Barren Luna 371

Chapter 371

Nolan's POV

I rushed to Solon's side before I even realized what was happening, putting myself between him and anyone who might be watching. The party around us hadn't noticed yet. Solon gripped the bar, his knuckles white as he tried to catch his breath after coughing.

"That stuff is strong," Solon said hoarsely. "Henry, pour me another glass."

"Stop playing around, Solon. This isn't funny. You're coughing up blood," Talia said, her voice low.

Leslie grabbed a napkin from the bar and wiped the blood from his mouth. She checked his pulse, quietly counting. After a moment, her face went pale and her eyes filled with fear.

"Leslie, what's wrong?" I asked. If he was having a relapse, I had the strength to restrain him on my own, but I wasn't sure I would be able to do it without anyone seeing.

Leslie quickly composed herself and said, “His pulse is unstable. Too fast, then too slow, then fast again. We need to go. Now."

"I'm fine," Solon said as he attempted to stand up straighter. "Just had a little too much wine. Don't make a scene. People are watching." He almost fell, but he gripped the bar to keep himself from falling. “See? I'm fine." Solon tried to smile, but the sweat on his forehead made it clear he wasn't okay.

'I know my brother,' Talia said through the mate bond. 'I know when he is trying to minimize how bad he feels. He only had one glass of wine. Solon shouldn't have reacted like this.'

I nodded, realizing this was serious.

"You're sweating through your shirt," Leslie said.

"I told you the wine was strong," Solon argued.

"Stop arguing with me and cooperate for once in your life!" Leslie snapped.

Solon didn't argue anymore, and that's when I realized things were worse than I thought.

I slipped my arm under his and helped him up, noticing how much he leaned on me. Solon could barely stand on his own. We needed to get him to the hospital quickly.

I turned to Leslie and Talia and said, "Stay calm, both of you. If we panic in front of everyone, it'll only make things worse. We will leave like nothing's wrong."

"If anyone asks, I'll let them know the Alpha King just had too much to drink and needs to sleep it off," Henry added. "Just get him back safely."

"Thanks, Henry," Talia said, and then we left the bar. Talia pretended to be drunk, and Leslie played along by scolding her, just to keep up appearances.

We were almost out of the square, moving past the last tables and leaving the firelight behind, when someone called out to us in a mocking tone.

"Leaving so soon, Alpha King?"

I turned and saw a young Alpha standing only a few feet away. His sharp green eyes and mismatched smile caught my attention. I knew I'd seen him before, maybe at the earlier Gathering, but I couldn't recall his pack's name.

Leslie stepped up, guarded in a way that set off alarms. She wasn't a fighter, but the way she braced herself said everything: she didn't trust this Alpha at all.

'Do you know him?' Talia asked through the mate bond.

'No, but he looks familiar. I don't remember the name of his pack,' I responded.

"Alpha Geoffrey," Leslie said. "Why aren't you enjoying the party? Is there something you need?"

Geoffrey lifted his hands in a show of harmlessness. "I'm just concerned, Luna Leslie. The Alpha King dropped after just one drink, and after everything this territory's been through, I had to wonder if the mad rogue toxin is still in his system. I thought it best to ask, for his own good."

"He's just drunk," Leslie said flatly. "I decided to spend some quality time with my mate alone and needed assistance."

"And you needed three people to do that?" Geoffrey questioned.

'Who does he think he is, questioning our Queen?' my wolf snarled in annoyance.

"He's always been terrible with alcohol," Talia said with a laugh, her voice easy, as if she were sharing some harmless family secret. "Ask anyone who's shared a drink with him. It's become something of a running joke at Silverfang. He's a terrifying warrior and a genuinely pathetic drinker."

"Is that so?" Geoffrey kept smiling, but his eyes moved between us, looking for any sign we were lying.

"Yes, it is. Go on back and enjoy the party," Leslie said again.

Geoffrey took a step closer, angling as if he meant to look Solon over. "Surely you can understand why I don't feel comfortable doing that. I'm concerned. Given recent events, it would put my mind at ease to confirm for myself that he's just had too much to drink."

Talia stepped forward and put herself between Geoffrey and us. I could sense her Luna aura growing stronger. Her cheerful attitude was gone, and now she was focused completely on Geoffrey.

"Your Queen has already explained herself more than she needs to," Talia said. "Please leave us."

"You will step aside, won't you, Luna Talia?" Geoffrey asked. “This is between us and you have no jurisdiction here."

'We need to get control of the situation. Our mate is getting increasingly agitated. A fight will bring unwanted attention,' my wolf warned.

"I'd think carefully about your next move, Alpha Geoffrey," Leslie said flatly. "I will not tell you again."

"I'm simply ensuring that Silverfang will remain safe," Geoffrey continued as he took another step closer.

"How dare you!" Leslie snapped.

"Silverfang is not your responsibility," I said, cutting Leslie off. Talia went under Solon's arm to carry his weight as I stepped forward to stand side by side with Leslie. "If you come any closer, I'll consider it an insult to our Alpha King and accept the challenge on his behalf, provided the Alpha Queen agrees."

"And I do," Leslie confirmed.

Geoffrey stopped and raised his hands to show he meant no harm. "Of course, Luna Talia, Alpha Nolan. No offense meant. I just wish I'd had the chance to talk to him tonight. Maybe another time, when he's feeling better." He gave a polite, almost mocking bow, then walked back towards the crowd.

"What was that about?" Talia asked.

"Not here," Leslie said.

We focused on getting Solon outside of the square, my jaw tight the whole time. I didn't look back to see if Geoffrey was watching. We all knew he was. I could feel his eyes on us.

Once we were clear of the square and out of earshot, I finally let my anger surface and confronted Leslie.

"Who the hell was that guy?"

Chapter 372

Nolan's POV

"His name is Geoffrey. He's the newly appointed Alpha of Doomfur Pack. We can talk about him once we're behind closed doors. I don't want to risk anyone hearing this," Leslie explained.

