Barren Luna 321

Chapter 321

Talia's POV

Last night, I barely slept. When I got back to my room, my hands wouldn't stop shaking as I pushed a chair against the door. I kept listening for footsteps in the hallway, afraid the imposter would return and force the mate mark on me.

All night, I kept replaying the possible ways to get a message to Robin. By early afternoon, when the guards were usually distracted, I knew what I had to do.

This morning, there was a young guard by the dining hall I hadn't seen before. I spotted him when Annie walked me to breakfast. He kept staring at my diamond earrings. He was young and undisciplined, just the kind of person I could use.

I approached him quickly and said, “I want to walk in the lower garden. I will not be long."

He replied, "Alpha said you can't leave the wing without an escort, Luna."

"You can be my escort. Walk me down," I said simply.

"I cannot leave my post."

"It'll just be for ten minutes. No one will know," I urged, trying not to let my anxiety show.

I held out the earrings, hoping their sparkle would convince him. "Take me to Robin's cabin. Then walk me back. That's all I'm asking."

He glanced at the earrings and then checked the hallway both ways. He paused for

a moment, took them and slipped them into his coat pocket.

"Ten minutes, Luna. That's all I can allow," he told me.

"Thank you," I said.

"Thank me if this works and we don't get caught," the young guard responded.

He walked me out through the lower garden and along a path to cabins behind it. The guard stopped at the path. He pointed at the third cabin and said, “That one. Be quick."

I went up to the door and knocked once. Robin opened it. His one eye widened the second he saw me.

"You shouldn't be here, Luna," he said.

"Let me in and close the door."

Robin stepped aside, and I came in. He shut the door behind me and turned the lock. "What are you doing here? Alpha is not going to like you being here."

"I need your help. I need to get out of here tonight," I told him.

"This is the Bloodmoon pack, Luna. It is your home. If you have issues, you should be talking to Alpha Nolan, not me," Robin stated.

"I know this is not the Bloodmoon pack, Robin. The man who looks like Nolan is not Nolan. I know he's Jason. I do not know how he has done this, but I know it is Jason," I retorted.

“You're mistaken, Luna. This is Bloodmoon," Robin repeated.

"Stop lying to me, Robin," I said, my voice catching. "I'm your Luna. Nolan and I got you and your daughter out of Michael's house. We saved you. We saved Annie. I need you to tell me the truth. Please, after everything, you owe me that."

"Everything I've done has been for her." Robin's voice broke, and he looked away. His hand trembled on the edge of the table. "He said I could die with the others, watch Annie die, or serve him. I wanted to keep her safe, so I did what he asked. He promised she'd be free once it was over." His single eye looked glassy, guilt written all over his face.

"Annie is going to die here if you don't help me," I pressed.

"What do you mean?" Robin asked.

"Do you really think Jason will keep his word? He's as bad as Michael, even worse. If he'll do this to me, someone he claims he still loves, what do you think he'll do with Annie?"

"He promised me she would be safe."

"He has been beating her, Robin," I lied. I hadn't seen him beat Annie, but I knew Jason. The way Annie shrinks back and always overexplains, I was certain he was beating her. Even if he wasn't, he was going to start. "Her arms are covered in bruises. Jason promised you a good life for her, and he has been hurting her since the day you handed her over."

Tears filled Robin's eye, and his face twisted with anger and guilt.

“No, you're just lying to get me to help you," he said.

"It is the truth. Jason will kill Annie once he is done using you,” I said.

"He said she would have everything she needed in the palace. He said she would be raised like a daughter of his household. He told me she was settling in and she was happier without me to remind her of what she lost."

“He's lying to you. Jason and the Rogue King are now enemies of every pack. They won't bring you and Annie freedom. Freedom only comes if they fall, and that's what I'm working toward. I have to leave tonight. Waiting puts Annie and all of us at risk. We're running out of time.

Robin sank into the chair by the table, looking empty and lost. He covered his eye with one hand, his shoulders shaking in fear. Every breath seemed like a struggle.

"You can't stop them. They have the mad rogues," he muttered.

"Healer Leslie was close to an antidote before I was kidnapped. She has probably completed it now. Without the mad rogues, Jason and the Rogue King are nothing," I explained.

Robin did not answer for a long moment.

"Your eye... was that him?" I asked quietly.

Robin touched the patch with two fingers and nodded. "Yes."

Guilt twisted in my chest. "I'm sorry."

"I'll help you," he said at last. "On one condition."

"What condition?"

His jaw tightened.

"Take Annie with you. I don't care what happens to me anymore. I only care that

she's safe.” His voice roughened. “You take her far away from here, and you never

let him get his hands on her again."

"I promise."

Chapter 322

Talia's POV

During dinner, Nolan sat across from me, eating slowly and asking how my afternoon had been. I tried to come across casual, but inside I was a bundle of nerves. He reached over and touched my hand.

"I hope you haven't forgotten about tonight, Talia. I have been thinking about it all day," he said.

"Of course not, my love. I am well rested today," I told him.

Nolan smirked, "Good. I am going to make sure it is a night you won't forget." If it had been the real Nolan, I would be quivering with desire. All I felt was disgust and dread for this imposter. I managed to force a seductive smile.

“Hurry and finish your soup so you can do your rounds. I want you back early. Don't make me wait," I said, letting my voice turn soft and inviting.

Nolan smirked. "I will be back early."

I watched him finish his soup. When he was done, he stood up, kissed my forehead, and left for his rounds.

Once he was gone, I let my fake smile fade.

'Disgusting,' my wolf growled. 'Get his scent off us!'

I wiped my forehead with a napkin, then left the dining hall and went back to my room. Annie was still asleep on the bed where I had left her.

Earlier, before dinner with the imposter, I had brought Annie the same soup. "I brought you some of the soup, sweetheart. Eat it before it gets cold," I told her.

