Barren Luna 311

Chapter 311

Talia's POV

I woke up in a room I didn't recognize. My head pounded like I had a hangover. Sitting up took more effort than usual. My body felt heavy. Whatever knocked me out had faded, but I still felt exhausted, even though I must have been out for hours.

"What happened?" I muttered to myself.

The bed was big, with white, heavy sheets which I knew immediately were not the ones I had picked out for Nolan and my room. The curtains were closed. Light passed through a crack in the curtains, making a harsh golden line across the bed. The room had a trace of lavender. Everything was meant to be comfortable, but it felt staged.

I did not remember coming here.

I tried to remember what happened. The last thing I recalled was Annie in the

garden, hugging me when I pulled her close and asking to come back to Bloodmoon with us. After that, everything got blurry. I remembered falling, and then nothing.

My wolf stirred at the back of my mind.

'Do you know what happened?' I asked her.

'No. All I know is that wherever we are, we are safe for now,' she responded.

'Where is this?' I asked.

'I do not know yet,' my wolf replied.

I called Nolan through the mind-link. 'Nolan, where are you?'

Normally, Nolan would respond in seconds, but there was nothing.

I tried again. 'Nolan, are you there?'

Nolan still did not respond.

The anxiety started in my stomach and worked its way up. Nolan always answered me. There was never a time when he didn't.

Something was horribly wrong.

'Have we lost our connection to Nolan? Do you feel him?' I asked my wolf.

'The bond is intact,' she responded, and I sighed in relief.

'Why is he not answering then?' I asked.

'I do not know,' my wolf replied. 'I've been trying to connect since I woke up.'

A knock came at the door. I was hesitant to answer. We were in an unfamiliar room, and I wasn't sure whether we were in danger. Another knock came at the door.

'Answer the door. Maybe we can get answers,' my wolf suggested.

"Come in," I said.

I watched as the door slowly opened. There in the doorway was Annie, shoving the door open with her shoulder. She was carrying a tray with both hands. A plate of food and what looked like a cup of tea. She set the tray down on the nightstand and turned to me.

"Good morning, Luna Talia. I brought you breakfast."

"Good morning, Annie. Where are we?"

"At Bloodmoon, Luna."

"What? This is not my room at Bloodmoon."

"Your room is being repaired, Luna. The Alpha said to put you in this one until it is finished," Annie explained.

I frowned. The last thing I recalled before waking up here was being in the Silverfang garden, saying goodbye before we had to leave at midnight to avoid the mad rogues. Did something happen while I was out? Was there another attack after we left? Why wouldn't Nolan tell me?

'Probably trying to make sure not to stress you even more. You've had a hard couple of days,' my wolf suggested.

"Sit down and eat with me," I instructed.

"Oh, I should not. The food is for you, Luna."

"Annie, sit down and eat with me. There is enough here for both of us, and I am not going to eat it all."

"I am not hungry, Luna."

Her stomach gave a small audible sound, and her cheeks went red. She would not look at me.

I motioned for her to sit down.

Annie hesitated, staring at the tray instead of me. She sat in the chair across from me without a word. I pushed the plate toward her. She took a slice of cheese toast and bit into it carefully, like a child who hasn't eaten in a while and doesn't want to seem too hungry. After the first bite, she kept going. She finished the toast in less than a minute and reached for another piece before slowing down.

"Annie, how did I get here?"

"The Alpha brought you back."

"From where?"

"From Silverfang, Luna. Don't you remember?"

"Actually, I don't. How did he bring me back? I do not remember the drive. I do not remember leaving the garden."

"You were tired, Luna. You were asleep almost the whole way."

"For the whole drive from Silverfang to Bloodmoon."

"Yes, Luna."

"That is not a drive a person sleeps through, Annie, especially with what was going

on. Where was Marco? Where was the rest of the escort?"

"They were there, Luna. I do not know the names."

"And Nolan was driving?"

"Yes, Luna," Annie said. Her answer came a little too quickly, and she looked away right after. What she said didn't make sense. I remembered Marco driving the whole time. Why would Nolan suddenly be the one driving? Why would Annie lie about something so small?

"Where is he now?"

"At the training grounds. He said to tell you he will be back later."

"At the training grounds, this early?"

"Yes, Luna."

"What time is it?"

"I do not know exactly, Luna."

"You were just outside the door with the tray. You did not pass a clock?"

"I did not check, Luna."

"Annie." I set my cup down, frowning. "Where is my maid Clara?"

Annie froze in mid-scoop of the oatmeal. She didn't look up at me at first. Then she said, "Clara is...She is in the... kitchen, I think."

"Clara is the head of the household at Bloodmoon. She would have been at the door

to greet me when I arrived. She would have been in this room before you. Why is she not here?" I questioned.

"She is really busy."

"With what?"

"With the household, Luna."

I watched her read face. She would not look me in the eye. My wolf bristled in me. 'She's lying to us,' she warned.

"Where are the other servants? Why is it only you bringing my food?" I asked.

“The Alpha said only me, Luna. He said you would be more comfortable with someone you knew," Annie replied.

"I have known Clara my entire life. Nolan knows that. So that does not sound like Nolan," I retorted.

"That is what he said, Luna."

I had had enough. Someone was instructing this little child to lie to me, and I had

had enough of it. I pulled the blanket back and stood.

Annie looked at me in panic. "Luna, you should eat first," she said.

"I will eat after I find him," I told her.

I walked to the door. Annie stood up behind me, the chair sliding back across the

wood.

“Luna, please. He will be back. He said for you to rest..."

I ignored her and opened the door.

Two guards were standing in the corridor outside. They turned toward me at once

and stepped together to block the doorway.

“Luna, you are not to leave the room, Alpha's orders."

Chapter 312

Talia's POV

"Move out of my way!"

“Luna, we have our orders. You are not to leave the room without the Alpha's permission," the taller guard said. Most guards looked awkward or intimidated when they had to say no to me. This one, on the other hand, seemed smug. It made my wolf snarl within me.