When we got to the hospital wing, Leslie got right to work. She drew blood, checked Solon's eyes, and felt along his neck and chest. She stayed quiet, making it clear she wouldn't say anything until she knew what was wrong. Talia stood by the door, fussing with her nails to distract herself from worrying.

“He hasn't relapsed,” Leslie said at last.

"Thank the Moon Goddess," Talia sighed in relief.

"Then, what happened? Why is he coughing up blood?" I asked.

"His wolf is still recovering, and Rosefall packs a punch. The combination just hit him all at once. He needs fluids and a reminder not to drink on an empty stomach.”

"You were right next to him. You could've stopped him," I said, earning a sharp glare from Leslie.

"How was I supposed to know one drink would have caused this?" Leslie countered, crossing her arms over her chest. "I didn't want him going in the first place."

"Can't argue with that,” I shrugged, and Leslie rolled her eyes.

"I'm sorry," Solon said from the bed, looking embarrassed. “I didn't mean to cause a scene in the middle of our party."

"I'm the one who's sorry," Talia said. "I was so caught up in it being Father's wine that I didn't think about what your body could actually take right now."

"It's not your fault. It's going to take time before I'm back to full strength," Solon said, and then he gave a weak smile. "It was worth it. I've always wanted to try father's wine."

"Well, happy that you enjoyed it because you're not going to have any for a long time," Leslie said, pointing at him. "There will be no more heavy drinking, and we're cutting your training back until your body catches up to where your pride already thinks it is."

"Understood," Solon said meekly.

"Now, try to get some rest. I will get you something to eat," Leslie said and then shooed Talia and me out of the room.

Out in the hallway, Leslie still looked worried. "Someone's going to come looking for him soon. Especially whoever won that spar. They'll want their prize."

“Derek's handling it. I already informed him of the situation. He will make sure the winner gets his prize,” Talia stated. “Derek will also tell anyone who asks that the Alpha King had urgent business and had to leave early. Nobody's going to think twice."

That seemed to calm her down, but then she muttered, "Unless Geoffrey opens his big mouth."

"So, what's the deal with Geoffrey? How did he become Alpha?” I asked. Even at my worst with Rudolf, I was never so openly disrespectful.

"The little asshole is trouble," Leslie said without hesitation. "That's his whole story, as far as I'm concerned."

"That's not an answer."

Leslie sighed and leaned against the wall, looking tired in a way that wasn't just about being worn out. "When Kent died, Doomfur didn't have a clear successor. He had no heir and never named anyone, since he didn't trust anyone enough. The whole pack split, with every would-be Alpha fighting for control."

"Why didn't Solon just go and choose an Alpha?" I asked.

"That was supposed to happen, but when Solon showed up, the pack was tearing itself apart. Several wolves stepped up, but as soon as one seemed to come out on top, they'd go down too. Geoffrey ended up being the last one left standing. Solon made him Alpha. He didn't have the luxury of waiting for someone better. Doomfur needed an Alpha on the spot," Leslie explained.

Her explanation made me remember something. "Solon talked about Doomfur falling apart a while ago, when Talia was learning to control Moonfire. I thought he was just venting back then, and most of it went over my head. Now I finally understand."

"Geoffrey wasn't Solon's only option. He could have chosen a Beta he trusted from another pack," Talia said.

"I get that, but Doomfur needed an Alpha right then. Leaving them leaderless wasn't possible with the Rogue King around. Do you know how hard the battle would have been if the Rogue King had taken Doomfur?" Leslie answered.

"I am just concerned that this was a bad decision," Talia pressed.

"And he thinks so too. Solon told me he feared Geoffrey could be worse than Kent. Kent was a coward, hiding behind threats and never taking real action. Geoffrey, on the other hand, doesn't hide anything. He just puts on that stupid smile like a psycho and does whatever he wants."

"We saw that ourselves tonight," Talia said flatly.

I remembered how his green eyes followed us, especially Leslie, like we were his prey. The way he taunted us and pushed his luck got under my skin. Wolves like him shouldn't have power. Who knows what he's doing behind the scenes or what he's planning?

"Geoffrey's trouble waiting to happen," I said.

"I feel the same way," Leslie agreed. "I don't like that he's staying here. I don't like that he came at all, honestly. He wasn't even here to fight the mad rogues, so why come now?"

"Tonight was supposed to be simple, and it feels like everything is getting complicated all over again," Talia groaned.

"We'll keep a close eye on him. Someone on him at all times for as long as he's here," I said.

Chapter 373

Talia's POV

We didn't head straight back to our room. Nolan wanted to keep an eye on the party a bit longer, and honestly, after everything with Geoffrey, so did I.

We returned to the party, but kept our distance so no one noticed us as we stood in the shadows between two string lights.

"Do we really need to watch him like this?" I asked.

"Yes. If he spreads rumors like Kent, I want to catch him in the act," Nolan replied. "Then, we will be justified in kicking him out."

Two hours later people continued to drink and dance. The young warriors sparred close to the fire while a small group of spectators cheered and jeered.

Someone was singing an old song, but off-key, but no one minded because they were all having too much fun.

"There," Nolan said quietly, and I followed his eyes.

Geoffrey stood in the middle of a group of Alphas, laughing and looking completely at ease, as if he had been part of Silverfang for years instead of just a few hours.

"He's completely different from Alpha Kent," I said.

"Kent could hardly stand being in the middle of so many Alphas," Nolan said. "He always hung back, kept track of the nearest exit, and never looked anyone stronger in the eye. That's part of why everyone judged him so harshly. He was a coward."

“Can you blame him?” I said. “He was wolfless in a room full of men who could tear him apart. It made him feel small and always afraid, so he got desperate for power any way he could. But Geoffrey isn't like that."

