Barren Luna 291

Chapter 291

Nolan's POV

I checked the guard rotation with the captain at the east gate, then walked the perimeter a second time. They were as tight as one night's notice allowed.

'Worrying will not help the situation. We have done what we can,' my wolf reassured me but I couldn't help it. I needed to make sure everything was close to perfect. I refused to allow anything to happen to Talia and Silverfang.

Derek and Marco waited for me by the inner courtyard when I came back from walking the perimeter.

"Everything up to your standard?" Derek questioned. He had always complimented my defenses even though back then I refused to listen to any of his compliments due to misguided anger for my father's death.

"Yes, huge improvements since the last time I was here," I responded. "Did Marco debrief you?"

"Yes, our warriors will keep an eye on Kent," Derek answered.

"That is not enough. From the moment Kent arrives tomorrow and until he leaves, I want you both monitoring him," I explained. "I want to know who he meets, how long he talks with each of them. If he speaks to another Alpha for longer than a greeting takes, I need to know immediately."

"Understood," Derek stated.

Marco nodded. He was quiet and I knew him long enough to know he was already mapping out a plan. That was why I trusted the pair of them with this. They were one of the best Betas.

"Get some rest. Tomorrow will be a long day," I told them before leaving them to plan.

The corridors had gone quiet by the time I reached my room. We had been moved to a larger guest wing instead of being in Talia's childhood room. It was a more private and secure arrangement that we needed now.

A young maid approached me before I entered the room. "Lady Talia came back some time ago, Alpha Nolan," she said. "She wanted me to tell you she is having dinner in the small dining hall."

"Thank you," I said and made my way to the dining hall. I had not seen Talia since morning, and the thought of her eating alone this late did not sit well with me. My wolf was restless being away from her for so long.

When I came in, Talia was staring at the wall. The plate in front of her was nearly full. She did not look up when the door opened.

"Talia, why aren't you eating?" I asked, but she did not respond.

Talia rolled a piece of bread between her fingers while she was deep in thought. I came around the table and rested a hand on her shoulder. She jumped, gripping her chest, and smiled.

"Goddess, you scared me," Talia said.

"I called your name. You didn't hear me," I told her as I leaned down and kissed her. "How did it go with Colin and your father?" I pulled her plate toward me as I began eating her food.

Talia set the bread on the table and let out a slow breath. "My father has decided to preside over the Harvest Gathering himself. It is non-negotiable."

My spoon stopped halfway to my mouth. I lowered it again without taking the bite. I had built my plans on one assumption, that the Alpha King would only make one appearance. Now, that he is presiding over it, everything had to change and there wasn't enough time.

"He cannot stand for a few minutes. How is going to be able to preside over the entire event?"

“Solon told him and I told him, but he refused to listen,” Talia responded.

"Why did he change his mind? Did something happen?" I asked.

"Alpha Kent is spreading rumors about his health and trying to instigate Alphas to rebel again father," Talia explained.

That surprised me. I didn't care about him being wolfless, but something about him rubbed me the wrong way. It wasn't lost on me that his father would have never relinquished the title of Alpha to him if he hadn't died. I never liked Kent but I respected his tenacity. I never expected him to turn on Rudolf, who had always been kind to him.

"He looked worse today. He nearly collapsed from coughing," Talia said. “He said he had a way to handle it tomorrow but I don't see it. I think it's be better if we told everyone the truth like Solon suggested.”

"Your father is a lot of things but he's not a liar. If he says he can handle it, believe him. Is there anything you know of, some treatment, that could allow him to temporarily regain his strength?"

Talia shook her head. "Not that I'm aware of, but that doesn't mean Leslie doesn't know of a way."

"Then we will ask Leslie to look into it," I said. I took her hand. Her fingers trembled against mine. "What else is bothering you?"

"I just don't know what tomorrow will bring. It is making me nervous," she admitted.

"Derek and Marco will be watching Kent," I said. "I will stay near your father the whole time, from the moment he enters the hall to the moment he leaves it. And if he shows weakness during the ceremony, Talia, even the smallest crack, Solon will take over."

"Agreed," she said quietly. "A quiet exit is better than him collapsing from exhaustion because of his stubbornness."

We finished dinner slowly, neither of us really hungry. Afterward, we went to bed without saying much more. Talia fell asleep quickly beside me, but I stayed awake, listening to the sound of her breathing in the dark.

Everything should have been under control. We had planned for every possibility we could think of. Still, I couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. Like we were stepping into a trap without knowing where it would spring from.

I closed my eyes and hoped tomorrow would prove me wrong.

Chapter 292

Talia's POV

Nolan and I reached the receiving hall right at sunrise. The first of the visiting Alphas were already there, gathered in twos and threes along the side aisles. I worked the line with Nolan half a step behind me, greeting and welcoming each Alpha and Luna.

"Welcome Alpha Kent. It is a pleasure for you to be here again," I told him, but Kent didn't respond. He continued staring out the window. My wolf bristled at his rude behavior, but it didn't matter. I wasn't going to take the bait. My family had done nothing to Kent. He was becoming an enemy for unfounded reasons and I would not be lenient with him once this backfires in his face.

'He has not spoken to a single Alpha since we came in,' Nolan said through the mind link. 'He is waiting for something.'

"The Alpha King has arrived," one of the guards near the main doors announced. Everyone turned as the main doors to the hall opened.

My father strolled into the room. Solon walked a half step behind one shoulder. Leslie walked a half step behind the other. My father entered the room as if he

hadn't been deathly sick yesterday.

'How is this possible?' Nolan asked.

My father looked suave. He was wearing a well-fitted silver suit with a silver and black hat pulled low over his grey hair which was smart. If any of his hair did show, they would assume it was part of his hat. He wasn't pale at all. His skin looked warm.

