Barren Luna 341

Chapter 341

Talia's POV

"I came to ask you for help against Morgana," I responded quickly. The older witch's eyes widened in surprise.

"Do not speak her name!" the witch on the left hissed, "Do you want to bring her here?"

"Stop being suspicious, sister. She wouldn't be here," the witch on the right scolded. "How do you know that name?" the middle witch asked.

"She's helped plan attacks against me, my loved ones, and my people. Now she's working with the Rogue King. Together, they want to destroy the werewolf world and put him on the throne, and she's making it happen. If she wins against us, she won't stop with wolves. We have a better chance against her if we work together than if we fight alone," I explained.

The witch on the left let out a scoff. "Together? You must think we're fools. The last time we trusted your kind, it nearly cost us everything. That won't happen again."

"I am telling you the truth. I have no reason to harm any of you," I countered.

"We should hear the she-wolf out," the one on the right said. "We've put up with Morgana for years because there was nothing the three of us could do to stop her. I grow tired of always preparing for Morgana's attack. If this wolf has a way to change that, I want to hear it."

"We can't trust the words of wolves," the left one snapped. 'Nothing good has ever come from them, or have you forgotten what happened a century of moons ago?'

"You speak like a bigot," the right one hissed.

The two of them argued, their voices getting louder. I stayed quiet because it wasn't my place to step in. They needed to work things out on their own. If that meant listening to them argue for hours, I would do it.

The one in the center had not said a word. She had been watching me the whole time, and when she finally spoke, both of the others stopped at once. "Quiet now, for you two embarrass us further."

"Her opinion doesn't matter," the left one muttered. "Give her to the trees and let us move on while the night is young."

"She passed the test," the middle one stated.

The left one turned and threw up her hands. "Camilla, you can't be serious," she said in exasperation.

“It is a fact, sister," the witch on the right said, still watching me. "The woods showed her what she wanted most and promised her she could have it if she stayed. Most people either give in or panic and run. She did neither. She passed the test, and she has my condolences."

"You have a strong constitution, young Luna," the middle witch complimented.

"Thank you,” I said. "Does that mean you'll help?"

The middle witch chuckled dryly before saying firmly, "No."

My brief hope vanished instantly.

“Do not look so disappointed. If left up to me, you would be with the Moon Goddess now," the witch on the left said.

"You survived the woods, so you get to leave, but passing a test isn't the same as earning an alliance. Take your people and go home. That is all we can offer you," the middle witch stated.

She turned to leave, and the two other witches turned with her, and the mist began to fold back in around them. My wolf pushed against me and said, 'Do not let them go. Convince them!'

"No! You don't get to play with me and then tell me no. I didn't come all this way for nothing," I yelled.

The older witch stopped and turned around. As she did, she lifted her hand, and the air shimmered white, then gold, until fire burst from the ground, creating a wall of flames between us. Heat pressed against my skin, and the flames rose higher than the tallest tree.

"Step back," she said through it. "We do not wish harm, but we will if you overstep. Be grateful that you have survived this ordeal. Go home."

"No."

"This fire isn't the woods playing tricks. It is real, and it will burn you to nothing if you test it."

"I am not leaving until you at least agree to give me advice on how to fight against Morgana," I said.

"Then you will have to face us, child, which you can not do."

'Fire didn't hurt us before. What if it is the same with hers?' my wolf suggested.

'I am willing to try it,' I said, and I walked into the fire.

'I meant to try with your hand first!' my wolf exclaimed, and I braced for pain, but felt

none.

I felt the fire just like I had in the dark chamber. It tried to burn me, but the heat rolled over my skin and then faded away. The flames seemed to feed the fire inside me, and I walked through them, coming out close enough to see the old woman's eyes go wide.

All three witches froze, shock clear on their faces. Whatever they expected, it wasn't me walking out of their fire unharmed.

"You can wield Moonfire?" the older witch asked in surprise.

"Yes, I can," I confirmed.

The middle witch didn't answer right away. She looked at me, then at the two witches beside her. They seemed to share a silent understanding before she finally gave a single, firm nod.

"We will speak with you, Luna," the older witch finally said.

“I'm Camilla,” she said. “This is Dalila, and this is Hattie." The younger two inclined their heads, the suspicious one last, and the quickest. "Maybe we can make an alliance after all."

Chapter 342

Nolan's POV

We'd been calling Talia's name for what felt like an hour, but the woods swallowed every sound. Marco cupped his hands and shouted into the mist, again and again, getting nothing back each time. Della paced a few steps away, jaw tight as she scanned the trees.

"Where are you, Talia?" Della screamed, but once again she received no response.

I fought off images of the trap Talia had fallen into. Every time I pictured it, I felt myself unraveling. I should have grabbed her. The ground gave way with her just ahead, and when I lunged, my hand closed on empty air. If I'd moved a heartbeat sooner, I could have saved her.

'She's alive,' my wolf said, the same thing he had been saying since it happened. 'I'd feel it if she weren't. The bond is thin in here, but I know she's alive.'

I was beginning to lose faith, and then I heard her. "Nolan!"

The sound came from ahead, through the trees, faint but definitely hers.

“Talia,” I called back, beginning to move towards the sound of her voice.

"Wait," Della said as her hand caught my arm. "That might not be her. It could be another trap."

"What if it is her?" I countered.

"We can find out, but we need to stick together,” Della said.

She was right, and I hated that she was right, and I made myself stand still with everything in me screaming to run at the sound.

Then the mist faded, and suddenly she was there.

She ran toward us through the trees, unharmed. Behind her, three women in white robes followed at a calm pace. Talia jumped into my arms, and I pulled her close to me. She was solid, warm, breathing with nothing out of place that my wolf could

sense.