Annie, no longer worried that I might tell Nolan what she did, ate the soup. She was already falling asleep before she finished, and she knocked the bowl over when she tried to stand up.

"I'm so sorry, Luna," she yawned.

"It's okay. You're tired. You should rest," I said softly as I placed her on my bed and pulled a blanket over her. She was asleep within a minute.

Robin had given me a sleeping potion back at the cabin. He said he got it from the healer to help with his insomnia. He'd seen the healer use it on injured wolves, so he knew it was safe and very strong.

'This could be a trap,' my wolf warned while I was pouring it into Jason's soup.

'No. If Annie wasn't involved, I would agree, but I trust Robin to choose carefully for Annie,' I told her.

'We should give him an overdose and be done with it,' my wolf huffed.

"No. Not yet. I need Moonbrook's help to make sure Jason pays. I won't let him have an easy death," I snapped.

I sat on the edge of the bed next to Annie. There was a bruise on her forearm, about the size of a golf ball. Seeing it made my heart hurt. How could Jason hurt a child?

'We'll get her out of here. He'll never hurt her again,' my wolf said.

At eleven, I heard the murmured exchange of guards outside my room. Then I heard Robin's voice.

"Take a break. I have her from now on," he said.

The other guard left without saying anything. Robin tapped twice on the door, just

like we had agreed at the cabin. I opened the door and let him in.

"Are you ready?" he asked. "You have to be sure about this."

"I am ready."

Robin walked over to the bed and bent down to pick Annie up. When her sleeve rolled up and showed the bruises, I saw pain on Robin's face. I watched his grief turn from anger and finally into a firm resolve.

"We need to go right now," Robin repeated.

"What's wrong? Are you unsure if the potion will work on him?" I asked.

"It will work, but I don't want to take any chances," Robin replied.

I nodded. After everything that happened last night, all I wanted was to get as far away from here as possible. Robin took off his black coat and wrapped it around Annie, pulling the hood up over her hair.

"Before we leave this room, you need to promise that you will do exactly what I tell you once we leave this room. No exceptions. Any hesitancy could get us killed," Robin said.

"I understand," I told him. "Let's go."

Robin stepped into the hallway first, and I followed. He led me down a side hallway I had never used before, then into a narrower one, and finally through a door I thought was just a closet. It opened onto a stone staircase going down.

"What is this?" I asked.

"A secret escape tunnel that Jason had the rogues build. He uses it for moving supplies out without being seen from the grounds and for other things," Robin replied.

The stairs went down for a long time, and our footsteps echoed off the stone walls. At the bottom, we stepped into an unfinished tunnel held up by old wooden beams. Some looked sturdy, but others leaned at odd angles. In some spots, I could see earth through the gaps. The tunnel felt unsafe, and I wanted to get out as soon as possible.

"What other things does Jason use the tunnel for?" I asked.

"Transporting captured wolves for the mad rogue experiments. He has been running tests on captured wolves down at the other end of the tunnel, but we're not going there," Robin answered.

I gritted my teeth. Jason was still carrying on his father's experiments. My wolf

huffed, ‘Like father, like son. It'll do everyone a favor once he's dead.'

We started down the tunnel.

"How far do we have to go?" I asked.

"There's a hatch in the floor of an old barn just outside Moonbrook's border," Robin explained. "We'll exit there."

I nodded at his instructions, but we had barely taken a few steps when footsteps sounded behind us.

Chapter 323

Talia's POV

Robin set Annie down against the tunnel wall. He put his finger over his mouth to tell me not to speak before he stepped past me to face the dark.

The first rogue appeared, and Robin attacked before he even knew what was happening. The rogue fell with Robin's blade in his throat. I never knew Robin could fight like that, but it sent a shock through me, and it made sense why my father always kept him so close.

"Take his armor," Robin said, wiping the rogue's blood on his leg.

"What?"

Robin stripped the rogue's armor off his body and pushed them at me. I pulled the armored vest over my head. The blood from the rogue's throat had already soaked through the front of it.

Robin covered his hand in blood and wiped it over my arms. I jerked away in disgust. "What are you doing?" I asked.

Robin grabbed me by the shoulder to keep me in place. “Stay still." He continued smearing it on my arms and on my chest.

Robin turned to Annie and did the same. "Are you going to tell us why you're covering us with blood?" I asked.

"We have to hide our scent. More rogues will come if they can still smell us," Robin said. He picked up Annie, handed her to me, and led me a few steps forward to where the tunnel split in two.

"Take the left path. You'll see a hatch. That will put you two miles south of Moonbrook's eastern border. Run as soon as you reach the surface," Robin said. "When the blood dries, they'll be able to smell you again."

"Why are you talking like you're not coming with me?"

"Because I'm not."

"Robin, no. That wasn't the deal."

"More will come. If I stay, I can hold them off long enough for you to reach the surface. This is the only way Annie gets out alive," he said grimly. "It's the only way Annie survives."

"But Jason is going to kill you for betraying him."

“Thanks for caring, Luna, but my life is a worthy price to pay if that means my daughter lives," Robin said.

I wanted to argue, to promise I'd come back, or say there had to be another way. But the look on his face showed he had already accepted what was coming. I couldn't answer at first. Then I heard footsteps behind us in the tunnel.

"I am coming back for you. As soon as I get her to safety, I am coming back," I told him.

"Go, Luna Talia, and don't look back."

I took the left path. The tunnel got narrower, and the ceiling dropped lower. I ducked under a beam. Then I heard Robin shout behind me. I held Annie tighter and ran.

The tunnel felt endless. It got tighter where the supports had broken, and I had to turn sideways twice to squeeze through, holding Annie close. Behind me, the sounds of Robin's fight faded away.

'Do not listen, Talia. Focus on getting out. He knew what he was getting into when he decided to help us,' my wolf said. I hesitated, haunted by the sounds behind us.

