Barren Luna 301

Chapter 301

Talia's POV

Marco brought Jason to the border in a convoy of five of our vehicles, each one filled with elite warriors except for Jason's seat. We came in a different car with Father. Leslie had set him up with a portable IV and a reclining chair. Solon and Nolan were in the front. I sat in the back with Father and held his hand the entire

ride.

We got out at the border of Silverfang territory. Jason was already standing outside his vehicle, surrounded by the elite warriors. He looked calm and relaxed as if this were just a normal routine. Jason saw Father in the chair, and he smiled.

"He looks great. Really. The picture of health," Jason mocked. "You sure you want to waste a potion on him? He looks like he might not make it through the next hour, let alone the day."

“Shut up, Jason," Solon said.

"I'm just saying. The dormant potion knocks him out for what, twelve hours? Twenty- four? You all keep telling yourselves he'll wake up, but I'm not so sure. A man in his shape goes to sleep, sometimes he just doesn't wake up."

"I said shut up!" Solon growled.

Jason fake-pouted and said, "Fine. Issue the order to remove the bounty on my head. Then, you get the potions, and you'll never have to hear from me again."

"Issue the order first," Jason said. "All packs stand down. Public, in front of these warriors, in your own voice. Then you get the potion."

"I can give the order, Jason. But before I do, I want to make sure you understand what comes with it. Yes, the bounty will be removed, but it doesn't change how the other packs will see you," Father stated. "If you continue to align yourself with the Rogue King, you make yourself an enemy of every pack ever harmed by rogues."

"Spare me the sermon," Jason sneered.

"You are going down the same path as you did with your father. The Rogue King is not an honorable man. He leads those who were banished for their crimes, drawing desperate followers with promises of vengeance. Anyone working with him jeopardizes the peace that we've bled for, you bled for. Every pack in this territory will come for you again, and removing the bounty today will not change that," Father said.

I was surprised that he would even attempt to sway Jason back to our side. He had done too much, in my opinion, to ever be trusted again. But I got my empathy from my father. He always wanted to give people second chances, even after they had wronged him.

Jason shrugged. "Noted. Are you or are you not going to lift the bounty?"

Father did not react. He looked at Marco, who lifted a small recorder.

"To every pack aligned with Silverfang, by order of the Alpha King, the bounty on Jason Shadowclaw is hereby lifted. All hunts are called off, effective immediately. He is to be allowed to leave Silverfang territory unharmed."

Jason looked at Nolan, then reached into his jacket and pulled out two vials. One was the same one we saw in his room last night. The other was smaller with a darker glass.

"Two doses. Here you go," Jason smirked. When Nolan reached for them, he pulled back.

"What are you doing, Jason? The Alpha King did what you asked," Nolan stated.

"I want Talia to escort me fully out of the territory," Jason said.

My wolf bristled within me. What was he up to now? Why did he keep changing the rules?

"Why?" Nolan asked.

“Because I want her to. Last condition. Marco can come too if it makes everyone feel better," Jason replied with a shrug.

Nolan's jaw tightened. I could tell he was deciding whether to argue. I touched his

arm.

"It's fine. Give Father the potion. I will walk him out with Marco and meet you back at the house," I said.

"Talia."

"Nolan, we can't waste anymore time. Just go. I'll be okay."

Nolan exhaled and snatched the vials from Jason. He glared at him before turning back to the car. I was thankful that Nolan didn't argue with me this time.

"Shall we?" Jason said.

Marco pushed him forward and said, “Let's go.”

I walked next to Marco, with Jason between us. The border was just a stretch of road along a thin line of trees, and we walked about a quarter mile to the marker. Jason stayed quiet for most of the walk. He glanced at me a few times, but I didn't look at him.

At the marker, I stopped.

"This is as far as I go," I said. "Do not come back into our territory. If you attack us or any packs, the bounty goes back into effect, and this time it won't matter if you're alive once caught."

"Fine." Jason smirked and said, "Now hurry back, Talia. I would hate for you to miss anything."

Hearing those words, I felt a sense of dread settle deep in my stomach. I turned and ran back down the path with Marco right behind me. "Reach out to them. Reach out to them right now, Marco. Something is wrong," I ordered once we made it to Marco's car. He drove me back to the pack house faster than was really safe.

"No one is answering me," Marco said in a panic.

When we came up the drive, the front of the house was crowded with people. Della was on the steps. She saw the car and ran toward it before Marco stopped.

“Talia, you have to come now," Della pleaded.

I was out of the car before she finished speaking. I ran past her toward the hospital. The hallway to the ER was crowded with staff fleeing. I pushed through them only to freeze in the doorway.

It was complete chaos. Derek fought with my father. He slammed him hard into the ground to get him off Solon, who held his chest in pain. Father was on the floor. His eyes rimmed in unnatural red, pupils blown wide and unseeing. His body jerked and convulsed as he thrashed around, snarling.

Panic collided with disbelief, tearing through me, and for a second, all I could do was grip the doorframe to keep from falling. Leslie was tending to a nurse who had been mauled pretty badly. Blood was dripping from a gash in Solon's chest and arm. He was straining to hold down one of Father's arms while Derek held the other.

"Nolan, do it now! We can't hold him much longer," Solon said desperately. Nolan stood over my father while holding a dagger.

"No, wait," I started to say but it was too late.

Nolan brought the dagger down into my father's chest.

I screamed.

Chapter 302

Talia's POV

My wolf howled within me as grief and rage consumed me, as I felt my father's aura vanish as his blood pooled around him on the floor.

I lunged into the room for Nolan. I slammed hard into him. His back struck the wall, knocking the air out of him. I clawed at him, ripping the flesh of his neck and chest. Nolan brought his hands up defensively to keep me from tearing his neck out, but he

did not try to fight me.

"Talia, stop! Stop!"

Solon grabbed my waist to pull me off Nolan. I threw my head back and hit his face, making him let go with a curse. I pushed him away. Leslie was shouting, but I couldn't make out her words. I hit Nolan again, and he still didn't defend himself. "Why? Why, Nolan?!" I screamed. "Why did you do it? Explain now!"

"Talia, I..."

“Tell me why,” I screamed and swung at him again.

Nolan caught my wrists and held them. He didn't fight back, but pulled me against his chest. I fought him, but he didn't let go.

