Barren Luna 331

Chapter 331

Nolan's POV

I carried Talia through the woods to Moonbrook. She stayed unconscious, and with every step, my wolf grew more anxious.

'Why won't she wake up?' he whined.

'I don't know, but we're going to find out,' I reassured him. 'Our mate is strong. She'll pull through this.'

When we reached the gate, the hospital was ready for us. Colin had sent a mind-link ahead, so they prepared a room on the ground floor.

Hartley, the doctor, had been with Colin's pack since he became Alpha and was accomplished but nowhere near as impressive as Leslie. She stayed calm and moved fast. She took Talia from me, laid her on the table, and started checking her fur for injuries. I stepped back to give her room.

"Is she okay, doctor? I found her unconscious in a fire," I said.

"How long was she in it?"

"I don't know. Maybe hours."

Hartley kept working. She checked Talia's flank, face, legs, and chest. She gently turned Talia's head to look in her ear, then lifted a paw to check the pads. At last, she put her stethoscope on Talia's ribs and listened for a while.

She set the stethoscope down and looked at me. "You said she was in a fire, but there are no burns and injuries at all.”

"What? How is that possible? Her fur is singed."

"Her fur is singed in two places along her flank, but the skin underneath is fine. There's no blistering or burned tissue, and her lungs are clear. Her heart rate is a little fast, but otherwise, she's not hurt," Hartley said.

A strange sense of unease ran through me. "That cannot be right."

Hartley shrugged. "You can see for yourself." She moved Talia's fur aside to show the unhurt skin. She put her hand on Talia's chest and kept it there. "The only problem is her fever. She's hotter than a wolf should be, but there's no organ damage. We'll cool her down and watch her. For now, that's all I can do, since I can't treat what I can't find."

"Is she sick?" I asked.

"No, Alpha. I have never seen anything like this before," Hartley replied. "Your Luna needs to be cooled off and given time. She will be okay. I will go prepare her ice bath."

Hartley left, and Colin came in right after. He had been waiting outside. There was still blood on his sleeves from the fight. He saw Talia on the table, glanced at Hartley's face, and walked over to me.

"You should mind-link Leslie," he suggested.

I hadn't thought of that, but I should have. If anyone would know what was going on, it was her.

I opened the mind-link to her.

'Leslie? Are you there?'

'I am here, Nolan.' She answered as fast as if she had been waiting for me to reach out. 'Where are you? Is she safe?'

'Moonbrook Hospital. She is in wolf form and unconscious. I pulled her out of a fire, and she has no burns. The doctor here cannot find an injury anywhere on her body. The only thing wrong is a fever that should not be possible.'

The link went silent. I waited for her to think.

'And Jason?'

'Dead. She killed him herself in the fire.'

The link went silent again, this time for longer. When she answered, she sounded excited but also cautious.

'Her wolf is unafraid of fire I think,' Leslie stated.

'What does that mean?'

'There is an old record at Silverfang, from before the current line of Lunas. I saw it once, and I have not seen it since. It speaks of a Silverfang Luna from long ago who wielded a power called Moonfire. The power was the wolf's soul and the Moon Goddess's strength bound together. The passage says Moonfire could call silver- blue flames that would not burn the one who held them, but would consume shadows and break curses. Those flames could sweep across a battlefield without touching the living. It was rare and used to push back dark forces. When it awoke in the Luna for the first time, the awakening was too much for her wolf and put her into a coma. A fever coma. It did not last long. The Luna would come out of it on her own.'

'You are telling me Talia has Moonfire? Is it possible?'

'I am telling you the description matches. The dark magic of the Blackveil Illusion would have called the power up, and the fire would have been the trigger. She is not harmed by the fire because her wolf was strengthened by it. The fever is the awakening burning through her. It should pass.'

I let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding. Leslie's words eased the fear in my chest.

'How long does it last? Do you know anything else?' I asked.

'I do not know. The record did not specify. But not long, based on what I have read. Hours, or a day on the outside.'

'Thank you for this.'

'When she gets home to Bloodmoon, she needs to start learning to control this. Moonfire isn't something to play around with. If she doesn't master it, she could harm others or suffer from fever many times.'

'Okay. We will be back home at Bloodmoon.'

'One more thing.'

'When she wakes up, the first thing she does is call Solon. He found out an hour ago that the two of you went after Jason without telling him, and he is throwing a tantrum now.'

I laughed. 'He won't be too upset with Talia.'

'No, but he will be upset with you. You should have called him before you did anything, Nolan.'

I hadn't thought to reach out to Solon. Everything had happened so fast. Talia wanted to deal with Jason right away, and she did.

'Thanks for the heads up. I will tell her,' I said, and then closed the mind-link.

Chapter 332

Talia's POV

Jason was on the floor in front of me. He couldn't speak now. Every time he tried, blood bubbled from his mouth. I saw him try to open the door, but he ended up trapping himself in here with me. He thought he was locking me in with him, but it was actually the other way around.

"Please, please," Jason was finally able to say.

His begging only made my wolf angrier. How dare he ask for mercy now? He'd shown none when he helped kill my father or when he kidnapped me and tried to force his mark on me. I remembered the way he smiled at me the day my father went mad. Jason didn't deserve mercy.

I lunged forward and bit into his neck. I shook him until my teeth snapped together, and then Jason fell to the ground, his neck torn open.

I knew the moment he died because his face began to change as the light faded from his eyes.

'Good riddance,' my wolf huffed.

I had killed him. I kept the promise I made to myself back in the rose garden. I had avenged Father, Robin, and all the others that Jason had killed. I thought I would feel triumphant, but there was only a hollow ache where my anger used to be.

Flames surrounded me, but they didn't hurt. I noticed, but I didn't have time to wonder why.

The heat that should have filled the room was inside me, pulsing under my skin and sinking into my bones. It built until it felt like I was breathing fire. My head pounded, and my legs grew heavy. I tried to stand, but my body wouldn't move.

I reached for Nolan through the mate bond.