'He did not agree to die for us,' I retorted.

My wolf bristled and snapped, 'Do not fool yourself, Talia. You understood the danger just like he did. We cannot waste time on regret. Annie needs you. Robin needs you to be strong. Let's make sure he won't die in vain.'

I wanted to argue that I wouldn't let Robin die, but Annie's small groan as she moved in my arms brought me back to reality. I had to get her out of here. I continued down the path until I came to a wooden ladder set into the wall with a hatch above it. I climbed one-handed with Annie tucked against my hip, pushed the hatch up with my shoulder, and came out into a barn.

I stepped out of the barn into the night air. I could see Moonbrook's outer wall rising to the north. Annie was heavy, and the vest was even heavier. Each step dragged at me, and my legs started to give out. The blood on my skin was already drying.

'Keep going. I will give you strength,' my wolf said, and a flood of energy rushed through me. I kept running until I was about a hundred yards from the outer wall, when I finally slowed. I saw two of Colin's men at the gate, and their presence made me want to collapse in the grass. I forced myself to stand quietly.

Then I heard footsteps again. Six men were crossing the open ground from the trees. They weren't rogues. They moved in formation and carried weapons like trained warriors. The crest on the lead man's chest gleamed in the light from Moonbrook's wall: Silverfang.

“I am Princess Talia of Silverfang. Stand down," I yelled.

The lead man did not stand down. He raised his sword and shouted something to the men behind him that I did not catch.

Robin's voice rang sharply in my mind, 'You are in rogue armor and covered in blood. They do not see you. They see a rogue holding a child. Get the armor off. Now!'

I set Annie down against my legs and pulled the vest over my head. I threw it on the ground in front of me.

"I am Princess Talia of Silverfang. Stand down," I repeated.

The men slowed down but didn't stop. The leader stared at my face as he tried to figure out what he was seeing.

I called up my Luna's aura. It pulsed inside me, then surged outward like a wave. The men visibly flinched as it washed over them. “I am Princess Talia of Silverfang. You WILL obey me!"

The six men immediately dropped to one knee, dipping their heads to me.

Nolan came up through the line of his men at a run.

"Talia!"

Chapter 324

Nolan's POV

She was filthy, but it was her.

Blood covered her face, neck, and arms. Her hair was matted with dirt and blood. The smell of rogues clung to her clothes, but I didn't care. My mate had returned to me.

"Thank the Goddess, it's really Luna Talia," Marco said behind me.

"Marco, take the child," I ordered.

Marco rushed forward and hugged Talia quickly before picking up Annie. He backed up to allow me to get to Talia.

I closed the distance to Talia in three strides and wrapped my arms around her. My heart hammered in my chest, the world around me blurring until all I could see was her. I had rehearsed what I would say, but every thought vanished now that she was here in front of me.

Gently, I drew back and took her face between my hands, studying her. There was a cut along her hairline. It was superficial. Her eyes were clear. My hands moved down her arms and sides, searching for injury. She was thinner than she'd been four days ago, but besides that, Talia was unharmed.

For four days, I had pictured this moment, but reality was completely different. Relief warred with a hundred new worries. Would she be targeted again? Was she tortured again?

'Stop worrying. We have her now,' my wolf snapped at me, but I couldn't help it. I wanted to shield her from every threat, but I knew that I couldn't hide her away.

“Nolan, I thought I wouldn't see you again,” Talia said as tears welled up in her eyes. Seeing her distraught made my heart ache. I kissed her forehead.

"I thought I lost you," I whispered, my voice shaking. “I searched everywhere. I..." I couldn't finish. She pressed her forehead to mine, and for a moment we just breathed together. Then the tears came. I held her as she wept into my shoulder. She pulled back this time, wiping the tears from her face.

"Are you hurt? Is any of this blood yours?"

"None of it. The blood is from a rogue. I am not hurt," Talia said.

I pulled her in again and held her. I had not been sure I would find her. I told myself I would, but doubt never left me. I'd been running on neither energy nor adrenaline, but just the thought of bringing her back. Thank the Moon Goddess I had found her. If I had listened to Solon, there was a chance I wouldn't have found her.

I had argued with Solon all morning about coming to Moonbrook.

"This is a trap, Nolan. Jason wants us on the road to Moonbrook, where he can ambush us," Solon had argued.

"And what if you're wrong? What if it was Talia?"

"It is not her. He is using your mate bond to get you to walk into his trap."

"Then, it is a clever move because this is the only lead we have. We have to investigate," I argued.

"You're being reckless!"

“Talia would go if it were you," I argued. “And if it was Leslie that was missing, would you not want to confirm if it was her?"

Solon cursed under his breath and said, "Fine. If you go, you're bringing some of the best warriors we have. If anything appears suspicious, you retreat. Talia will kill me if something happens to you."

"Deal."

I had planned to meet Colin at the wall and organize a search from his border east, back toward the Rogue King's territory. Marco and I were talking about the search line when I heard her voice.

It came from beyond the rise where the guards were posted. It was faint, but my wolf howled in my mind, 'It is her. It's our mate!' I didn't believe it was really her, since I didn't hear anything else.

I turned to Marco and asked, "Did you hear that?”

"Hear what?" Marco asked.

Before I could respond, I felt her. Her Luna command flowed over me as she ordered my warriors to stand down.

'Go! Go now!' my wolf whined as he pushed to take control. My feet were moving before I even realized. I still couldn't believe it was really her until I came over the rise and saw her.

"What happened? Walk me through everything from the beginning," I said.

“I fainted in the garden from the jasmine on Annie's dress. I woke up in a place that looked like Bloodmoon. I tried to reach you through the mate bond, but I couldn't feel you."

"How did you get out?" I asked.

"Robin helped me," Talia answered. "I know you have questions, but I don't feel safe out here. Let's get inside the pack wall, and I will tell you everything."

