Barren Luna 41

CHAPTER 41

Jason's POV

I had no patience for Viki today. Her constant pestering about the Luna Ceremony was starting to get on my nerves. I'd told her more than once that the ceremony would happen after I secured the alliance, but she wouldn't

listen.

Viki continued to send a dozen messages demanding my input on pointless things like fittings, guest lists, and flower preferences. It had gotten to a point that I put her on not disturbing my phone to get some peace. Then, she had sent omegas to check on me when she didn't get a response from me within two minutes. It was exhausting.

Talia had never been like that. She never asked me for opinions on trivial things. She just knew how to lead, how to act like a Luna without needing my permission. The comparison angered me every time it crossed my mind, and I hated that I couldn't stop making it.

I stayed in my office, lying to her about being deep in strategy meetings. I mostly just wanted to have a moment to myself without being talked to death about the Luna Ceremony. At least she respected the fact that I was in meetings and left me alone.

While leaning back enjoying my third glass of whisky, the door burst open causing me to spill the whisky all over the desk and my shirt. Henry stepped in and quickly locked the door behind me.

"What now?" I growled cleaning up the mess I made. When I looked up because Henry didn't respond, I noted his expression. He looked disgusted and angry. "What's wrong?" I repeated.

Henry walked over and offered me a yellow manila folder. "You need to see this."

I opened it. It was a medical report for Viki. I scanned the prescriptions, the dosages, and the accompanying notes. Then my eyes caught blood test results and the bolded phrase: High Levels of Redbone Essence.

I frowned. “That’s just an herbal supplement for her nausea, right?”

“No,” Henry said. “Redbone essence comes from the Redbone Flower which is toxic. It causes bloating, fatigue, and temporary hormone shifts, but it slowly poisons the person taking it.”

My hands clenched the edge of the folder. “You’re saying someone poisoned Viki?”

“She’s not pregnant,” Henry stated. “She never was. That flower is used by wolves trying to trick others into believing they’re expecting. It is an old trick, and the flower is hard to come by now.”

“Do you have proof of this?” I asked.

“I knew you would say this. Flip to the last page,” Henry replied,

I flipped to the last page and there was a full breakdown of what Redbone Flower is and the side effects. Henry was telling the truth. A growl rumbled from my chest, deep and low and I threw my whisky glass at the wall.

‘You fool!’ my wolf snarled within me. ‘I told you Viki was a liar. I told you she was beneath us and now, we have lost our mate!’

“Was there ever a pup?” I asked, hoping that maybe Viki had lost the pup and was scared of my reaction.

“I am sorry, Alpha. She was never pregnant,” Henry added grimly, I half expected Henry to tell me I told you so, but he remained silent waiting for my next order.

I shoved back from the desk. “Where is she?”

CHAFTLE ROSITY ONE

“At home. Still thinking the Luna Ceremony is on schedule,” Henry replied.

“Good. Keep it that way,” I said.

“What are you going to do?” Henry asked.

“Get the car ready,” I responded.

I kept my expression neutral as I left the office. Inside, I was seething.

The drive home felt like an eternity. I slammed my hands down on the steering wheel in frustration. Every pack member would laugh if they found out. Jason, the Alpha, played like a fool by a scheming woman. The thought made my teeth grind.

‘Let me out! I will make her regret ever lying to us!’ my wolf begged me. I wanted to agree but I had to think of the bigger picture.

Roy, her father, was my top warrior. He was arrogant, but he was valuable. I needed him if I was to become Alpha King. Making an enemy out of him would not benefit me right now.

So I swallowed the urge. I would not kill Viki tonight. But I would not make a fool out of her just like he had done

to me.

When I got home, Viki was lounging on the chaise in one of her satin robes. She looked startled and quickly stood

“Jason,” she said. “You’re home early. Is something wrong?”

Her shrill voice intensified the headache I had. My wolf clawed against my skin, urging me to rip her throat out, to end her deception here and now. But I forced him back down.

I stepped forward, grabbing the remote, and turning the tv off. “Go get dressed.”

Her eyes widened. “What? Why? It’s 9pm.”

“We’re going out tonight. I’m tired of eating the food here at the pack house. I want something different tonight,” I said, forcing a smile on my face.

Her worried expression quickly replaced my giddiness. She leaned forward to kiss me but I turned my head. She kissed me on my cheek. Her touching me made me sick to my stomach.

“A surprise, right?! I’ll go get ready now!” I watched as she rushed back to the bedroom. The opportunity to go out and be seen made her ignore the fact that I was enraged. Talia would have been able to notice. How could I have been so blind to not see how much of a lying manipulative bitch Viki was?

“I’m ready!” Viki said cheerfully as she walked up dressed in a form fitting yellow dress.