I caught Nolan's wrist without thinking. His pulse was quick under my fingers. He held my hand for a brief second.

'Leslie must have figured something out and kept it from us,' my wolf suggested and I agreed.

Across the hall, Kent's mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water.

"It cannot be," Kent muttered, He said it loud enough for the two men beside him to hear. "He was on his deathbed two weeks ago..."

My wolf bristled. I felt she needed to check Kent, but it wasn't the time. I forced a smile back on my face.

"Alpha Kent, mind your manners today. You do realize it is an offense to wish bad on the Alpha King," I scolded him.

Kent glared at me. Before he could respond, Nolan approached him. The Alphas near Kent backed away.

"Whatever you were about to say next, Alpha Kent, think it through," Nolan warned. "If I hear about you spreading one more rumor, I'll make sure you get real familiar with the dungeon and what it's like to not have a tongue. Are we clear?"

Kent's lips pressed flat. He gave a short nod and said, "Of course, Alpha Nolan.”

I crossed the hall to my father. The Alphas in our path made room. Solon caught my eye and shook his head a fraction. I kept my voice down when I reached my father, but I could not keep the brightness out of it.

"Father, you look great. Tell me how you managed this," I said low enough for only him to hear.

My father glanced at me from under the brim of the hat and then waved me off. "That doesn't matter. What matters is that I am able to do what is required today." He tilted his head toward Solon, and the brim caught the light again. "Although Solon's taste in hats is as poor as it has ever been. I asked for something plain. This is not plain."

"You opted to wear a silver suit. The hat matches and it is plain," Solon argued. "This is not plain. It is a costume prop," my father retorted.

I laughed before I stopped myself. The feeling of dread had lessened, seeing my father like this. I needed to know what Leslie did.

"You sneaky wolf," I teased as I looped arms with Leslie. "All those nights at his bedside and you had a miracle worked out. You let me sit there thinking we were losing him."

Leslie smiled weakly and said, "Talia. Please. Not now. We will talk later, once the day is behind us. You and Nolan should take your places." She pulled her arm free before I could stop her. Nolan touched my elbow and turned me toward the stage.

My father climbed the three steps without a hand on the rail. The murmur that rolled through the room was one of confusion. Everything Kent had said about father looked like malicious lies.

"Alphas of the territory, welcome to this year's Harvest Gathering," my father started. “I open the gathering now with the same offer I make every year. Any request, any dispute, any grievance, you may bring before me today and it will be settled."

A chair scraped along the stone. It drew everyone's attention.

Kent stood.

"Alpha King, before the standing matters are heard, I beg your indulgence. Another Alpha has traveled a great distance to be here today. He comes bearing a gift for Silverfang. He waits at the doors now. I would ask he be admitted before we proceed," Kent requested.

We had not been told of any other Alpha. The guest list had been settled three days ago. So, who was this new Alpha?

'Something is wrong about this,' I told Nolan through the mind link.

'I am reaching out to Marco now to see if he knows who this Alpha is,' Nolan responded.

The doors at the back of the hall had already begun to open before my father gave his answer.

A man stood in the doorway. My breath shortened in my throat. The unease that I had felt earlier came back with full force.

Chapter 293

Jason's POV

I killed the last guard outside the hall and wiped the blade clean on his sleeve. Kent's torch lifted twice in the window above me. I grinned. It was the signal I had been waiting for.

I walked the path to the great doors. The doors began to open as I came up to them.

I stepped through into the hall. The whispers started as soon as they saw me, sharp and shocked.

My wolf was on edge and so was I. It was risky coming here. The hall was full of Alphas, and if they decided to attack me, I could take some of them down, but I would not make it out alive. The trick was reading the room before the room read me. I scanned the faces in the front rows and saw exactly what I

needed to see. Confusion. Hesitation. No one wanted to make a move. No one would dare harm me with me being backed by the Rogue King.

I looked at the stage and froze. The Alpha King stood there, staring back at me. This was wrong. He was supposed to be on his deathbed. The reports had said he was bedridden, barely able to lift his head. Yet here he stood, no cane, no one holding him up, looking like he had never been sick. How the hell was that possible?

'Don't panic. We're here now. Follow through,' my wolf urged.

Solon was already moving along the side of the stage. "Guards. Surround him. This man is a traitor!" he ordered.

The guards moved in on me. I lifted my open hands waist-high so they could see them. "Is that how you are going to treat a guest?”

"You are no guest of ours," Solon snarled.

"You will want to hear me before you throw me into the dungeon,” I said.

"You can say it from the damn dungeon," Solon countered.

“I have brought a gift today. It is worth enough to end the bounty you placed upon me," I said with a smirk.

"You are only trying to buy time. You have brought nothing into this hall but yourself," Solon scoffed. "Take him and lock him in the dungeon."

"Wait,” Talia said and the guards stopped their approach. Solon's jaw flexed in annoyance, but he didn't undermine her and waited for her to continue.

"If he claims a gift, let him show it," she said.

I couldn't help but smirk. Talia always had a weak spot for me. Even after everything, she couldn't help but defend me. She probably didn't realize she was doing it. That part of her, the part that had always wanted to give me the benefit of the doubt, was still there. I wonder how that made Nolan feel, knowing she still cared for me.

"My lady," I greeted. "Your hospitality is generous. A little overeager, perhaps."

Talia frowned and said, "Present the gift, Jason, or go to the dungeon. Those are your only options."

"I don't think so after this terrible welcome," I sighed. "The gift will not be presented this afternoon. I will enjoy the Gathering, eat, and sleep under your roof like a proper guest. Then, we will discuss the matter tomorrow."

"Your audacity is mind boggling," Nolan growled. He had been quiet throughout the entire exchange until now. I hadn't realized how close he had gotten to me. My body tense as I prepared for an attack.