"Why?" I asked. "Why would I be confined to my room?"

"For your safety, Luna," the taller guard answered. I believed he was practically sneering at me as he studied my face as if he was told to report on my emotions. The shorter one wouldn't look me in the eyes.

"My safety from what? There is no threat inside Bloodmoon, or is there?" I questioned.

"No, Luna. Alpha..."

"Then, get out of my way. I will not be kept here," I snapped, interrupting him.

"We cannot, Luna," the shorter guard repeated. "Alpha said you must stay in your room for your safety. He will come to you later."

'Who are they to defy us? Let me out! I will teach them who runs this pack,' my wolf snarled.

"You are speaking to your Luna. I am giving you a direct order. Move, or I will make you move," I said sternly.

"We answer to the Alpha. Our orders come from him. We are sorry, Luna," the taller guard answered with a shrug, but he didn't seem sorry. No guard had ever had the audacity to speak to me like this. I didn't believe them for one minute that Nolan would have said this. Nolan knew how much I did not like being kept out of pack affairs.

'But he also will override what we want if he thinks our safety is in jeopardy,' my wolf reasoned, but that didn't make me feel any better.

On top of that, I didn't know these guards. Why would he have guards that I didn't know watching over me when there were Della and Marco?

"Then bring Nolan to me now. I want him here in this corridor in ten minutes," I ordered.

"The Alpha is not available, Luna," the shorter guard responded.

"Make him available!"

"We cannot, Luna."

Annie had come up behind me. She wrapped her arms around my waist in an attempt to keep me in place. It only served to further agitate me.

"Luna, please. The Alpha is busy. He asked me to take care of you while he was gone. I am here. Whatever you need, I can get it for you. Please come back inside and finish your breakfast. He will be here as soon as he can," Annie pleaded.

I turned to her and pried her arms off me.

"Annie, I did not bring you to Bloodmoon to be my maid. I brought you here to give you a home. Get Clara. I want to speak with her now," I told her. After everything that Annie had been through, there was no way I would have turned her into a maid. "The Alpha said that only I could tend to you, Luna. I'm sorry," Annie said.

"I do not care what he said," I snapped. "Get Clara to me now!"

"I cannot, Luna..."

"Annie," I growled as I was losing my patience. "Do not make me repeat myself."

Fear flashed in Annie's eyes as she took a step back from me. “I am supposed to stay with you, Luna. The Alpha said it was important that I did so. Please don't be mad."

My wolf was thinking the same things I was. Nolan had been worried about my safety even before we left Silverfang. The mad rogues' attack hadn't helped. I remembered how his jaw stiffened when I said I wanted to be alone, and how he tried to convince me to let him come with me to the rose garden.

'This is him acting too careful again,' my wolf huffed.

'Maybe, but I'm not so sure,' I responded.

Whatever was going on, I could handle it like I always did by going straight to him and telling him to stop overdoing it. I had work to do today. I needed to call the other packs after what happened at Silverfang. The Luna of Bloodmoon didn't just sit in a room while her pack carried on without her.

I moved forward, shoving the guards out of my way with surprising ease.

"Luna, what are you doing?" one of the guards asked.

"Going to find the Alpha. You can tell him I am coming to find him," I replied.

The taller guard put his hand on my arm. I slowly turned to him, my Luna aura flaring. I glowered up at him.

"Take your hand off me," I growled.

"Luna, please..."

"Take it off, or I'll remove your hand from your body," I snarled.

The guard quickly removed his hand.

I walked past them. I heard Annie say something behind me, a small panicked sound, and one of the guards started to follow me and then stopped. I did not look back.

The corridor was long. I turned at the end of it and went down the next one, and then the one after that, looking for him. None of it looked familiar. Where was I?

I turned the corner at the end of the long corridor and ran into someone coming the other way.

I was caught by both arms before I could go down. The person held me firm for the second it took me to find my balance.

I looked up, and it was Nolan.

"Talia, what are you doing out of your room? I told Annie to let you rest," he said. "Seriously, Nolan. I've told you multiple times I-"

I paused in mid-sentence when my wolf whispered, 'No scent. He has no scent!'

This man looked just like Nolan. His hands were the right size, the right shape, and held me the same way. But my wolf was right. He had no scent. I should have noticed it right away.

My heart raced wildly, and a cold wave ran through me as the realization hit me.

This was not Nolan.

Chapter 313

Talia's POV

Annie and the guards came around the corner behind me a moment later. The three of them stopped when they saw the man holding my arms. The guards straightened to attention.

"I'm sorry, Alpha. We tried to get her to stop, but Luna wanted to see you," Annie explained.

Nolan kept his eyes on me as he spoke to them. "All three of you can leave. I have her."

The guards bowed and turned back the way they had come. Annie hesitated. She looked as if she wanted to say something.

“Annie,” Nolan snapped, causing Annie to flinch. “Did you not hear me?"

"I'm sorry, Alpha," Annie responded.

"Go with them," Nolan told her again. Annie nodded, bowed, and quickly left. The corridor was now empty except for the man who looked like Nolan standing across

from me.

"You can let go of me now," I told him as I looked at his hands still on my arms. “Or are you going to drag me back to my room?"

"I just want to make sure you're okay," Nolan responded. "I would never force you to go back to your room if you didn't want to go."

"Well, I find that hard to believe. I woke up, and you weren't there. On top of that, you left me in the protection of strangers. Do you know how confusing that is?" I said.

"You are home and back in Bloodmoon. You are safe," Nolan reassured me.

"Then why am I being kept in a room with guards at the door?" I questioned. "For your safety," Nolan said simply, as it made sense.

"That doesn't make any sense. You say nothing is going on, but why do I need guards?" I asked.