"Do you know who kidnapped you?" I asked as we walked towards Moonbrook's wall.

"Jason, it was Jason."

My wolf bristled within me, snarling. 'That bastard!'

I felt him push at the inside of my chest the way he did when he wanted out, and the only thing keeping him in was me. He wanted to run. He wanted to find Jason and tear him to pieces.

I had suspected it was Jason, but hearing it confirmed sent a sharp wave of anger through me. Jason had been an arm's length from me during the Harvest Gathering, and manners be damned, I should have killed him when I had the chance.

'We will not make that mistake twice. Do you hear me?' my wolf growled. 'Even if our mate tells us not to, we will kill him.'

'We will,' I agreed.

'Promise me,' my wolf pressed.

'I promise,' I said. I would make Jason regret every decision he ever harmed Talia. I would ensure that he died a terrible death.

I was about to ask another question when Annie's voice came from behind us.

Annie had woken in his arms. She was looking at me over Marco's shoulder with her eyes very wide in panic.

"Alpha Nolan?"

Chapter 325

Talia's POV

Nolan got to Annie before I did. He walked across the grass with his hands open and stopped a few feet away so he wouldn't scare her.

"You are safe. We are taking you to Moonbrook," Nolan said.

Annie kept her eyes on Nolan. Her arms stayed tight around Marco's neck, and when Nolan reached for her, she jerked away.

"Annie, this is Alpha Nolan. He's my real mate. He won't hurt you," I said, hoping to comfort her. Annie looked back and forth between us but still held onto Marco. "Come here, sweetheart. Everything is okay."

I opened my arms. Marco moved forward and gently encouraged Annie to come to me. When she reached out, I hugged her, and she held me tightly, pressing her face into my shoulder.

"Do not leave me at Moonbrook. Please, Luna, please. Do not leave me there. I don't want to be alone," Annie pleaded. My heart hurt for her. I was the only person she trusted now that she thought her father was gone, and he might really be gone this time.

"It is only for a little while, Annie," I said softly. "Alpha Colin is a good man. He will keep you safe until everything is resolved."

"Will you come back?"

"I will come back. The moment the war is over, I will come back for you, and I will take you home with me. I am not abandoning you."

Annie's voice was hushed against my chest while she breathed. After a moment, she nodded against my shoulder. "Okay, Luna."

Colin met us just inside the wall. As soon as he saw me, he hurried down the steps, crossed the courtyard, and hugged me so tightly I had to lean in to keep my balance. “Nice seeing you too, Colin," I managed, breathless.

"Thank the Goddess," Colin said while releasing me. "We thought for a moment that..."

"I'm alive, that's what matters," I said, cutting him off.

Colin nodded. "We were so worried," he said, and then he stopped. "We can talk about that later. I had rooms made up for both of you. Once you've cleaned up, come to my office. We have a lot to discuss."

An hour later, Annie and I were clean and ready to speak with Colin. I wanted more time to just decompress, but I knew we had to speak on this now, as Jason was probably already planning his next move. Annie went and sat near the window with her hands in her lap.

Colin sat at his desk. Nolan sat next to me and wrapped his arm tightly around my shoulders, like he was afraid I might disappear.

"Tell us what happened, Annie, from the beginning," Colin instructed. "Start with the morning Robin disappeared."

Annie lowered her gaze to her hands and paused, collecting her thoughts before she spoke.

"Father went on a trip. He left Silverfang with some others. They were going to Fangvale. He told me he would be back in a few days."

"And then?"

"He did not come back. I waited for a week. One night, I overheard that Father had been injured in a rogue attack on the road and had vanished when they returned with help. The next morning, I decided to go look for him myself."

"Annie, why didn't you tell anyone?"

"No one was telling the truth. And Father had already gotten into trouble. No one was going to help," Annie said, and my heart ached deeply for her. It hurt to see how alone she felt, carrying all her fear and doubt on her own.

"How did you end up with Jason?" Colin asked.

"I left through the side gate when nobody was watching. I went down the road that led toward Fangvale. I had been walking for an hour when Alpha Jason came up to me. He was walking the same road. He said he had been looking for me. He told me he had taken Father to a healer because nobody else would, and told me he'd take me to him," Annie replied.

"He told you Robin was dead?"

"Yes. He said the healers had tried, but they could not save him. He said I had no one. He said I belonged to him now, and he would feed me to the rogues if I disobeyed him."

I tried to stay calm as I listened, feeling sick at how Jason had taken advantage of a child.

"Alpha Jason forced me to take a pill. It made me feel like I was floating. Then he sprayed perfume on me, and everything wasn't so scary anymore. He told me to go to the rose garden at Silverfang and wait for Luna. He said she would follow me."

Nolan's hand clenched on my shoulder. I placed my hand over his in an effort to calm him.

"I waited. I meant everything I said, Luna," Annie continued. "When you hugged me, you fainted. I wasn't scared because you got up after a few minutes. The men took you and put you in a car, and we went to the dark place."

"I don't remember this," I said. "I was unconscious for two days."

"What was the dark place?" Colin asked.

"It was the place with no windows. There were guards everywhere. It is where Alpha Jason took after he told me Father was dead," Annie answered softly.

"Can you tell us what happened there? Take your time," Colin coaxed.

"It's where he whipped me. He whipped me until I did things right. He wanted me to call him Alpha Nolan. I didn't know why because he was Alpha Jason," Annie continued after a moment.

I froze, trying to take in what Annie said. Jason hadn't looked like Nolan to her. So, was it an illusion or had Jason done something else to me?

It seemed like Nolan was thinking the same thing I was and asked, "Did the packhouse or gardens look like Bloodmoon?"

"No, the packhouse was dark and scary. The garden outside was dead. No flower,

just dead bushes and dirt," Annie replied.

"And the people in the house, sweetheart. What did they look like?" I asked.