'I told you she was safe,' my wolf huffed.

"You're all right. Thank the Moon Goddess," I said.

"I'm better than all right. I've gotten what we came here for." She pulled back enough to look at me, and she was excited in a way I had not seen since before any of this began. "These are the coven leaders, Nolan. Camilla, Dalila, Hattie." The three of them had stopped at a respectful distance back. "They've agreed to work with us."

I looked from her to the three witches and back.

"You convinced a witch coven to ally with wolves that fast?" Marco questioned. "You're amazing, Luna."

The middle witch, Camilla, stepped forward. Amusement glimmered in her eyes. "Welcome to what's left of the coven, Alpha. Your Luna is more persuasive than she has any right to be." She turned. "Let us speak indoors. The rest of this is better said sitting down."

I kept glancing at Talia in disbelief. She had entered these woods with an impossible task and emerged having accomplished it. 'Did you think we would not get the alliance? When our mate sets her mind on something, she gets it,' my wolf stated, and I couldn't agree more.

The coven's home sat in a clearing the mist did not touch, low and old, built around the old and established trees. They brought us inside and put food in front of us: fruit, cheese, and some type of wine. Della immediately went for the food. Marco looked at her in horror.

"If they were going to poison us, they would've killed us already," Della said. "I am starving, so I'm eating."

Marco facepalmed."Excuse our Beta's manners."

"No offense taken. Her bluntness is refreshing," Hattie laughed.

"Why agree to our alliance?" I asked, turning the conversation back to the topic at hand. "You had every reason to turn us away. What changed?"

Camilla took a sip of her tea before setting the cup down.

"Years ago, a Luna came here with Moonfire. She wanted peace between witches and wolves, and for a while, she had it. But when she died, no one was left to keep it together. The old distrust returned." Camilla looked at Talia. "We didn't expect to see another Luna with Moonfire. We do not believe in coincidences. It was fate for you to be here today."

"So you're doing this because of the Moonfire?"

"Partly," Hattie answered. "Moonfire isn't just rare. It nullifies a witch's power. When Moonfire is present, our spells collapse, as if the threads of our magic unravel in its light. It can dispel illusions, break through wards, even strip power from hexes already laid. Most magic bends or recoils away from it instinctively, like animals from fire. That's why it is the key to defeating Morgana."

"Then, there's the fact that Morgana is a very real problem for us," Dalila added from her place by a window, farthest away from us. "She has an alliance with the Rogue King, and he is a powerful backer. If she gets her way and the Rogue King gets control of the packs, then we'll be standing alone against her." She folded her arms and sighed in annoyance. "She's a stain on this coven's history. We should have stopped her before, but we couldn't. If your Luna's Moonfire is our second chance, I'll take it. No matter what it costs my pride."

Only one thing still bothered me, and it had been on my mind since Leslie first mentioned it. "But Talia does not know how to use Moonfire.

"Is this true?" Camilla asked.

"It was triggered by accident when I was trapped in a burning room," Talia replied.

"It saved her life at that time, but what about later? That worries me more than Morgana does right now," I added.

"And you are right to be concerned," Dalila said. "Untrained, that fire is as dangerous to her as to anyone she aims it at."

"That's why I'll be training her myself," Camilla interjected.

Talia took my hand under the table. "Truly?" she asked in excitement.

"I do not lie," Camilla answered. "You will be more than prepared when it is time to face Morgana."

"Thank you," I said, and meant it. "When do we start?"

“This isn't a group lesson,” Dalila snorted.

"Moonfire must be learned alone, away from prying eyes, and it takes time. She'll remain here, in closed training for at least a week with no interruptions," Camilla explained.

Her answer caught me off guard.

"A week?!"

Chapter 343

Talia's POV

Nolan's face said it all before he could even open his mouth. The concern was plain. It was the same as whenever he sensed trouble and knew he couldn't protect me from it.

"I have to master this," I told him. "Right now, I am using the Moonfire without realizing it, and every time I become feverish. I can't fight Morgana if this power is only moments away from putting me into another coma. Then, I become a liability. Camilla can help me with that. My power is the whole reason we have the alliance. Let her help me, help us."

Nolan reached out and laid the back of his hand against my forehead, and his frown deepened at the heat coming off me.

"You're burning up right now," he said, and Camilla snapped her fingers. Dalila begrudgingly offered me a cup of tea, and I took it from her.

"This will take care of the fever," she said quickly before heading back to her position at the window.

"See, this is exactly what I am talking about. They know how to help me. I need to do this, Nolan. Please don't fight me on this," I said.

"Then I'll stay," Della said. "I'll sit in a corner. I won't make a sound to disturb her training. She shouldn't be alone in a strange place full of witches for a week."

"No," Camilla said firmly. "A week is already the bare minimum. I'm pushing it as it is. Moonfire training can't happen with anyone else present. The power senses everything: every heartbeat, every stray thought. If someone doesn't belong, it can ruin the whole process. If you want her safe and in control, she has to do this alone."

I took Nolan's hand off my forehead and held it.

"Trust me," I said. "I'll be fine. They have no reason to harm me."

Nolan looked at me for a long moment. Then his shoulders dropped, the fight going out of them.

"All right."

Camilla nodded, her satisfaction clear. "Rest for today. The trip here was taxing, and these woods sap your strength more than most realize. Training will begin at sunrise." She turned to Nolan. "Dalila will guide you out in the morning. As long as she's with you, the forest will let you pass."

“Fine,” Nolan responded, and Della and Marco nodded.

"Hattie, take them to their rooms," Camilla said.