"Enough! After what you've done, the only thing you'll be doing is rotting in a cell," Solon snarled. "Guards, take..."

"We agree to your terms," the Alpha King said, stopping Solon in mid-sentence. Solon looked at the Alpha King in shock but said nothing. His body trembled as he was seething in anger. Seeing him like that warmed the heart.

Solon had spent years looking down his nose at me, treating me like I was just some grunt, and now he was being overruled in front of every Alpha in the territory by his own father no less. The same father that mine poisoned and there was nothing he could do about it.

Solon had to swallow his anger down. He couldn't defy his father in front of everyone. I made sure my smirk stayed in place long enough for him to see it.

"You won't be smiling for long, bastard," Nolan growled, low enough for only me and the guards nearby could hear.

I turned my attention to him and smiled smugly, knowing it was driving him crazy as well that he couldn't touch me. We would have our fight in due time. I'd make him pay for what he did to my father.

"He will be treated as a guest for today. Tomorrow he will present what he has come to present. Until then he is under the roof of Silverfang. See him escorted to his room," the Alpha King ordered. There were murmurs from the Alphas, but no one argued with him.

The guards lowered their drawn arms. They formed a circle around me and led me out of the hall. I could feel their hostility towards me, but they were bound by the Alpha King's word. They wouldn't harm, not like they could anyway.

'Why did you let this moment go to waste?' my wolf questioned. 'We had the room. This was the perfect opportunity to finish him off.'

'In case you missed it, that was a man on death's doorstep. Somehow, they cured him and I need to know how. So, for now, we will stay and bid our time. We will figure out what they've done and then tear it apart even if it means poisoning him again.'

Seeing Talia and Nolan's fury at seeing me was worth as much to me as the original plan would have been. The Alpha King would die. Whatever had restored him would not hold forever. When he died, I would use his death to split the two of them apart and take my rightful place as the Alpha King.

Chapter 294

Talia's POV

I watched Jason walk between the guards out of the hall. Anger rose in my throat as he smugly left. My hands gripped the arms of my chair so hard that I was splintering the wood. Nolan put his hand over mine, and through the mind link, he said, ‘Talia, don't give him the satisfaction of seeing you lose your composure.'

'He waltzed into Silverfang like he owned the place. Goddess knows what happened to our warriors for him to be able to get in without us being alerted,' I responded angrily.

'I know. We will deal with it,' Nolan said. 'It is better to let him think he has the upper hand now. We don't need your father having a relapse in front of everyone.' He ran his thumb across the back of my hand. I took a deep breath, exhaling through my nose a couple of times to let my anger subside. My father raised his hand from the front of the stage, and the hall quieted. The Alphas stopped murmuring.

“Alphas, I owe you an apology for the disturbance that has just passed through this hall," Father explained. "This 'guest', who arrived, was not on the list of those invited, and the manner of his arrival was an insult to every Alpha sitting in this room. You came here in good faith, and you have been given less courtesy in return than you were owed."

The Alphas didn't respond. They still look concerned about Jason being here. I didn't blame them. The only one who looked calm was Kent.

"There is one more thing I would like to address before we move forward," Father continued. “This will be the last Harvest Gathering I host. My son, Solon, will be taking over as Alpha of Silverfang over the coming months. When he is ready, he will stand before you as the next Alpha King of these territories. I ask each of you for the same support you have given me, and I ask you to give it to him as freely as you have given it to me."

There was a low, surprised murmur amongst the Alphas. They were going through whiplash. They were led to believe the Alpha King was deathly ill, but he doesn't look like it. Then Jason, the traitor, shows up, and my father announces his retirement.

"You have my support, my King," Colin said, raising his glass as he stood. "To Silverfang."

One by one, the Alphas rose to their feet and lifted their own cups. They all showed their support to Solon, who was beaming. "For Silverfang!"

I rose with the others, but my gaze stayed fixed on my father. Sweat traced his temple beneath his hat. His hand held the cup steady, but I could see it was taking considerable effort from the bulging veins in his hand.

'Solon,' I said through the mind-link. 'Look at father. He is sweating.'

'I see it, Talia. We have to hope that he can hold out until this is over.'

'How is he doing this? You must know what Leslie did.'

'I do not know. I asked her this morning before he came down. She would not tell

me. She told me he had asked her to keep it from all of us, including me.'

'What? Why the secrecy?!'

'Maybe this is where we get it from.'

'This isn't the time to joke, Solon.'

'I know. We will ask Leslie again later, but for now, let's focus on getting through the Harvest Gathering.'

I sank into my seat and folded my hands in my lap. I didn't like any of this. My father set his cup down and turned to Kent.

“Alpha Kent. Stand, please," my father ordered.

Kent rose from his seat. The two men beside him did not rise with him this time. The hall had gone very quiet again.

"Alpha Kent, I would like you to explain, in front of this assembly, how Jason, the traitor, came to be here," my father questioned. "I would also like you to explain the rumor you have been telling certain Alphas in this room for the past days, the rumor in which I was already on my deathbed and unfit to host this gathering."

Kent's mouth moved for a moment before he spoke.

"Alpha King, I was deceived. The man who came through the doors approached me weeks ago with claims I could not verify. He told me things about your health that I now see were not true, and he threatened my pack if I did not pass on what he had told me to the other Alphas. I am ashamed to have been used in this way. I offer my apologies to you and to this assembly," Kent said. His voice shook as if he was in fear but his eyes told a different story. Kent looked at my father with disdain. The apology was fake. He knew who Jason was. All the Alphas knew, so how did Kent not realize who he was?

"Do you expect us to..." I started and stopped when my father's eyes caught mine. His look was unmistakable and final. Not now.

'He is lying,' I said through the mind-link.

'We know,' Solon answered. 'This is not the place to take him apart. We will deal with him later.'