"The walls have not been breached. There are no mad rogues inside the borders," Nolan explained. His tone unnerved me as it felt like he was patronizing me. "I just wanted to make sure you were guarded until I knew you were stable.”

"I am the Luna of this pack, and I have been locked in a room with no answers about where you are, when I am allowed to leave, or why two guards I have never seen before in my life have been ordered to stand outside my door. I want an explanation, Nolan.” My heartbeat raced as I spoke.

I felt my hands clench at my sides, trying to keep the tremor out of my voice. I could not let him see my fear, so I squared my shoulders back and met his look unflinching, even while confusion twisted tighter inside my chest with every word.

"I am sorry, Talia. I gave the order before I knew you would wake the way you did. I will have the guards reassigned. They will not be at the door when we come back," Nolan conceded.

"And I want to go outside, now,” I demanded.

He hesitated briefly. It was as if he were deciding whether it was a good idea. If I were in Bloodmoon, this was my home too, and I should be able to go wherever I wanted.

“Alright. I'll take you to your garden. How about that?" he finally said as he offered me his arm. My wolf bristled within me. Nolan never did that, but I took his arm anyway and allowed him to lead me to the garden.

"How did we leave Silverfang? I do not remember anything after I fell asleep," I said.

"I found you in the rose garden after you collapsed. You frightened all of us. I came down the path looking for you when you did not come back to the car, and you were on the gravel between the rose bushes," Nolan explained.

"I thought for a moment that you were not breathing. Leslie checked you over and said you would be fine. Solon told me to bring you home, that it was better for you to wake up somewhere familiar than in a hospital bed in Silverfang. So I did. The drive was the longest drive of my life. You did not stir once."

The story was neat. It answered every question I might have asked, but none of it made sense. If I had collapsed, neither Leslie nor Solon would have allowed me to leave. And Silverfang would have been more comfortable than Bloodmoon because that is where I grew up.

'Are we sure we're not dreaming?' I asked my wolf.

'No, we're awake,' my wolf replied. 'Look at his neck.'

I looked at the side of his neck while he spoke. The mating mark was there. The scratches I had put on his neck in Silverfang were not.

I remember the scratches had been bandaged when I woke up the next morning from being sedated. That was four days. The scratches I gave him in the ER should have been faint scars, but there was no mark, no discoloration, not even a faint line.

'Can you feel Nolan through the bond?' I asked.

'No. I can feel the bond. I cannot feel him,' my wolf replied.

'What does that mean?" I asked.

'It means whoever this is, he is not Nolan,' my wolf said firmly.

'How is that even possible? Could it be blocked or damaged?' I asked.

'It could. But if it were, I would feel pressure on it, and you would know it too. The bond is open, but I cannot feel our mate,' my wolf replied. 'He is either unconscious or far enough away that I cannot reach him.'

This imposter showed me through a set of doors and out into a garden. Rose bushes lined the path. The layout matched Bloodmoon's lower garden, but something still seemed off.

"I have been working on some new cultivars. The white ones over there are new. Do you like them?"

"They are beautiful."

I let the silence hang for a moment before I found the courage to speak. “Nolan, I

have to ask you something."

"Yes?"

"Why do you not have a scent?"

Chapter 314

Talia's POV

“Ah, I should have explained. Leslie suggested the scent suppressors for the road. She did not want the rogues catching the scent of any of the convoys leaving the gates and tracking them back to the packs. Every Alpha and Luna on the road used them. They were given out at the gate before we left," Nolan explained.

A cold chill went up my spine. Leslie would not have recommended that, as it had not worked before when Solon and Nolan followed me to Jason's when I got the potions the first time. I forced a smile and nodded. “Leslie is so clever. I am glad Solon has her."

"Yes, it was a good idea," Nolan responded with a strained voice as if agreeing with me was detestable.

"Shouldn't it have worn off by now?" I asked.

"I may have used too much of it," he laughed nervously. "The dose she gave me was meant for a larger wolf. That is probably why you are not picking anything up from me right now."

Once again, he had a rehearsed excuse for everything. My wolf paced within me. 'Stay calm. You have to stay calm,' she warned.

"It will wear off in a day or two. I have been told I smell like absolutely nothing until then," he continued.

I maintained the forced smile even though my thoughts raced with fear. I was very sure that this was not my Nolan or if it was, something was very wrong with him. I could not risk a direct confrontation with him.

One wrong move could trap me here for good. I slowed my breathing and played my part. I needed to figure out who he was. I would not get any answers if he realized I was not falling for his lies.

"That makes sense. I was worried for a moment," I sighed.

"You do not need to worry. I am right here."

"I know. I am sorry. I think I am still not entirely awake. I think I am hungry, actually. Can we go to the dining hall? I have not eaten anything but the bread Annie brought up this morning."

"Of course. Let's go."

I took his arm again, and we walked back inside. He led me down the corridors just as Nolan would have, taking the same turns at the same pace with his hand resting in the same spot on my back. He had studied Nolan well, but he couldn't fool me.

'Try reaching out to Solon,' I told my wolf.

'I am trying, but I can't reach anyone,' my wolf whined.

'Keep trying,' I told her.

The dining hall had a single small table set near the window. A maid entered a moment after we sat down. I did not recognize her. Just like the shorter guard, she wouldn't meet my eyes.

The maid's eyes flicked past me warily before focusing on Nolan. Nolan pulled out my chair for me before addressing, "What are you doing standing there? Tend to your Luna.” His tone was harsh, which was unlike Nolan. He never talked to his pack members like that.

The maid rushed over with a fake smile plastered on her face. Her posture made it clear she did not want to stay long.

"What can I bring you, Luna?" she asked.

"I would like Clara to take the order, please. She knows what I usually have. Could you go and get her for me?"

The maid paused and looked at Nolan. I watched her face. She hesitated momentarily because she did not know what to say.

Nolan answered before the silence became awkward.

"Clara is on sick leave," he advised. "She has been since the day before yesterday. I

did not want to bother you with it. She will be back as soon as she is able."