"Yes, Camilla,” Hattie said, ushering us out of the room. She led us toward the guest rooms, down halls we didn't go when we first arrived. The witches we passed in the corridors slowed and looked at us, and a few stopped outright to stare. Nolan leaned close.

"Why do they keep looking at us like that?"

"They're probably just surprised," I said. "It can't be every day a pack of wolves walks through here. We're a novelty."

“It used to mean something worse than novelty," Della said, low enough that only we heard it. "Last time wolves and witches were in the same room, it meant a fight was coming. This truce only works right now because both sides want the same thing. Take that away, and we're back to being the enemy in their hallway."

"A win is a win in my opinion," I said. "If we can fight on the same side, that's a start. Maybe we can build something better this time. There's nothing stopping us from trying for more once Morgana's out of the picture. Peace happened once; we can make it happen again."

Della looked conflicted. Her expression was a mixture of worry and warmth. Whatever she was going to say, she decided against it and simply said, "We'll see Luna."

We reached the rooms, and Hattie left us without another word.

"Get some sleep. You've got a long way back tomorrow." I tried to make it light, but it came out sounding more serious than I meant. “I might not be able to see you off. If the training is what Camilla says it is, I'll be shut away training before you even set off."

Della pulled me into a hug and held it longer than she usually did.

"Take care of yourself," she said into my shoulder. “Do not let them work you into the ground. And if anything feels wrong, you send for us. I don't care what the rules

are."

"I will."

She let go. Marco reached out and gripped my arm, giving it a reassuring squeeze before saying, "Stay safe, Luna." Then he and Della turned and made their way to their room.

Nolan and I then went into our room.

Once the door shut, he went and sat on the edge of the bed. I stepped between his knees. His arms circled my waist, and he rested his head against my stomach. We remained like that for a moment while I rubbed his back.

"It's only a week," I said at last. "That's all it is. When it's over, when Morgana and the Rogue King are dead, we can finally have the life we want. No more spells, no more traitors, no one trying to steal our faces. Just you and me ruling over our pack as we should be."

He looked up at me, eyes full of warmth.

"You went into the Lost Woods and came out with the coven on our side. You survived the Blackveil, and you made Jason answer for what he did to your father." He drew me down for a long, gentle kiss. "I'm so proud of you. I should say it more."

Emotion tightened my throat, and I let it.

"Come get me in a week," I whispered.

"Not a day later," he promised.

Chapter 344

Talia's POV

My wolf woke me up before dawn. All I could hear were Nolan's soft snores and the occasional creak of the house. I groaned, wishing I could sleep longer. 'Seriously? It's barely morning.'

'Camilla's here. She said to wake you,' my wolf replied.

That woke me up fast. 'How do you know that? Did she talk to you?'

'Sort of. I can feel what she wants. She's getting impatient,' my wolf said.

Nolan kept sleeping, his arm draped over my waist. His face was peaceful, free from worry. I didn't want to wake him. Goodbyes with Nolan always lasted too long.

I kissed his forehead gently and slipped out from under his arm. I dressed quickly and tiptoed to the door.

Just like my wolf said, Camilla was waiting outside with a candle. The flickering light made her seem older than she did in daylight.

"I am sorry for the hour," she said. "I know it is a cruel way to start. But dawn is when the mind is quietest, and a quiet mind is what you need. For the rest of the week, we will start at this hour."

"It's no problem," I said. "Let's go."

She led me through quiet halls to a room tucked away from everything else. When she closed the door, I realized this room was soundproof. The room was padded with no furniture. It was barely lit with one candle.

"How am I going to train if there is nothing for me to train with?" I asked.

"This isn't like your wolf's training regimens. We will begin with explaining what Moonfire is," Camilla replied. "Tell me what you know of it."

"Only that it is fire and it keeps me from being burned," I answered.

"Moonfire isn't just a normal flame," she said, sitting down and gesturing for me to join her.

"Your body already knows this, but your mind has to catch up. You can't just light it and put it out. Moonfire is your wolf's spirit mixed with the moon's power, running through you like blood. Yours is strong, even stronger than I expected. But strength without control is dangerous, and you have a lot of strength but not much control. That's why we start with awareness, not action. Before you can use it, you have to find it inside yourself."

I sat across from her and closed my eyes.

"Breathe," she instructed. "Slow your pace. Focus on your heartbeat. Don't search for the fire; allow it to come."

I closed my eyes and focused on my heartbeat, letting everything else fade. At first, there was only darkness and the soft thump of my heart. Then a gentle warmth began to rise inside me, like the current of a slow stream. It had always been there, but I never noticed until it was out of control. Now, in the quiet, I could feel it moving softly through me.

"I can feel it," I said.

"Good. Don't try to control it. Just let it be. Accept it," Camilla instructed.

Temptation and impatience got the better of me. I tried to grab the flame, hoping to bend it to my will.

'Stop!' my wolf warned, but it was already too late. The flame surged, and heat rushed through me. My skin burned, and my head spun.

"Stop! Let it go," Camilla ordered sharply, but before I could move, a splash of freezing water hit my face, snapping me out of the feverish haze.

I gasped, dripping and shocked. "Did you just throw water at me?"

Camilla didn't flinch. "Would you have liked to burn instead, child?"

I scowled, wiping the cold water off my face. "No, I would not."

"You can't force Moonfire into your grasp. It isn't something you can bend to your will. Just like your bond with your wolf, there needs to be mutual respect. Rest, and then you will try again."

I sat quietly until my hands stopped shaking. When I was calm, she nodded for me to try again.