"Let go of me! Let go, you bastard! You murdered my father!" I screamed at him. "Talia, I'm so sorry," Nolan responded as he held on to me.

Leslie was behind me. I felt a needle in my arm before I understood what she was doing. Cold spread through my arm from whatever she injected into me.

"Save him, please," I pleaded. The word was already slurring as it came out. “Leslie. Save him. Please. Please save him..."

The last thing I saw was Nolan's face, tears streaming down his cheeks, before everything went dark.

A moment later, I opened my eyes and found myself in a garden. There was soft golden light surrounding me, and the scent of roses was everywhere. Roses climbed trellises, spilled from beds, and lined a path by a low stone wall. I recognized this place. I hadn't tended to it since returning to Silverfang.

My father was at the end of the path, kneeling by a rose bush with pruning shears in his hand. He looked much younger than he really was. His hair was thick and black again, not white and thin. He wore the pink sweater my mother bought for him, the one he stopped wearing after she died.

"Father?"

He looked up, and he smiled.

"Talia, come here," he said with his arms wide open.

I ran to him. He caught me, and I clung to his sweater, crying into it and unable to speak for a long time.

"H-How are you here? I saw you die. Nolan killed you... I saw him kill you..."

Father stroked the back of my head. “Talia. Do you trust Nolan?”

I hesitated. I had just seen him kill my father. How could I trust him?

"Answer the question."

"I don't know. I don't know anymore," I answered honestly.

"Talia, I need you to listen to me." My father pulled back enough to look at me. “Never doubt him. Things are not what they appear to be. Jason is working to turn you two against each other. You cannot allow anyone to destroy the bond you have with Nolan. Do you understand?"

"But, he murdered you. Solon could have stopped him," I argued.

"There was nothing Solon could do for me. Nolan did the kindest thing he could have by putting me out of my misery," Father said gently. "I tested Nolan before I ever allowed you to marry him, remember? I trusted him with your heart, and I was right to. Whatever you saw in that room, Talia, there's a reason for it. And soon, you'll understand why."

"Okay," I muttered. "But this isn't fair. I wasted years in Shadowclaw, and I barely had any time with you after we found each other again. Why did I have to lose you so quickly?"

"That is how things are," Father sighed. "Things are going to get even harder now, Talia, and things won't be fair for a long time. You will have to be strong."

"Don't leave me, please. Don't go," I pleaded as I held on tighter to his sweater.

"You don't know how I wish I could, but I can't stay. I will be with your mother soon, and we will be watching over you," Father replied.

Fear rose in my chest. What if I let down everyone he wanted me to protect?

"I can't stay strong without you. I can't do any of this without you. I can't do this alone," I said.

"You are not alone. You have Nolan. You have Solon. You have Leslie. You have a pack full of people who love you, and you have a Beta in Della who would walk through fire for you. You are not alone, Talia. You will never be alone."

I sobbed even harder.

He held me for what felt like a long time. Then he gently pulled me back and placed his hands on either side of my face.

"Silverfang needs you. The other packs need you. You are going to be strong because there is no one else who can be strong for them right now, and that is what being who you are means. Promise me."

"I promise."

"Good girl," my father said before he kissed my forehead. "I'll stay with you until you wake."

My father rocked me just like he did when I was little. I wanted to stay awake and talk with him more, but my eyelids felt heavy. I closed my eyes, inhaling his scent, trying to remember everything about it.

"Remember, be strong, Talia. I'll always be with you," he whispered.

"Don't go," I said, opening my eyes and finding myself no longer in the warm

embrace of my father, but in a hospital bed.

Early morning light came through the blinds. Nolan sat in the chair beside the bed, slumped to one side, sleeping.

Chapter 303

Talia's POV

Nolan looked awful. He had dark circles under his eyes as if he hadn't slept in days. The scratches I left on his neck were covered with bandages. Nolan had stayed in that chair by my bed the whole time I was unconscious, and seeing him there made me feel so guilty that I had to look away.

'He will forgive us,' my wolf reassured me.

'I don't deserve forgiveness for hurting him like this,' I said, and then noticed an envelope on the table next to the bed. My father's handwriting was on the front.

I picked it up with shaking hands and opened it.

Talia,

If you are reading this, I have died by Jason's trickery. I knew from the start that something was wrong when Jason offered you the potions. He is just like his father. Michael coveted Silverfang's power, and I suspected Jason felt the same. With my death, I was right.

Do not blame Nolan. I asked him to end my life if the potion made me lose control. He didn't want to. He fought me, but I made him promise because there was no one else. I couldn't have Solon, or you do it.

I'm sorry I hid it from you. If you knew, you would have tried to stop me, and I couldn't let that happen. The price of the potion was always mine to pay.

I love you, Talia. I've loved you every day since you were born. You're a powerful Luna and a beautiful woman, and I'm proud to call you my daughter. Silverfang is in your and Solon's hands now. Things won't be easy. You must work together to stop Jason and the Rogue King from destroying the peace we kept, but I know you can.

Be strong, sweetheart.

I will love you always,

Your Father

I read the letter twice. By the second time, tears blurred the page.

Nolan groaned. He lifted his head, and as soon as he saw that I was awake, he stood up to give me space. Nolan looked relieved, then sad, as he noticed my tears.

"I will get Leslie," he said.

"Nolan, stop."

"I know you don't want to see me right now. She said to get her the second you woke up."

"Nolan, stop, please. We need to talk."

Nolan stopped halfway to the door with his back to me.

"I'm sorry," I told him. "I know that father asked you to do it."

"I didn't want to. I really didn't. I didn't have a choice, Talia. He..."

"You did the right thing," I said, cutting him off. “He was out of control. If you hadn't, there is no telling how many people he could've killed while on his rampage."

The words came easily, but part of me wanted to scream. My father's final moments haunted me. Knowing the person I'd trusted all my life had turned into something wild and terrifying would stay with

me forever. I was ashamed, realizing how hard this was for Nolan. Watching two father figures lose themselves had to be heartbreaking.

"You don't have to apologize for anything, Talia," Nolan said.

"Yes, I do. I should have trusted you the moment I walked into that room. I'm sorry I attacked you. I'm sorry I made you sit in this chair, feeling like you'd lost me on top of everything else," I said.