"Not at all," Nolan said. "He's confident, almost cocky. He's strong and knows it. He doesn't feel bad about not fighting with us because he knows he could beat almost anyone who challenged him."

He won't be satisfied just running Doomfur," I said quietly. The way he tried to get close to Solon made my skin crawl. Geoffrey didn't have good intentions. Maybe he wanted Silverfang for himself, maybe it was something else, but whatever it was, it wasn't going to end well for any of us if he got it.

As if he could tell we were talking about him, Geoffrey turned his head in our direction. Even with all the people between us, his eyes locked on mine right away, without needing to scan the crowd.

My wolf froze, every instinct on alert at how easily he found me. It felt like he already knew where I was before he even turned. Geoffrey smiled and raised his glass to me. His smile felt more like a threat than a friendly gesture, making the hairs on my neck stand up.

'Don't give him the satisfaction of seeing our response,' my wolf growled.

'I think it's too late for that,' I responded.

I forced a smile, and Geoffrey's grin widened, like he enjoyed seeing me

uncomfortable. He didn't care at all that we were watching him.

"We're done here," Nolan said as he placed a hand on the small of my back and led me away.

"That felt familiar," I said once we were out of the crowd, heading for our rooms. "That look reminded me of Michael."

Nolan stayed quiet for a moment. He knew exactly what I meant. Geoffrey had the same scheming look Michael used to have. Sometimes you never saw him coming. He would find your weakness and use it before you even realized what was happening. Then came the violence. Geoffrey seemed to be the same.

"He's not getting near you," Nolan said. "Or Solon, or anyone else in this pack. He makes one move I don't like, and he'll have to deal with me."

"I believe you," I said, and I meant it. Still, it unsettled me that even knowing Nolan's reputation, Geoffrey was willing to push boundaries.

Back in our room, I lay awake long after Nolan fell asleep beside me. I stared up at the ceiling.

'You are not sleeping,' my wolf said softly. 'Too much on your mind?'

I didn't answer. Instead, I thought about everything. Solon was still recovering. Leslie was pregnant with Silverfang's only heir and working herself to exhaustion. Now there was a new Alpha who might want to hurt Solon. Why couldn't we ever have a moment of peace?

'We can't stay here in Silverfang. We have our own pack to take care of,' my wolf said.

‘But I can't just leave Solon and Leslie here on their own with this mess,' I countered. 'Geoffrey only backed down because Nolan threatened him. What do you think he's going to do when he leaves?' If we leave, there's nothing to stop him from going after Solon or trying to turn the other Alphas against him. He could lie, divide the pack or even attempt to take control by force.

'We can't defend Solon forever,' my wolf argued. 'He is going to have to deal with this, or the other Alphas will see him as weak.'

I turned over and saw that Nolan was already awake, watching me in the dark like he knew I needed to talk.

"I don't know what to do," I admitted.

"About Geoffrey?"

"About all of it. It doesn't feel right to go home while Solon is still recovering. He and Leslie need me here," I said.

Nolan reached over, pulled me close, and rested his chin on top of my head.

"You don't have to make a decision tonight," he said. "Whatever you choose, whenever you choose it, I'll support you. You're not doing this alone."

Chapter 374

Talia's POV

By morning, I knew we needed to talk to Solon.

"Let's have breakfast with Solon at the hospital," I said to Nolan as I stepped out of the shower, "before the day gets away from us."

"Sure, I want to see him too," Nolan responded.

We got dressed and walked over together while the packhouse was still quiet. The hallway carpets were muffled under our footsteps, the air heavy with the smell of spilled wine and distant woodsmoke from the fire pit. Most of the pack was sleeping off last night, and the square outside was littered with confetti and broken cups.

Solon and Leslie were already at the table when we walked in. Leslie smiled at us. "I didn't expect you two this early," she said, waving a servant over as we sat down.

"Bring more plates," she told her. "And tell the kitchen I said thank you for last night; everything was perfect."

"Yes, Luna," the servant said before leaving.

Leslie turned to us and said, "You do know Solon arranged an actual chef for your meals at the packhouse. You didn't have to come all the way to a hospital for breakfast, of all places."

"I missed him," I said, dropping into the chair beside Solon.

"More like you are worrying," Leslie said.

"Maybe."

"I told you, Talia, that I am okay. There's nothing to worry about," Solon said as he put down his spoon.

Leslie's eyebrows went up, delighted. "Should I be worried you're reconsidering that trip back to Bloodmoon?"

"I had planned on leaving after the party," I admitted. "But after what happened, I want to think it over. I might stay a few more days. Nothing's decided yet."

"That's my fault," Solon said immediately, guilt written all over him. His fingers tightened around his spoon for a moment before he set it aside, glancing down as if he could not quite meet my eyes. "You shouldn't be rearranging your life around my recovery."

"It's not a problem," Nolan said, stopping Solon before he could feel worse. "Della can wait a few more days to plan her party."

Solon started eating again, and Leslie poured drinks for everyone without being asked. For a while, it actually felt like a normal family breakfast. Nobody brought up Bloodmoon, Geoffrey, or anything stressful.

As we finished eating, there was a knock at the door. Derek came in with a folder under his arm, scanning his notepad before looking up.

"Sorry to intrude, but we have some requests," Derek said. "We've got families requesting to move into Silverfang and two packs asking for assistance with damages from rogue attacks during the battle."

I moved to stand, but Nolan placed a hand on my thigh. "You stay here with Leslie and Solon," Nolan said. "I'll handle this."

Nolan kissed my temple and followed Derek out, already asking about the damage before they left. A few seconds later, Leslie stood and put a hand on her stomach for a second.

"Where are you going? You haven't finished your breakfast," I said.

"I have a checkup," she said. "It's just routine, nothing new, just the same questions as last week."

"Do you want me to walk with you?" I offered.

"No, I'm fine. Stay with Solon. He's been stuck here since last night, and you're better company than the ceiling," Leslie said.