This time, I just breathed and let the flame exist. I listened to my heartbeat and let the fire match its rhythm. Slowly, the two blended. The warmth didn't feel strange anymore. It was part of me now.

'It's calm now,' my wolf murmured within me. 'I can sense it. It's not fighting us anymore. It's truly ours.'

"Good," Camilla said, as if she could hear it too. "Now. Gently. Allow a little of it to move down your arm, into your hand."

I closed my eyes and imagined the flame moving into my open palm, letting it settle there slowly, like water filling a still pool. Little by little, I felt it gather in my hand.

When I opened my eyes, a small flame rested in my palm. It glowed silver-white with a blue center, but it didn't burn. It just sat on my skin, calm and gentle, giving off a soft, cool light.

"There it is," Camilla said, sounding pleased. "You have basic control now. You've done better than I expected for the first day. If you continue to listen to my instructions, you will have it mastered within the week."

I closed my hand, putting out the flame, and felt the warmth return to me. I was exhausted, sweat soaking my shirt, but I was relieved. For once, the fire hadn't taken over. I was the one in control.

"You did well," Camilla said as she stood. "But don't let it go to your head. This was the easy part. Holding it in a calm space is nothing compared to keeping hold of it when chaos finds you. That's what the rest of this week is for."

"Thank you for everything," I said. "I'll be ready tomorrow."

Chapter 345

Nolan's POV

The sun had barely dipped below the horizon when Della, Marco, and I made our way back to the Bloodmoon pack's territory. The woods around our home were painted in deepening shadows, with the air thick with the scent of pine and damp earth. The usual path to the packhouse felt lonelier without Talia beside me.

Walden was waiting for us on the porch. "Welcome back," he said. His gaze flicked past me and back again. "Where is Luna Talia?" he asked, casual in tone, but concern showed in his eyes.

I kept my expression steady. "She's in closed training," I said carefully. “She still needs to learn how to control her new ability. She is in good hands, and I will bring her back myself in a week."

Walden looked relieved. "That's good. She's strong. I'm sure she'll come back even stronger." He shot me a sly look. "A week, huh? That's a long time without your mate. Going to be lonely?"

I rolled my eyes, forcing a smirk. "I'll be busy enough with pack matters. I doubt I'll have time to miss her."

Walden laughed. "If you say so. Now, if you'll excuse me, Alpha, I'm going to get some well-deserved rest. If something happens, get Marco to do it."

I laughed, and Marco stated, "Don't worry. I'll handle it." I watched Walden walk toward his house. He'd been through a lot and always stayed loyal. I owed him.

'Once we deal with the Rogue King, we'll let him take a vacation. He really deserves it,' my wolf said, and I agreed.

Inside, the packhouse was busy as usual in the evening. Voices filled the halls, pots clattered in the kitchen, and music played from the rec room. Someone laughed upstairs, and the smell of fresh cookies came from the kitchen.

Usually, all the noise would comfort me and remind me the pack was safe and together. But tonight, every sound just made me notice what was missing. Talia's absence felt like a quiet ache underneath it all.

'You are acting as if she won't come back,' my wolf huffed.

'Says the one that nearly drove me insane when she disappeared.'

'That was different. We know where she is. She is safe. We can wait a week,' my wolf stated.

Della noticed my reflection as we passed a mirror on our way through the foyer. Her lips curled in a mischievous smile. "Missing your other half already?"

I huffed, but she just laughed. "If it gets too bad, I can lend you, Marco, for company. He's housebroken, mostly."

"Hey!" Marco exclaimed. "That was the only time, and you said you wouldn't talk about it."

I side-eyed him. "Do I even want to know?"

Marco came over and put his arm around my shoulders. "Forget about that. How about we take the night off? How about we raid your stash and have a real drink?"

The idea was tempting. Anything to distract from the gnawing worry. "Fine," I agreed. “But only if you two promise not to trash the place."

"Promise," Della said.

"Do you have fingers crossed behind your back?" I questioned.

"Of course not. I would never," Della teased.

We headed to the office connected to my bedroom. Marco went right to the tall cabinet and dug out a bottle of vintage whiskey. I'd been saving it for something special. I shot him a look. "That was meant for Talia."

I went for the bottle, but he opened it with a grin. "Tonight's special enough. Besides, you're my best brother. Who deserves a drink more than you?"

"And Talia deserves better than this," Della said, grabbing the bottle from Marco to check the label. "Where did you even get this?"

"Not everyone gets to be the Beta of a Princess. We make do with what we have," I said.

"Not anymore. Your stash is getting a full makeover this week," Della said.

I couldn't argue with her. Della poured the first glass and raised it in a silent toast. Marco filled mine, the amber liquid shining in the lamp light. We sat together in a loose circle.

The first sip burned, and Della coughed. "Goddess, what is this? Did you soak grapes in gasoline?" she joked, then poured herself another glass.

Marco nudged me. "You know she'll be fine, right?"

"Talia's tough," Della added. "She'll probably master her power and be ready to come back early."

I let out a quiet laugh. "I know. Still..." I swirled the whiskey in my glass. "I already miss her. She's only been gone a few hours, but it feels like something's missing. I can hardly stand not having her here."

Marco grinned. "Look at you. A year ago, you would have laughed at the idea of missing anyone, especially the Alpha King's daughter. You've gone soft."

I couldn't help but smile. "You got me. I won't deny it."

Marco clapped me on the back. "The cold-hearted alpha is now a lovesick pup. Hell must have frozen over."

"You have no room to talk," I responded.

Marco finished his drink and poured another. "I don't know what you're talking about."

I smirked. "Says the guy who writes Della poetry and pretends he's not a romantic."