Every bone in my body screamed for me to strangle the life out of her. I couldn’t do it. I would do something so much worse. I would take back everything she gained by forcing Talia out.

“Come on then. I’m starving,” I said, leading her out of the packhouse.

CHAPTER 42

Jason’s POV

The ride should have been silent.

Instead, Viki filled every moment with her endless chatter about the Luna Ceremony: color palettes, flower arrangements, guest counts, the type of crown she wanted crafted for the ceremony. Each word chipped away at what little control I had left. My hands gripped the steering wheel so tightly I thought I would break my hand.

She didn't notice. Or maybe she didn't care. Goddess, she was so selfish and vain. I hated to admit but I missed Talia. The thought only intensified my anger.

"…and for the reception, I thought gold accents with crimson tablecloths would be perfect," she continued, her hands waving dramatically. "It will give the impression of strength, of prestige. Exactly what Shadowclaw needs."

'Just let me throw her out of the car. Then, we can run her over,' my wolf suggested.

By the time we pulled off the main road and onto the narrow trail that cut toward the northern border, I thought I would take my wolf up on his offer. The car stopped, and I stepped out first, inhaling the cool night air.

Viki frowned, peering outside. "What's going on? This isn't the restaurant." I walked around to her side of the car. She still sat in her seat looking bewildered. I grabbed her by the wrist and slung her out of the car.

Viki crashed into the mud, ruining her dress and satin heels. Her eyes widened in confusion. She slowly pulled herself up. "Jason, what the hell? Do you know how much this dress cost? What has gotten…"

I cut her off by throwing the folder at her. It struck her chest, the report slipping out of the folder before falling to the ground at her feet. "That's what has gotten into me, Viki. Care to explain?"

She bent down, snatched it up, and flipped through the contents. As her eyes scanned the pages, the blood drained from her face. Her hands trembled, clutching the folder as though she might tear it apart to erase the truth inside.

Her head snapped toward me, her lips parting. “I can explain.”

“Well, go on then: I’d love to hear your explanation,” I growled. The words vibrated from deep in my chest, thick with my wolf’s fury.

“I…that’s not…you don’t understand,” she stammered, her voice faltering. “It was because I love you! Don’t you see? I didn’t want to lose you to that omega! I had to do something!”/

“So you thought lying about the pregnancy was the best way to do that?”

“I had to show you I was the right choice for you. I did all of this because I love you.” Viki argued.

“You think love justifies betrayal?” I asked, my voice low, dangerous.

She rushed forward a step, desperation twisting her features, “I did it for us,” she cried. “I knew that omega trash was not right for you. I had to show what she really was. And the pregnancy was my way of doing it. It would get you your father’s favor and…”

My wolf surged, snarling, his rage spilling into my voice,

“You’re not carrying my heir, Viki!” I roared, cutting her off. The mention of Talia’s name snapped the fragile thread of restraint I had been clinging to. “All that’s in your stomach is poison!”

She flinched, then forced herself closer, tears streaking down her face. Her voice cracked, shrill with panic. “We can still fix this, Jason! Please, just give me a chance. I can still make you proud. I can still be your Luna!” Viki

reached for me, and I jerked away from her.

“You will never put your disgusting hands on me again,” I growled.

“Jason, please, don’t be like that,” Viki begged. “I love you. You have to believe me. Why would I go through all of this if I didn’t?”

“You did it all for yourself,” I taunted. “I could never accept a Luna who would lie and manipulate to get what she wants. What would you do if you decided I was no longer good enough for you?”

“Jason, please. I would never do that to you,” Viki pleaded, reaching for me again.

“I am not willing to find out,” I said flatly.

Viki’s

me?”

eyes widened in fear, and she took a step back from me. “What are you saying? What are you going to do to

“I, Alpha Jason, banish you, Viki Mayers, from Shadowclaw,” I said coldly. Viki gripped her chest in pain as she could feel the pack bond snap. Her mouth fell open, disbelief painted across her face. Tears began streaming down her face.

“Take it back,” she whispered. “After everything, after what we’ve been through, you can’t mean this.”

“I stood by you when you ruined my pack and my reputation only to find out that you’ve been lying to my face this entire time,” I said. “I mean this Viki. You should be grateful I didn’t kill you! I don’t ever want to see you again.” Her shriek split the air. “No!” She lunged, her nails flashing as she reached for me. The warriors I’d stationed in the shadows stepped out, restrained her, but she twisted violently, slipping past them like a feral cat.

“You can’t do this!” Viki screamed, her voice ragged and wild. “Everyone knows you threw away your fated mate for me! If you cast me out now, you’ll be the biggest joke among all the packs! I sent invitations already!”

I turned sharply. My wolf snarled, tearing at the inside of my skin, demanding blood.