My father watched Kent long enough for Kent to start to become nervous. He still had his remorseful expression, but it began to waver. There was no one to protect him if Father decided to throw him into the dungeon right now. I hoped my father would, but instead, my father said, "We will speak of this further at another time, Alpha Kent. You may sit."

For a split second, Kent looked relieved before he sat down. None of the other Alphas looked at him. They seemed to be distancing themselves from him. "Now, let us continue," Father stated.

A few Alphas discussed disputes between trade routes that were easily resolved. Then, Alpha Landon stood. His arm was in a cast, and he had a bandage covering the wound on his neck, but for the most part, he looked okay.

"Alpha King, rogues attacked my Lonefur pack days ago. We were able to repel them, but we suffered casualties and losses to farm land. My warriors report that rogue scouts are watching the pack. I ask for assistance while Lonefur restores," Alpha Landon said.

"Solon," my father said. "Send five hundred warriors to Lonefur, beginning at first light tomorrow."

"Yes, father."

"Thank you, Alpha King."

Henry rose next and said, "Lonefur was not the only pack to suffer a rogue attack. Doomfur was also attacked. I am concerned that Shadowclaw will be next, as we are the closest ally to Doomfur."

"Then, I will send warriors to Shadowclaw and Doomfur," my father stated. "Solon..."

"Alpha King." Kent had risen from his seat suddenly. His voice was even now, no tremble in it at all. “I will have to respectfully decline your aid."

Everyone in the hall turned to look at him at once.

Chapter 295

Talia's POV

"I have already handled the rogue attacks on my territory," Kent explained. "I will manage the restoration of my pack myself. I see no need to trouble the Alpha King with what is properly my own concern. I am sure there are other packs that will require your aid more than I.”

Henry turned to Kent, surprise etched across his face. Landon's jaw flexed, and his nose flared in anger. Solon shot a worried glance at me. The other Alphas all looked visibly agitated. We were all thinking the same thing. The silent accusation was simple.

Traitor.

Kent must think we were fools if he thought we would believe a wolfless Alpha of a small pack could repel a rogue attack the same size that nearly crippled Lonefur and almost killed its Alpha. Even if he was no longer loyal to my father, it made no sense to refuse help.

Refusal would only bring more attention unless the rogue attack never happened. Suddenly, the idea of Kent working for his own gain, playing both sides for reasons we could not yet see, seemed more likely than ever.

My father did not show any of what I knew he was thinking. He smiled warmly at Kent, which made Kent look at him in confusion.

"Alpha Kent, you honor your father today. Philip would have answered the same way," Father praised him. "A capable leader who handles his own pack and does not request aid when it is not necessary, that is what your father was, and that is what I see in you."

I studied Kent's face as my father spoke. At the mention of "Philip," his careful mask faltered for a heartbeat before he restored it and sat down.

Everyone knew how unstable Philip and Kent's relationship was, especially after the night Philip backhanded Kent during an event for disobeying him. My father's subtle dig at him reopened a wound better than a physical blow.

Feeling my confusion as to why father would goad Kent like that, Nolan reached out through the mind link. 'Whether Kent cared for his father or not, he is still Philip's son. This will make him think twice about his decisions. Whether it will change what he will do next, only time will tell.'

For the next two hours, my father listened to a multitude of requests. There were old boundary disputes, grain requests from two eastern packs after a bad harvest, and a complaint from a small pack about an unpaid debt. My father split the requests between Solon and me, and we wrote them down so nothing would be forgotten.

When the last of the matter had been heard, my father turned to the hall. "The gathering is closed. Please rest. Food will be brought to your rooms. Travel safely, whether you're leaving today or in the morning."

The Alphas bowed their heads in answer.

"Beta Derek will assign an escort to lead those to your rooms. Those that are leaving tonight. Safe travels," Solon stated. Derek and his guard began leading the Alphas out of the hall.

Henry came to the front of the hall before he left, with Colin a half step behind him and Landon a few paces behind them both. Henry stopped at the foot of the stage and looked up at my father.

"Alpha King, if there is anything we can do for you tonight, anything at all, you have only to send word," Henry said.

“I am grateful, Henry. Truly. Go and rest. You have a long journey ahead of you tomorrow, and I have kept you long enough today," Father replied.

"Are you sure?" Alpha Landon asked. "I owe you a debt. Without your aid, I would not have made it."

Father smiled weakly and replied, “It is our request that caused you harm in the first place, so you owe me nothing. Please rest. We can speak again in the morning."

Alpha Landon hesitated and then bowed before leaving. Colin watched him go and said, "Now, will you let me help? You know you could..."

"No, Colin. Rest. All matters were taken care of. I appreciate your support, but go," Father said firmly.

Colin nodded.

"Let us know if anything comes up," Colin said. I watched them leave as the hall doors closed.

"All things considered, that went well. I think..." I stopped when I saw my father's condition. All the strength he'd shown all day had vanished. He was ghastly pale, drenched in sweat as he barely stood.

"Leslie," my father croaked out.

Leslie was at his side before the name had finished leaving him. Solon was at his other side a second behind her, and the two of them took his weight between them and turned him toward the corridor behind the stage.

"You overdid it," Leslie scolded. "Let's get you back to your room."

We had barely rounded the corner of the corridor when my father collapsed.

He gave no warning, didn't even stagger. One moment, he was upright between Solon and Leslie, the next, his knees didn't buckle; they completely gave out. Only their quick reflexes kept him from crashing to the stone floor.

‘His aura.....his aura is fading!' my wolf said in alarm.

I closed my eyes and reached for my father's aura. And just like she said, it was fading fast like water pouring from an overturned cup. Every werewolf could sense the life force that made an Alpha, but it was more than just strength. It was the core of his power and his bond to the pack. If an Alpha's aura faded entirely, it meant he was on the brink of death, powerless to protect himself or those he led. The realization made my chest tighten with panic.