'Nolan, can you hear me? I am trapped in a room. It's on fire.'

I received no response.

'Nolan, please. Where are you?'

At last, I felt him. I could hear his voice, but the words were unclear. The heat was too much, and I stopped resisting.

When I woke, the light seemed wrong.

It wasn't a firelight, but the white glow of hospital lights. The room smelled of cleaning solution rather than smoke. I felt my fingers on the sheet before I opened my eyes. I didn't remember turning back into my human form.

Nolan was beside the bed. His hand was around mine. His head had gone down against the edge of the mattress, and he was asleep.

I squeezed his hand.

He sat up quickly. His eyes met mine, and for a moment, he just looked at me. Then he hugged me.

"You..." My voice cracked, and I cleared my throat. Nolan offered me water, which I drank. "You found me."

"I will always find you."

"What happened? Everything is a bit hazy."

"You killed Jason," he said. "You are a strong Luna. Don't let anyone tell you differently."

"I should have done it sooner. I had openings before, but I did not take them."

"You took the one that worked. That is the one that mattered."

"I am sorry I did not listen to you in the past and let you handle him. I was naive and..."

"You did nothing. You always look for the positive in everyone. That's what I love about you. You are the grace that I didn't have the luxury to give. That's why we're a good pair," Nolan said. "All of this is finally behind us now. We can move on from here."

I pulled him close for another hug and pressed my face into his shoulder. He held me, warm and solid. His scent, amber and pine, wrapped around me and eased the ache in my chest. I breathed it in, letting it comfort me like sunlight.

Nolan let me stay like that for a moment and then gently helped me lean back against the pillows.

"There is something you need to know about what happened in the fire."

"I felt it. The fire was not hurting me."

"Leslie says you have something called Moonfire. It is a Silverfang Luna ability from a long time ago. It came up in you because dark magic was used on you, and the

fire was the trigger. Your wolf was not hurt because she was being fed by it," Nolan explained.

That made sense. I remembered how the heat became overwhelming, as if I were absorbing it.

'That was it,' my wolf spoke up. 'I did not know what it was. I only knew the fire was on my side.'

"It puts you into a fever coma for a while," Nolan said.

"Oh Goddess, for how long?" I asked.

"Don't worry. It was only for a few hours. When we're back at Bloodmoon, we'll find a way to handle it. Leslie said Moonfire is powerful, but it can be dangerous if you don't learn to control it."

That worried me. It felt like there was always something new to face. I hoped we could have some peace before we had to deal with the Rogue King.

'Stop worrying about that and kiss our mate. It has been too long,' my wolf scolded.

I couldn't help smiling as I pulled Nolan down and kissed him. He kissed me back,

his hands roaming my body as he climbed into the bed. For the first time in a week, I let myself relax under his touch.

The door opened. Colin walked in. "Is she awake now? I heard her...."

He stopped mid-sentence as he took in the scene, and I immediately pulled away

from Nolan, my face heating.

"Hey, Colin," I mumbled.

"I can see that you're awake," he said, clearing his throat. "Very awake. Talia, I should've knocked. My bad."

"But I can see you're not sorry at all," Nolan said, shooting him a glare.

I burst out laughing and couldn't stop. Nolan looked down at me, shaking his head helplessly.

“How are you feeling, Talia?" Colin asked, walking closer with a grin. “Because I'm thinking we should throw a party for our little victory. It's been a stressful week. What do you say?

Chapter 333

Talia's POV

"No, Colin." I smiled at him.

"Come on, Talia."

"The Rogue King and Morgana are still out there. Killing them is our next goal. I am not throwing a party in the middle of an operation," I stated firmly. I didn't want to get distracted and let them get the upper hand.

"You are not in the middle of an operation. You are in a hospital bed, coming off a fever that should have killed you. You're going to rest tonight, at least. Or your body will choose for you, and it'll be longer than a day," Colin explained.

I looked at Nolan for help, but he said, "He's right. You need to rest."

"Are you best friends now?" I teased.

Colin threw his arm around Nolan's shoulders. Colin looked proud of himself while Nolan looked unfunny.

"We are. He and I have been bonding all week. We have inside jokes, a handshake, the whole thing. You missed it," Colin responded.

Nolan deadpanned and shoved him off.

I laughed and said, "Fine. Fine. I'll go."

"Now go away and make it happen. Talia has someone she needs to mind-link," Nolan stated.

Colin stood up and put a hand on my shoulder. "Glad to have you back, Talia."

I smiled. "Glad to be back."

Colin left, and the door closed behind him. Nolan was looking at me. He did not have to say it. I nodded and opened the link to Solon.

'Solon, are you there?' I asked.

'Talia, are you all right? Where are you? What happened? Leslie said you were unconscious. Are you all right?' Solon asked. His speech was slurred as if he were waking up.

'I am all right. I am awake in a hospital bed at Moonbrook, and I have never felt better. I killed him, Solon. Father is avenged, and the spell that was on me broke when he died. Then, I passed out. Apparently, the fire triggered Moonfire.'

He went quiet for a moment. 'Moonfire,' he repeated.

'You know what that is?'

'Yes, I did not know it was a real thing. I thought it was a story Mother used to tell.'

'I thought so too. It is what kept me alive in the fire. Nolan promised to help me find a way to control it.'

'You should have told me,' Solon said abruptly.

'I know.'

'You should have told me you were going after him, Talia. I would have come,' he said.

'I know. I am sorry. Things happened so quickly. I only wanted to make sure Jason didn't have a chance to run,' I explained.

The link went quiet for a little longer. 'Are you really all right?' Solon asked.

'I am really all right.'

'Watch yourself when you get back to Bloodmoon. Do not go anywhere without warriors, and do not let Nolan go anywhere without them either.'

'We will, Solon. There will be no going off anytime soon.'

'Leslie is at the antidote day and night. She thinks she is close. The moment it is ready, she is sending it to every pack we have an alliance with.'

'Tell her thank you.'

'I will tell her.'