In one swift motion, my hand shot out, clamping around her throat. I slammed her back into a tree, the bark cracking under the impact. Her feet dangled as I pinned her there, my grip tightening. Her eyes bulged with fear, her hands clawing at my wrist. One flex of my fingers, and I could end her right here. The temptation was intoxicating

“What did you say?” I snarled, my fangs lengthening as my wolf surged dangerously close to the surface.

CHAPTER 43

Talia’s POV

I stood near the open window, the wind brushing my cheek as I waited for Solon to finish his phone call. As soon as he said his goodbyes, Solon focused his attention back on me. “I heard the southern border is back safe again,”

he said.

“Indeed, it is. The rogue attack from the southern border has been handled. No injuries on our side, and the scouts confirmed it wasn’t a pack incursion,” I reported to Solon.

Solon, seated behind his desk, nodded with approval. “Good work. You’ve been handling the border well, even with everything going on.”

Since returning to Silverfang, Solon had given me oversight of the southern patrols, an area that he once solely managed. Now that I was supposed to rule alongside him, allowing me to manage the southern patrols was a show of trust that I appreciated.

“I found out more information about the rogue Alpha Nolan is looking for,” I continued.

Solon looked up in surprise. “Talia, I told you to stay away from him.”

“Don’t worry. I am. That is not how I found out about the rogue,” I said.

“Then, who did he tell?” Solon asked.

“He didn’t tell anyone,” I replied. “The guards that escorted Alpha Nolan down into the dungeon overheard a conversation he had with a prisoner about a rogue whose eyes turn red when angry,” I explained.

“Do you know which prisoner?” Solon asked.

“The senior rogue in the last cell. The one that is always rambling,” I answered.

Solon’s gaze lingered for a second longer than usual. “So, he wasn’t lying.”

“Seems like it,” I said.

“He wasn’t lying about this one thing doesn’t mean he didn’t come here with ill intentions. This information doesn’t change anything. He is still dangerous, so still, be cautious with him.”

“I will. You don’t have to worry about me, Solon,” I agreed.

After he returned to reviewing a report, I began stacking stray documents. His desk was always cluttered, despite how organized he tried to appear. Solon lived in organized chaos.

I saw a crimson envelope underneath a stack of papers. Solon noticed my line of sight and said, “Don’t bother with that. It’s nothing important.”

“Now, you know that is going to make me more curious about this letter.”

“I’m serious. You’re not going to find that interesting.”

“What are you hiding, dear brother?” I asked as I picked it up. The wax crest had already been opened. I reopened the letter and the mischievous smile on my face dropped as soon as I saw the Shadowclaw’s symbol embedded in deep crimson.

Alpha Jason Dalton and Miss Viki Mayers invite you to celebrate their union at the Shadowclaw Estate, next full

moon.

That was next week.

I stared at the invitation, rereading the gold lettering to ensure I wasn’t imagining things. Jason wasn’t just replacing me; he was making it public. He had thrown away our five-year relationship, our fated mate bond as if it was nothing but a passing fling. And Viki had got exactly what she wanted.

I tucked the invitation back into the envelope and put it back on his desk. “So, Viki finally gets to be Luna.”

Solon snatched the envelope and threw it into his trash can. “Jason’s a disgrace. He betrayed you. Let that slut publicly insult you with that fake apology and then have the guts to invite every Alpha to his sham of a marriage as if he’s proud of it.”

“Solon, he IS proud of it,” I said evenly. “He is a very vain man. He has always wanted to look powerful. In his mind, Viki will allow him to do that because she’s not an omega. So, I’m not surprised by this.”

I’m just disappointed, I thought, but I had already given up on our relationship. There was no going back for me after this kind of betrayal.

“You should be furious,” Solon said. “You were his mate for years, and now he’s…”

“I’m fine. I don’t care what he does. He and his pack are no longer my problem,” I interrupted, even though my throat felt tight.

Solon stared at me for a long moment. “You’ve grown, Talia.”

I shrugged with a smile. “I had to.”

“I won’t attend,” Solon declared.

“You might have to,” I replied.

“I wouldn’t celebrate someone who betrayed my little sister with a slutty homewrecker,” Solon swore.

“Shadowclaw is the third-largest pack. With our father stepping down soon, your attendance would be expected. Political optics matter right now,” I explained. “But I appreciate the gesture.”

Solon let out a sharp breath. “Then I’ll make sure he knows how I feel about Alphas who betray their fated mate bonds. That fool has no idea what he lost.”

I nodded slowly. “That’s his loss. At least now I know the truth. If he’d known who I was from the start, he probably would’ve continued pretending. I might not have ever known his true intentions.”

Solon’s gaze softened slightly, but he said nothing. Instead, he turned away and returned to scanning the reports on rogue activity I’d submitted earlier. “I was meaning to discuss strategy for the northern border,” Solon said, changing the subject.