A cold wave of terror crashed over me, stronger than anything I had ever felt in battle. My heart hammered so loud I could barely hear myself think.

"Leslie, what is happening to him? What did you do?!"

Chapter 296

Talia's POV

My father looked even worse than yesterday. The scent of death lingered in the room. It made the hair on the back of my neck stand on end.

IV tubes ran from my father's arm and chest to the machines by his bed. The only sound was the slow, steady beep of the monitor, each tone making the silence feel heavier. His hat was gone, revealing his silver hair, damp and stuck to his forehead. His skin looked ghostly pale and almost waxy.

For once, my wolf had nothing comforting to say. She paced inside me, restless. Her silence only made my dread worse.

I stood in the doorway and could not make myself walk in.

“Leslie, what happened to him? He was fine this morning. He hosted the entire

Harvest Gathering. Why did he decline so fast?" I questioned.

Leslie stood by the bed, holding a chart. She didn't answer, just kept reading as her brow furrowed deeper.

"Leslie! Answer me!" I demanded.

Nolan came in behind me and put his arm around my shoulders, holding me against his side.

"Talia, Leslie is doing everything she can. You need to stay calm," he said. I felt his Alpha aura trying to calm me. Usually, it would help, but I couldn't relax this time.

Solon walked past us and entered the room. He stopped next to Leslie. "What did father ask you to do last night? How was he able to hide his illness?"

Leslie set the chart down. "You have to promise me that you will not go off the handle once I tell you."

"Leslie..." Solon started.

"No, I need you two to promise," Leslie said firmly.

"We promise," Solon confirmed, and I nodded.

"He asked me for Rosea root," Leslie finally admitted.

Solon cursed quietly and put his hand to his face. I felt Nolan's unease through our mate bond. "What? What does it do?" I asked.

"It's a forbidden herb. It is similar to the Redbone essence as it comes from the same flower," Solon explained.

"What were you thinking, Leslie? Why would you give him that?" I questioned.

"I tried to talk him out of it. He wouldn't listen. Then he used his Alpha command on me," Leslie said.

"What exactly does it do?" I asked.

"It restores the body for a few hours. It would last long enough for him to stand through the Harvest Gathering," Leslie explained.

"What were the side effects?" Solon's voice was quiet.

"For a healthy person, it would cause organ damage," Leslie answered. "With him already poisoned...He told me he had already taken the risks into account but he had to do it."

A sharp ache twisted in my chest. My thoughts raced. I wanted to scream, to break something, to somehow undo what had happened. All I could do was stand there, helpless and heartsick, staring at Leslie as I tried to accept what she was telling me. "How long does he have now?" I asked. My voice did not sound like mine.

Leslie looked at me, and the look held until I understood the answer before she said it.

"One week."

My legs gave out. I didn't even feel myself falling, but Nolan caught me before I hit the floor and wrapped his arms around me. I cried out, and he just held me tighter, letting me sob.

“Talia,” Solon said. "We did everything we could. There was nothing for us to do once he had taken it."

I couldn't bring myself to look at my father. My heart pounded as I tried to process everything. My wolf howled inside me as we struggled to accept it.

And then I thought of Jason.

I pulled back from Nolan and looked up at him.

“Jason's gift! He would not have brought something like that in here unless it was something we could not refuse. Solon, we have to go to him right now."

"Then let's go."

Nolan kept his hand on my back as we left the room. The guards outside Jason's room bowed to us as we approached. One of them opened the door without a word.

Jason sat at a table by the window, eating slowly like he had all the time in the world. He looked up as we came in, smirking as he set down his fork.

"You took longer than I thought. I was starting to wonder if you were going to come at all."

"What is the gift, Jason?" My voice was harder than I had expected.

Jason leaned back in his chair and studied my face before answering. My wolf snarled inside me. 'He's toying with us. Let me out, and I'll make him answer.'

“The potions made from Frostmoon Vine,” Jason responded before taking a sip of his wine.

"You think this is funny. You could never let go of an opportunity to take a jab," Nolan growled.

"Do you think we're fools? We know it was you who attacked Alpha Landon. We also know that you destroyed the second batch he was bringing to us," Solon said. "So, stop the games. Tell us what you really have, or I will escort you to the dungeon where you belong."

"No need to get testy. I sincerely have it," Jason said.

"You destroyed it yourself, Jason. We knew it!"

Jason smiled at Solon as if he'd just been praised.

"Did I, though? How would you know? You were not there. The men who were there were getting the life beaten out of them. How would they know what I did or didn't do?"

“Don't play games with us, Jason,” Nolan warned. His Alpha aura flared, and so did Solon's. If this kept up, Jason wouldn't be leaving this room alive.

Jason looked at Nolan for a moment. Then he reached into his jacket and brought out a small glass vial. He set it on the table next to his plate, uncorked it, and poured a small measure onto the wood.

"Check it if you still don't believe me," Jason said as he put the vial back up.

Leslie walked over to the table, bent over the small pool on the wood, and breathed

it in. She held it for a long moment. Then she straightened, and she looked at me.

"It's real."

Chapter 297

Jason's POV

Hope flashed across Talia's face when Leslie spoke, and I almost smiled. Seeing that tremor of hope, I was filled with a dark satisfaction. That was exactly what I wanted. I wanted her to feel just enough hope for her father that I could savor crushing it. Everything was still going according to plan.

Talia's entrance said it all. She looked frantic, struggling to keep herself together. She was desperate. Something had gone wrong, and now she had no choice but to consider my demands.

I put the cork back in the vial and held it up between my fingers, watching her eyes follow it. Her jaw tightened and her lips pressed together. I pretended to drop it, just to catch that flicker of panic in her eyes. Her breath hitched, a small tremor showing her fear.

"That should clear me up as a traitor, right?" I asked.