"Of course," I nodded as if his answer was believable. "I am sorry to hear that. I hope she is all right. Please give her my best when you see her."

"I will pass it along, Luna."

I turned back to the maid.

"I will have whatever the kitchen is making for lunch. And," I said, looking at the man who was not my mate, "the Beef Burgundy, please. He loves it. I have not asked the kitchen to make it for him in months."

The maid wrote it down in her order book and said, "Yes, Luna."

"Make sure they use the heavy cream sauce and not the lighter one. Nolan dislikes the lighter one," I continued.

"Of course, Luna."

The maid left. Nolan grabbed my hand from across the table and rubbed the back of my hand with his thumb. I fought the urge to cringe and snatch my hand free.

"It has been too long since we have had a proper meal together," Nolan said.

"Yes, far too long," I agreed. "We should do this more often."

'It is Jason. It has to be Jason,' my wolf growled. 'Why are you going along with this? We need to tear his throat out and leave!'

'Maybe. It could be the Rogue King for all we know, but we're going to find out real soon,' I responded.

'How?'

'Jason is severely allergic to mushrooms,' I said simply.

The food came. The Beef Burgundy was rich and dark in the bowl, and the smell of the cream and the wine filled the room. I made a small approving sound as I lifted my fork.

"It looks so good, doesn't it?"

"Yes, delicious," Nolan responded.

I cut a piece of meat along with a mushroom. It was a small piece of mushroom about the size of the tip of my thumb. It was small enough not to be noticed.

I leaned across the table with the fork. "Try this. The kitchen really has outdone itself."

Nolan opened his mouth.

I fed him the mushroom.

Chapter 315

Talia's POV

I watched him eat the hidden mushroom. "Good, isn't it?" I asked, smiling.

"That is good," Nolan replied, taking a sip of his water. “Beef Burgundy... I can't believe I forgot about the dish."

"We've been so busy lately. We really have been neglecting ourselves," I said as I cut another piece of meat with another small mushroom hidden underneath it. "Have some more. I'll tell them to make this more often."

I held the fork out to him again. He leaned forward and took it.

"I agree. I'll let Annie know," Nolan said.

For a moment, I was somewhat relieved. This imposter wasn't Jason, so that was at least good. Then, I noticed a small crease appear between his eyebrows. The corner of his mouth quivered as if he was trying not to cough. My pulse quickened. Was I imagining things?

I ate slowly, watching him over the rim of my cup. The crease between his eyebrows had become more pronounced. He was sweating now.

"Are you okay? You seem to be sweating," I said.

The imposter gave a weak, nervous laugh before saying, "That bite had a bit of spice." I noticed his hand trembled as he reached for his glass of water.

"But you said that was the best part," I pressed as I cut him a third piece. I noticed the imposter hesitate to take it. There was a flicker of doubt in his eyes before he forced himself to eat. He couldn't stop now or it would have given him away.

With each chew, his face became even more flushed. He tried to clear his throat. The sound seemed strained, and panicked.

The imposter pushed his chair back quickly. It almost fell over as he stumbled to his feet.

I gasped at his sudden movement. "Nolan, are you okay?" I asked in fake worry.

"Forgive me. Something urgent has come up," the imposter said.

His voice had gone hoarse. He swallowed twice while he was speaking, and the second swallow he grimaced.

"Do you need my help? I can..."

"No, no, my dear. You keep eating. I'll catch up later," he said quickly, cutting me off.

The imposter left the dining hall so abruptly that his chair finally fell over. Hand over my mouth, I suppressed the urge to laugh as a giddy thrill ran through me as I watched him flee.

'If we're lucky, he'll die from asphyxiation. That'll teach him for trying to trick us,' my wolf huffed.

When the door clicked closed, I listened to his fading footsteps with a feeling of satisfaction. ‘But knowing it is Jason doesn't help him, and him dying now certainly won't help either. We need to figure out how to get out of here,' I answered.

The weight of my situation was settling uncomfortably over the short-lived victory. I didn't have time to gloat. I now knew it was Jason, but I still didn't know what he was up to.

Then I stood up and went to the door. I opened it slightly and called, "Annie, come here. I need you."

She appeared at the doorway within seconds as I was sitting back down. She had been waiting just outside.

"Yes, Luna."

"Come sit and eat with me. I do not want to eat alone."

"I should not."

"Sit," I said firmly.

Annie sat down. I slid the second plate, the one the impostor had barely touched, across the table to her. This time, she began eating without waiting for permission.

'Why did you bring the little traitor in here? What is your plan?' my wolf asked.

'I need to know where we are. This place looks like Bloodmoon, but it is not Bloodmoon. The bond does not reach Nolan from here. I need to confirm where we actually are,' I explained.

'How? I doubt she knows anything,' my wolf huffed.

'I am sure he is careless around her and probably revealed more than he should

have. As a child, she will answer a casual question without thinking about it the way an adult would,' I said.

I watched Annie eat for a moment before asking, "How are you settling in at

Bloodmoon? I know it is different from Silverfang."

“It's fine, Luna. Thank you," Annie replied with a full mouth.

"What have they been having you do? I want to make sure they are not working you too hard."

"I mostly work in the kitchen, clean, and bring food to guests. I'm trying to be a good maid."

"You are doing well."

"Thank you, Luna."

"I've been thinking all morning. You should learn about trade routes. Clara visits nearby packs for exchanges. You know, pack, um..." I trailed off, pretending to forget.

"Oh, do you mean Moonbrook, Luna? The one to the east?" Annie responded without looking up from the plate.

My stomach dropped, and I was glad that Annie wasn't looking at me. It gave me a moment to compose myself and push down the dread I was feeling.

"Moonbrook. Of course. Thank you. I couldn't remember."

"Yes, Luna."

"Thank you, Annie. Finish your food."