'One more thing. Take care of yourself, Solon. You are the Alpha King now. The pack needs you whole. Do not run yourself into the ground because of me.'

'I will try.'

'Try harder than that. Sleep when you can.'

'I will. I am glad you are not dead, Talia.'

'I am glad too.'

The link closed.

Nolan was watching me. I let myself sit with the closed link for a moment before I looked at him.

"He is going to be all right," I said. "He needs sleep. He has not slept."

"That makes three of us."

"Help me up. I have a party to be at." I said, grinning.

The party was in the main hall at Moonbrook. Colin pulled it together in about four hours, which wasn't surprising since he'd trained his household to keep up with him since he was sixteen. Lights hung from the ceiling, tables along the walls were covered with food, and a small stage in the corner had two of Colin's musicians.

When we walked in, the warriors saw us and cheered. Marco offered me a drink and said, "Welcome back, Luna!"

After a while, the musicians changed the song to something slower, and I pulled Nolan toward the open space in the middle of the hall.

"Dance with me," I said.

"You know I do not dance."

"Come on, just this time."

Nolan let me pull him into the middle of the floor. He put one hand at the small of my back and the other in mine. We started moving.

He was better than he had been the last time we had done this. “Did you practice?" I asked. Nolan nodded.

"How and when? When did you have time?" I asked.

"With Colin. Do not tell him I told you."

I laughed.

We moved together to the slow rhythm of the song. For the first time in over a week,

I let myself relax.

I was looking past Nolan's shoulder toward the open doors at the back of the hall when I saw the figure.

It stood outside, under one of the trees just beyond the courtyard lights. The figure was hidden in the shadow of the trunk, not moving. It didn't look like a guard and wasn't standing like one either. It was watching the hall.

A cold chill went up my spine, tightening at the base of my neck. I squeezed Nolan's hand and tried to steady my breath, but the uneasy certainty settled in: whoever or whatever hovered in the shadows had not come to celebrate.

I missed a step then. My foot came down on Nolan's. He playfully yelped and then

said, “What is it? What are you looking at?"

I looked back at him. "Nothing, I'm sorry," I responded.

"That wasn't nothing," Nolan pressed.

I looked again toward the tree. The shape was gone. No one was under the tree.

The courtyard lanterns lit the grass at the trunk and the trunk itself, and whatever had been there a moment ago was gone.

I put on a smile and said, "I am more tired than I thought I was."

"We can go," Nolan suggested.

"Yes, I think we should."

He took my hand again. We said our goodnights and walked back through the

corridor toward our room.

I told myself I was just too tired to imagine things.

Chapter 334

Rogue King Kargon's POV

Morgana walked into my office without knocking. I poured her a glass of bourbon and handed it over. "For you to forget your manners, this must be serious."

She took the glass and drank quickly, wincing at the burn. "Jason is dead," she finally said.

I set the bottle down. I wasn't surprised. Jason was unstable and reckless. My wolf

had mocked me for working with him. He knew Jason would fail, and now I'd have to listen to him gloat for days.

"How?" I questioned. "Was it Alpha Nolan?"

"The Princess did it," Morgana said.

I inclined my head in respect and said, “I didn't think she had it in her.”

"She stabbed him and then tore his throat out," Morgana said.

"Smart. You always have to make sure your enemy won't come back," I said, taking a big gulp of my drink. "What about her? Did the rogues kill her?”

"She escaped the house during the fire after she killed him. She's at Moonbrook now with her Alpha. They'll return to Bloodmoon tomorrow morning," Morgana said. "He had four days alone in that house with her. Four days, with everything I gave him, the illusion, the scent, the rogues, and he still failed. What a disappointment,” I said.

"His plan was sound if he had..."

"His plan would have never worked, because he was a fool. I gave him the resources of a king because I needed his father's network. I thought I could turn the son into what his father was. He wasted everything trying to make her see his face as her mate's instead of getting what we needed," I said sharply.

"I did not understand why he wouldn't just mark her once he kidnapped her. None of it made sense,” Morgana said.

"He wanted her to love him again. That's what the marking was about. He wanted her to look at him the way she did before he poisoned her father. Jason was just a little boy pretending he was worthy of being Alpha King," I said. It was disgusting how Jason ruined himself for a she-wolf that wouldn't even give him a second glance.

"You are not wrong. Michael would not have made that mistake."

"He is dead, and so is his son," I scoffed. "Now, I am out of an asset." "What is your next move?" she said.

"I had a plan. I was going to put Solon on the Alpha King's seat, let him hold it just long enough for Jason to take Talia, then kill Solon while he was distracted by his sister's disappearance, and take over the packs one by one. Now, I have nothing."

Morgana was quiet for a moment, and then she came closer. "There may be a way forward."

"I'm listening," I said.

"Take the throne yourself. You don't need anyone to give it to you. You have an army, and with my help, you could become Alpha King," Morgana answered.

The idea had crossed my mind, but I thought it would be too much trouble to get the packs in line. They wouldn't willingly follow a rogue. But now, with Rudolf dead, the packs were wary. They would probably submit to anyone with power if it meant protection.

"We would have to deal with Solon, but it is doable," Morgana continued. "Should I have someone to poison him too?"

"No need. Solon doesn't matter. He's not worth the effort," I said. "He's Alpha King in name only. He doesn't have his father's strength or his sister's intelligence. I'm sure he's not even preparing, just letting his sister do his dirty work like the coward he is."

"He is ordering every allied pack to seal its borders and train its warriors. Leslie is working all day and night trying to finish the antidote for the mad rogue poison," Morgana said.

I laughed. "She is wasting her time."

The poison was Morgana's work. Its base was my blood. There's no antidote without my blood.

"She would need a miracle from the Moon Goddess herself to create the antidote without your blood," Morgana said smugly.

"Are the mad rogues ready?" I asked. "It will be best to attack while they are still recovering."

Morgana didn't answer right away. I poured myself another glass, giving her time to respond. When she still didn't speak, I said, "Answer the question, Morgana. You know I don't like repeating myself."