Della covered her mouth to hide a laugh as Marco's cheeks turned pink. "How... how do you know that?"

"I'm your Alpha. I know everything," I teased.

"Alright, you got me. Mates change us, make us whole. All I know is that I never want to go back to life without her," Marco stated.

"See, there's that romantic," I teased.

"Shut up," Marco blushed.

We sat quietly for a moment. I looked at my friends and was thankful. Even with Talia gone, I wasn't alone.

Marco lifted his glass again. "To mates, and to making it through the week without burning down the pack house."

Della giggled. "And to Talia. Let's hope she comes back soon."

Chapter 346

Nolan's POV

Five days.

I counted every one of them.

Every night, I found myself reaching out for her through the bond, desperate for even a trace of connection. I replayed our last conversation over and over, wondering if I'd said enough, if she knew how much I trusted her. Sleep came hard, and when it did, my dreams were filled with moving shadows and the sound of her voice just out of reach.

I was at my desk, sorting through the week's paperwork, when Marco came in without knocking. He sat down across from me and stretched his legs out, acting like he owned the place. I shot him a look until he put his feet down.

"Nothing on the rogues," he said. "No sign of them at any of the markers. It's like they packed up and left, which is not like them."

I frowned. "That's not good. What are they up to?"

"No idea, but I'd take this over daily attacks." He looked at me, then at the pile of reports under my hand. "You've been in this office or out on the training field every day for five days. The warriors keep asking me to come back."

"I need to stay busy. If I stop, I just think about her. She still hasn't reached out, Marco. Not once," I said.

Marco nodded, understanding what it's like to miss your mate. "Has the coven sent any word or an update?"

"Nothing from them as well."

"Then drive out there and check on her. The Lost Woods accept us now. You could sneak in, check on her, and leave," Marco answered.

"I'm not doing that," I said firmly.

"Nolan, come on."

"No. If she found out I was checking on her, like she's a pup who can't be trusted, she'd be furious and she'd have every right. Talia told me to trust her. I'm not going to break that trust two days before she comes back. I won't make that mistake again."

Marco's mouth twitched. "That never stopped you before."

"I mean it. I have learned from my mistakes."

"Because by my count, we're closer to the fourth."

I gave him a flat look. He just raised his hands and grinned.

"Come to lunch," he said as he stood up. "Della's been cooking all morning, and she'll be impossible if no one eats. Come sit for an hour and act like a person."

I was about to answer, but then I felt Solon reaching out through the mind link. He was being pretty insistent.

"Go on ahead," I told Marco. "It's Solon. Tell Della I'll come when I can."

Marco left. I opened the link and said, "I know what you're going to ask. Nothing has changed since you last asked."

'Still? It has been five days.'

'Yes, I know.'

I remembered telling him on the second day, since Talia was too busy to do it herself. Solon didn't deserve to be left out. He wasn't happy when I told him. He yelled so much I had a headache for two days, but he got over it faster than I expected.

'She's in good hands. The coven will not harm.'

'I know,' Solon replied. 'There have been no mad rogues since the last attack, and there's not a single sighting across any allied territory in over a week.'

'The same thing is happening with us. It should feel like good news.'

'I'd rather have them causing trouble than this silence. The Rogue King is holding

his forces back for something, and not knowing what it is just gets to me.' He sighed, sounding frustrated. 'You were right to send her for training. We have to be ready for whatever those two are planning.'

'No argument there.'

'But everything else is wearing me out.' He paused, and I could hear his breath over the link. 'Doomfur is falling apart. Kent never named a successor, so now every contender is circling. Three packs want me to back their Alpha, and other work to coordinate. I keep thinking about my father and how he kept all the packs together for so long, making it look easy. I've been in charge for less than a month, and I can barely manage.'

'You're doing better than you think,' I told him. 'Your father had years to learn. You had to step up overnight, and that's not easy.'

A moment of quiet passed.

'Thank you, man,' Solon said, sounding grateful. 'I needed to hear that.' Then, more firmly, 'Let me know the moment anything changes. As soon as she's out of those woods, I want to know.'

'You have my word.'

The link closed.

'He talks too much,' my wolf said.

'Give him a break. Talia is all the family he has left, and with her gone, we're the closest thing he has,' I replied.

I pushed back from the desk and stood up. Lunch first, then the training field, and the rest of the reports tonight. I was halfway to the door, already planning my afternoon, when the room lurched.

There was no pain, just a sudden lightness. I sensed a strange floating sensation behind my eyes. Then, impossibly, I caught a trace of her scent. It was warm and familiar, as if she were right next to me, even though she was far away.

I stopped with my hand on the door frame.

"Talia," I whispered within the quiet office, "is that you?"

Chapter 347

Talia's POV

I sat with legs crossed on the floor of the sealed chamber, eyes closed and hands resting open on my knees. I reached for Nolan. I've been doing that for over an hour now, with no luck.

"Picture him," Camilla said from somewhere to my left, her voice low and even. "Visualize him standing next to you. Think about the heat of his skin. Think about how his scent surrounds you. Hold on to that, and let the fire carry it to him."

"It's not reaching him," I said. "I can feel it leaving me, but nothing comes back."

'It may just need time,' my wolf said gently from within me. 'We need to be patient. We will reach him.'

"She is right," Camilla said. "Do not rush this. Your control over the fire is good now, better than good. But this isn't about control. You cannot control the mate bond any more than you can force the fire. Moonfire has its own will. It will obey, but only if you ask gently, with focus and patience. You must trust that the one on the other end is reaching back. Try again. This time, do not beg him to respond.'

I nodded, keeping my eyes closed, and tried again.

