremony. There are urgent matters that I need to discuss with him."

“He's busy with preparations. You know how focused he is,” I lied. “He wants everything to go perfectly."

Colin narrowed his eyes and leaned forward, so his voice was low enough that no one could overhear him. “Talia, I've known you since you could barely walk. You've never been able to lie well."

"I'm not lying," I said confidently.

"Your nose does a little twitch when you are," Colin pointed out, causing me to frown.

I turned to Nolan for support. “He's right,” he said with a shrug. “No need to continue with this. Let's

continue this in private."

We led Colin to father's office. Once the heavy door closed behind us, Colin immediately asked, "Is he... dead?"

"Goddess, no,” I exclaimed. "Why would you think that?"

"Because only death would keep your father from running the Harvest Gathering,"

Colin said. "So, if he's not dead, what is going on?"

"The truth is, Father is very sick," I explained.

"What do you mean sick? We don't get sick," Colin said.

"He was poisoned by Michael. It's a slow toxin, and there's no cure. The only thing that could have helped was a potion created from the Frostmoon Vine, but Jason destroyed both the potion and the plant."

Colin stared at me, anger and disbelief on his face. "Poisoned? You kept this secret from your allies? From me?"

Nolan's hand landed on my shoulder. "We had no choice. Rudolf did not want anyone to know. We even found out by accident. If anyone found out, Silverfang would become a target."

"Everything has an antidote. There must be some sort of cure. You just haven't found it yet," Colin responded. It made my heart ache to see him grappling with the truth of the matter.

"We've been searching for a solution, Colin. We haven't stopped searching but we're running out of time," I said.

Colin stood so fast, his chair scraped harshly on the stone floor. "Take me to him." "Colin, you're not supposed to know," I told him. "It would be better..."

"Talia, please," Colin begged, interrupting me. "Rudolf is practically a second father to me, Talia. I need to

see him. Please take me to him."

I nodded. Colin was one of the few people I trusted. I knew he would never harm my father and perhaps with him here now, he could come up with something that none of us had thought of. "Alright, let's go before any more packs arrive."

When we arrived, Father lay propped up in bed, reading a book. His skin looked paler today making the dark marks stand out even more. When he saw us, there was a mix of surprise and shame in his eyes.

Before father could ask what was going on, Colin had already moved to his side, took his hand, and leaned in to speak softly. “Don't worry. I am going to do everything I can to help you stay safe and get better," he vowed.

Solon caught my eye and nodded toward the hallway. I followed him outside. "What's up?" I asked.

"We have a problem," he said, keeping his voice low. "Alpha Kent is spreading rumors that Father is

dying and can't lead the Gathering."

I groaned in frustration. "So, it is what we feared. Kent is working with Jason."

Solon nodded. “Beta Derek is trying to stop the rumors, but I don't know if it'll be enough. Maybe we should tell the truth, get ahead of this before Kent turns everyone against us."

"No." I said firmly. "We stick to the plan. We double security, prepare for anything, but this stays between

1. us. Father can't know how...."

A voice from behind me caused me to jump.

"What can't I know?"

Father stood in the doorway, pale and thin, bracing himself against the wall.

"What are you hiding from me?" he asked again.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & NINETY

Talia's POV

"Dad, what are you doing?" I asked. "You should be resting in bed." I had not expected him to get out of bed let alone move so swiftly that we did not hear him.

"Talia, do not try to change the topic," my father responded coldly. The lines around his mouth had deepened with the strain of holding back a cough.

"We were only going over the preparations for the Harvest Gathering," Solon said. I nodded, not expecting Solon to lie so easily; however, we didn't need to stress out our father by telling him about Kent.

My father did not answer right away. He looked at me, and then at Solon, and then back at me, and when he finally spoke his voice was very calm, which was always how he sounded when he was deeply displeased.

"Do not lie to me, Solon. And you, Talia, I am disappointed in you."

"What did I do?"

"You're supporting his lie."

Colin shifted beside him and said, "We already heard most of what you two were saying. You didn't close the door all the way."

I face palmed and let out a sigh of frustration. There was no point in pretending now, and lying to my father had never really worked for us even when we were children. "We just wanted to make sure you were okay," I tried to explain but my father frowned.