"Not yet," Morgana finally answered. "I still need more time."

I frowned. "You've had months, Morgana."

"The mad rogues are unstable weapons. The transformation tears them apart from the inside. Most die within a month of the change. I'm still working on a binding to hold the transformation together, but I need more subjects and more time," she said.

"You have one week," I said nonchalantly.

Morgana looked at me in surprise and said, "That is not enough time, Kargon."

"You have one week," I stated firmly. "If you do not have a stable mad rogue by the end of it, I will kill you."

"Kargon," Morgana said in disbelief.

"You have been with me long enough to know I do not repeat my past mistakes. Tell me you understand," I said.

I didn't care about her excuses. She was useless to me if she did not keep her promises.

Morgana held my look. She did not look afraid, but mildly offended. “I am not a thing."

"I understand," she finally said, and Morgana left without another word.

I had waited long enough, humoring Jason's foolishness and biding my time until the perfect moment. Every day wasted was another day I lived in the shadow of those who denied me what should have been mine from the start.

I would make my own legacy, seize the power that was denied to me, and crush those who thought a rogue could never rule. I was not going to wait another fifteen or so more years.

It was time for all the packs to bow down to their true king, me, Kargon, the Rogue King.

Chapter 335

Talia's POV

We said goodbye to Colin at the Moonbrook gate just as the sun was rising and headed home. The roads were empty, much to our surprise. We were nervous that the rogues would attack, but they did not appear. I didn't know if that was a good or

bad thing.

'They slinked back to their master. The packs should be safe for a little while at least,' my wolf said.

By the time we reached the Bloodmoon border, the sun was already going down behind the trees.

Walden was waiting for us at the gate. He was Nolan's Chief Warrior and had led the pack while we were away. As soon as the car stopped, he came over and opened my door before the driver could. He never said he was worried, but I could see it on his face.

"It is good to have you both back, Luna and Alpha. The pack has missed you both," Walden greeted.

"Thank you. It is good to be back, Walden," I said.

Nolan got out on the other side and walked over to join us.

"Report," Nolan said. "What did we miss?"

"Rogues have been testing the borders the whole time you were gone. They come at night, in groups of two or three, looking for weak spots, but they always pull back when the patrols show up. We haven't seen any mad wolves at all," Walden explained. “There weren't any other major incidents to report, Alpha."

"Good. Thank you, Walden. I knew I could rely on you."

"I kept the training schedule you set and pushed it even harder. Now we have more elite warriors than before, and I promoted a new second to lead the western drills. Her name is Arya. If you want to meet her tonight, I can call her in," Walden added.

Nolan shook his head. "Not tonight. I need time to decompress. I will meet her when there is time."

"Understood."

We walked up to the pack house. The lights were on, the place was busy, and omegas greeted us enthusiastically. Some looked relieved, and others proud. Word must have spread about Jason.

Clara was waiting at the door of our private quarters. We saw her as we were halfway up the steps. Seeing her there, healthy and smiling, was the first thing that made me feel truly at home.

“Luna, you're back!" she said excitedly.

"What am I, chopped liver?" Nolan muttered, and I chuckled.

Clara bowed to Nolan and said, "Of course you're not, Alpha. The pack has full faith in you returning safely, but I prayed for you too, like I always do."

Nolan blushed and turned away, not knowing what to say. I smiled, and then Clara took both my hands into hers. "Luna, I have prayed to the Moon Goddess every single day that you would come back to us safe, and the Moon Goddess listened to my prayers. How are you? Are you injured?"

“I am fine, Clara. Thank you for keeping everything running while we were gone. The house looks exactly the way it did when I left it," I said.

"That was the point, Luna. I wanted you to come home without having to worry about anything. You must be starving. Go and shower. I'll have dinner ready by the time you're done,” Clara remarked before she hurried off to the kitchen. I watched her go as Nolan entered. I looked around, taking in my home.

When I was trapped in that other place, I knew instinctively that the man was not Nolan and that where I was was not Bloodmoon. No matter what my eyes told me, none of it sat right. Only after I got out, when Colin named the spell, did I realize my sight had been used against me the whole time. Now, standing in the real house, that's what I kept thinking about.

'You really can't help yourself but to stress yourself out,' my wolf sighed.

'Look. It's odd being here now,' I said.

'Don't overthink it. You knew something was wrong before I even told you,' my wolf said. 'It is okay to be weirded out, but release it. We're home with our mate.'

'But...'

'No buts. We killed him. We are no longer under the illusion,' my wolf said firmly, and I held onto that.

Dinner was quiet at first. Nolan ate, methodically and silently, but I just moved my food around my plate. My appetite had vanished. All I could think about was the figure under the tree at Moonbrook.

I kept telling myself I had imagined it, but the more I tried to believe that, the less I did. Every time I closed my eyes, I could still see the dark outline standing under the branches. I wanted to come home and let it all go, but I couldn't.

Nolan set his cutlery down. "Alright. That is enough."

"What?" I asked, startled by his sudden statement.

"Tell me what you saw."

"What are you talking about?"

"You do know what I mean," Nolan responded. "At the party. When we were dancing, you stepped on my foot, and then you wanted to leave."

"I told you it was nothing," I lied.

“You are the better dancer of the two of us by a wide margin. Something made you do it. I let it go that night because you were tired and you had been through a week I would not wish on anyone. But we are home now, and we are safe, and I want to know what you saw," Nolan pressed.

"There was a figure. Outside the hall, under one of the trees past the lit part of the courtyard," I admitted.

"What kind of figure?" Nolan asked.

"It was standing in the shadows under a tree, watching the party. It gave me a bad feeling the moment I saw it. When I looked again, it was gone," I explained. "And your wolf?"

"Whatever it was, she was sure it was not a wolf, and it didn't mean us well."

Chapter 336

Talia's POV

Nolan fell silent for a moment and said, "It must be the witch."

"Why do you say that?" I asked.