Once she was gone, Solon turned to me and said, "If you don't get me out of this hospital, I am going to go insane." I couldn't help but laugh.

"I'm serious, Talia."

"What did your doctor say?"

"That I need to move, but I can't keep walking around the hospital. I need to get outside and get some fresh air," Solon said.

"Let's go to the garden then," I offered.

We went out to the garden behind the hospital, a smaller, quieter stretch than the one at the packhouse, more shade than my garden. It was a shorter walk than going

to my garden, so Leslie shouldn't be too upset if she found out about it.

Solon walked slowly, his hand brushing the low hedge to keep his balance. I watched his steps, worried about him.

"You're already getting stronger," I told him. "In a few weeks, you'll be back to normal."

"Don't," he said sharply. "Don't try to make me feel better. Leslie says I'll recover if I rest, and I believe her. She's never been wrong before."

“I feel there's a but coming,” I said.

"But it feels different to me. My wolf says this will take a long time." Solon flexed his hand slowly, checking if it worked right. "If someone challenged me now, I couldn't win. I don't have the strength of the Alpha King. I'm not even as strong as an Alpha right now, more like a Beta."

I didn't know what to say. My brother was always so confident, and it made me nervous to see him admit how far he'd fallen. He had always seemed unbreakable to me, a force that nothing could harm, just like Father. Now his lack of confidence made me nervous.

'Do not doubt Leslie nor Camilla,' my wolf scolded. 'He will recover.'

'I know that, but how do I make him believe it?' I responded.

"Camilla said it would take time, and you have improved so much in just a few days. Give yourself some credit, Solon. You're still healing," I tried again, more carefully this time. "That's not the same as being weak."

"Isn't it?" Solon almost smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "I used to walk this whole garden no problem. Now I get tired after just a few steps."

I still didn't know what to say, so I kept quiet. We walked in silence for a long time. When Solon finally spoke again, his voice shook in a way I'd never heard before, not even when our dad died.

"Talia, do you think I can still call myself the Alpha King like this?"

Chapter 375

Talia's POV

“Of course. In just a few months, you've done what most Alphas could only dream of doing in years," I said. "You kept the packs together when they were ready to fall apart, brought the Alphas together, and ended the rule of the Rogue King and Morgana, who haunted this land long before we were born. No one doubted you deserved to be Alpha King, Solon. You've already shown what you can do, and you'll keep showing it, because that's who you are."

"I know what I've done." He rubbed his face, and for a moment, he looked even more tired. “That's not what's bothering me."

"Then what is?"

"There's a rumor going around that my condition has gotten worse, that the mad wolf toxin is back and I'm relapsing." His voice was flat, without emotion. “It's spreading quickly. Three people asked Derek if it was true this morning, and one of them even asked Leslie directly. It upset her, even though she's trying to stay strong."

"I'll find out who's spreading it and stop it myself before it goes any further," I said, turning to leave.

"No." He caught my wrist, gentle but firm. "I'm handling it my way. I'll explain everything at the afternoon meeting. Once everyone hears it from me, that should put the rumors to rest."

I didn't like it, but I understood why. People would believe him more than if I tried to stop the rumors, which might just make it look like we had something to hide.

'It's Geoffrey,' my wolf said, voice low and sure. 'Who else would gain from making Solon look weaker? He saw him cough up blood, and now, just one night later, everyone's whispering. That can't be a coincidence.'

I agreed it was too much of a coincidence. He did not back down until Nolan threatened him, and now this, I would bet my life that Geoffrey wanted to be the Alpha King. The question was how far he was willing to go to get what he wanted. Was he planning to challenge Solon outright, or was he just stirring up trouble to shift the balance of power?

I agreed, but I kept it to myself. Solon already had enough to deal with, and I didn't want to add an unproven suspicion to his worries.

"How are you going to explain it?" I asked instead.

“I'll tell them the truth," Solon said, his voice steady. "The toxin's out of my system, but it will take me time to recover."

"That news won't go over well,” I said. "They will see it as a sign of weakness.”

"That's why I'll announce that you and Nolan are taking over as Alpha King and Queen for a short while," Solon answered. "Just a week. Enough to help me get through the mountain of work and keep things stable until I've mostly recovered. I wouldn't ask if I had any other choice."

"Absolutely," I replied, not hesitating. "We'll stay as long as you need us, Solon."

As I made my way back to my room after leaving Solon, the weight of his request settled heavily on me. Doubt crept in. Would the others see this as a weakness, or understand that even strong leaders sometimes need support?

That afternoon, when the meeting started, the hall was packed. Every Alpha who was still there stood close together, the room full of restless energy. No one knew why they'd been called, and everyone was whispering. Solon waited at the front until things quieted down.

"I'm aware that rumors have been circulating. Some of you have heard that my condition has worsened, that the toxin has somehow returned. I'm addressing this because it's important that you feel confident in my ability to lead as Alpha King." He paused, then continued. "The fact is, the toxin is gone. There's not a trace left in me."

There were quiet whispers in the hall. Some people seemed calm, but others looked nervous as everyone waited. I caught someone asking, "Who will lead if Solon can't?" and another person answered, "I think Nolan is going to be the new leader."

"However, I am still in the process of recovering from the poisoning," Solon continued. "It will take time, but I am confident I will regain my full strength. In the meantime, Alpha Nolan and Luna Talia will be taking on leadership duties alongside me. They will oversee council meetings, coordinate between the packs, and approve any urgent decisions that arise, so that nothing is delayed while I recover. This is only temporary. I don't plan to rely on them any longer than necessary. Any questions or concerns?"

I watched the Alphas closely and noticed the hesitation in their eyes.

No one spoke for a while. Then suddenly, a cold, mocking laugh came from the back of the room, and every head turned toward it at once.