"One of you will explain it to me from the beginning," my father said firmly. “And you will explain it now."

"Alpha Kent has been spreading rumors for several weeks now about your health,” Solon said. "He has been telling the other Alphas that you are dying."

"And how would he know that? Who would have told him that?" my father asked.

"We believe he is working with Jason," I replied.

“He has also been urging certain Alphas to consider breaking away from Silverfang's authority altogether," Solon continued. I looked at him in alarm. Solon had not told me about this.

My father did not speak for a long moment. He turned his face slightly away from us, and I saw the muscles in his jaw tighten, and then he began to cough, doubling over against the doorframe. This was exactly what we wanted to avoid.

“Dad, please go lie back down," I urged. Colin caught him under one arm, and I went to him under the other, and between the two of us we got him back into his bed. Solon brought water and I held it to his mouth until the coughing eased, and for several minutes none of us spoke as we waited for our father's breathing to slow down.

"Do you two remember Alpha Philip, Kent's father?” my father asked.

"Of course," Solon replied and I nodded. "He was one of the strongest Alphas in our region in history. He was a decisive but fair leader."

My father nodded and said, “Even those who disliked him, respected him. I disagreed with him often, but overall, he was a good man.” He paused to catch his breath, and Colin moved to pour more water, but my father waved him off.

"His death came without warning," my father continued. "He wasn't injured, sick, or poisoned. It was as if his body just gave out on him. I ordered an investigation and it went on for months. Eventually I had to end the investigation because I could not find anything."

Solon and I looked at each other. This seemed a lot like what we were dealing with, what Nolan went through. It was a trend of weird circumstances that led to the death of an Alpha.

"Kent inherited the position," my father continued. "Kent is nothing like his father. Philip was a man of direct action, and Kent has never done a thing directly in his life. There was always suspicion that had something to do with Philip's death and

now it has resurfaced now."

"Then we expel him. We do it tonight before the Harvest Gathering begins. This way we can stop him before he can cause any issues with the visiting Alphas. We have grounds enough already," Solon suggested. I could tell it was more of a suggestion. As soon as father agreed, he would order Derek to take action.

I put my hand on his arm before he could press the point any further. "Wait. Solon, wait. He is being too open about this. He would not be moving this aggressively if he did not have support behind him. We do not yet know whose support."

"We already know who it is. It is Jason."

"Or it could be the Rogue King or another pack. If we make a move on him before we know, we may force whoever is backing him into the open at the worst possible moment. Remember what Leslie said."

"Solon, trust me, I am right there with you, but Talia is right," Colon added. "The timing of the rumors and the boldness of the approach isn't a coincidence. This feels like a well thought out trap. Expelling

Kent tonight would make all our enemies know we're catching on. Let's use their overconfidence against them and let them show their hand, so we know what to do."

My father closed his eyes for a moment, and I thought he might be giving in to the exhaustion. But then he opened his eyes again and he had a resolute expression. I felt my stomach tighten before he spoke.

"I will preside over the Harvest Gathering myself," father said. "In person. Tomorrow."

"Father, no," I said. "You have not recovered. If you appear in front of the gathered Alphas and show any visible weakness, you will feed the exact narrative Kent has been spreading."

"I have to do this," father said firmly.

"There are other ways to demonstrate authority," Solon said. "I can issue a public declaration in your name. We do not need to put you bodily into the hall to remind them of who their Alpha King is."

"I wasn't asking your opinion," my father stated. Even while sick, his Alpha aura still

was oppressive enough for us to drop our gaze in submission.

'Do not keep fighting him on this, my wolf warned. 'He has made up his mind.'

'We can't let him do this. He'll die,' I said.

'He is our father and our King. He has the final say. There's nothing we can do,' my wolf lamented.

"Do not think I don't appreciate your care and consideration. I do, truly I do, but while I still breathe, I am the Alpha King and I will do everything in my ability to protect Silverfang and you all," he said.

"How are you planning to do this? You can barely stand now," Solon asked defiantly.

"I have ways to manage my condition for the duration of the gathering," my father replied. "For now, you will