Solon scoffed. "You have done nothing but murder since you were exiled. Do you really think you can bargain your way out of avoiding punishment for what you have done?"

"Their deaths are as much your fault as it is mine," I retorted as I knew it had been Solon to put the bounty on my head. Talia wouldn't have done such a thing. "If you had left me alone, they wouldn't have died."

"Do you hear yourself? Your bastard of a father was a murderer long before now, and you were an accomplice to it all," Solon snapped.

I grit my teeth from snarling. How dare he bring up my father! "How many did the Alpha King murder, I wonder. Nolan was convinced that he was his father's killer for so long. It is not like he's innocent in all this. He..."

"Enough," Talia interjected, cutting me off. "That is an entirely separate issue, Jason. You worked with rogues and killed innocent people."

"Who can prove this?" I questioned. "All I did was get support when I was exiled. Now, I'm here with something that you need. I think it is a good exchange."

"No, it is not," Talia stated.

"Of course it does. I'm fixing my father's wrongs," I lied. "Your father needs this vial. I risked my life to bring it here. It will save him. Isn't that enough to remove the bounty?"

"My father is not dying," Talia responded.

I laughed before I could stop myself. Her lie was so obvious it was almost funny. She hadn't even tried to hide it. Her eyes were red, her face still streaked with tears. She hadn't bothered to clean up before coming here.

"If you saw yourself right now, you'd realize how ridiculous you sound," I said.

“As I said, my father is not dying,” Talia said firmly.

"Then, why do you need the potion? Come on, Talia. I think we're past lying to each other. I've trusted you, even though these two did not. I've been honest with you from the very beginning. Couldn't you give me the common courtesy to do the same?"

Nolan sneered at what I said. I caught a flicker of doubt in Talia's eyes. That was exactly what I wanted. The rift between them was widening.

"I am not lying," Talia doubled down.

"Then you wouldn't have rushed into my room demanding to know what my gift was. You would have just sent me to the dungeon instead," I argued. "Stop lying, Talia. It doesn't suit you, and you're wasting both our time."

She did not answer.

"Well, if what you said is true, then you don't need the potion. I should pour it out," I said, uncorking the vial and tilting it slightly.

"Stop. Okay. Okay. Just stop," Talia exclaimed, her voice shaking, hands trembling as she reached out instinctively as if to stop me from actually pouring the vial out.

I placed the cork back into the vial, grinning. "See, was that so hard?"

"What do you want?" Talia asked through gritted teeth.

I'd been waiting for her to ask that. An hour earlier, Kent had reached out to me through the mind-link, and what he told me changed my whole approach for tonight. He'd gotten close enough to the Alpha King to catch his scent.

Kent recognized it right away as Rosea root. He said the Alpha King must have used it to look healthy for a while. That explained everything from that morning. It was a smart move. I never thought the Alpha King would use a forbidden herb, the same thing he always condemned in others. The irony wasn't lost on me.

My wolf had stirred when Kent's voice faded out of my mind. 'Do not trust him. He could be lying to us.'

'He has no reason to lie to us,' I responded.

'He has every reason to lie to us,' my wolf countered. 'He only swore his loyalty to save his life.'

'Perhaps, but he is useful, and we need as many spies as possible for our plan,' I told him.

Kent had promised loyalty to me back when the rogues almost took Doomfur. I didn't trust him at first; men like him only swear loyalty to save themselves and will betray you if they get the chance. I was ready to treat him like any other Alpha that would act so cowardly by tearing his throat out.

Then I realized he was the wolfless Alpha. Kent's father had beaten him for it his whole life, and I understood what that felt like. I knew what it was to have a father you could never please. That kind of pain could turn into loyalty if you handled it right, and I knew how. That morning was the first proof that sparing him had been the right call.

"Jason." Nolan's voice cut back in. "Your conditions."

I set the vial on the table between us, keeping one finger on it. As long as I held it, none of them could grab it without starting a fight they'd lose before I could tip it

over.

"First, I will leave Silverfang safely tomorrow. No tails, and no ambushes. Second, the Alpha King clears my name publicly so every pack stands down. Once both are done, you get the potion."

Chapter 298

Talia's POV

"Fine. I'll have him tell everyone in the receiving hall," I said. "Then, you will be escorted to the border where you will never come back."

"No, that won't work," Jason responded.

"What do you mean? I agreed," I shot back. I was already agreeing to what he demanded. What more did he want?

"I trust you, Talia, but not them." Jason pointed to Nolan and Solon. "Your father has to do it at the border, not under the same roof as everyone who wants me dead. Think of it as a way to ensure my survival in all this. I'm sure you understand."

My wolf growled within me, 'We can not trust him. Every word he speaks is a lie.'

Jason was smart to ask for this. He was right to believe that they would go back on their word. Alpha Landon and Colin were two wild cards who would kill him given the chance. On the other hand, my father was still in the ER, hooked up to tubes. His condition was fragile; any attempt to move him even a short distance meant risking a sudden drop in blood pressure or him going into cardiac arrest before we even had a chance to use the potion. Moving him now could kill him faster than the poison in his veins.

"I cannot agree to that," I said. "You said he only needed to publicly do it."

Jason smirked and said, “Talia, you don't get to set the terms. You want something from me, so we're going to do it my way. He can do it from a chair. He can do it from a stretcher, for all I care, as long as he does it in his own voice and in front of enough people that the order cannot be walked back. Once it is done, you get the potion."

"And if he cannot speak?"

"Then, no deal, but I'm sure he will speak. The alternative is dying. Neither of you will allow that if you have any choice."

Solon stepped forward. “How do we know you won't destroy the potion the second we sign off on this? You hand the vial to Leslie, my father drinks it, and we find out an hour later that it was water or worse. You've walked out of Silverfang tomorrow never to be seen again until the next time you decide to set fire to one of our packs."