"That is the kind of thing a witch does," Nolan answered. "The figure disappeared without leaving a trace, which has to be using magic, and witches use magic."

"How do you know what a witch does?"

"Every Alpha is trained to know the other species, what they can do and what they cannot, and how to tell one from another. It is part of what you learn coming up," Nolan explained. "But your father banned every pack from making contact with witches, and I was never curious enough to go looking past what I was taught. So I know what I learned as a boy and not much more than that."

"So, it could have been Morgana."

"It could have been her, or a familiar. I will inform Colin to be careful, and we will look into it more tomorrow. Tonight we are relaxing," Nolan responded. I wanted to continue talking about it, but I knew Nolan wouldn't let me. He was already being patient with me for not telling him immediately what I had seen.

I picked up my fork again. I had just taken my first real bite when the door to the dining hall burst open.

"I am back!"

Della burst through the door as if she had been shot out of a cannon. Marco followed a step behind, moving more slowly, looking like he had given up trying to keep her at a normal pace somewhere along the way.

I stood up before I even realized I was moving. Della hurried across the room and hugged me. I hugged her back. "Goddess, it's good seeing you!" Della said, squeezing me.

"Why didn't you tell us you were coming?" Nolan questioned Marco. "We would have met you at the border. We could have at least put warriors at the border in case something happened."

"That is so sweet, being worried about us," Della teased.

"I'm serious. That was reckless, Marco."

"This is on me, not Marco," Della said, letting go of me but keeping one hand on my arm. "I told him not to send a word. I wanted to surprise her."

Nolan dropped the subject. He knew Della well enough to realize that arguing with her about something she had already decided was a waste of time.

We all sat down. Clara, hearing the commotion, came out smiling and set more

plates and food on the table. For the first time in over a week, everything was right again.

Della piled food onto her plate and let out a sigh of relief after her first bite.

"I have missed this," she moaned.

"Were you not eating at Silverfang?" I asked.

"You do not understand. A week at Silverfang and I forgot what spice tasted like," Della complained. "Leslie cannot cook. Her food is so bland that I lost weight because I preferred not eating. How can someone ruin meat?"

Everyone at the table laughed.

"How is Silverfang?" I asked. "It has only been a week since Father died and Solon took the seat. How is he holding up?"

"Silverfang is fine. Solon is fine. He is tired, he is doing too much, and he will not let anyone help him with any of it, which is exactly what you would expect. Leslie is buried in the pharmacy day and night, working on the antidote for the mad rogue toxin. She is barely sleeping. There was not much for me to do there once things settled, and I would rather be here with you than there eating terrible food and listening to medical stuff that I don't understand, so I came back."

"I am glad you're back. I have so much to tell you," I said.

Della set her fork down and looked at me, her expression becoming serious. "You killed Jason."

"I did."

"I want to hear it, all of it. I want to know how it happened."

Marco shifted in his seat. "Della, maybe not here, maybe not tonight. She just got home."

"It is all right," I said. "I did not tell Solon everything either. I gave him the short version because the long version would have had him on his way to Moonbrook before I finished, and he has many packs to run."

So, I told her everything.

I told her how Jason had allied with a dark witch, and how the witch had placed a spell on me called the Blackveil Illusion that made me see Jason's face as Nolan's the entire time I was held in that house. The house itself had looked like Bloodmoon to me, down to the rooms and the gardens, while everyone else there saw an abandoned, run-down house.

Della listened the whole time without interrupting, which was unusual for her. "And how did you do it?" she said when I finished. "How did you actually kill him?" "He took me to a room he had set up, thinking he was going to mark me. He cuffed me to the bed before I could cuff him, and he told me he had known the whole time that I knew," I continued.

"You didn't tell me he did that," Nolan growled.

"No need because I took Solon's dagger and stabbed him in the neck with it. Then, I tore his throat out," I finished.

The table went silent. Marco stared at me, surprised by my ferocity. Della smirked and said, "That's my girl. Honestly, I thought it would be Nolan to put an end to Jason, but this is better. I'd love to have seen the stupid look on his face. I bet he didn't even see it coming."

"He didn't," I confirmed.

"At this point, you'll have a fierce reputation to match Nolan's," Marco added. "And how is that a bad thing?" I asked.

Nolan gripped my hand and said, "It isn't. It is as it should be." Marco nodded.

Della reclined in her chair. She was quiet for a moment, thinking it all through, and when she finally spoke, her voice was more serious than it had been all evening.

"Then the real problem is not Jason anymore. The problem now is the witch, Morgana, right?"

Chapter 337

Talia's POV

Nolan and I shared a startled glance. I had not mentioned Morgana or even hinted at it, yet Della said it so casually as if that woman's name didn't cause children to have nightmares.

"I never told you the witch's name," I said.

"You did not need to. It was clear it had to be her," Della replied, her tone relaxed, as if discussing the weather.

Nolan's eyes narrowed. "How do you know that?" he asked.

Della smiled, a sly glimmer in her eyes, clearly enjoying our uncertainty. "Because I collect information that most would ignore: old names, old grudges, and half- remembered stories the elders no longer tell. Did you think I only cared about food?"

Nolan opened his mouth, and Della quickly said, "Don't answer that. Anyway, when you described a witch who could create an illusion that complex and cruel, only one witch would be capable of that. I knew it had to be her," Della explained, picking up her spoon and stirring her stew.

Nolan placed a reassuring hand on my knee. "How reliable is this information?"

She looked down, her teasing gone. "Extremely. I can prove it after dinner. I will bring you the ancient text about her."

"Morgana is likely allied with the Rogue King," I admitted. "She may even be watching us, right now."

Della's face lost all trace of amusement. "Then we're in deeper trouble than I thought."

After dinner, we regrouped in the office. Della arrived carrying a weathered, heavy book and a map. Marco came in behind her, looking troubled. The four of us gathered around the desk.

"This is it. I found it in your father's private library," Della said. She set the book down with care, as if presenting an artifact to a council. She turned the yellowed, brittle pages until she found the passage she wanted. Her finger paused near the middle; the ink was faded but still legible.