Geoffrey stood by the back wall, arms crossed, looking a little amused, as if he'd just heard a private joke he was happy to share. My wolf growled within me at his disrespect. We couldn't address him, not now. It would make Solon look weak to the Alphas.

"Alpha Geoffrey," Solon said, giving nothing away in his voice. "Do you have something you wish to say?"

"No offense meant, truly," Geoffrey started as he stepped forward, so that everyone could see him. "It's just that we've heard the Alpha King himself say his recovery could take a long time, and we don't know how long. I just wonder, respectfully, if now might be the time to think about replacing him, for everyone's good."

Chapter 376

Talia's POV

The room went completely quiet.

I stood up fast, fury flaring in my chest. "Solon is the rightful Alpha King by birth and blood," I snapped. "It was his leadership that led us to victory against the Rogue King and Morgana. And you have the audacity to casually suggest he needs to be replaced?"

"Talia, let him talk," Solon said firmly, stopping me. He wasn't using his Alpha aura, but I knew the tone. Solon wanted me to stop and let him handle it. Geoffrey's smug smirk grew.

'Sit down, my love. You have to let him handle this,' Nolan urged through the mate bond. I exhaled, forced myself to sit down, and kept glaring at Geoffrey.

"Thank you for allowing me to speak, my King." Geoffrey inclined his head, the gesture carefully measured rather than genuinely deferential. “Everyone here remembers that Kent, Doomfur's former Alpha, was executed for aiding Jason, the traitor. When it was time to pick another Alpha for Doomfur, I overcame every challenge to claim the title of Alpha. You, Alpha King, appointed me to lead Doomfur not out of obligation, but because you believed I was worthy. Isn't that right?"

'That bastard knows Solon would have never chosen him under normal circumstances,' my wolf snarled. Geoffrey was maneuvering him into a corner where that left no room for denial. If Solon refused to agree, he'd be calling his own judgment into question, making him look indecisive and unsure of his own authority.

"That is correct," Solon confirmed. "At the time, you were the most reasonable option."

"That means you know I understand how important it is for a pack to have the right leader and how dangerous it can be to keep someone in power out of old loyalty," Geoffrey continued. I bristled at the words. He was reducing Solon's position to an act of nepotism,

"And what's your point?" Solon asked.

"What Luna Leslie did with the antidote is amazing, and she has my respect. But honestly, no one knows how long you'll need to recover, not even her," Geoffrey went on.

"He makes a good point," an Alpha muttered.

"Alpha Nolan and Luna Talia have their own duties at Bloodmoon and can't stay here forever. When they leave, who will lead if the Alpha King isn't ready?" Geoffrey continued. “For Silverfang and the other packs, and with no disrespect, maybe it's better to make the change now, while things are calm, instead of waiting for a crisis."

I could tell he'd planned this. Every sentence was made to sound careful and concerned, not greedy. He wanted the room to see him as the practical choice, and several Alphas were already nodding, actually considering what he said.

'This isn't good. It looks like they actually agree with him,' I told Nolan through the mate bond, forcing myself to keep my expression neutral.

'This is worse than dealing with Kent. He never could have made an argument like this,' Nolan replied.

'Agreed.'

"What do you think, Alpha King?" Geoffrey asked.

Solon looked at him for a moment. "So you're saying the next Alpha King should just be the strongest Alpha here? Is that what you are implying?"

“No, not at all.” Geoffrey shook his head. "If this were just about strength, Alpha Nolan would be the Alpha King. We all saw him kill the Rogue King, but that's not what I mean. What matters is who's truly fit to lead, and right now, even you admit that's not clear."

Heat rushed to my face as my wolf snarled inside me. How dare he insult Nolan? My mate was not just some dumb brute.

Solon gave a dry laugh. "You don't give Alpha Nolan enough credit. Our success was possible only through Alpha Nolan's partnership and quick action. Taking the Rogue King required more than just brawn. You would understand that if you were there that day."

Some Alphas began murmuring about Geoffrey being disrespectful. His smug expression faltered a little, and I felt a bit satisfied. This was not how he expected things to go.

"But this is not the time to make a decision on such an important matter, Alpha Geoffrey. I will take your suggestion under consideration," Solon said.

"Of course, I wouldn't expect that." Geoffrey nodded, grinning as if he had won even though nothing had really been decided yet. "Take all the time you need, Alpha King."

The meeting ended soon after. People left in small, uneasy groups, talking quietly as they went. Several glanced back at Solon on their way out, and the room's mood stayed unsettled.

"You did well, Solon. Go rest and try not to let this bother you," I said.

"Don't take anything that bastard said seriously," Nolan added. “He just wanted to make you doubt yourself in front of everyone. No one wants to replace you."

"That's the problem. He wasn't wrong about any of it. I haven't thought about what happens if I can't recover quickly, or at all," Solon said.

"Solon," I began, but he shook his head before I could say more.

"I need some time to think," Solon said. "I'm not asking you or Nolan to fix this for me. I just need some space."

I started to follow him, not wanting to leave him alone with all that on his mind, but Nolan caught my arm.

“Let him go,” Nolan said quietly. “He has to work through this on his own. He doesn't need us telling him how to feel."

"Then, let me help him in another way," I said.

"Like how?" Nolan asked.

Chapter 377

Talia's POV

I paused, searching for a way to help Solon, when an idea suddenly came to me.

“Let's start working on the paperwork. He has already told everyone we're stepping in to help him. Let's actually get a jump on it," I suggested.

"Good plan," Nolan said.

We were halfway to the Alpha King's office when Della's voice suddenly filled my mind. 'Talia! Where are you? I have been waiting for hours! You said you'd be home today, and then nothing, not one word!'

At first, I didn't understand what she meant. Then I remembered I'd promised to be home today, before everything with Geoffrey happened, and I never told her my plans had changed.

'Della, I'm really sorry. Everything changed so quickly here, and I forgot to let you know. We're still not back. I'll need at least another week, maybe more,' I told her.