"They looked like themselves, Luna," Annie answered.

"Did it look like the Bloodmoon pack to you at all?"

"No, Luna."

"What did Jason look like to you?"

"He looked like Alpha Jason. He looked like he always looked."

Chapter 326

Talia's POV

Nolan and Colin were both shocked by my question. "Why would you ask her that?" Colin asked.

"Jason looked like you to me, Nolan. The entire time, I thought I was with you. At dinner, he wore your face so perfectly I couldn't tell the difference. He walked through corridors identical to ours, every detail right down to the light on the rails and the faded rug. He even showed me through a rose garden that matched the one I planted. The illusion was so convincing, I started to doubt my senses. I even felt at home, which scared me most."

"How did you figure out it wasn't me?" Nolan asked.

"I was suspicious because he didn't have a scent. Then, I confirmed it at dinner when he had an allergic reaction to mushrooms," I replied. "Even after that, I still only saw you. The house looked exactly like Bloodmoon, down to the placement of the dining chairs. Annie described a dark stone building with dirt outside, but to me, it was home until I started looking for the cracks. If I hadn't been searching for faults, I never would have noticed."

Nolan did not answer for a moment. I saw his jaw clench. For a second, I thought he might shout, but he just stayed quiet.

Nolan turned to Colin. "Tell me you have an explanation for the perfume that hypnotized Talia."

"The perfume was a Bewitching Scent I think. It's been banned in every pack up here for as long as I can remember. Years ago, it was used and almost wiped out an entire Alpha line. After that, everyone agreed to never use it again."

"What about her seeing Bloodmoon when it wasn't there? Or Jason looking like me?" Nolan asked.

"The Bewitching Scent doesn't do any of that. What Talia is describing is called the Blackveil Illusion. It makes you see whatever the caster wants them to see," Colin said.

Nolan scoffed. "How low will that coward stoop? Dark witches? No wolf has ever allied with a witch, let alone a dark witch."

"No one has cast that spell in a long time; most witches with that kind of skill have been dead for years," Colin explained.

"That isn't the case anymore since Talia clearly has that spell cast on her. So, which witch do we need to hunt down?" Nolan responded.

"There's only one witch left alive who could cast it," Colin said. "And if it is who I think it is, we have a bigger problem on our hands.”

Nolan stood up and began pacing. "Dammit. Not her."

I looked between them, my anxiety growing with every second of silence. The tension was thick enough to make my skin prickle, and I realized I was holding my breath. My mind raced through the stories I'd heard as a child, each one more frightening than the last.

"Who are you talking about?" I finally asked.

"Morgana," Nolan said. Colin and I visibly flinched as if he had cursed us. Both of us shrank back a little without meaning to. For a second, I recalled how my father used to lower his voice whenever he spoke of her, as if saying her name too loudly would summon her.

"Impossible," I said, shaking my head. "There is no way she would work with him. She would have killed him on sight." I tried to steady my breathing, counting the seconds in my head to hold myself together.

"He has to be. The Blackveil Illusion isn't something just any witch can do. It takes years, even centuries, of experience," Colin added.

The idea of Jason working with the witch every Alpha feared for a generation was almost too much to process. He couldn't have managed this on his own. He must have had help from the Rogue King. I realized that my father had been right about more things than I had realized.

"My father was afraid of Morgana," I said, my voice unsteady. "He used to tell me stories about her turning entire packs against themselves. She was the boogeyman for me. I always thought he was exaggerating until now." As I spoke, a chill went down my spine, and my memory of my father's warnings settled uncomfortably on

me.

'None of us will be safe until we handle Jason and the Rogue King,' my wolf responded. 'Then we will handle the witch, but we'll take it one step at a time. First things first, let's get the spell removed.'

"How do you break the illusion?" I asked.

"Whoever's under the spell has to kill the person who requested the spell to be cast. In this case, that's Jason," Colin answered.

"Thank the Goddess," Nolan said.

"Don't get too excited. There is a catch," Colin added.

"Oh come on!" Nolan said, throwing up his hands in exasperation.

"Talia has to be the one to do it," Colin said. "She has to kill Jason."

My wolf surged in my mind, her presence hot and fierce. I could feel her bloodlust. 'Good,' she growled. 'We will deal with him now. He will pay with his blood.'

Justice mattered more than anything now. I was the one who would bring it. The Moon Goddess had given me a path out of the spell, and it matched exactly what I had already promised myself: Jason would answer to me.

"Are you positive about this?" I asked.

"It has to be you, Talia. Not Nolan. Not Solon. Not one of the warriors. It has to be you," Colin replied. "If anyone else kills Jason first, there could be severe side effects. So, to be safe, it has to be you. We will do everything we can to help you, but you have to be the one to end his life."

My wolf bared her teeth inside me, and for once, I didn't try to hold her back. I let her anger fill me.

"That is exactly what I want." I said.

Chapter 327

Talia's POV

"I plan to rip out his throat and...."

Colin cleared his throat and gestured toward the window. Annie had fallen asleep, her chin resting on her chest.

"Let's continue this conversation in the morning once you both get some rest," Colin said.

"There is no morning. I am going back tonight," I retorted.

"You are not in shape to make that call tonight," Nolan interjected.

"I told Robin I would come back for him soon. Jason will notice I am gone by tomorrow. If we wait, the next time we find him, it will be on his terms, not ours. We do not have until morning."

Colin gave a resigned sigh and said, "Again, not in front of the child. Have some tact." I blushed at Colin's mild scolding. He was right. I shouldn't be talking about Robin in front of Annie, especially since Annie believed he was dead. It wouldn't be right to give the child false hope.

There was a knock at the door, and the housekeeper entered. "Yes, Alpha?"

"Take the child to her room and stay with her until Luna Talia returns to her side," Colin instructed.