"There was one coven once. Six witches led it, the strongest of their kind, and they kept the whole craft in balance. Originally, the coven and the packs shared no bad blood. We coexisted harmoniously for years."

She turned the page.

"One of the six began studying dark magic in secret. By the time the others understood what she had become, she had already killed two of them. The three who were left could not kill her. She was too strong by then, but they were able to drive her out. Then, she built her own coven based on the dark magic she mastered. The witch was named Morgana," Della said.

I grasped the gravity of the situation. Morgana was not just a powerful witch; she was cold, calculating, and dangerous. Facing Jason would be far easier than confronting Morgana.

'And she will die just as he did. Stay confident, Talia,' my wolf reassured me.

"After her expulsion, Morgana gathered followers. She looked for those who craved power more than peace," Della continued. "She spent decades launching attacks against the original coven, and more than once, she turned her sights on wolf packs. She's a master of illusions and disguises. She pitted our kind against witches. A lot of blood was spilled because of misunderstandings."

I nodded, recalling the stories my father once told as warnings.

"Your father restrained our kind. He forbade open conflict and insisted we limit our dealings with witches. He believed peace was possible, but only if we kept our distance," Della added.

"And then Morgana disappeared," Nolan added, voice edged with suspicion. "No one's seen her in a generation."

"Until now," I interjected. "She's working with the Rogue King. The attacks, the chaos, it all fits."

Marco frowned. "So, what do we do?"

"We speak with the coven and ask for their aid," I suggested.

"The coven never trusted us, and now we're supposed to go begging for help?" Marco balked.

"It is not begging," I said. "We would be forming an alliance. Morgana threatens them as much as she threatens us. They will appreciate being informed."

"There is no guarantee that they will," Marco argued. "There is a lot of bad blood between our kind."

"Only because Morgana caused chaos. The coven should recognize that now," I replied.

"Your own father spent his whole reign keeping us apart. I think it should stay that way. We will find another way," Nolan stated.

"He kept us apart to stop a war. This is not that. The coven lost two of their own to Morgana. She broke their order. No one alive wants her dead more than they do," I argued.

"Or they blame the wolves for killing so many of their sisters," Marco said, "and they shut the door in our faces. Or worse."

"They might," I said. "But the fact remains: while Morgana lives, none of us are safe. She can assume any of our faces and bypass our defenses. I could be sitting across from you, and it would not be me. We would never trust our own eyes again."

I turned to Della for help. She would at least support me in this.

"I am no more eager than the rest of you to enter a witch coven. They could turn on

us as soon as we cross into their woods," Della said quietly. "But Morgana must be stopped, and we cannot do it alone."

Nolan let out a slow breath. "I do not like this." He crossed his arms, doubt shadowing his features. "Witches are unpredictable. The last thing we need is more uncertainty."

Della closed the book, her fingers lingering on the cover. "But Talia is right, we can't fight Morgana alone. She's too strong. The coven knows her weaknesses."

I met Nolan's gaze. "As long as Morgana lives, we are all at risk. She will come for

us regardless, and I would rather be prepared than defenseless when she does." There was a long silence.

I could see all of them wrestling with the risks, the unknowns, and the fear. Finally, Nolan nodded. "If we're doing this, we will go together."

Della unrolled the map and spread it across the table. She traced a path westward through valleys and dense forest. "The coven's last stronghold is deep in the Lost Woods. There are no roads. You would need to travel on foot. Once we enter, the coven will know we're there, and there'll be no turning back."

I studied the map, committing each twist and landmark to memory. "We leave at dawn. Marco and Della, you will come with us."

Marco nodded. There was still a glimmer of fear in his eyes, but I knew Marco would stand with us. "Yes, Luna."

Della rolled up the map, tucking it away. "I'll gather what we need. There are some things that can protect us in case the witches are hostile."

"We'll rest tonight. Tomorrow, we head into the woods."

Chapter 338

Talia's POV

I couldn't sleep that night. Moonlight came in through the window, drawing silver lines over the messy sheets and floor. Whenever I shut my eyes, I saw the figure from Moonbrook under the tree, smiling at me.

'Please tell me it's just my nerves,' I said to my wolf.

'It is. The witch is not bothering us. Get some rest,' my wolf responded.

Even though she confirmed I was safe, I still couldn't sleep. It bothered me how easily Morgana had put a spell on me. We needed to stop this from happening again. Would the coven's protection be strong enough, and would they even want to help?

I let out a frustrated groan and threw my pillow off the bed, almost knocking over the lamp on the nightstand. Nolan moved beside me and turned to face me. “What's wrong?" he asked with a yawn.

"Sorry," I apologized. "Go back to sleep."

He leaned up on his elbow. "Come on, talk to me. What's keeping you up?"

"There's too much on my mind," I replied.

"There's always too much on your mind," Nolan agreed, "but that never stopped you from sleeping before."

"I'm worried we're moving too slowly, or that she's already casting spells on us. What if the coven won't help? I can't stop thinking about it," I said.

Nolan nodded and sat up. "If you can't sleep, let's go for a run. It always helps me clear my head. What do you think?"

My wolf responded to the suggestion, eager and restless. 'Yes, please. We haven't gone on a run in months.'

"Why not? It can't hurt," I said.

We slipped outside and paused under the stars, waiting a moment before we shifted. As my wolf, I took in the scents and sounds: roses, the distant river, and animals moving in the dark. I felt alive, every sense sharp.

Nolan started off, and I kept up before moving ahead. He caught up, and we took turns leading as we ran through the dark. Moonlight came through the trees. The ground felt soft under my paws.

My wolf had waited months for this, and I let the run loosen my tension with every step. We ran through Bloodmoon woods, moving through old trees and jumping over roots and streams. Dew cooled my fur, and Nolan kept pace with me. For a while, there was no war or fear. There was just the run, the wind, and us.