Jason smiled at him. "Solon, do you really think I went to the trouble of getting this potion just to pour water on a table?"

"I think you would do anything if it meant that it would save your miserable hide." "Your hesitancy to agree does bring up a good point. I haven't done anything to make you believe I am being honest," Jason

said. He tapped the table for a few seconds as he thought it through. Then, he smiled as he leaned back in his chair. "Here's how we do this: I stay here until your father drinks the potion. Surround me with as many guards as you want. The vial stays right here until your father clears me. If anything goes wrong, kill me on the spot. How is that?"

Something in the way he watched us stuck with me, made me uncomfortable. Jason sounded so reasonable for someone talking to the very people who got his father killed. I couldn't shake the feeling that Jason was putting himself at risk because he knew he was going to win in the end. Even with my reservations, it was a good plan. On the surface, it looked like we had the upper hand, and I prayed that it stayed that way.

"Done," Solon agreed.

Jason smiled, the calm one I had been watching him use all night. Something in my chest stayed tight when I looked at it. He had agreed too easily.

We left.

Leslie barely got down the hall before turning on us. "How can you agree to this?"

"We don't have a choice," I said.

"That son of a bitch knows exactly what he is doing. The King cannot leave the bed, Talia. He cannot stand long enough to clear that bastard's name. Jason is asking your father to die in front of an audience," Leslie argued.

"Leslie. Stop." Nolan stepped in. "He will be surrounded by guards. He'll stay in the chair, say what needs to be said, and be back in bed within the hour. Conditions are set. If Jason moves, he's dead. If anyone touches the Alpha King, they're dead. We've done everything to make this safe."

Leslie looked at him for a long moment. Her shoulders dropped a fraction. "Fine. Fine. But if he gets one degree warmer in that chair, you bring him back. I do not care if Jason has been cleared or not. You bring him back, Nolan."

"I will."

By the time we got to the hospital wing, Solon and Nolan had made a plan. Elite warriors would take Jason to the border the next day. If rogues tried to rescue him, the warriors would kill him before they got close. If Jason tried anything, any signal or move toward a weapon, they would kill him.

"What if he keeps his word?" I asked.

"Then we have to honor the deal," Nolan said. "Your father gave his word in front of every Alpha at the Gathering. We don't break it. But the second he is out of Silverfang, then the bounty can be placed back on his head."

We came around the corner into the hospital corridor. I tried to step past Leslie toward my father's door. She caught my arm.

“Talia. Let him rest. He needs every minute of sleep he can get tonight, and you standing over the bed is not going to help him. He will wake in the morning."

"I just want to see him for a minute."

“Talia. Please, do you trust me?”

"Of course I do."

"Then, let him rest."

Chapter 299

Nolan's POV

"Of course I do," Talia responded.

"Then, let him rest," Leslie pleaded. Her eyes met mine over Talia's head, and she gave me the smallest nod. I understood. I put my arm around Talia's shoulders and turned her gently away from the door.

"Talia. Come on. Let's go."

"Nolan, I want to see him."

"You will see him tomorrow anyways."

Talia hesitated. Solon said, "Don't stress, Talia. Leslie and I will watch over him. If he wakes, we'll tell you."

"You promise?"

"I promise," Solon said, and Leslie nodded.

Talia let me turn her, but she did not move her feet at first. I waited. After a moment, she took the first step on her own, and I walked her back down the corridor with her weight half against my side.

We ate in our room. Talia said little but ate everything. I felt her anxiety through the mate bond. I turned on the shower for her.

"Nolan, I'm not in the mood," she said as I helped her out of her clothes.

"Just shower. Take all the time you need," I said, guiding her in.

While she was showering, there was a knock at the door. An omega brought in a cup of tea. "This is from Healer Leslie for Princess Talia." The omega quickly left.

After her shower, Talia looked better but tired. She drank her tea and lay down facing away. Ten minutes later, she was asleep. I sniffed the cup; something smelled off.

'A mild sedative,' my wolf said. 'It is to help her sleep.'

I lay beside her and watched the ceiling for a while. I didn't know how tomorrow would turn out, but I had to be optimistic. Sleep finally took me, but it didn't last.

Solon's voice sliced through the mind-link, sharp and urgent.

'Nolan. He is awake. Come alone. Do not bring Talia.'

'On my way,' I replied, my pulse jumping.

Confused, I slipped out of bed, careful not to disturb her. Luckily, Talia was in a sound sleep and didn't even stir. I dressed in the dim light and left quietly.

Solon waited in the hospital lounge, looking somber. I started to speak, but he walked to Rudolf's room, opened the door, and closed it behind me.

Rudolf was awake, propped on pillows, tubes in his arm, monitor beeping, but his eyes were clear.

"Nolan. Come here."

I moved to the bed. He raised his hand slightly; I took it. His grip was weak. "Thank you. For taking care of her. For keeping the promise you made me on the day you married her. I have watched you keep it every day since."

"You do not have to thank me."

"I do. I want more time with the three of you. I would have liked another five years. Another two. Even another one. But I can feel it. It is closer than any of you know."

"The potion will put you to sleep tomorrow. Once Jason is gone, we will find a cure. We are not going to stop looking."

He shook his head. "Nolan. Stop. I appreciate the effort. I want you to know that. But I have accepted it."

"Accepted what?"

"My organs are failing. The poisoning started months ago before we even knew the damage. I knew the herb would speed things up, but I had to protect my children and pack," Rudolf said.

"No, the antidote could reverse this," I argued.

"Even with a cure, the damage can't be reversed in my time left. My wolf's asleep;

he hasn't spoken since you came back. He won't again."

I did not have anything to say to that. I held on to his hand and waited.

"That is not why I called you here, Nolan. I called you because I have a bad feeling about Jason's proposal."