"I don't blame you. You walked into a room where your father was on the floor, and you saw what you saw, and you did what anyone in this house would have done. None of it is on you."

"Your neck."

"My neck will heal soon."

I sat up. He sat down next to me and put his arms around me. I let him hold me and hugged him back. We stayed quiet for a while.

There was a soft knock at the door. Della pushed it open a few inches, but didn't

come in right away. When she saw us, she came in, looking worried.

"I didn't mean to intrude. I just...Are you two okay?" Della stammered.

"We're okay, Della."

"Thank the Goddess," Della sighed. "I've been outside that door for two hours waiting to hear something, and the last thing I heard was you screaming at him. I've been losing my mind, Talia."

"Come here."

Della came over to the bed. Nolan stood up to allow her to sit down, and I hugged her. She held on longer than she usually did.

"I'm so sorry, Talia," she murmured into my neck.

"I know," I responded as I pulled back. "Della, I need you to do something for me." "Anything."

"Bring Solon, Leslie, the senior warriors, and any council members who are here in Father's office in thirty minutes," I ordered. We had to decide our next move. How we handled this would decide Silverfang's future.

"Are you sure?" Della asked. "You should take some time to grieve."

"No, this has to be done now," I replied.

Della didn't hesitate. She stood and left the room as quickly as she came.

Nolan looked at me. The concern on his face remained. "You don't have to do this today. The packs can wait. No one will hold it against you if you take the morning."

"They can't wait, Nolan. The news of my father's death will be everywhere by lunchtime if it isn't already. If Silverfang doesn't show it is still standing; every wolf in the territory will start asking who's in charge. We don't have any more time to rest. We needed to maintain stability like my father would have wanted."

Nolan looked at me for a long moment. He took a deep breath and then nodded. "Then, I will support you."

Chapter 304

Talia's POV

Half an hour later, we went to Father's office. Solon, Leslie, Derek, Marco, and two Elders were waiting for us. As soon as Solon saw us, he stood up and said, “Before we have this conversation, I want you to know that Father told Nolan to do it. He didn't want to, but father made him promise. He-”

"It's okay, Solon. I know."

Relief immediately softened his expression. "You read Father's letter, didn't you?"

"I did." I stepped forward and wrapped my arms around him. “So don't worry about me. And I'm not upset that you kept it from me."

Solon was left speechless. I could see the emotions warring behind his eyes: relief, confusion, and embarrassment. Finally, he just sat back down.

I sat down at the head of the table with Solon sitting next to me. "I'll get straight to the point. I brought you all here to decide what to do next. But first, what happened after I left with Jason? How did my father go insane like that?"

No one spoke first. All eyes were on Leslie, who was staring down at the table. She looked up at me and said, “I didn't know he had taken the wrong potion.”

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Both potions were real," she said. "Both vials were exactly what Jason said they were, except the labels had been switched. The dormant potion was labeled the awakening potion."

"How could you be so careless?" One of the Elders scolded. “You didn't think to check the vials before giving them to the Alpha King?"

"I did check them. I was sure they were real, but... the difference was so slight I missed it. I'm sorry," Leslie said quickly, trying to explain, but the Elder cut her off.

"Your hubris is what killed the Alpha King. You think you are the best healer, but you make amateur mistakes because of your arrogance!" the Elder countered.

"I'm sorry..." Leslie's voice shook. "I should've checked more thoroughly. I never thought Jason would dare switch the labels. By the time I realized it, it was already too late."

"How can you sit here and say that? You knew he..."

"Enough!" I snapped, interrupting the Elders. They quickly closed their mouths. One looked annoyed, but I dared him to speak again.

"It is not your fault," I told Leslie while glaring at the elder who wouldn't meet my eye. "If it wasn't for Leslie, my father would have been dead long ago."

"I gave it to him, Talia. I held the vial to his mouth. He drank it because I told him it was safe," Leslie sobbed as she covered her face.

"This is not on you, Leslie. Jason and Michael are responsible for all of this," I said firmly. Part of me wanted to let myself break down alongside her, to admit how overwhelmed I felt. But leadership meant hiding that, at least for now. I could only hope that my words were enough for her, even if they barely reassured me.

Leslie did not answer. Tears streamed down her face as her shoulders shook, and she made no attempt to wipe them away. Solon rubbed her back gently, glancing between her and me as he struggled with his own helplessness.

"The thing that I don't understand is how the awakening potion would cause that reaction," Solon said. "It doesn't make sense."

Solon was right.

The potion shouldn't have triggered such a violent reaction unless his system had already been poisoned by mad rogue blood toxin.

"The toxin... they're the same!" Nolan growled.

His words snapped everything into place.

"Leslie," I called, cutting through her sobs. "Are you saying the chronic poison Michael used on Father actually originated from the mad rogues' blood toxin?"

She wiped her tears quickly, regaining focus. “Yes. I only just confirmed it. That's why Jason said there's no cure. The toxin had already built up in the Alpha King's body for months-so when he took the awakening potion, it only triggered a violent reaction."

Solon's jaw tightened. "That son of a bitch!"

His fist slammed into the table. The water glasses rattled. Leslie flinched, and Nolan instinctively reached out, steadying her arm.

"That bastard sat in our guest room last night, ate our food, and mocked us for begging for the potion. He planned all along to kill our father, and we let him walk free," Solon said.

"I know," I said bitterly.

"I want him dragged back here," Solon snapped. "I want his head on a spike. I———” "Solon, sit down."

He did not sit down. Instead, he stood there gripping the back of his chair, his entire body trembling with suppressed rage and frustration, his knuckles turning white.

"He will answer for it," I said. "I am not letting him run free. We are going to make him pay for everything he has done. Sit down."

"We need to track him down now," Solon growled.

"No, we need to do damage control right now. It is what father would have wanted," I countered.

Solon finally released a long, unsteady breath and sank into his chair, anger simmering beneath the surface but replaced by a grim acceptance.

"Father's funeral will be tomorrow. Every pack that can send a representative in time, we want them here," I said.

Solon nodded.

"After the funeral, you will be sworn in as the Alpha King." Solon opened his mouth to argue, but I continued. "Father already announced it at the Harvest Gathering. You need to take the title sooner rather than later."