We ran until we were too tired to keep going and reached the lake, where the moon's reflection moved on the water. We shifted back, out of breath and relieved. I sat on the cool grass, hugging my knees, and Nolan sat next to me, pulling me into his arms. No longer running, all my worries returned.

He brushed my hair out of my face, his thumb tracing my cheek. "I can tell you're still bothered. Talk to me now."

I paused before I spoke. “I'm scared, Nolan. I keep doubting every decision. What if going to the witches is a mistake? What if my instincts are off? I misjudged Jason so many times. What if I'm wrong again?"

His eyes flashed with anger, not at me, but at what Jason had done. "Don't say that. Don't doubt yourself because of him. Jason made you question your instincts and lose trust in yourself. That's over now. You're stronger than he ever was."

I closed my eyes, letting his words register. “You sound so sure.”

"That's because I am. You're brilliant, Talia. Don't ever think otherwise. The fact that you worry is what makes you a great Luna.” He took my hand, squeezed it gently, and kissed my forehead.

For now, I would trust him, since I couldn't trust myself.

"Have you told Solon that we're going to visit the coven tomorrow?" Nolan asked.

"No, he's been too busy. I don't want to add to his stress. He has so much to deal with right now," I said. I honestly felt bad for Solon. I knew he wanted to be Alpha King one day, but not like this.

Nolan nodded. “You should tell him. You've kept him out of the loop for too long. I think you've shown us we shouldn't have done that to you, either.”

I pulled away from Nolan. "Wait, I'm not doing it on purpose," I said, pouting. "I just wanted to wait. I didn't want him to talk us out of going, or worse, try to come with us."

"I know. I'm just teasing," Nolan said, laughing as he pulled me back into his arms. "Solon trusts you to make the right call, whether you tell him or not, though he should know where you are. But I get why you waited." He brushed my hair from my face. “Whatever you decide, I'm with you."

"You are not afraid I am wrong."

“I'm afraid of a lot, but you making a mistake isn't one of them,” he said with a crooked grin. "If Morgana ever tries to send something or someone through my gates disguised as you, I'll spot it before it even gets a word out and I'll tear it apart. There's only one you. No magic could ever convince me otherwise."

I laughed. "You're ridiculous, you know that? But you're the best mate I could ever ask for!"

He grinned, leaning in. "Does the best mate get a reward?"

"I think so," I said seductively before kissing him.

Chapter 339

Talia's POV

Walden met us at the gate as the car was being loaded.

"You have been home for only two days," he said. "I started to think you might unpack."

"I know. I'm sorry. This must be hard on you," I said. Walden had been taking care of Bloodmoon alone for a long time. He really deserved a break.

"I'm teasing, mostly." He stepped back and let the warriors finish with the last of the bags. "Go on. Just come back in one piece, both of you. The pack would rather have you slow than not at all."

"We will. Hold the borders. We won't be gone any longer than we have to be," Nolan stated.

Marco drove. Nolan sat up front with him, and Della and I climbed into the back. The gate disappeared behind us, then Bloodmoon, and the road opened up to the west.

About an hour into the drive, Della turned to me and smiled.

"Well," she said. "Someone had a good night."

"What?"

She tapped her neck. "The hickies on your neck."

I blushed and reached for my neck before I was able to stop myself, and Della's grin got even bigger.

"Don't bother covering it. There are at least three. You two went to bed tense and clearly worked it out." She sat back, pleased with herself. "I'm calling it now. Between the two of us, you'll be the first one pregnant. Mark my words."

I blushed. I looked at Nolan in the mirror. He didn't look embarrassed at all. If anything, he seemed pleased, like he'd just been given a compliment.

"Don't encourage her," I said to him.

"I didn't say anything," he said.

Della kept going. “And you," she said, pointing at the back of Nolan's head. "You've had Marco running drills and everything else you can think of for weeks now. You haven't given him a single evening off. I want my mate back."

"Once this is settled,” Nolan said, "he's all yours, for as long as you want. I won't even contact him."

"As long as I want?"

"As long as you want."

“Good. Because I have plans. I bought a few things in Fangvale I want to try, and Marco still hasn't seen the box."

I giggled. "You haven't shown him the box yet? Wasn't the whole purpose of it to use it on your mate once you had one?"

"It's not like I had time. Remember that toy we saw with the-"

"We're not doing this in the car." Marco interrupted as his hands tightened on the wheel.

"Doing what? I haven't said anything yet. What has you all tense? I have the perfect toy for you. You won't care about anything for at least a week," Della responded.

"Okay, that's enough," Marco answered quickly, blushing.

We all laughed. He let us laugh for a bit, then cleared his throat and looked for a new topic.

"Tell us more about the Lost Woods. What are we walking into, Della?" Marco asked.

"Alright," Della's smile faded. "They belong to the coven, and they have for longer than anyone's written down. They're not normal woods. Every story says the same thing: the forest will test your heart. There's an old legend about an Alpha who marched in with fifty warriors, planning to burn the witches' home. They say the trees swallowed his warriors one by one, leaving nothing but blood on the roots.Intruders will be tested and threats will be vanquished."

"And us?" Marco asked. "How does the forest tell us apart from someone there to do harm?"

"Did you not hear what I said? We're not there to do harm," Della said.

"We're going to ask for help. That's all we want. If the stories are right, the woods will not become volatile toward us," I added.

"If the stories are right," Marco muttered.

Nolan turned in his seat to look at all of us. "Once we're inside, the only thing that keeps us safe is each other. We stay together. No splitting off, no following a sound, no taking a path because it looks faster. We walked out the same way we walked in, all four of us. Agreed?"

"Agreed," we said in unison.

The drive seemed endless. As we went, the land around us slowly changed. Farms and towns faded away until only trees lined the rough, narrowing road. After another hour, the road was gone, so we parked the car and started walking.

The Lost Woods began where the mist did.

It hung over the tree line like a wall, white, low, and still. Unlike normal fog, it didn't drift. It just stayed where it was. We stood at the edge and looked in, quiet for a moment.

"This is it," I said. "Are we ready?"