"Yes, Alpha," the housekeeper responded, walking over to Annie. She slipped her arms gently around her, one under her knees and the other cradling her shoulders. Annie barely stirred as the housekeeper carried her out, closing the door behind her. Nolan turned to me and asked, "What is your plan? How are you going to get back without anyone noticing?"

"I go back through the tunnel. I pretend nothing has changed. I let him believe I still think he is you. Tomorrow night..."

"Tomorrow night?!" Nolan exclaimed. "You are going to wait a whole night?"

"I can't just kill him outright. I have to find an opening when he least expects it and then, I kill him," I explained.

"On your own? Just like that?"

"Yes, that is the only way the spell breaks. Colin was pretty clear about that," I replied.

"And where am I in this plan?"

"Really? That is what you are upset about?"

"No, it is a valid question. Are you going to be taking on the rogue wolves on your own, too?"

"Nope. You and the rest of the warriors will be nearby. Close enough to come in when I signal, but far enough away that he can't smell you," I continued. "If rogues attack, you handle them. The warriors should wear bite-proof armor for the mad rogues. We don't want..."

"No," Nolan said, cutting me off.

I held his gaze, refusing to back down. "I have to go back, Nolan."

"We spent four days searching for you, trying to get you away from a man who's spent that same four days planning who knows what for you the second you walk back through that door," Nolan snapped. "We will attack the house head-on tonight. We take the gates with everything we have, and we kill him on the way in."

I shook my head. "What if he runs? He'll go straight to the Rogue King. He's not stupid, Nolan. I'm sure he has a backup plan in case we attack him."

"You do not know that."

"I know him. He was my mate for years before he betrayed me. I know what he does when he is cornered. He runs. He has been running from his father since long before I knew him. We are not giving him another chance to run," I stated firmly.

"She is right," Colin added. "Nolan, you're not going to talk her out of this. She is as stubborn as her father. You're going to lose this argument."

Nolan looked at Colin, then at me. He didn't look happy with either of us. For a moment, it looked like he might keep arguing, but his shoulders dropped, and he let out a slow breath. He understood the logic, even if he hated it. We didn't have time to wait.

"Fine," he said at last. "The moment something looks wrong from the outside, we're going in. I'm not waiting on a signal that never comes."

An hour later, we stood close to the tunnel entrance. Nolan hadn't spoken since we'd left the office. I could feel his anxiety, but he never spoke against the plan again after agreeing.

'He trusts us, but he is worried,' my wolf said. I didn't blame Nolan for being worried. I was taking a huge risk by going back, but I had to hope that the sleeping potion held and Jason's ego would be his downfall.

"If you're having second thoughts, you don't have to do this," Nolan said as he placed a hand on my face, his thumb stroking my cheek.

"No. I'm okay. I'm going to get this done," I said confidently. Nolan's other hand rested softly at the small of my back, checking for Solon's dagger hidden beneath my clothes, making sure it was where I'd told him it would be.

"It is easy to gloat when you have the upper hand. Don't. Be quick and don't second-guess yourself," Nolan advised.

"I understand."

"The second something seems off, we're coming in. We're not going to wait for a signal," Nolan added.

"I know, but everything is going to work out," I reassured him.

"Promise me you will contact me if something is wrong."

"I will."

Nolan held my gaze and said, "Promise me."

"I promise."

Nolan kissed me, lingering for a moment with his forehead pressed to mine. Then

he took a step back and said, "Go before I change my mind."

I turned toward the tunnel. As soon as my feet touched the dirt in the tunnel, I felt my

wolf stir inside me. She had been quiet during most of the planning, but as soon as we were in the tunnel, I felt her bloodlust again.

'This time he dies,' she growled.

Chapter 328

Talia's POV

I had not gone fifty feet into the tunnel before I caught the smell of blood.

It was rogue blood, yet under that was a scent I recognized quite well. 'We have to find Robin. He's injured,' my wolf warned.

I rushed around the next bend and saw them.

Rogue corpses lay across the floor of the tunnel. Blood pooled around them. My nose wrinkled at the smell. Then, I found him.

Robin lay on his side against the wall. His one good eye stared blankly. Robin's

hand was still gripped tightly around the hilt of his dagger.

"Robin? Robin?" I repeated, rushing over to him and knelt beside him.

'He is gone,' my wolf whispered. 'Death is on him.'

'No, we don't know that,' I said in denial and then checked his pulse, hoping that he was just unconscious. As soon as I touched his skin, I knew he was gone. His skin was cold.

Anger and regret rose inside me. I wanted to scream or hit something, but I held it back. "Why didn't you come with me?" I whispered as the tears rolled down my face.

"I am sorry, Robin. I am so sorry I did not get back in time. I will take care of your daughter. I promise you, she will have a home with Nolan and me when this is over. She will grow up safe," I whispered. "May you rest in peace with the Moon Goddess."

My voice broke at the last words. I let myself grieve for a moment. Then I closed his eye and stood up.

The rest of the tunnel was quiet. I came up through the hatch, half expecting to be met by rogues, but no one was there. I quickly walked to my room, avoiding the guards.

'Thank the Goddess,' I sighed.

'Don't thank her yet. Go shower. The sun will be up soon,' my wolf urged.

I changed out of my clothes and took a quick shower. I kept watching the bathroom door, worried Jason might come in, but he never did. Afterward, I put on one of the dresses Annie had set out and hid the dagger in the loose fabric at the back.

By the time I was done, it was already dawn. Then, someone knocked at the door and I knew it was time.

I walked to the door, drew in a deep breath, and let it out slowly to calm myself. Then I opened the door and saw Nolan, but not my Nolan, instead sick twisted Jason wearing an illusion.

"Where were you? You were supposed to come to me last night," I demanded before he had a chance to speak.

"I fell asleep on the patrol route. I don't know how. I have never done that in my life," Jason explained.