"I don't know if I'm ready for that."

"You don't have a choice." I held his gaze. "Tomorrow, we need to stand united. Jason will expect weakness, and Kent will take advantage of the situation. We need to show them that we are strong and undivided."

Solon gave a firm nod.

"Then we tell every pack the truth," I said. "We tell them Jason and Michael poisoned the Alpha King with mad rogue blood toxin. That they've been working with the Rogue King for years."

I paused, letting the weight of it settle.

"Every pack needs to understand one thing-Jason and the Rogue King aren't just enemies." My voice cooled. "They're the greatest threat our world has ever faced!"

Chapter 305

Talia's POV

The next day gray clouds hung low over Silverfang, making it feel like the Moon Goddess was mourning with us. I stood in front of my mirror, studying my reflection. My hair was pulled back in a bun. I wore the Rosecrest with a simple, black gown.

Nolan came in quietly and closed the door with a soft click. He wore a black suit, which made his eyes look even more intense.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

I shook my head. "No, but I will be."

Nolan turned me gently to face him. His thumbs brushed against my collarbone in small, soothing circles. "Talia, you don't have to be strong in front of me."

I looked up at him and saw concern in every line of his face. I wanted to lean into him and let him hold me until the pain faded. But there was no time. Lately, there never seemed to be enough time.

"I can't," I told him, “because if I let myself now, I don't know if I'll be able to pull myself back together."

Nolan studied me for a short moment before nodding. "I already double-checked the security procedures. The guards are positioned at each entrance. The warriors are armed and ready."

"And what about the Alphas and the Lunas?"

"Arriving within the hour. Colin and Landon are already here. The others are en route."

I turned back to the mirror. "Help me with the buttons?"

Nolan worked silently. When he finished, he rested his hands on my waist and pressed a kiss to the back of my head. "I'm here," he murmured. "Whatever happens today, I'm right beside you."

I met his eyes in the mirror and managed a small smile. "I know."

The funeral was being held in the Great Hall, where Silverfang Alphas had been mourned for generations. Overnight, the room had changed. Black banners hung on the walls, each showing our pack's silver wolf emblem.

The hall was full when we arrived. Every visiting pack that stayed for the news, every Alpha and Luna from the Harvest Gathering, every council member, and every senior warrior were there. They stood as we entered.

I kept my eyes forward, focused on the wooden coffin at the end of the aisle. It was closed, and I was grateful for that small mercy. Seeing Father's face would have broken the fragile composure I had managed to hold onto.

Even without seeing him, the reality of his absence hit me hard when we reached the front. The coffin sat there, solid and undeniable, holding the man who taught me everything about strength and duty.

'You have to maintain your composure,' my wolf urged, even though she was grieving right along with me. 'We have to show strength no matter how much this hurts.'

I drew a deep breath and steeled myself. Solon stepped forward to the podium, and

I moved to stand at his right hand. Nolan took his position to my side, but behind

me.

Solon looked out over the assembly.

"Yesterday, my father, Alpha King Rudolf of Silverfang, was taken from us. Not by illness, not by age, but by deliberate poisoning." A murmur rippled through the crowd. Solon raised his hand, and it subsided. "The traitor, late Elder Michael Dalton of Shadowclaw, administered the toxin with the assistance of his son Jason Dalton, the disgraced and exiled former Alpha of Shadowclaw, who has now allied himself with the Rogue King."

The crowd's shock turned into anger. Growls rumbling through the hall, deep and threatening.

"Jason is no longer simply a criminal to be hunted," Solon continued, his voice rising. “He is an enemy of every pack. I hereby cancel the previous order to remove the bounty on Jason. The bounty stands. Moreover, I declare both Jason and the Rogue King enemies of all werewolves. Any pack that holds them shares in their guilt."

He paused, letting the words sink in. The crowd was with him now, their grief channeling into righteous fury.

"I stand before you today not just as Solon, son of Alpha King Rudolf. I stand as the new Alpha King of Silverfang." He placed his hand over his heart. "I vow to lead our pack with the same honor and dedication as my father and I vow to avenge Alpha King Rudolf, to hunt down those responsible for his murder, and to see justice done. This I swear by the Moon Goddess and by the blood of our pack."

The response immediately came, a thunderous roar of approval, which rocked the rafters. "We stand with you, Alpha King! " the assembly shouted. “Justice for the Alpha King Rudolf! Death to the Traitor!"

Solon waited for the noise to fade then turned to me. I moved to the podium, my hands quivering as I clasped the edges. I looked out at the crowd, seeing red- rimmed eyes and tear-stained cheeks.

"My father, the late Alpha King," I began, my voice cracking slightly, "was a great father and an even better Alpha King. He protected Silverfang and maintained peace among the packs not through fear, but through respect and fairness."

I swallowed hard, blinking back tears. "He taught me that strength is not just power. It is a responsibility. It is a sacrifice. He sacrificed everything for this pack, and in the end, he sacrificed his life to protect us from those who would see us destroyed." The crowd was weeping now. I could smell their sorrow in the air.

"I thank him," I continued, my speech now calmer, "for showing me what it takes to lead. I thank him for his love, his guidance, and his constant faith in me. And I wish him..."

This time, my voice fractured completely, and I had to pause, breathing hard, before I could finish. "I wish him a peaceful rest with my mother and the Moon Goddess".

I stepped back, unable to say more. Nolan's arm came around my waist, pulling me back into his chest. I leaned into and let his Alpha aura wash over me, comforting me. Solon placed a hand on my shoulder.

The rest of the ceremony went by in a blur. Pack leaders came to offer condolences. Allies shook my hand and promised support. I went through it all on autopilot, nodding and thanking them, trying to keep my composure.

Hours later, the hall had emptied. Most of the mourners had departed to their guest quarters or begun the journey home. Only a handful remained, the core leadership of Silverfang and the visiting Alphas who had chosen to stay for the political discussions that would inevitably follow a transfer of power.

I was speaking with Colin about the security of the northern passes when the doors burst open. Derek stumbled in, his face pale, his clothing torn and stained with blood. He looked like a man who had seen hell itself.

"Mad Rogues!" He gasped, doubling over to brace his hands on his knees. "Dozens of them... At the northern border!"