"As ready as we'll ever be," Marco sighed.

"Remember what I said. We stick together," Nolan said, and then we went in.

The mist drew tightly around us, closing off the world until only our small circle remained. The trees here were enormous, older than anything in Bloodmoon woods, their bark faded to gray, and their tops vanished into the white shroud overhead. Years ago, someone had cut a trail of pale notches at eye level, leading west, and we kept to their path.

After a few minutes of walking, Nolan's voice broke the quiet. "That split tree on the left...we've already marked it."

"I don't think so," I replied.

"I'm sure of it. We passed that trunk before we reached the burnt tree, and now the burnt tree's behind us again." He halted, brow furrowed. "The woods are shifting. The coven is playing tricks, trying to make us lose our way."

We stood together, peering into the mist for another notch, but the ancient woods gave us nothing in return.

Then my wolf surged forward without warning. For a moment, her instincts took over, and the world appeared to tilt.

'Not that way,' she warned. 'That way is wrong. There. Go the other way.' She pulled me toward a gap in the trees to our right, away from the marked path entirely. 'There. Now.'

I walked toward the gap she picked. The ground opened under my foot, with no edge, no warning, and no time to grab anything. I yelped in surprise as I fell straight into darkness, and then I was no longer falling but standing in it.

“Nolan,” I called. My voice did not echo. It seemed as though the darkness swallowed it.

My voice did not echo. It went out into the dark and stopped, as if the dark had taken it.

“Nolan! Marco! Della!" I cried out again. “Where are you?"

No one answered.

Chapter 340

Talia's POV

'What happened? I thought you were getting us somewhere safe,' I said.

'I'm sorry. I felt magic in the other direction. I thought I was leading us away from it, but I walked us right into another trap. I'm sorry,' my wolf apologized.

'It's not your fault. It was a bait and switch,' I sighed. 'The trap was meant to be confusing.'

'Should we wait for them to find us?' my wolf suggested.

'No, let's just figure out how to get out of here. Nolan is probably worried,' I said.

By now, Nolan would have realized that I was missing and would be recklessly searching the forest for me. Marco and Della would try to calm him down but they would probably fall into a trap if they weren't already in one. The best way to keep everyone safe was to get out myself.

I moved forward into the darkness, feeling around for a wall or edge, but found nothing. The floor was flat and seemed to go on forever. My feet started to ache, but I kept moving. I couldn't stay here.

Then, ahead of me, someone said my name.

"Talia."

I knew the voice, but it couldn't be real. I hadn't heard it in weeks, and even then, it wasn't really a voice. The last time I saw him, he was red-eyed and thrashing, screaming in a way I'll never forget, while Nolan stood over him with the dagger. Now, he sounded like he used to, before the potion changed him.

"Father?"

He was there in the empty darkness. He opened his arms, and I rushed to hug him. His arms wrapped around me, and I leaned into him.

"I am so happy to see you," I said into his shoulder.

"Me too," Father said.

"I avenged you. I killed Jason," I continued.

“I knew you would be able to do it. I am so proud of you,” Father responded. “You brought me back."

'Talia, get away from him,' my wolf urged. 'This isn't real. He isn't real. You know he isn't.'

I knew.

Of course I did.

My father was gone. I saw him die, and I buried him myself. I knew the truth, but I didn't want to let go. For a moment, I stayed in his arms, wishing it was real. Grief came over me. I wanted to believe I could stay, that he was alive somewhere, that I could rest and none of the pain had happened. Every part of me longed for that comfort.

'This is part of the trap. Don't get caught up in regret. We can't change the past. Our mate needs us, our pack needs us. Move away, Talia, or we'll be lost here forever,' my wolf pressed.

"You've done enough," Father said, pulling back and resting his hands on my shoulders. "Let someone else deal with the mess Jason made. You can stop now. Stay here with me. There's no pain here. No Rogue King, no mad rogues, nothing. You can stay and take care of the roses with me." Rose bushes appeared behind him, and their pleasant aroma spread through the air.

'Get away from him!' My wolf was shouting now, throwing herself against the inside of me. 'Get away from him, Talia, now!'

I closed my eyes and exhaled as I shrugged off his hands. "As much as I would love to, I can't," I said as I backed away.

"Why make this difficult? All you have to say is yes, and you can stay here with me. Your mother is here too. Don't you want to see your mother?" my father asked, reaching for me.

I stepped backward, keeping out of his reach. "I know, but I can't stay here with you."

"Why not, you silly girl? You've missed me, haven't you?" he questioned.

"Yes, but you're not real. None of this is real," I said.

"Don't be foolish, Talia. I'm your father. I know what's best for you, and you need to stop. You failed as a Luna before. You're going to fail again. You don't know what you're doing, and that's okay. All you have to be is my little princess," Father said.

I sneered. "My father never taught me to hide from hard things. He taught me to face them. He would never tell me to give up, and he never doubted me." "Talia, I know what's...."

"You're wearing his face, but you don't know anything about him. He would never talk to me like that." I gathered myself. "You're a trick. You're reaching into me, trying to find a weakness to use against me. You will not succeed."

His face changed. The smile disappeared, and briefly, he had no expression at all. He looked like a puppet with my father's features, blank and empty, waiting for someone to tell him what to do.

"Stay," he ordered.

"No."

"I am your father, and you will do what I say," he yelled.

“Shut up! You're not him!” I snapped and swung at him.

He shattered and disappeared the moment I made contact with him. The darkness broke apart too. Cracks spread out, filling the emptiness with light until there was no darkness left.

Suddenly, I was back in the forest. Sunlight shone through the gray trees. The white mist faded, drifting away between the trunks like a retreating tide.

Ahead of me stood three women.

They wore white robes, and veils covered their faces, showing only their eyes. They watched me calmly, as if they had been waiting for anyone to come out of the darkness. The woman in the middle was older, with gray hair that looked like soft moonlight. Her presence was strong, almost like an Alpha's. She came closer to me. "What brings you here, Luna Talia?"