I crossed my arms and said, "I waited for hours. I don't even know when I fell asleep."

Jason looked surprised, then his face turned serious. My wolf tensed inside me and

said, 'Calm down. He doesn't know anything.'

"I have some bad news. Robin is dead," Jason finally said.

"What? How?" I asked in fake surprise.

"We found his body in one of our escape tunnels. We are still trying to figure out

what happened," Jason explained.

"Why was he in the tunnel?"

"That's what I want to know. He wasn't supposed to be down there."

"I have not seen him since yesterday morning," I said.

"Are you sure about that?" Jason asked.

"Of course. All I know is that I waited up for you and you didn't come," I pouted.

Jason stared at me, waiting for me to crack under pressure, but I continued to pout. His stare downs didn't work when we were mates, and they didn't work now. Finally, he sighed and said, "I don't know what we are going to do about Annie."

"We can't tell her yet," I said quickly.

"And why is that?" He asked.

"Because I know how it feels to lose a father. We can't just spring it on her. I want her to be as happy as she can be first. Let me have her to myself today," I explained.

"That makes sense. You can have her. I need to finish up paperwork. I will be back," Jason said, and then he turned and walked away down the corridor.

I closed the door and pressed a hand on my chest. 'Do you think he's on to us?' I asked.

'No, but he's suspicious,' my wolf advised.

By mid-afternoon, Jason still hadn't returned. The housekeeper advised that he had been in his office since morning and asked that he not be disturbed. I didn't like the sound of that.

That was one thing Jason didn't need: time alone to think. With time, he could figure out why Robin was in the tunnels. I couldn't let him figure that out. I had to act and seize the chance to kill him now.

'What are you doing? You're being reckless!' my wolf scolded as I left the room.

'He will only let his guard down if he thinks he is about to mark me. If I wait, he may act first,' I told her.

'That is too much of a risk!'

'All of it is a risk. I would rather do this than wait for his next move, and I don't know what to prepare for,' I said.

'I do not like it.'

'I am not asking you to. I am asking you to trust me,' I told her before knocking on Jason's office door.

"I said I did not want to be disturbed!"

I opened the door and walked in. He looked up at me curiously while I closed the

door behind me. "What are you doing here?" he asked.

I walked over to his desk. I leaned forward giving him a clear view of my cleavage.

"I am tired of waiting, Nolan," I purred.

He smirked and said, "You are full of surprises today."

I leaned closer. "I want you now. Not tonight. Right now."

He gulped hard. The stressed look from earlier was gone from his face. Lust filled

his eyes.

"I cannot wait any longer either."

Chapter 329

Talia's POV

Jason walked around the desk, picked me up, and carried me through a side door I had not seen before. We went down a hallway I did not recognize until he stopped at a door. He set me down and unlocked it with a key from his pocket.

Inside the room was dark except for candles burning along the walls. There was a bed in the center of the room. Beside it, a table held a row of objects laid out for use.

On the table were whips, handcuffs, dildos, and other things I did not recognize. My stomach twisted with nausea.

"What is this place?" I asked, forcing a smile.

"It's the Play Room. I made it just for you," Jason said as he closed and locked the door.

"Was our bedroom not secure enough?" I questioned.

“I wanted a place where we could be alone without anyone interrupting us,” Jason explained. He walked over to the table and picked up the first item: a leather whip. He held it up for me to see. "I want you screaming my name all night."

'He intends to torture us,' my wolf warned. 'I told you we should not have gone and found him.'

I let out a nervous laugh. "Oh, you're getting kinky tonight," I said.

"I want it to be a night that we will both remember for a very long time," Jason said as he set it down. "Let me explain what they're for.” He picked up the next item, then another, explaining what each was for.

The more he talked, the more disgusted I felt. Jason was out of his mind if he thought I would allow him to use anything on me. All I had to do was bide my time. I need to get him close enough to stab him in the heart.

'We could shift and fight him,' my wolf suggested.

'We won't be able to fight him one-on-one. He is still the son of an Alpha. We have to wound him first,' I told her.

I forced myself to look interested. My wolf paced within me. 'We should strike now while we have him alone,' she urged.

'No, not yet. We need to make sure he can't run,' I told her.

"Pick something. We'll start with what you want," Jason said, bringing me out of my thoughts.

I walked over to the table and picked up the handcuffs. "The cuffs. I want to use them on you," I said.

Jason smiled. "Of course you'd pick those. You always liked being in control, Talia."

Jason held out his wrists. As I extended my hand toward his wrist, he grabbed my wrist first, snapped the cuff onto it, and quickly turned me to lock the second cuff to the bed frame before I could react.

"What are you doing? I said I wanted to use them on you, Nolan," I protested, yanking back.

"Do you think I'm a fool, Talia?" Jason asked.

"What are you talking about? Let me go," I said, yanking at the handcuff again.

"I've known since the dinner with the mushroom, Talia," he stated.

"Nolan, this isn't funny. I don't know what you're talking about. You love..."

"Stop, Talia. You've always been a terrible liar. You hate me. I see it in your eyes every time you look at me."

I stopped pulling at the handcuff and said, "Fine, Jason. Uncuff me. Let's end this."

"I don't think so, Talia. You see, I have you right where I want you."

"Sure you do," I scoffed. "I think you're just scared of what I would do to you if you released me."

Jason frowned. "I have the upper hand here. You don't get to talk down to me."

I rolled my eyes. "You're going to die today. Whether you release me or not, you're going to die, Jason."

"You're very sure of yourself for someone cuffed to a bed."

"You made the biggest mistake of your life by hurting my family, Jason."

"No, you did. I'm going to make you remember what it was like to be my mate, Talia. Your precious Nolan will never look at you the same way after I'm done with you," Jason said as he came closer. I could smell the lust coming off him, but he still wasn't close enough. His fingers touched my mate mark, causing me to flinch, and he gripped my hair, holding my head in place.