Bloodmoon did not border Moonbrook. Bloodmoon did not border any pack closely. Moonbrook was nowhere near it.

Jason brought me to one of the Rogue King's houses and dressed it up to look like Bloodmoon. How was that even possible? That alarmed me more than actually being kidnapped.

'Colin is at Moonbrook. He can help us,' my wolf said.

'Yes, but we would have to get there,' I responded. Safety truly was right around the corner. I had been unconscious for two days. Nolan and Solon would already be searching for me. I would just have to get to the main road at least. If I were lucky, I could make my way to Moonbrook. Colin would take me in, and I could get word to Nolan and Solon. Then, we could finally end this foolishness.

I had my way out, but I was on borrowed time. I had to act before Jason did.

Chapter 316

Jason's POV

I reached the bathroom in a suite three corridors away from the dining hall before the first wave hit. My hands shook as I dropped to my knees in front of the toilet, breath ragged, and threw up. I kept vomiting for the next ten minutes, panic rising with each convulsion. Cold sweat soaked through my shirt before the second wave hit; my heart hammered in my chest.

Mushrooms.

She had fed me mushrooms, and like a fool, I let her. By the time I realized what was going on, my throat had started to tighten, and my skin had already started to itch. I couldn't let her see me react like that, so I fled before she noticed.

Now, slumped against the cold bathroom wall, heart pounding, shame burning behind my eyelids, I tried to slow my breathing.

'She knows. She did this on purpose,' my wolf barked. 'She tried to kill us!'

Maybe. The allergy was not a secret she had found out by accident. It was a confession I had made to her in private, and she had carried it carefully for as long as we were together. Remembering that trust made my heart ache. For a moment, beneath the anger and humiliation, I almost missed the way she used to look at me when she tried to keep me safe.

'She used our feelings against us. She tried to kill us,' my wolf repeated.

'But she didn't,' I said.

Unfortunately for Talia, my food allergy hadn't killed me. My father had spent years forcing mushrooms into my food when I was a boy. He called it forcing the allergy out of me. It nearly killed me more than once. I hated him for it then, and for a long time after. Now, sitting in this bathroom with my throat tight but not closing, the irony was not lost on me. His torture had saved my life. Once again, the old man was protecting me in his own twisted way.

'Your plan is failing,' my wolf repeated, pulling me out of my thoughts. 'We should just give her to the Rogue King.'

'Or Nolan has poor taste in cuisine,' I countered. 'The Rogue King said the spell would make sure it cloaked everything. There is no way for her to see through it. Talia would not have ordered the dish to test me because there is no test to run.'

'You don't know that,' my wolf growled. 'You don't think that it is too much of a coincidence that Nolan's favorite dish had mushrooms in it?'

'She thinks I'm Nolan. She was being affectionate.'

'Once again, you refuse to believe the reason!'

'I am keeping the possibility open. There is a difference,' I argued.

I made myself replay the meal. I thought about how she smiled and how she talked about spending more time together. All of her reactions had been normal. My answers to her questions were perfect, but something gave me pause.

'Her responses were too accepting,' my wolf said, which was what I was thinking. 'She went from upset to calm too fast. She stopped pushing after the scent question. That is not Talia.'

My wolf had a point. When things didn't make sense, Talia was not the type to let it go until she figured it out.

I opened the mind-link to the Rogue King. I could feel his irritation almost immediately.

'Jason, what do you want this time?!'

'I need to know if the spell is failing.'

'It is not failing,' he responded with an annoyed tone.

'How can you be so sure?' I questioned. 'I believe Talia is testing me because she doesn't believe I'm Nolan.'

'She knows nothing. To her, you are Nolan. To her, this house is Bloodmoon. Morgana was very clear that unless you died, she would only see the illusion,' the Rogue King explained.

'Then how did she...'

'You are wasting my time with your paranoia!' the Rogue King snapped. 'I am not your father. I will not continue to humor your delusions!'

I did not answer for a moment. I wasn't sure what I was doing by reaching out to him. I didn't need him to think I could follow through with our plan.

'You are wasting time on her,' the Rogue King said before I had the chance to respond. 'You have been wasting time on her since you took her. Kill her. Move on

to Silverfang and take the territory. You get your revenge that way. You do not get it by playing house with her.'

'I am not playing house with her.'

The Rogue King scoffed. 'You could have fooled me.'

'I just need Talia to trust me long enough to break her guard; everything else will fall into place.'

'Time? You have an obsession.'

'I have a plan, and we have a deal. You help me become Alpha King, and I give you the pack territories you have been after for years. The deal does not change.'

I closed the mind-link before he could respond.

Maybe the Rogue King was right. I could just be paranoid. The kitchen would not have known about my allergy, nor would Talia be able to see through the illusion enough to test whether I was the real Nolan.

Or maybe my wolf was right.

I could not tell yet. I could not afford to assume either way. Every move I made from

this point forward had to be carefully planned.

I was going to take revenge. I was going to take it on her, Solon, and especially Nolan.

I was going to ruin Talia completely for betraying me.

And I was going to start by marking her tonight.

Chapter 317

Talia's POV

I didn't ask Annie about Clara or the other servants. I already had what I needed. The real Nolan and Solon were out there somewhere, searching for me, and the only reason they hadn't found me yet was that I wasn't anywhere they'd expect.

Jason was wearing Nolan's face. It had to be a spell, since nothing else could have stopped the bond from reaching Nolan. The spell was rare and dangerous. It didn't just cover someone's features; it interfered with the mate bond itself, tricking it with layers of borrowed memory. It was almost certainly a witch's work. The thought made me furious.

'We should've killed him when we had the chance,' my wolf grumbled as she continued to reach out to Nolan, Solon, and even Della with no luck.

After what I did to him at the table, I doubted he'd come back tonight. The vomiting alone would keep him down for hours. I had a window of time, and I planned to use

it.

I spent the afternoon with Annie.

"Come walk with me. I've been in the bedroom too long," I told her.