I stopped trying to force the memories and let them flow naturally. The memory of escaping Jason rose up first. Then the field on the Moonbrook border, and how Nolan froze at the sight of me, alive. The lake, the chill of the grass, his forehead resting against mine. I gathered all these memories and let the fire carry their warmth out to him, not as a desperate call, but as everything I had to offer.

And then, finally, he answered.

'Talia? Is that you?' Nolan's voice came through, and the bond between us filled with his presence. It felt like he was right there with me, as if I could reach out and touch him.

'It's me!' I said, unable to stop the smile in my words. 'I did it. I learned to master the fire. Camilla showed me how to use it to deepen our bond. No matter the distance, we can find each other now. We'll never be cut off again.'

'Are you safe?' Of course, that was his first question.

I laughed and said, 'I'm fine. I promise.'

'Truly? You're not hurt?'

'Come see for yourself.'

There was a pause. 'What do you mean?'

'Camilla says that my training is complete. She said I'm ready to go.'

'Don't tease me, Talia.'

'I'm not. She said I can come home tomorrow. Why would I tease about that?'

There was a pause before excitement and relief poured into our mate bond. I couldn't help but smile at how much Nolan had missed. me. 'Then I'll be at the border of the woods at daybreak, not a second late.'

'I'll be waiting.'

I let the connection close softly, enjoying the lingering warmth before I opened my eyes. Camilla was there, watching me, hands folded in her lap.

"I assume you were able to contact him from the smile on your face," she said.

Without thinking about whether it was allowed, I leaned over and hugged her.

Camilla stiffened at first, and momentarily, I worried I had gone too far. Then her arms came up and wrapped around my back, awkward and a bit unsure, like someone who hadn't done this in a long time.

"Thank you for helping me," I told her. "You have no idea what this means to us."

"No need for that. You did all the work. I simply provided instruction," she said, but she held on a little longer.

After that, she took me to lunch in a dining hall where the coven always ate together. In just five days, I'd found my place among them. Once Hattie and Dalila had accepted me, the rest of the coven was approachable from then on. Hattie was sweet and reserved, quietly sliding an extra roll onto my plate. Dalila was harder to figure out at first. It was clear she had a difficult history with werewolves, but once she warmed up, she was all boldness and wit.

They were making apple pies at the big table when Dalila and another witch started debating about the crust. "It needs at least ten more minutes," Dalila insisted, crossing her arms. "If you leave it that long, it'll burn!" the other protested, waving a floury hand.

In the heat of their argument, a pie slid off the table and tumbled toward the hearth. “Careful!” Hattie cried, but I was already in motion. I put my hand into the fire, plucked the pie out, and turned it over in my hands, the heat rolling off my skin as if it meant nothing.

"A little toasted, but overall it is fine," I said with a laugh as I had caught the pie before it burned. I slid it back onto the table.

Dalila looked at the pie, then at my unburned hands, and a slow grin spread over her face.

"You know, Moonfire isn't just for ending witches. It's practical too. You'll never burn your fingers in the kitchen again," Dalila said, giving me a wink.

"I never would have thought of using it like that. It really is a gift. I wish I'd awakened it sooner,” I said. I remembered all the times I'd burned myself on pots and pans at Shadowclaw, especially on those days when I was stuck cooking for the whole pack because I didn't trust the omegas to do it right. Moonfire would have saved me a lot of pain.

Dalila set her rolling pin down and leaned in, a mischievous glint in her eyes. "Oh, but there's an even better use for it. That fire isn't just for kitchens or battles."

She dropped her voice to a wicked whisper. "With the right person, used the right way, it'll give you the best sex of your life."

My face instantly caught fire, and this time, it had nothing to do with my ability.

Chapter 348

Talia's POV

I woke before sunrise, my senses sharpened and my wolf's energy humming

impatiently within me. Both of us felt coiled and ready to move.

Today, I was finally going home.

The moment my eyes opened, I reached for Nolan through our bond, something that had become second nature to me. The connection pulsed steadily and strongly between us, vivid even across the miles. My wolf responded with a quiet joy, a ripple of contentment just below my skin.

'Are you on the road yet?'

'Well, good morning to you too. I'm already en route to the Lost Woods,' he said, his voice warm with barely contained excitement. 'I'll be at the edge of the Lost Woods in about three hours.'

'Camilla will meet you there and bring you in.' I pressed my face into the pillow to hide my wide grin, though no one was there to see it. 'I can't wait to show you what I can do now. You won't believe it.'

He laughed. 'I can't wait either. I'll see you soon.'

The connection faded, and I lingered for a moment, savoring the echo of his presence before forcing myself out of bed.

I went to the sealed chamber one last time while I waited for him. I no longer needed Camilla's guidance for this. Sitting cross-legged on the floor, I closed my eyes, focused on my heartbeat, and called forth the Moonfire. The power answered with a gentle surge, flooding my senses with cool light. I opened my eyes to see silver-blue shadows flickering across the chamber walls as the flame hovered above my palm, calm and obedient.

A week ago, this power had nearly killed me. Now, it responded as if it had always been under my control.

'He's going to be proud of you,' my wolf said.

'I know. I am proud of myself too,' I agreed.

I closed my hand, and the flame disappeared.

Three hours should have passed painfully slowly; instead, Hattie found me pacing within the sealed chamber and pulled me out.

"You'll wear a groove in the floor," she said. "Come and have tea with me. He'll get here faster if you're not standing at the door willing him through it."

She sat me down in the warm room off the kitchen and placed a steaming cup of tea in my hands. The kitchen buzzed with gentle chaos. Hattie's quiet humming blended with the rhythmic thud of dough being kneaded and a savory scent drifting through the air.