Della was quiet for a long time before she finally said, 'A week.' She sounded tired and frustrated. 'You're missing a lot while you're gone. Annie's grown fast since you left. Every morning, she asks if you're home yet. I'm running out of things to tell her.'

I felt a pang of guilt. With everything going on, I'd forgotten about Annie and what I promised her. Annie only had me now. 'Tell her I'll come back, and it won't be much longer.'

'Is something still wrong out there? Are there still more mad rogues to deal with?' Della asked. 'Not knowing what's going on is making me a little scared.'

'No, that's not it. Solon was bitten during the fighting...'

I could feel the shock of it even through the link. 'What?' she exclaimed.

'Yes, he's okay. Leslie's antidote saved him, but his wolf is weak and he's recovering slowly. Since Leslie is pregnant, she can't take care of the pack business right now, so Nolan and I are staying to help while Solon gets better,' I explained. 'Then, there's the jerk Geoffrey. He's the new Alpha at Doomfur, and he wants Solon replaced.'

There was a long pause before Della said, 'That's honestly too much for me to take in at once.'

'That's your first thought on hearing this? That it is too much to take in at once?' I asked incredulously.

'If you were me, you'd be saying the same thing. I've been praying to the Moon Goddess that everything was okay, so I am happy to hear that it is, for the most part,' Della responded. 'Do you need me? I can be there by morning. I'll leave Marco in charge. Just say the word.'

'No,' I said, gentle but firm. 'Stay at Bloodmoon and look after Annie. We've got this under control, and honestly, having one more person here while Solon's being watched would hurt his reputation.'

"Okay. Fine," Della said. She didn't sound convinced, but she let it go, like she always did when she was too tired to argue. 'Call me the moment something changes, Talia. I mean it.'

'I will. I promise.'

'Good. And the penalty for not telling me in advance is that the party will last even longer now,' Della said.

'Fine. I can agree to that,' I told her.

'You didn't have a choice. Now go and help Solon, Super Girl,' Della said and closed the mindlink.

I sighed, feeling guilty. I pictured Annie asking about me, her little voice full of hope, and Della sounding tired. Even though she doesn't mind helping me, I know she must be worn out.

'This is only temporary,' my wolf replied. 'Della will be okay.'

"Is everything okay?" Nolan asked, bringing me out of my thoughts. "You stopped walking and weren't responding when I was talking to you."

"It was Della. I just told her we won't be back for another week," I said to Nolan as we started walking again.

"I imagine that went well."

'Better than I thought, actually,' I said. 'She's worried and offered to drop everything to come help, which I declined. We've got enough happening here without adding her volatile self to the equation."

As much as I loved Della, she would never let Geoffrey act passive-aggressive toward any of us. Knowing her, she'd probably start a pack feud as soon as she saw him. That's the last thing we need right now.

When we got to Solon's office, paperwork was everywhere. Stacks covered every surface and even spilled onto the floor. Folders and ledgers were piled up, some urgent, others left untouched since before the war.

I stood in the doorway for a moment, just staring at the mess and feeling almost hopeless.

"Now I get why my father always looked ten years older than he was," I said. "It was all those late nights in his study dealing with this."

"Running one pack is exhausting even on a good week. This is just too much. How did he handle all this before?" Nolan said, making his way to the desk and lifting a stack to see what was underneath.

'Do you really think a week will be enough time to get this under control?' my wolf asked.

I didn't have an answer for her, and I didn't want to think about it. I could feel my wolf's restlessness. For now, we just had to get started and do as much as we could, or at least get things organized before handling anything else.

There was a knock at the door. Derek leaned in, arms loaded with more folders, giving me an apologetic look.

"Sorry, I know this is a bad time," he said. "We got even more requests today."

Chapter 378

Talia's POV

For two days, all we did in the office was answer requests and fill out forms.

Other than meals and our evenings with Solon, Nolan and I pretty much lived in that office. Our packs used to work together fairly well. Each had its own ranks and territory. The recent war with the mad rogues left things tense. The chain of command was a mess. We settled pack arguments, approved rank changes that had been ignored for weeks, and dealt with the pile of requests that everyone had put off during the fighting.

Nolan let a stack of papers thud onto the desk. "I don't understand how there are so many requests."

I snorted, not looking up from my own stack. "And we haven't even touched the stacks that are in his bathroom."

Nolan groaned. "Moon Goddess, help us."

The door creaked open and Solon poked his head in, looking both grateful and a little guilty for leaving us with all this work.

"Still alive in here?" he asked, peering over the mountain of paperwork.

"Barely," Nolan said, not looking up from his stack.

"Shouldn't you be resting?" I asked. "Leslie is going to freak out if she finds you here."

"Then, let's hope that she doesn't find me," Solon replied. "How's everything going?"

I waved at the piles of paperwork. "How do you think it's going? I don't know how you manage all this."

"This is the twentieth form that was filled out improperly. There are instructions at the top of the page!" Nolan exclaimed in frustration.

"Should I bring snacks next time or just more work?" Solon asked.

"Snacks," Nolan said instantly.

I nodded. "And maybe some whiskey."

Solon laughed and said, "I'll see what I can do," before leaving.

On the third morning, Nolan and I woke up tangled together under a blanket on the office couch. We had been too exhausted to make it back to our own room. I sat up. Every muscle protested. My joints were stiff, as if the paperwork had pressed its weight onto my bones.

"My hand's dead," I grumbled, shaking out my fingers. "One more signature and it might actually fall off."

Nolan groaned into the couch cushion. "At least Derek hasn't dumped more on us. He promised the last batch yesterday was the last of it. Whatever's left, we finish today."

All that remained was a stack of post-war disputes Derek had sorted for us. They were much more organized than I felt I deserved that early in the morning. I picked up the first folder with my coffee. Nolan did the same across from me.