"Of course, Luna. Where would you like to start?"

"The lower garden. Then the library. Then the east wing."

She took me down the corridor and out to the lower garden first. I made a small sound at each rose bush she stopped at, pretending to be charmed by the ones she said were new. While she pointed out the flowers, I counted the guards and noted where the trellises were positioned.

Next, we went into the library. I perused the shelves. Half the titles were books I'd never owned, but I made myself look pleased.

"And the east wing, Luna?"

"Yes, I want to be sure rooms are fresh for guests," I lied.

The east wing had a long hallway of bedrooms. It didn't match the real Bloodmoon's layout, but it was close enough that you didn't know what to look for; you would have thought it was perfect.

By the time we finished the tour, the sun had begun to set. I had memorized the layout and guard positions. I noted the angle of the drop from my window to the kitchen garden below, the route from the kitchen garden to the outer wall, and the corner where the trellis would help me climb over.

I had a plan.

"Annie, I'm tired. I'm going to lie down before dinner," I said.

"I will sit with you, Luna."

"No. I want the room to myself. Don't come back until I ring."

"Are you sure, Luna? The Alpha said I should stay with you."

"I'm sure. I'll ring when I want you back. Take some time to relax. You worked through lunch."

She hesitated, thinking about whether to argue. I held her gaze until she decided to listen.

"Yes, Luna. Have a good rest," she said and left my room. I waited for a few minutes to make sure Annie actually left before I walked over to the wardrobe and opened it. The dresses Annie had hung were all pale colors. I pushed them aside and noticed the darker clothes. I could wear those tonight.

Then, I went to the window. It was not sealed shut. I checked the corner post of the bed; it held my weight. Everything I needed was in the room. I would put it all together after midnight, once the house was asleep and I was sure he was not coming back.

A knock came at the door then.

I froze for a while. Was Annie knocking? I had already told her I would call when I needed her.

"Annie, I told you I am going to lie down. What..."

I stopped midsentence as I opened the door, for it was not Annie standing in my doorway but the imposter, Nolan.

He looked recovered, much to my dismay, standing in my doorway as if he hadn't had an allergic reaction.

"Talia, you look like you were not expecting me," Nolan teased.

I forced a smile on my face and said, "I was lying down."

"You seem disappointed."

"I'm not disappointed," I said, stepping back to let him in.

He came in and closed the door behind him. My wolf tensed within me. He crossed

to me before I could put any furniture between us and pulled me against his chest.

"It has been a long time since we have been alone here together. I have missed you. I have missed your body. I have been thinking about you all afternoon..." Don't gag. Don't gag!

I kept telling myself as his hands on me made my skin crawl. For a split second, a memory of the real Nolan came to my mind. His laugh against my ear, the tender way his fingers would brush mine, never forcing, always waiting. Now the same hands, or the imitation of them, turned my body cold with dread. My mate bond flared up, recoiling, rejecting Jason's advances in every way.

'Get him off us before he realizes we are disgusted,' my wolf warned.

"I am exhausted, Nolan. You'd think after being unconscious for so long, I'd be well rested. But the day has worn me out completely," I offered him an apologetic smile and squeezed his hand. "Let me make it up to you tomorrow, okay? I'll be all yours for the entire night. Whatever you want. Does that sound fair?"

I lifted up on my toes and placed a kiss on his cheek, the way I would have kissed Nolan. The real Nolan would have been satisfied with that and cuddled with me.

But this imposter's eyes hardened with desire. He wasn't taking no for an answer. My heart drummed with panic.

Nolan bent and lifted me. "Wait. What are you doing?" I yelped.

He carried me to the bed, ignoring my struggles, before dropping me onto it. His weight crushed the air out of my lungs. His lips slammed onto my own before I could register what was happening. His fingers explored the side of my neck, tracing the mating mark Nolan had given me. My body tensed beneath him, all muscles locked in dread.

"This mark," he said. "It's faded. It needs renewing. It's been too long."

Chapter 318

Talia's POV

His hands moved to the front of my dress and began to pull at the buttons. He was not careful. The first button came off in his hand. The second one came off as he tore through the fabric with his claws.

'How dare he!' my wolf snarled. I could feel her pushing to take control, but I forced her down.

"Nolan, stop," I said, making my voice tremble. When he groped my breast painfully, I yelped, "Please."

Then, he at last looked at me. The look was one I had never seen on Nolan's face, and especially not directed at me. It was a hungry, possessive thing, the look of a man who was about to take something he believed he was owed.

"Please control your wolf, Nolan," I said. "You would never force me. You have never forced me. You are not going to start tonight. I trust you!"

He hesitated as he looked conflicted, but he had finally stopped, and that alone was a relief.

"I am exhausted. Give me just one night. I promise you I will be worth the wait. Tomorrow night, I will make you forget you ever had to ask twice," I promised.

I held his eyes while I spoke. I did not look away from him once.

He sat back. The look on his face slowly changed into the smile that was still not Nolan's, but was at least no longer the look of a predator that has caught its prey.

"You drive a hard bargain, Talia."

"I always have."

He kissed me again and I forced myself to kiss him back. He stood up off the bed, walked to the door, paused with his hand on the handle, and looked back at me one more time.

"Rest well. Do not forget what you promised."

"I will not forget."

He left. The door closed behind him. I heard his footsteps move down the corridor, turn at the end, and fade.

I got up from the bed, went to the bathroom, spat into the sink, and rinsed my mouth twice. I scrubbed the side of my neck where his fingers had been until the skin was red and the feel of him was gone.

'He wants to mark you again. He wants the bond. He wants you tied to him through the mark.'

'I know. He is going to do it tomorrow night if I am still in this house.'

'Then we leave now.'

'Yes.'

I changed quickly into dark clothes. Black pants and a dark shirt would make me less visible at night once I stepped outside.