"Talia should be here for this."

"No. I need to talk to you about it before tomorrow. Talia is already on the brink of a meltdown. She does not need to hear this."

I nodded and waited for him to continue.

"The night of your father's death should have been the day that I did. Your father was never the intended casualty. That night, your father thought something was wrong. He swapped glasses with me. When I realized what he had done, it was too late. I had blocked all of this out of my mind until now, as

it was a painful memory that I did not want to remember. I wasn't even able to be the one to put him out of his misery."

I felt the breath go out of me.

"He died for me, Nolan. Your father died for me, and I have lived with that every day since. I have lived with the regret of knowing his son grew up without him because of me."

"That was not your fault. Michael did that, not you. And I am sorry for the way I treated you when I was younger. I am sorry I blamed you for it," I responded.

Rudolf closed his eyes for a moment, and I saw a tear move along the corner of one of them.

"Thank you, Nolan. I am sorry too. I should have done more for you when you were a boy. I should have been there in ways I was not. I did not know how to be, and I am sorry for that."

He opened his eyes again, and the clarity in them was sharper now, like a man bringing himself back to the thing he had called me for.

"Jason is his father's son, Nolan. I do not believe for a moment that the potion is a clean offer. Michael used mad rogues' blood for years to set people up, to send them into frenzies they could not come out of, to make good men hurt people they loved. If Jason has done the same to what is in that vial, then what is going to come out of me tomorrow is not going to be me. It is going to be something else. You know what I speak of. If the worst happens, I could become a danger to everyone here. I could turn on Talia, on Solon, on you. I might try to kill or maim anyone I see. That's the true risk, Nolan. It won't be me inside my body. You need to be ready to face that."

"Leslie, already checked it. It..."

"If that happens," Rudolf continued, cutting me off. "If I lose control, if I move toward Talia, or Solon, or Leslie, or anyone, I need you to promise me something, and I need you to promise me now, before anything else."

I went still.

"Promise me you will kill me. Immediately. Before I can hurt any of them."

Chapter 300

Nolan's POV

"No, no, I can't agree to that. Leslie confirmed that the potion was real. We shouldn't think about something that isn't going to happen," I said.

"Do not underestimate Jason," Rudolf argued.

"I set the conditions myself. Twenty guards would monitor him if he played dirty games. If he moves or rogues approach tomorrow, he dies. I have made it as airtight as I could," I told him.

“I know you have, and I am grateful for the way you have handled it. But I have known Jason longer than any of you have, and I knew his father before him, and I have never trusted either of them."

I looked at Solon as he stepped inside. One glance told me he already knew the dilemma I was facing, and I instinctively looked to him for support. Surely, he wouldn't agree with what the King was asking of me.

"He's right, Nolan," Solon said.

"Solon, you can't be serious," I replied, stunned.

Solon looked conflicted but shrugged. "I don't like it either, but I agree with father."

Leslie, who had entered without me noticing, immediately shook her head. “No, Solon. There has to be another way."

"There isn't, Leslie," Solon said firmly. "It has to be Nolan. There's no better option, and no time to find one."

I shook my head, my wolf rejecting the request before I even could. 'We can't agree to kill our mate's father! We can't do this!'

The repercussions of this decision would not be a one-time deal. Every time Talia thought about her father, she would remember that it was me who killed him.

'Stop. This may not come to pass,' my wolf said.

'You don't know that,' I retorted. What if she never forgave me? What if the bond we had snapped because of a promise I made at this moment?

"Nolan." The Alpha King's voice brought me back from my thoughts. "Listen to me. You are the only one I trust besides my own children, and my children cannot do this. You are the only one who can do this, and you are the only one whose hand will be steady enough to make it quick."

"No, I..."

"Think about what happens if I lose control in front of the Alphas. Think about what it looks like. The Alpha King is in a poisoned frenzy, hurting his own daughter in front of every pack leader in the territory. The packs splinter. The territory splinters. Solon never inherits a thing because there is nothing left to inherit. That is what Jason has set up for tomorrow!"

"And if I do this, if I do what you are asking, the Alphas will see me kill you. They will not accept that."

"They will see you protecting them from a monster. They will see you and Solon supporting each other just like it was between your father and me," Rudolf explained.

Hearing him say that almost brought me to tears. Deep down, I had always cared about Rudolf.

I shook my head again. "What about Talia? She won't be able to accept this. At least include her in this decision."

"As Alphas, we must make the hard decisions even for our Lunas," Rudolf stated firmly. “She will survive my passing because I will make sure she understands. I will leave her a letter. She will know what I asked of you, and she will know you did it because I asked. Talia has never been the hateful type. She will be in pain, and she will be angry, but her love for you will not fade."

Solon placed a hand on my shoulder. " If anyone tries to spin the situation to put doubt in Talia's mind about why you did it, I won't let it happen."

"Neither will I," Leslie said.

"I will tell her every word that was said in this room tonight. I will not let this choice be used against you. You have my word on that," Solon declared.

Leslie spoke up again. “Let me try one more thing. I've been working on an antidote for mad rogues' blood. We're only weeks away from perfecting it. We just need to postpone the meeting-"

"No, Leslie."

"My King, please.....”

"A delay gives Jason another move. He is already two moves ahead of us. If we delay, he will use those days to set something else, and we will be reacting to him rather than moving first. The only way to take his plan off the board is to drink the potion tomorrow and let it run its course, and to be ready for what comes out the other side. There is no other path."

I thought about Talia in our bed, about the morning, about what she was going to have to carry for the rest of her life if his bad feeling was right.

“I promise,” I said quietly. "If it comes to that, I'll do it."

Still, I clung to the hope that he was wrong. That tomorrow would come, the potion would put him to sleep, and we would find the cure before it was too late.

Because if we didn't... the promise I had just made would destroy all of us.