Chapter 306

Talia's POV

Shock rippled through the room. I rushed to Derek's side, my heart hammering against my ribs.

"Were you bitten? Did any of them bite you?" I questioned.

I could feel Della's eyes on us as her father was covered in blood. She was attempting to maintain her composure as Beta, but I could practically feel her panic.

Derek shook his head and said, "No. This blood... It's not mine. It's from the others. The warriors who fell."

I was relieved but felt guilty, as that meant there were warriors who did not make it.

"Take a break and then explain clearly, Beta Derek," Solon commanded, striding

over.

Derek wiped blood from his face. "Our scouts reported seeing rogues, which wasn't unusual. Then, they were attacked on their way back. They were mad rogues. Warriors were bitten and turned within minutes. They breached the gate."

The room erupted in panic. Lunas were wailing, and Alphas were prepping themselves for a fight. Solon held up my hand, demanding silence. "Quiet," he Alpha commanded, and the hall quieted.

Anger twisted in me. Jason couldn't even allow us time to mourn before he attacked us. He saw our grief as his chance to strike at Silverfang. It made me sick at how utterly shameless Jason was.

"We pushed them back," Derek continued. "We got the infected beyond the wall and sealed the gates."

"How many are we talking about?" Solon asked.

"Dozens of them, maybe more," Derek replied.

I turned to Della, who was now pale. "Take your father to the hospital now. Have

Leslie check him for any wounds. Then you come right back here."

Della nodded, taking Derek's arm. He swayed but managed to walk with her support.

The remaining Alphas and Lunas crowded around us. Their faces were a mixture of fear and accusation. Alpha Thorne of Ironclaw spoke first. "The former Alpha King has yet to be buried, and already the Rogue King strikes? This is an act of war!"

Luna Mara of Riverbend added, her voice high and frightened, "If the mad rogues spread beyond Silverfang, every pack will fall into chaos. We have no defense against this plague." Her words sent a chill through the hall. Everyone knew what happened to those who were bitten: within seconds, their bodies twisted and their minds snapped, turning them savage, leaving only hunger and violence behind.

I felt anxiety clawing at my chest, but I forced my expression to remain calm. "Inform your packs to prepare, as we may not be the only ones being attacked."

"What about us right now? What are you going to do about the very real threat at your door?" Luna Mara demanded.

"We will find a solution," I said, projecting confidence I did not feel. "Silverfang has faced worse and endured."

"How can you say that? You disappeared for years!" Luna Mara snapped.

"It was Princess Talia who made sure the wall was constructed, which is keeping us safe right now. Without it, we would have already been overwhelmed," Solon chimed in, and Luna Mara bowed her head in submission. "We will contain this threat. We will find a cure, and we will make the Rogue King pay for every life he has destroyed."

Alpha Kent stepped forward from the back of the group. My eyes narrowed as soon as I saw him. His face was composed, almost too composed, considering the panic around him. My wolf bristled within me as she growled, 'What is he doing here? How dare he show his face!'

"Perhaps we should consider opening one of the gates," Kent said smoothly. "There is no reason for us to be trapped here. Every Alpha and Luna in this hall is safer on the road back to their own pack than they are sitting in Silverfang waiting for the next breach."

Landon spun on him with pent-up aggression. "Open the gates? Are you insane?" "I said only one," Kent responded.

Landon's face flushed even harder. "You would walk every Alpha and Luna in this room past mad rogues on the road and call it a solution? Did you hear Derek? They are at the wall. They are outside the wall right now. You are suggesting we send people out into them. Are you insane?"

Colin spoke immediately after. "That is the worst suggestion I have ever heard. You put a single one of these people on the road today, and they do not reach their packs. They become more of them. We will be fighting our own friends by morning."

"Keeping us here is a death sentence," Kent countered. "If the walls fall, we are all trapped like rats."

Colin stepped up beside Landon. He was exuding his Alpha aura, no longer the welcoming, positive persona he normally wore. "You are trying to cause a panic." "No, I am just stating the facts. If..."

"The walls will not fall," Colin said firmly. "And suggesting we open the gates now, when the threat is immediate, is either stupidity or treachery. Which is it, Kent?"

Kent opened his mouth to defend himself, but before he could speak, Nolan stepped forward with a coldness that reminded me of when I first met him. "Alpha Kent brought Jason into the Harvest Gathering," Nolan said, his voice cutting through the argument like a blade. "He vouched for him. If Kent has been working with Jason all along, perhaps we should test a theory."

"And what theory would that be?" Colin asked with a sinister smile.

"Maybe we can see whether the mad rogues outside our walls would harm you or not. If your alliance with Jason is real, you walk out the gate, and you walk right through them. If it is not, we find out the cost of your suggestion the same way the rest of us would have."

Kent's face paled. His eyes widened, panic flashing across his features. "You can't..... you wouldn't..."

Nolan didn't look at me. He didn't look at Solon. He simply pointed at the door. "Marco, throw Alpha Kent out of Silverfang now!"

Chapter 307

Nolan's POV

Marco did not hesitate. He reached out and grabbed Kent firmly by the arm, ready to drag him toward the exit. Kent jerked his arm free with a quick twist. He shoved Marco backward, then turned sharply to face me, his eyes blazing with anger.

"You do not get to make that call. Solon is the Alpha King, not you," Kent growled. “You are disrespecting him by deciding what happens to me without his word!"

My wolf bristled, hackles rising with a low growl as Kent defied my order. Still, he was right. I did not really have the right to decide his fate, even if I was sure Solon would not challenge me.

"Stand down, Marco. My apologies. I acted rashly."

That was not true. I had been thinking about it for the past hour, ever since the Harvest Gathering. Letting Kent think he had the upper hand did not cost me anything.

"Marrying the Alpha King's daughter does not make you superior to me, Nolan. We are both Alphas. You do not get to order my exile because you do not like my suggestions," Kent growled.

"I see nothing wrong with what Nolan decided," Solon said from behind me.

"Then you are a pitiful Alpha King. Your father at least had the courtesy of running things himself," Kent shot back.

The room went deathly still, charged with silent, simmering hostility. All eyes locked on Kent. I could feel anger prickling over my skin and, through the mate bond,

Talia's fury burned like a wildfire in my mind.