I stripped the bed, tying the sheets together and testing each knot with my full weight. The length was enough to lower me most of the way to the kitchen garden below the window. I would have to take the last drop on my own feet.

'Let's go,' my wolf stated, and I jumped to action.

I tied one end to the post nearest the window and threw the rest of it out into the dark. The sheets carried me about two-thirds of the way down. The last third I had to let go of and fall, and I rolled when I hit the ground the way Father had taught me to roll when I was a girl.

I got up quickly and ran.

The grounds were quiet. I hunkered behind the low hedge that ran along the south side of the kitchen garden and listened. A guard moved past the corner of the house twenty feet from me. He did not look in my direction. He paused at the corner, scanned the dark lawn beyond, and continued his round.

I moved when he passed.

I ran from the kitchen garden to the long hedge by the wall, keeping the hedge between the next guard and me. When a second guard appeared, I dropped behind

a planter and waited until he passed before moving again.

The trellis at the eastern corner was covered in vines. I climbed slowly to avoid making noise. I cleared the top of the wall on my belly and lowered myself down the other side.

The ground on the other side was the forest floor. I dropped the last few feet, rolled when I landed, and ran east toward Moonbrook.

After a few minutes, my wolf bristled and growled, 'Someone is tracking us!'

'How close?'

'A few hundred yards and they are coming fast.'

'More than one?'

'I cannot tell just yet. The wind is obscuring their scent.'

I picked up the pace, zigzagging between trees: left around one trunk, right around the next, ducking under branches and using the space behind them to change direction. The forest floor was uneven, roots cropping up unexpectedly. Twice, I nearly fell but caught myself on the nearest trunk and kept going.

The footsteps behind me changed. They were not closing as fast as they had been. Whoever was following had to work to keep up with me, which was the point of every turn I had taken.

I broke out of the trees at the edge of a small clearing, and then I saw Moonbrook patrols. Three of them, on the far side of the clearing, were moving in a careful line through the open ground. The crest on their jackets was the Moonbrook crest. I had not been more than fifteen minutes from Colin's territory after all.

I lifted my voice as I came out of the trees. "I am Princess Talia of Silverfang. I need to speak to Alpha Colin now!"

The lead patrolman's head came up. He did not look at me. He looked past me. His eyes were wide with panic, and he shouted to the two men behind him, "Rogues! Fall back! Fall back!"

The three of them turned and ran into the trees on the far side of the clearing.

I turned immediately.

The forest behind me was full of green eyes, dozens of them, spread out among the trees in a wide arc.

They had been the ones following me.

And they were closing in.

Chapter 319

Talia's POV

The first set of green eyes broke from the line and came at me low, weaving quickly between the trees. I saw the rogue's hunched form for an instant and managed to step half a pace back, preparing myself as he lunged the remaining distance toward

me.

A howl split the forest.

From off to my right, its sound rose, long, high, and sharp. Instantly, every set of green eyes in the trees around me flicked toward the noise. The rogue about to land on me twisted its body mid-leap, claws skimming past where I'd stood, and turned aside. The eyes withdrew into the darkness in a coordinated sweep, vanishing together like a flock of birds wheeling as one. In seconds, the last shapes disappeared, and the forest behind me was empty.

I stood in the clearing, my heart pounding so hard it hurt. My breath came in shallow, uneven bursts, and I fought the urge to collapse to my knees.

I heard the crunch of approaching footsteps through the undergrowth, getting louder as someone drew closer to the clearing.

Nolan was walking toward me through the trees. For him to show up now, in this exact place, at this exact moment, was not a coincidence. Had he been following me all along? Or was someone else watching, reporting my every move back to him? The idea sent a cold chill down my spine.

'Stay calm. We can talk our way out of this,' my wolf reassured me.

"What are you doing here at midnight?" he asked coldly.

'Don't try to hide that we're afraid. Use it. Bring up the rogues,' my wolf suggested.

"There were rogues everywhere. We have to deal with them first," I said, dodging his question.

"What rogues?" Nolan asked. "What are you talking about?"

I looked at Nolan as if he were crazy. "You did not hear the howl? You can't smell them?"

"I heard you, not a howl. There are no rogues here. Patrols cleared the area before sundown. You're imagining things," Nolan responded.

"I'm not imagining things. They were here," I stated firmly.

"Why are you this far from the house?" Nolan responded.

"I...I needed to go on a walk," I replied.

"I thought you were tired," Nolan said, taking a step toward me. My wolf bristled in me. This was it. I had acted too recklessly, and he was going to know I was on to him.

“Luna, there you are! I have been looking for you," a voice called out.

I turned toward the voice. The man who came out of the trees wore the dark uniform

of a household guard. He had an eye patch over his right eye. He stopped at the edge of the clearing and bowed to the imposter.

"My apologies, Alpha," he said while trying to catch his breath. "Luna came down to the kitchen earlier this evening looking for someone to walk with her. She said she could not sleep. I offered to come out with her so she would not have to walk the perimeter alone. I lost track of her in the trees a few minutes ago."

I finally recognized that voice.

It was Robin.

He looked thinner than I remembered. His hair was longer. The eye patch was new, and the skin around it was scarred in a way that had not been there when we brought him out of Michael's house.

"Is that right, Talia?"

I nodded. "I could not sleep. My wolf has been a nightmare all day. I needed to walk, and he insisted on coming with me. We got separated in the trees because I went farther than I meant to. I am sorry for the trouble."

"Your wolf has been a nightmare?" Nolan asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Throwing a tantrum. She acts up when I've kept her in too long. I've been exhausted, and she's raging at me for it. I thought a walk might help," I explained.

Nolan searched my eyes to see if I was lying before saying, "Wolves can be as spoiled as children. Get yours under control. A Luna who can't manage her wolf is no use to her pack."

I forced a weak smile and said, "You are right. I will work on it."

"Come back to the house, both of you," Nolan ordered.