"What are you making this time?" I asked.

"Chicken pot pies," Hattie responded. The door to the kitchen opened, but it was Dalila who entered. I went back to drinking my tea. Dalila slid into the chair across from me, a broad grin spreading across her face as she openly sized me up.

“Look at you,” she said. “You have the look of a puppy watching for its owner from the window. I swear, your ears almost perked up when I came in.”

"I don't have puppy ears."

"You have the whole posture." She grinned. "And don't think I've forgotten what I told you in the kitchen. You've got a long ride home ahead of you. You remember what that fire of yours is good for besides fighting. Put it to use.”

My cheeks burned as I recalled what she said about "the best sex," so I quickly changed the subject.

"Do the two of you have mates?" I asked. "Is that even a thing, for witches?"

Hattie smiled at that, gently, and shook her head. "The Moon Goddess doesn't hand us a destined mate the way she does your kind. We find people the ordinary way, or we don't. And we haven't had much of a chance at the ordinary way." Her smile dimmed. “Morgana has kept us shut inside these woods for most of our lives. She once claimed that no other witches should exist, but those loyal to her, and she'll stop at nothing to make sure of it. You don't go out walking in the world looking for someone to love when the most dangerous witch alive wants your coven dead.”

"That's the part that makes me maddest," Dalila said, and there was a real edge under the joke. "The years she cost us hiding here while she gets to do whatever she wants. It makes my blood boil."

I felt awful asking them about it now. I couldn't imagine how lonely it has to be without their other half.

"I'll tell you this," Dalila continued. "The day that woman is finally in the ground, I'm walking straight out of these woods, and I'm not stopping until I find a boyfriend. A loud one with terrible manners. Camilla will hate him."

I laughed so hard I nearly spilled my tea. Then there was a knock at the door.

My whole body tensed and turned toward the door. For a moment, I thought Nolan must have arrived early, that Camilla had brought him in, and I was already on my feet before my cup hit the table.

I went to the door and pulled it open with his name already half out of my mouth. It was Camilla, but she was alone.

"Where is Nolan?" I asked, and then I noticed her painful expression. It made me freeze in place.

"Talia," she said, her voice suddenly gentle in a way that made my chest tighten before I even heard the words. "I need you to remain calm."

"Ok. Where is Nolan?" I asked again.

"Nolan was attacked on the road by mad rogues before he reached the woods—" "What?" I interrupted. The blood drained from my face.

Chapter 349

Talia's POV

I rushed past Camilla and sprinted down the hallway.

"Talia, stop!” she called, but her voice was distant, drowned out by the images of Nolan bitten, his body twisting and changing into something wild and lost.

'Enough,' my wolf warned. 'You're letting fear take over again. He's not lost to us.'

I made it to the infirmary and followed his scent to the room he was in. I froze when I saw him.

He lay there wrapped in blood-soaked bandages across his chest, arm, and shoulder. Nolan didn't move, except for the slow rise and fall of his breathing.

"Nolan," I said as I took his hand in both of mine. "It's me, Talia. Please wake up."

Nolan didn't respond.

'I can not reach him through the bond,' my wolf whimpered.

I called his name again and again, desperate for any response, but he remained silent. Tears slid down my cheeks as dread twisted in my chest. What if something was terribly wrong? Was he trapped in pain, suffering as my father once had?

"He was not bitten."

Camilla came in behind me. I turned as she walked to the other side of the bed and looked down at him.

"But he's not waking up. He..."

"Listen to me, child. Your mate was not bitten," she repeated, cutting me off. "What you're seeing is just the toll the fight took on him. His wolf has put his body into a deep rest to heal. He will wake up and come back to you."

"You're certain he wasn't bitten?"

"I have never lied to you, child. I will not now," Camilla responded.

"Then why does he look so terrible?" I asked.

“Because he was badly hurt. We've given him medicine to help his body heal faster

and to ease his pain." Her face softened as she looked at me.

"Stay with him. Keep your bond open and hold on to him. Even while he's unconscious, he'll feel you near, and that will help him come back. You being here is the best medicine we have."

"Thank you for saving him. I don't know how to repay you," I said, my voice shaking as I tried not to cry again.

"Repay me by staying calm, lest you wish to burn down my home with Moonfire. He will wake, child. Give him time," Camilla responded before leaving the room.

I pulled a chair to the bed, took his hand again, and held it tight.

I sat beside him, staring at the bandages on his chest, and suddenly understood. This was what I had put Nolan through every time I was the one hurt and unresponsive. The helplessness I felt now, holding his hand and waiting for any sign of life, was the same pain he had felt for me, again and again, never letting me see how much it hurt. Now, in his place, I finally understood. Tears ran down my face.

"For every time I made you wait like this...I didn't know. I'm so sorry."

Waiting was torture. Every minute, I fought to keep from thinking of worst-case scenarios. As Camilla instructed, I poured all my love and hope into the mate bond, silently begging him to come back to me sooner.

Eventually, my back ached so much I couldn't sit still, and anxiety crept in again. I stood up, telling myself I needed to find Camilla and ask whether this was normal and whether he should have woken up yet.

I had barely taken a step away from the bed when his hand wrapped around my wrist.

I spun around. His eyes were open, just slits, glazed and tired, but open.

"There you are," he said, his voice raspy and cracking.

I broke down. I hugged him, trying to be careful of the bandages. His good arm

slowly came up and rested on my back.

"You always say you'll find me," I said into his skin. "This time I found you."

"Took you long enough," he murmured, and I couldn't help but laugh.

I sat back, wiped my face, and looked at him. Relief started to give way to anger.

"Tell me what happened to you," I said.