“All you had to do was accept me back. But now I'm going to make you regret everything, Talia. It's what you deserve. At least I'll make sure you feel good during some of it."

As he leaned in to bite my neck, I said, "And this is what you deserve."

I drew the dagger with my free hand and drove it into the side of his neck. Blood spurted from Jason's neck and fell on my face.

Jason screamed as he pulled back, clutching his throat while blood poured through his fingers. His shoulder hit the edge of the table, knocking it and the candles over. The wax caught fire. Flames spread across the wood floor in seconds.

'Give me control!' my wolf roared in my mind. Shifting while restrained was risky, but I knew I had to try before the fire got to us.

Pain shot through my wrist and shoulder as my body contorted. For a moment, I thought the cuff might hold and break my arm before it finally gave way. I turned toward Jason with my lips curled back into a snarl.

'NOW!' I roared through the mind-link to Nolan before closing it.

Jason retreated toward the door. His movements were sluggish. His hand was still pressed to his neck, but his blood was still flowing. Jason's eyes were wide with fear.

"Stay back,” he managed to say as blood bubbled up into his mouth. "Please... stay away from me..."

I didn't stop. There was only one thought left in my mind.

I was going to tear him apart.

Chapter 330

Nolan's POV

Colin and I stood near the barn with the warriors behind us. Everyone was silent. We had been waiting for hours to hear from Talia.

Colin kept his hand on my shoulder, like he thought it would stop me from going into the tunnel before we got the signal. But I wouldn't break my promise to Talia or put her at risk. Still, it was taking too long. I thought we'd get the signal last night, but now it was mid-afternoon and there was still nothing from Talia.

"It has been too long. She should have signaled by now," I muttered.

"I know, but you'd know if she was harmed. We have to wait," Colin replied.

My wolf was still pacing. 'Something is wrong. We need to go now,' he whined.

'No,' I answered firmly. 'We have to trust her.'

My wolf had been restless since Talia went into the tunnel. He had been pestering me for the last fifteen minutes about going after her. I'd told him no over and over, but it was getting harder to resist.

I could sense Talia through the bond. She was alive and so far, not stressed. "Anything?" Colin asked.

"She's keeping the link closed on purpose," I said. "We don't know if that spell will alert him if she tries to reach out through the mind-link."

The minutes passed. I had just decided to wait sixty more seconds before going in anyway when her voice finally came through.

"Now!"

Her word hit me with full force, and then the mind-link cut off. I didn't hesitate.

“Move!” I ordered as we approached the barn. Rogues emerged.

"I'll handle the rogues. You find Talia," Colin stated. Colin and his warriors cleared a path for me, and I quickly entered the tunnel through the hatch.

I ran through the tunnel. The dirt walls pressed in at the tight spots, and roots

scratched my back. The air smelled of old rogue blood and a familiar scent: Robin. He hadn't made it.

'Talia will mourn him,' my wolf said.

'She will avenge him,' I added.

I climbed out of the hatch and was shocked to see how worn down the house looked. Talia truly was under a spell because the house looked as if it were moments away from falling apart.

As I moved through the corridors, the smell of blood hit me. It was stronger than I expected. Colin's warriors had reached the house before me. Bodies were scattered across the floor. Some were Colin's men, but most were rogue wolves.

'We have to get her out before the Rogue King finds out,' my wolf warned. I agreed. There were too few of us to fight him now.

I came through the central hall into the corridor leading to Jason's office. A maid was crouched against the wall near the door. Her apron was covered in blood. She was rocking herself as she sobbed softly.

I stopped in front of her. "Where is she?"

My voice made her yelp in surprise, and I repeated the question. "Where is she?" "Who? Who are you?"

“I don't like repeating myself,” I growled. “Tell me where Luna is. Where is Talia?!"

The woman pulled away from me, unsure if she should answer.

"If you think your loyalty will save you, it won't. Jason is dead. If you don't tell me what I need to know, you'll end up dead too," I snapped. I was bluffing. I'd never kill an omega who was forced to help Jason, but she didn't know that.

"In the basement," she blurted out. "Through the office, there is a door. He took her down there I think."

"You need to get out of here right now if you want to live," I told her before running past her, heading toward the office.

The office was just as Talia described, with a desk in front and a side door at the back, except everything looked decrepit. I went through the door and down the hallway she mentioned. At the end, I found the basement door.

I smelled the smoke as soon as I reached the door. 'She's in there!' my wolf exclaimed. I quickly mind-linked Colin, 'Get your warriors out. A fire has started.' 'What about Talia?' Colin responded.

'Don't worry about her. I found her, and I will get her out,' I said and closed the mind link.

I slammed my shoulder into the door and broke the lock. It swung open, releasing a cloud of smoke and heat. I hurried down the stairs into the chamber.

The room was on fire. Flames had taken the walls and the bed. Jason's body lay on the floor in the middle, candles scattered around him, his clothes already burning. His throat was torn open.

Talia lay on her side in wolf form on the far side of the room. Her fur was bright and untouched, not a hint of burn, yet she didn't move.

Part of the ceiling had fallen and blocked my path from her. I grit my teeth and slung it out of my way. The flames burned my skin, but I didn't care. I slid my arms under her, lifted her up, and carried her out of the room.

'I've got her,' I told Colin through the mind-link. 'Get everyone out!'

I carried her up the stairs, through the office, and into the hallways.

I made it to the front of the house and out into the night air.

The fighting outside was over. Colin had finished with the rogues. The warriors who had been fighting inside the house were heading out of the house that was now going up in flames.

I set Talia down on the grass.

Her body was burning hot under my hands. I pressed my palm to her chest, and the heat rose through her ribs into my hand, like a fever.

"Talia, I need you to wake up," I said, gently tapping her nose. She didn't respond. "Come on, Talia. Wake up."

Still, there was no response.