He turned and started walking back the way he had come. Robin fell in behind him, the way a guard would. I tucked my arms tight across my chest, hugging myself against the cold as I followed between them, feeling scraped raw and painfully exposed.

We walked through the trees for about a minute before I spoke again. "I really didn't expect you here, Robin. Annie told me that you'd gone to the Moon Goddess. I thought you were dead," I said, keeping my voice light.

Nolan spoke before Robin could. "Robin asked to join as a guard. He said the work suited him. The mad rogues are still moving. Annie is safer in the house with you, where Robin can look after us. He chose this."

"I see. I am glad you are well, Robin."

"Thank you, Luna."

I walked the rest of the way back between them without speaking. The path back to the house was longer than the run out. By the time we cleared the trees and the kitchen garden came into view, I had a clearer picture of what I was working with than when I first tried to flee.

I had underestimated the imposter. There had to be people watching me that I could not see. If not for Robin, I'd already be dead.

Every moment I stayed here was another chance for him to discover that I knew the truth. I couldn't let him mark me. I had to get out before tomorrow night. The only way that was going to happen was with help from the inside.

Robin was the place to start.

Chapter 320

Nolan's POV

Talia had been missing for three days now.

I had barely slept since Talia disappeared. Four hours in my desk chair was all I had managed. The mate bond was intact. She was there, unreachable but alive. Each hour without her drained me. It felt worse than the last time she disappeared because I had gone against my instincts. Something had felt wrong about that night, and I should have gone with her.

'We will find her like last time, and we will make whoever took her pay with their life,' my wolf promised, but it didn't make me feel any better.

The morning meeting started at seven. Della came in first, her hair pulled back, the dark circles under her eyes deeper than they had been the day before. Marco entered after her. Solon sat quietly, already in his chair when I came down. Derek arrived last, clutching a map as he stepped inside.

"Any news?" I asked.

Derek was the first to respond. "Unfortunately, no, Alpha Nolan. We have nothing new to report."

"We have searched everywhere we know to search and turned up nothing," Della added. "It's as if she has vanished in thin air."

"What about you, Marco?" I asked.

"Same on my end," Marco added. "No trail. No witnesses. Whoever took her was thorough."

My claws dug into the wood of my desk. My patience was at its limits. How could we have no leads?

“Nolan, I don't want to ask, but can you..." Solon started but trailed off.

“Have more faith than that, Solon," I growled. "She is alive. I can feel her. That is the first thing I confirmed."

"Then, why can't you reach her?” Solon asked. His voice came out harsher than he intended. I didn't hold it against him.

"I don't know. My wolf has been trying since the first night. He gets nothing back. He tells me she is trapped, but he cannot tell me where," I answered.

"Jason did this," Della interjected. "It has to be him. The timing of the

disappearance, the fact that it was Annie who led her away, it has to be Jason."

I had also been thinking the same thing. Jason wanted to use Rudolf's death to break us apart. When that didn't happen, Jason switched to Plan B: just kidnap Talia.

"There is something I have not told you," Marco stated, bringing me out of my thoughts. "I should have told you on the first morning. I thought I could fix it, but everything got out of control."

"Say what it is, Marco," I said.

Marco sighed, and Della rubbed his back. "After the Harvest Gathering, when Jason left Silverfang under escort, I decided to track him. I had two of my men follow him from a distance. They tracked him for two days, but lost him on the third day when they were ambushed by rogues. By the time they had cleared the rogues, they could no longer find Jason," Marco explained. "He could have gone anywhere from where I lost him. I should have told you the day he disappeared. I am sorry, Nolan." Anger surged in me, but then it faded to disappointment. I exhaled. I did not have the bandwidth for anger this morning.

"It is done. We work with what we have now," I told him.

How could I even be upset with Marco? This was as much my fault as it was his.

I had let her go to the rose garden alone. I stood by the car and watched her walk down the path because she asked me to. I shouldn't have. If I'd walked behind her, Annie couldn't have taken her. If I'd been ten feet down the path, I could have stopped it as soon as it began.

'Stop!' my wolf snapped. 'You will not regret respecting our mate's wishes. Her being kidnapped was not your fault.'

'If I had...'

'That coward would have found another way to kidnap Talia or harm her. The only thing you are to blame for is underestimating our enemy,' my wolf said.

I didn't want to accept that Jason, of all people, had outmaneuvered me. Perhaps

the death of his father gave him the cunning that had been missing. Then, the same thought I'd had for days pushed forward.

"How far did you track him?" I asked.

"About sixty miles from here," Marco answered. “Why?”

"Where was the Rogue King's last known location?" I asked.

Solon picked up the map and pulled it across my desk, turning it so I could see.

"Here. The castle is here," Solon said as he pointed to a region northwest of Moonbrook's border. "The Rogue King has held this abandoned castle for over a decade now. We have not been able to put a team inside the walls without losing the team."

"If Jason took her, that's likely where she is." Derek stated.

"I am going," I stated firmly.

"Are you insane? You can't just go there like that!" Della exclaimed.

"Yes, I can."

"You don't even know if she is even there," Della argued.

"I do not care. It has been three days, and this is the only lead we have. I'm going," I responded.

"I am going with you," Derek chimed in. “You are going to need someone to watch

your back, and the Rogue King has a debt to be paid."

“Dad, no! It's a suicide mission. You can't!" Della argued.

"It is my duty as Beta and a friend of Rudolf to protect his daughter," Derek

responded.

Before Della could respond, Solon's phone rang at the table beside the map. He picked it up and said, "Hello."

There was a pause. "Colin, are you sure?"

He listened, then said, “Understood. Thanks, Colin." He hung up.

"Colin found something?" I asked.

Solon spoke quickly. "Colin's patrol saw a woman by the eastern border. She claimed to be Talia, but rogues appeared before they could confirm. They reported it to Colin."

"It sounds like a potential trap.” Della said.

"It does not matter. I am going to Moonbrook."