"Aren't you being a hypocrite?" Talia sneered.

"What did you say to me?" Kent questioned with narrowed eyes.

"You have been operating with malicious intent since the Harvest Gathering. Your alliance with Jason has disgraced your father. Philip would be ashamed of what you have become," Talia responded.

Kent's face twisted as raw emotion broke through what he had been hiding for the past two days. The careful look he wore during the apology, the Harvest Gathering, and the funeral vanished, replaced by fury.

"Don't you dare say his name! Everyone in this room has looked down on me since I was a child for being wolfless. Just like my father did," Kent snapped.

"Alpha Philip was never like that. I saw the way Philip spoke about you when you were not in the room. He defended you to anyone who said a word against you. He praised you to my father more than once," Solon said.

“Praise me? Bullshit!" Kent bitterly laughed. “He beat me like I was a dog on the street!"

"Yes, he was strict with you. He was strict with everyone. He was an Alpha, and that was his way. But he did not despise you. He protected you," Solon countered.

"You don't know what you're talking about. You weren't there every day. Of course, he would show his good side with you. He used to make me sit at the far end of the table at meals so he would not have to see me. So, I made sure he'd never eat again!"

Kent's last words seemed to slip out before he realized it. I saw the realization cross his face a moment later. He closed his mouth quickly, his eyes darting to the door. But two warriors were already standing in front of it, blocking his only way out.

"What have you done, Kent? Philip loved you," Solon said in horror. "He felt guilty that it was something he had done that kept the Moon Goddess from giving you a wolf."

"You are lying!"

"I am not!"

"You are lying because you are the new Alpha King, and you think you have to be diplomatic. He hated me every day and made sure I knew it!"

I felt sick with disgust. I had heard enough.

"Stop!" I snapped. "Listen to yourself. You are standing in a hall full of people you spent your whole life believing despised you, and not one of us has said a word against you for being wolfless. The hatred you keep talking about lives in your own head. Your father protected you. The Alpha King welcomed you at every Harvest Gathering, and you still cannot hear it. The hatred that drove you to kill Philip and to throw in with Jason is not coming from anyone in this hall. It is coming from you!"

Kent stared at me with stubborn defiance. Years of self-justification showed in his eyes and in the set of his jaw. He would not back down.

"You do not know what it was like-"

"You are right. I do not. But what I do know is that you killed a man who loved you, and you sold out this territory to a man who is using you, and you have spent the entire conversation telling us that none of it is your fault. It is your fault, Kent. All of

it."

Philip had been a friend to my father and the Alpha King. When I heard about Philip's death years ago, it hollowed me out. He had given me strength when I struggled to manage Bloodmoon. Now, anger and bitterness burned through me as I learned Kent was the cause. Kent had his father and chose to kill him, while mine was taken from me. Kent did not deserve Philip.

'He deserves to die with Jason,' my wolf growled, and I agreed.

I turned to Solon. "How do you want to handle him?"

"Your call, Alpha Nolan."

I looked at Marco. "Take him to the wall. Push him out to the mad rogues."

Marco grabbed Kent's arm firmly. Kent struggled, twisting and pulling to get free, but another warrior stepped in to help hold him. Together, they kept Kent in place as he yelled, "You can't do this to me!" Panic rose in his voice.

Alpha Landon stepped forward with curiosity. "Will the mad rogues spare him?”

"He is dead meat," Leslie said as she entered the hall. The color drained from Kent's face. She walked around Marco and the warrior holding Kent. Della followed behind her.

"The mad rogues are loyal to the Rogue King by blood. They only spare those who carry the Rogue King's blood. Jason wears a red pendant containing the Rogue King's blood. Alpha Kent has nothing like it. If he goes outside, he dies."

"No! No! Let me go!" Kent screamed in terror as Marco, with the help of another warrior, marched him out. The door closed behind them with a heavy thud, the latch dropping loudly into place, echoing in the now quiet place.

We waited in silence. I heard someone breathing heavily near the back. It was one of the Lunas trying to stay calm. Henry stared at the floor. Colin had not moved from his spot.

A few minutes later, Kent's scream broke the silence from beyond the wall. It was raw and full of terror, starting high and ending suddenly, cut off mid-breath.

Chapter 308

Nolan's POV

One of the Lunas let out a muffled sob when she heard about Kent's death and hid her face in her hands. No one else spoke. Kent's death felt deserved after he killed Philip and helped Jason hurt Rudolf. I turned to Leslie and caught her eye.

"How is the antidote coming?" I asked.

"It's not ready yet. Right now, it can suppress the mad rogue poison, not cure it. The bitten warriors we were able to contain are stable, but they won't remain so without more doses. We can't make more until we get the last ingredient," Leslie said.

"What is the last ingredient?" Talia asked.

"I am not sure yet. I am still testing out options. I think I am close to finding it. I just need more time," Leslie replied.

"We'll help you find it as fast as we can. Every resource we have will go toward closing the gap," Talia said.

Landon shifted in his seat. He hadn't said anything since Kent screamed, but he clearly looked like he needed to say something.

"What's wrong, Alpha Landon?" Solon asked, noticing Landon's anxiousness.

"What about us? We can't stay here in Silverfang until you are able to repel the mad rogues," Landon said, and other Alphas nodded in agreement.

"My wall at Lonefur isn't finished. If the mad rogues attack tonight, we can't hold them off. I need to be there," Alpha Landon said.

"You're not the only one with that problem," Henry added. "Doomfur is in the same spot, especially now that they don't have an Alpha."

Leslie spoke up before Solon could. "Then leave in the dead of the night. It is a new moon tonight. There will be no moonlight. The mad rogues' vision will be at its weakest. They hunt more by sight than scent now, and the dark gives you the best chance to move."

Solon nodded. "Every pack will leave at midnight, with Silverfang escorting you to your borders. Once inside, seal your pack and check everyone for bites."

"If we find bites?" an Alpha asked.

"Contain them, or put them down," Solon ordered. "Showing mercy now will get you overrun. Everyone must steel themselves and get ready for war. Jason and the Rogue King won't stop at Silverfang. We know what they're after, and we'll fight back."

The Alphas in the hall answered, "Yes, Alpha King."