"I was almost here when my tire blew. I barely managed to stop the car without crashing. When I got out, rogues swarmed me. They came out of the tree line all at once, dozens of them, mad ones, more than I've ever seen," Nolan said.

"You went alone?" I asked.

"Of course not. You know I am not that reckless," Nolan answered. "I went with my warriors. I lost all of them. They took bites that were meant for me. Then, I had to fight to put them out of their misery when they turned."

He grimaced at the memory, and I knew some of them had been with him since he was young."This is not your fault, Nolan," I told him.

Nolan nodded and continued, "I held on until I got close enough to the Lost Woods, and then there was fire everywhere, and the rogues were reduced to ash. The last thing I remember is Camilla telling me to hold on."

"Could it have been a coincidence that they were there?"

"No, it couldn't be a coincidence," Nolan replied. "They knew exactly where I would be. Someone sent them there."

Only one person could have known the road and the time, and could move that many mad rogues to the exact place where Nolan would be that morning. "Morgana," I said.

Chapter 350

Talia's POV

"Yes, it has to be her," Nolan said. "The figure under the tree at Colin's party. She's had eyes on us this whole time, and after that ambush on the road, she knows we went to the coven, and she knows they said yes. She wouldn't have come for me otherwise."

He sat propped up on the pillows, still pale, with bandages standing out against his skin.

"So, they are not observing anymore," I said.

"No. She and the Rogue King are enacting their plan, and that means we need to prepare. We go to Silverfang. We pull everything together in one place, your brother's strength and ours and whatever the coven can give us, and we get ready for a war, because it's coming whether we're ready or not."

I sat on the edge of the bed and looked at his bandages, wishing we could give him at least a week to heal.

"You can barely sit up."

"I'll be on my feet by morning. Whatever the witches gave me is speeding up my healing factor." He took my hand in his. "I'm not asking you to pretend I'm fine. I'm telling you I'll be fine. We can't stay here while they are already making moves to attack."

"You took on dozens of mad rogues today. You lost a lot of blood." My voice came out tighter than I wanted. "Forgive me if I'm not ready to load you into a car and drive you toward a war."

"I know.” His thumb moved over the back of my hand. "I'm not pretending it didn't happen. But just as you convinced me to let you go after Jason, so too with Morgana. We cannot sit and wait on this."

I didn't like it, but I didn't have a counter to it either.

"We leave tomorrow," I said. "It's already dark, and you need one more night of rest at least. We will leave in the morning."

Nolan nodded, and then I heard his stomach growl. "I'll get you something to eat. You just rest."

"Can't do anything else," Nolan said, forcing a smile. I kissed him and then left.

I brought him dinner myself since he wasn't well enough to sit at the table, and I needed the walk to clear my head. As I walked, I kept thinking about our decision.

The dining hall was warm and noisy with the coven eating, and Hattie waved me over as soon as I walked in.

"How is he?" she asked.

"He's awake and already telling me what to do about war plans, so he's mostly himself,” I said, picking up a plate. "We're leaving for Silverfang in the morning."

"We figured," Dalila said, taking the plate from me and finishing it herself. "I wish we could come with you. I'd love to be there when that woman finally goes down." "You can't?"

"Camilla won't allow it. Someone needs to stay and run the coven," Hattie said.

"But you're not going alone. Camilla is coming with you. She's already in her room packing," Dalila added.

"Camilla's coming with us?"

"You sound surprised."

"I am surprised. She's the eldest, and everyone looks to her. I thought if anyone came with us, it would be you or Hattie, not the head of the coven."

Hattie and Dalila traded a look.

"It has to be her," Hattie said quietly. "You should understand why before we set out, because she will never tell you herself. Morgana is Camilla's adopted daughter." "What?!" I exclaimed in surprise.

"Yes, Camilla found her when she was young and alone, took her in, and raised her as her own daughter," Hattie continued.

"Then...how did she turn out like this?" I asked.

"If it were anyone else, I'd say it was childish ambition, but something was off with Morgana. She had more raw talent than anyone in the coven for generations. Sometimes, when Camilla praised her, you could almost see a shadow cross her face, as if she were caught between gratitude and resentment. She never spoke about her life before Camilla found her, but I always wondered if something had happened to her before she joined us. Maybe she felt she didn't really belong, no matter how much Camilla tried. When there was a fight over who would lead, Camilla supported her, defended her, and told us Morgana would be the best of us one day. Morgana wasn't ready to lead yet, but she would be in time. We thought she was happy with that," Dalila said.

"So, what changed?"

"All that time, Morgana was secretly teaching herself the dark arts. She's selfish and greedy. It made no sense. She would have eventually led the coven, but she wanted it right away. When two of our sisters found out, she killed them to keep them from telling Camilla," Dalila explained, and I gasped aloud in horror.

"The girl Camilla raised murdered two of us, Camilla's own sisters, and tried to take everything Camilla had worked her whole life to protect."

My wolf bristled inside me. Now I understood what we were up against. Morgana wasn't just power-hungry. She was evil.

"That doesn't mean Camilla has to come," I said.

"That is exactly why," Hattie added.

"Camilla feels guilty because she let Morgana become this. She thinks it's her responsibility to stop Morgana, and nothing we say will change her mind. Believe me, we've tried." Her voice shook with anger.

"Camilla gave her everything, and Morgana threw it away. Now she's out there killing for a Rogue King. If I ever get my hands on her, I'll make her regret that she was ever born. I swear it on every sister we lost. She's deserved to-"

"Dalila, enough!"

Dalila flinched at the command and stopped mid-sentence. Camilla stood in the doorway, and none of us had heard her come in.