"It better be. If I spend another day doing this, I may set the entire room on fire," I warned as I went to brew us some coffee.

The first folder I opened was from Beta Henry of Shadowclaw. I wondered why he hadn't just talked to me. Instead, he sent a report. Whatever he wanted must have been important.

Henry's report was more detailed than I thought it would be. The mad rogues mostly attacked Silverfang, but some reached other packs too. Everyone who was bitten got the antidote, but a few wolves, like Solon, were left weaker. Some were in even worse shape. Henry's idea was simple and honestly smart: set up a department to help these wolves recover, train them slowly, and make sure they aren't treated as less than the rest of the pack.

"Look at this," I said, tapping the page. "Henry's two steps ahead, as usual."

Nolan scanned it, eyebrows raised. "Can't believe this is the same Beta that reported to Jason."

"The only reason Henry became Jason's Beta was that they were friends," I explained. "Jason wasn't always awful; he changed over time. But even from the start, Henry was smart. The only real mistake he made was sticking by Jason for as long as he did."

"Either way, he has great leadership skills and integrity," Nolan added.

"I agree," I said, placing the folder into the finished pile. "Solon needs to see this when he is up for it. If Henry's responding to this in Shadowclaw, I am sure there is a need for it in other packs as well."

Nolan grinned at me over his coffee. "War council before breakfast. You make it look easy."

"Hey, I've had smart ideas before," I shot back. "Remember, I am the reason every pack had fortified defenses before the mad rogues attacked, and everyone called me paranoid."

"You were paranoid," Nolan said, grinning. I shot him a look. He just laughed. "Still, you were right."

We kept working through the folders until the stack finally looked manageable. I was just starting to think we might actually finish today when my hand stopped on a thick folder near the bottom of the pile.

It was labeled "petitions," which seemed odd, as the other folders were labeled with the pack name of where a petition or request came from. This wasn't just another routine dispute or rank change.

My stomach dropped when I opened the folder. I flipped past the first document, then another, my hands moving faster with each one. Some of the documents were dated before the party, even before the Rogue King was killed.

I stared at the growing stack, anger burning in my throat. There weren't just a few. There were a lot.

Each was worded a little differently, but they all said the same thing: Request to Replace the Alpha King.

Chapter 379

Talia's POV

I couldn't stop staring at the petitions. Every single one demanded Solon be replaced, but I didn't understand why. He had already proven he deserved the role.

"You look like you're about ready to tear something apart," Nolan said as he came

over.

I handed him the folder. "See for yourself."

"Is it that bad?" Nolan asked before reading the first document, and his frown grew as he looked through the rest.

"These are all anonymous," he said finally.

"The ungrateful bastards are too cowardly to stand by their own words," I growled.

The petitions were blunt. They said the packs needed a new Alpha King for the future. Some even named who they wanted, and most chose Nolan.

"There were already a few before Solon got sick, which wasn't surprising," Nolan said, sounding frustrated. "Now everyone thinks he is a lost cause. It's ridiculous that they think he will recover in just a few days."

I rubbed my face. "Right. Everyone's already given up on him."

"If they really wanted this, they would petition the Council," Nolan said.

"They won't. They will not make any moves to replace Solon because as of right now, he hasn't done anything for them to need to. The Alphas want him to step down on his own. It is a threat before an escalation."

Nolan tilted his head, thinking. "I bet Geoffrey is behind this."

"It has to be him. Geoffrey has been causing trouble since the party. With the petitions being anonymous, I wouldn't be surprised if he wrote them all himself to turn us against each other," I said.

Nolan stayed quiet for a moment. The only sound was the soft rustle of papers as he closed the folder.

"You know Solon's opinion is the only one that matters, right? Whatever he decides, the rest can go to hell."

"It's not that simple," I said.

"It really is," Nolan replied. "If anyone tries to force it, they'll have to go through me first."

I gave a short laugh. "That's supposed to make me feel better?"

"It's supposed to remind you that you're not alone." He pushed the folder aside and took my hand, lacing his fingers with mine. "Let's finish up and go see Solon tonight."

After much protest, Solon was moved from the regular hospital room to his own. He was still hooked up to monitors, but he looked more comfortable.

Leslie sat at the end of the bed and gently rubbed her pregnant belly. Solon rested against a pile of pillows. He looked better than he had two days before, but he still seemed small in the oversized hospital gown. When we walked in, he smiled right away.

"Well, if it isn't my favorite dynamic duo," he croaked, grinning. "You came at the right time."

I laughed and pulled up a chair. Nolan stood behind me with his hand on my

shoulder. Leslie grinned at us before turning to Solon.

"Tell them," she said, poking him gently in the thigh.

He rolled his eyes and gently touched her belly. "She kicked this morning," he said, looking right at me. "Hard enough to make her mom curse in two languages."

"She?"

"Yes. We found out we're expecting a daughter," Leslie said.

I couldn't help but smile back at him as some of my tension faded. "My niece is probably already planning to take over the world."

"She'll inherit her mother's temper," Solon said, grinning. "Goddess help us all."

Leslie tapped his leg playfully. "If she gets anything from us, it'll be my patience and your stubbornness."

Solon saw the folder in my hand, and his smile faded. "This isn't just a social visit, is it?"

"The paperwork's done, but we need to talk about two things," I said, handing him a printout. "First, the mad rogue antidote isn't working as we hoped. Many wolves who got it recovered, but some, like you, are still weak. For some, it's even worse."

"Marco reported symptoms like blindness. Solon might be doing better only because he's the Alpha King," Nolan added.

Solon frowned. "Has anyone died?"

"Not as far as we know," I said.

"There was no time to test it for side effects," Leslie said quietly. "Are any of the symptoms permanent so far?"

"It's too soon to say," I replied. "All of this is new, as you know."

Solon looked at Leslie and then at me. "What do you think we should do?"