The group started breaking up and getting ready. Henry walked over to Solon and pulled him aside to talk quietly. Della moved through the crowd, checking names and giving instructions as she worked with Solon's warriors to organize the escorts.

I waited until the hall had emptied out to approach Solon. He had sunk down in a chair. His shoulders relaxed as he took a moment to breathe. "You did well for your first day as Alpha King, brother," I praised him.

"It didn't feel like it," Solon muttered.

"Don't overthink it," I told him, patting him on the back. "You're a natural.”

"Thanks, but what are you still doing here? You should be getting ready to leave," Nolan said.

"Not before we help you get Silverfang settled. Where do you need me?" I responded.

Solon stood and placed his hands on my shoulders. "I appreciate the offer, but you and Talia need to go home. Bloodmoon needs you both. Jason won't stop at Silverfang. Your pack needs you tonight, not tomorrow."

"Solon..."

"I'm not asking," Solon said. "Bloodmoon is your responsibility. Handle Bloodmoon. I'll handle Silverfang."

Talia joined me, frowning. "I'm staying. You have mad rogues at the wall, and you're now Alpha King. I'm not leaving you to face all of that alone."

"Talia, no."

"I am staying."

"You'll always be Silverfang's princess, but you're Bloodmoon's Luna now. Bloodmoon needs you. You can't be two places. Father knew that when you married Nolan. So do I," Solon stated.

Talia didn't answer right away. She didn't want to admit he was right. She wanted to help, but she was doing too much. I couldn't let her wear herself out. No matter what she said, I was taking her back to Bloodmoon.

"I will be fine here," Solon said. "Leslie is with me. Derek is with me. Henry is staying through the night to help with the escorts. I have what I need. What I do not have is a second pair of eyes on Bloodmoon, and that is what you can give me by going home."

Talia sighed, fists clenched, and pointed at Solon. "Send word the moment anything changes. And I mean it. Don't keep me in the dark."

"You have my word."

We left the hall together around 11 p.m. after Solon hurried us out to pack and get ready. Marco waited with our car in the inner courtyard. The drive back to Bloodmoon would take most of the night. Talia stared out the window with haunted eyes. She hadn't slept well in two days. I didn't say anything, knowing even exhaustion wouldn't quiet her thoughts on the road.

We were halfway down the long road through the southern grounds when Talia spoke.

"Stop the car."

"Talia."

"Marco, stop the car, please," Talia said, leaning forward in her seat. She looked out the window toward the approaching gardens. "I want to go to the rose garden. I want to say goodbye to my father properly."

"Pull over, Marco," I ordered, and he did so.

I got out of the car with her. "I'll come with you."

"No, Nolan, just let me go alone," Talia said.

"Then, Della will go with you," I countered.

"I just need a few minutes, just a few minutes, Nolan."

Talia had never asked before. Usually, she left without a word, always determined and stubborn. Now, her voice was quiet and almost pleading. We were still on Silverfang land. I had no real reason to worry, but I felt a twist of unease in my stomach. She needed space, and I wasn't going to stop her from having it.

"Ten minutes. If you're not back before then, I will carry you back." "I promise."

Chapter 309

Talia's POV

I walked down the path to the rose garden. The maids were there when I turned the last corner. Two of them were pruning the bushes while the other held a basket.

“Hello, Princess Talia,” one of them greeted me. “Do you need anything tonight?”

“No. Please leave me alone,” I said flatly, my voice coming out harsher than intended.

They exchanged uneasy glances, one whispering to the other two, before both bowed and walked out of the garden.

I picked up a pair of shears from the stone bench and walked over to the first bush. Father learned to love rose bushes. It was Mother who had convinced him of their beauty. When I was little, we pruned the bushes together.

"Running a pack is just like taking care of a rose bush," he had told me as he pointed out a cane. "You have to be able to spot those that took strength from the others without giving anything back to ensure the safety and health of the pack."

Father knew how to relate to me. He used the roses to teach me about politics and how to run a pack. I didn't even realize it at the time.

When the roses bloomed each year, we picked the petals together for the wine we made every autumn, in honor of Mother. The wine was always ready by summer, and the few bottles that lasted into winter went to the Alphas who had earned a seat at his private table.

I had not made wine with him in years. I promised myself I would be able to do so next year, but now the pain of regret pounded in me. How could I have been so stupid to trust Jason? My chest tightened with guilt. Why hadn't I listened to my Father when he warned me about him? If I could go back in time, I would reject Jason immediately as my mate.

'We can not bring him back, but we can avenge him. Once the Rogue King is dealt with, we can make new memories and honor him,' my wolf said.

'I am going to kill Jason myself!' I responded.

Memories of him lying to me, saying he loved me, before he betrayed me with Viki, flashed through my mind. Then, the recent memory of him mocking my father, knowing he had no intention of leaving him alive. He did all of this for revenge. Now he made a mortal enemy out of him. I was going to make him pay for all the years I wasted on him when I should have been home with Father and Solon.

Suddenly, I heard footsteps on the gravel behind me. I turned around to see a small girl standing at the edge of the path. She had short curly red hair that looked almost copper in the light. Her hands were clasped in front of her waist and her shoulders were pulled tight.

It took me a moment to realize who she was. It was Annie. I'd only seen her once, weeks ago, when we brought her back from where Michael had kept her. She seemed smaller then, though maybe that was just because she'd been mistreated.

"Annie, what are you doing out here?" I asked.

She didn't answer.

I asked, "Is everything okay, Annie?"

"Thank you for helping my father and me. I never thanked you properly, princess," she finally said.

"You did not have to thank me. It was my duty to ensure your safety," I said.

Annie nodded as tears filled her eyes. "I'm sorry about the Alpha King. He was always kind to me."

"Thank you, Annie."

"How is your father holding up?" The last time I saw Robin, I'd barely stopped Nolan from hurting him.

Annie's lips trembled. She whispered, "My father joined the Moon Goddess."

I froze.

"When? What happened?"

"A few days ago. The healer said his heart was tired."

I walked over to her and reached out to hold her tiny hands.

'Oh no. Oh, poor pup,' my wolf whined. After surviving being kidnapped, losing her father was just cruel.

"I'm so sorry, Annie," I said.

She nodded. Her face was swollen and pale, her eyes rimmed red. She didn't cry, but grief clung to her.

"Princess Talia, are you leaving Silverfang tonight for Bloodmoon?" Annie asked. "Yes, we have to go home. Why?"

"Can I come with you? I have no one here. My parents are gone. I won't be your problem. I'll help with whatever you ask," Annie said.

I couldn't refuse her. Even if I'd wanted to, I wouldn't have been able to. I opened my arms and drew her close. At first, she was stiff, but she soon relaxed, letting her hands grip the back of my dress.

Then, I smelled it. The smell of jasmine hit me at the same moment. I paused, struck by how out of place it was here as it overpowered the scent of roses. It lingered so strongly on Annie's hair, her skin, or maybe the front of her dress.

"Are you wearing Jasmine?" I asked as I released her. When I stepped back to get away from the scent, I nearly toppled over.

"Yes, Princess Talia. It was my father's favorite scent..." Annie murmured.

"Annie, let's get your things. We need to...need to...,"

My words came out slower than I meant, panic prickling beneath my skin. The more

I struggled to speak, the heavier my tongue felt.

Dizziness coiled through my head, and a tingling numbness began to creep up my arms. Something was wrong. My wolf was talking to me, but I couldn't understand what she was saying.

I dropped to my knees on the gravel.

"Annie?"

The last thing I saw before everything went dark was her small white shoes,

standing perfectly still in front of me.

Chapter 310

Nolan's POV

An hour was too long.

During the first half of the hour, I kept telling myself she just needed some time alone, and that taking her out of the garden too early would be a mistake. Even so, I couldn't shake the uneasy feeling growing inside me.

I kept replaying our previous conversations to see if I missed anything. Was she trying to keep her distance from me? Did she blame me for Rudolf's death?

'You are overthinking this,' my wolf scolded. 'She is not fickle. She wouldn't betray

us.'

I knew my wolf was right, but doubt still lingered. Talia never stayed away this long without letting me know.

I reached out to her through the mate bond. 'Talia, is everything okay?'

I waited a few seconds, but there was no response.

'Talia, it has been over an hour. We need to go.'

There was still no response.

I started down the path. By the time I reached the turn to the garden, I was running.

The garden was empty.

The shears were on the gravel, not on the bench where they belonged. A basket was left behind, and I could smell a weird jasmine scent in the air. She was gone. Something was wrong.

I went back to the two guards I had passed on my way in. "Did Luna Talia come back this way?" I asked.

"Yes, Alpha. About forty minutes ago," one of the guards responded.

"Was she alone?" I questioned.

"No, sir. She was with a little girl."

"What's her name? What did she look like?"

"I don't know the girl's name but she's small with short curly red hair. Luna had her arm around the girl's shoulders. I thought Luna Talia knew her," the guard explained.

My wolf perked up immediately. 'That's the girl you rescued from Michael's house a few weeks ago. Her name is Annie.' My stomach dropped. It couldn't be a coincidence that Annie showed up somehow.

"Did Luna Talia speak to you?" I asked.

"No, Alpha. She looked tired. The little girl said they were going to the front gate,' the guard replied.

"Find me all the rose garden maids, now," I ordered.

The guard didn't hesitate. He came back with three women, who looked confused

and afraid. "What is going on, Alpha Nolan?" one of them asked.

"You are not in trouble. I just need to ask a few questions," I said.

They nodded and waited for my questions.

"Did you see Luna Talia leave the garden?" I asked.

"Yes. I saw her on the upper path with Annie. Luna Talia looked unwell. She was leaning on the girl, and her steps were unsteady. I called out to ask if she needed help, but Annie said they knew where they were going," one of the rose maids answered.

This felt like a repeat of what happened with Maggie luring Talia away to be kidnapped, and no one realized what was going on until it was too late. I cursed under my breath. I knew I should have gone with Talia.

I mind-linked Marco. 'Talia is missing. She left the rose garden with Annie, Robin's daughter. They went toward the inner courtyard about forty minutes ago. Find them now. Take Della with you.' Della knew Silverfang and knew what Annie looked like. If Annie were located, she'd be able to identify her quickly.

'On it.'

I joined the guards in the corridor, my voice tight. "Check the inner courtyard again. Don't assume anything."

One of the guards, breathless, caught up to me. "Alpha, the kitchen staff says they last saw Luna Talia by the side door. That was about an hour ago."

I nodded. "Send runners to every gate. No one leaves unless I've checked them myself. I want descriptions of both Talia and Annie in every post."

The house was busy with people getting ready to leave at midnight. Every hallway was full of worried faces. As we moved from room to room, staff and guards shared what they knew, and we tried to piece together a timeline.

A maid found me as I was searching the western garden. "I think I saw Luna Talia and Annie near the grand staircase forty-five minutes ago. Luna Talia looked pale, Alpha. The little girl was holding her up."

"Why didn't you help?" I questioned, annoyed.

"I was in a hurry, sir. I needed to make a delivery before midnight. I am sorry," the maid responded.

I nodded and waved her off.

Another guard reported to me about 15 minutes later. "They passed through the eastern wing only twenty minutes ago. Lady Talia was moving quickly, and Annie was right beside her."

I pressed for details, but no one could say where they'd gone next. The more sightings we collected, the less sense it made. Talia moved too fast, sliding through the palace like water past my fingers.

My wolf paced inside me, agitated, ears pricked for any hint of her presence. 'Reach the bond again,' he urged.

I tried reaching out to her again, desperate for any sign. But there was nothing. No warmth, no answer. The mate bond usually let me sense her mind like a gentle thread tugging between us, even if we were far apart; her emotions, her thoughts, her presence were always there at the edge of mine. Now, it felt like she was completely shut off from me. That could only mean two things: she was blocking me on purpose, or she was unconscious. Neither option was good.

After two hours of searching, my hands wouldn't stop shaking. Anxiety gnawed at my insides. The memory of when Talia vanished for days and I was powerless to help her returned with cruel clarity. Back then, every second tore at me in exactly the same way, but I never imagined I would feel that fear all over again. How the hell could this have happened again?

Solon's voice came through the mind-link. 'Nolan, why are you still there? It is past midnight.'

I didn't know what to say at first, and Solon noticed it.

'What's wrong? What happened? Why is everyone looking for Talia?' Solon asked. 'Talia is missing...'