"Beta Henry already suggested setting up a group to care for and train pack members, to help them recover and prevent discrimination or unrest," I said.

Solon nodded slowly, thinking it over. "Fine. Do it."

"I think we should offer it to all packs, not just Shadowclaw. If this is the new normal,

we should set an example," I said.

"I trust your judgment, Talia. Do what you think is best," Solon stated.

I jotted down some quick notes and held my pen above the page, searching for the right words. "There's... something else," I began, but my voice shook. "Just say it," Solon said.

I swallowed and met his eyes. "There's been talk about succession. Anonymous petitions. They want a new Alpha King. They want you to step down..."

I thought Solon would be upset, but he just leaned back against his pillows. "I'm not surprised," he said. "After Geoffrey's speech, I figured the petitions would show up."

Leslie grabbed his hand and rubbed her thumb over the back of it. "I won't let them force you to step down. I won't let it happen." She looked at Nolan and me. "We won't let that happen."

Solon smiled. "It's okay, Leslie. I've already thought about it." He turned to me, his eyes serious. "Talia, can I talk to you alone for a minute?"

Nolan let go of my shoulder, gave it a quick squeeze, and followed Leslie into the hallway.

"Are you really not upset about this?" I asked as soon as the door closed.

"No, not at all," he said calmly. "I've made my decision. You will be the next Alpha King."

Chapter 380

Talia's POV

"No," I refused firmly.

"Talia..."

"No, Solon. I won't let you do this," I said, standing abruptly.

"Sit down, Talia," Solon said.

"Solon, you're not dying. You just need time to recover. The packs will understand eventually. You can't give up on yourself like this," I continued.

"This is something I've carefully considered. I've thought it through for days, and to be honest, I was already thinking about it when Father became sick," Solon said. "You have to replace me, Talia."

"I can't accept this, Solon. The title belongs to you. You earned it, and Father gave it

to you. I know you're worried about your strength and your wolf, but you will recover at last," I argued.

"And what if it takes years, Talia?"

"What?" I said in disbelief. "What do you mean it could take years?"

"My wolf says recovery could take years," Solon explained. "Even then, I'll never be what I was."

"You don't know that. Leslie's treatment..."

"Won't fix everything. And you know it. The packs and Silverfang can't wait years for a proper leader," he said.

I hated the weakness in my voice. "You can't just hand it off. There are rules."

"Screw the rules. Silverfang is our father's legacy. I'm not letting some power-hungry bastard take it over," Solon said. "Even if people call me selfish, I believe only someone from the Carson family should inherit the title of Alpha King. You have proven your courage and ability during the war and are a worthy Luna who could take the throne."

No matter how much I wanted to argue and convince Solon he was wrong, I knew he was right. It would be irresponsible not to make a decision now. With Geoffrey lurking, I didn't want him to outmaneuver us and leave us with an even more complicated situation.

'Then, accept the position,' my wolf said.

'I can't bring myself to do that, nor can I see anyone other than Solon as Alpha King,' I responded.

'Our mate could be the Alpha King,' my wolf suggested. 'If a choice has to be made, let it be our mate.'

"Why not Nolan? He's family. The Alphas already suggested him," I suggested.

"Nolan is strong, but he's not a Carson. I'm not saying that as an insult. Power like this could change someone unprepared for it, and I'm not willing to risk that," Solon explained.

He was right. There were tales of Alpha Kings who let authority poison their judgment, turning fierce protectors into tyrants who drove off their friends and ruled through fear. Others isolated themselves, certain only that their strength could hold the packs together, but in the end, their isolation led to disaster. That legacy was why the packs looked to families like ours.

"You're so old-fashioned, Solon," I teased with a weak smile.

He just raised an eyebrow. "Maybe. But I want you to take this seriously. Sleep on it and give me your answer tomorrow."

By the time I left Solon's room, Leslie was gone. Nolan was waiting outside, and when he saw my conflicted expression, he pulled me into a hug.

"Come on," he said quietly. "Let's go out for dinner."

“It's late. We can have the kitchen send something to our room.”

"No, we need to get out just for tonight."

A few minutes later, we were tucked into a corner booth at the only diner still open in Fangvale. The air smelled of fried onions and cheese. The vinyl seat squeaked when I moved, sticking to the backs of my legs.

"What did Solon want to talk to you about?" he asked.

"He wants me to take over as Alpha King. I guess that would make me Alpha Queen," I replied.

Nolan's eyes widened. "I...was not expecting that."

"You should do it," I suggested.

"No, thank you," Nolan said almost immediately.

"The Alphas would accept you in a heartbeat. You killed the Rogue King. You have earned their respect," I reasoned. "I would stake my life on you never betraying us."

Nolan leaned forward and kissed me. "I'm honored, but no."

"But your father was the Alpha King like mine. If he hadn't been murdered, you would be the Alpha King right now," I argued.

"True, if I wanted it, but Solon has made his decision. He wants you, not me, and I respect that," Nolan replied. He leaned back and raised his wine glass. "To the future Alpha Queen."

I grinned despite myself. "So you're going to be my royal consort?"

"Only if I get a special hat."

"I'm not cut out for this, either," I sighed.

"That's what makes you perfect. You're not one of them. You don't even want the job," Nolan said.

I was quiet for a long time, thinking about the title, about Dad, and about everything Solon had sacrificed. My chest tightened, and I bit my lip as my anxiety grew.

"If I say yes, will you stand by me? Even if everyone else turns?"

"I'd burn down the world for you," Nolan said. "Just sleep on it."

I nodded. "Okay."

"We should take bets on whether you convinced Solon to choose me over you," Nolan joked.

I scoffed. "You are going to win. I'd be better off trying to convince a rock to change its mind."

Nolan laughed.

But as I stared into my empty glass, the laughter faded, replaced by silence. Solon's question echoed in my mind, and the future, the packs, and the throne all waited on my answer. I wasn't sure I was ready to give it.