Before he could continue, there was a knock on his door.

“Come in,” Solon called.

Della stepped in grinning from ear to ear, “Sorry to interrupt, but I have some good news.”

CHAPTER 44

Talia's POV

"Oh Goddess, I know that look. What juicy gossip do you have now?" I laughed.

Della laid the folder on Solon's desk and flipped it open without waiting for permission. Inside was a printed screenshot of a blurry image. Jason and Viki were mid-argument near the Shadowclaw border. Jason looked tense while Viki appeared frantic.

"Someone posted this an hour ago," Della said, tapping the photo. "And it's already been shared across several pack gossip groups. People are saying Viki was banished from Shadowclaw."

I leaned over the image. "What? They had a fight?"

Solon glanced over, arms crossed. "Or she got herself kicked out," he said flatly. "Seems like Jason found out something he didn't like about his 'perfect little Luna'."

I looked at another image. Viki's mouth was open in mid-yell, one arm outstretched toward Jason. She didn't look like a smug bitch giving orders and throwing insults. She looked like a desperate woman being thrown away.

"That's what she gets. Now she'll know what it feels like to be betrayed by someone she cared about,' my wolf snorted.

I wasn't too sure. Viki was a schemer. Could this be another stunt to garner sympathy?

"Are we sure these images aren't fake?" I asked. "Shadowclaw's reputation is tanking. I can see her pulling a stunt like this to get people to feel bad about her."

"No, I think this is real," Della countered. "Viki would have never let herself look this pathetic."

Solon removed the red envelope from the stack of papers I had just organized. He showed it to Della. “Look. This came in the mail a few days ago. The wedding is still on for next week. All ten pack Alphas have already RSVP’d. If something changed, Shadowclaw would have to explain why publicly. That kind of humiliation would be a disaster. I think this is just another one of Viki’s stunts.”

“She doesn’t look like she’s acting,” Della replied with a snort. “And Jason’s too stiff. I know that posture. That’s a man who’s about to explode from anger. My instincts say this marriage is dead.”

I rubbed my temple, trying to make sense of it. “If it’s true, it’s odd that neither of them has made a formal statement. Shadowclaw isn’t usually this silent when it comes to major announcements.”

Della shrugged. “Or maybe Jason’s hoping no one finds out until after he fixes it. And by fixing it I mean convincing you to come back to him. He’s going to come crawling back to you, tail between his legs, in a day or so. Maybe sooner.”

Solon laughed under his breath. “You talk a big game for someone who doesn’t have a mate.”

Della glared at him. “I have a boyfriend.”

“Who?” Solon challenged.

“None of your business. Maybe if you weren’t so emotionally constipated, someone would mate with you.”

“Don’t try to turn this on me,” Solon said. “Better yet, I’ll make a bet with you. If you’re right, I’ll buy you whatever you want.”

“You might as well give me your card now because I know I’m right,” Della shot back.

“Enough,” I said, hiding a small smile. “You two are worse than children.”

Before either could reply, my phone buzzed. I glanced down and froze.

Jason.

Della leaned over my shoulder to see who was calling me. She then held her hand out to Solon. “I told you so,” Della hummed and then stuck her tongue out at Solon.

“You haven’t won yet,” Solon said before turning to me. “Are you going to see what he wants?”

“I’m debating on ignoring him or throwing the phone across the room,” I responded.

“Well, you can’t do that. I have a bet to win. Answer the phone,” Della urged.

I rolled my eyes and slid my thumb across the screen. I put the call on the speaker.

“Jason, I told you I was done with you at the café,” I said.

“Talia, please, just listen,” Jason pleaded. His tone surprised me as he had never used it with me.

“You have thirty seconds,” I said coldly.

“I messed up. I am so sorry Talia,” Jason confessed. “Viki lied to me. I should’ve listened to you. Please, I just need to explain everything to you in person!”

I didn’t answer right away. My wolf growled low within me. She was disgusted by the sound of Jason’s voice. Even now, after everything, part of me wanted to scream at him for the betrayal, but I kept my tone neutral.

“Not interested,” I said.

“Wait. Don’t hang up. I won’t make her my Luna,” Jason said quickly.

“So what? It doesn’t change the fact that you cheated on me with her,” I argued.

“Talia, please, just give me another chance. I’ll make it up to you!”

“No, Jason. I want nothing from you. I will NEVER forgive you. Don’t ever call me again. We are done,” I hung up and blocked his number.

CHAPTER 45

Viki’s POV

The tray clattered loudly as Henry dropped it on the small table near the wall. The smell of roasted meat and steamed greens filled the room, but I barely noticed. My appetite was gone the moment I saw the judgment in his

eyes.

“Please,” I said softly, forcing a tremble into my voice. “Just let me talk to Jason. Just once. I need to explain.”

Henry didn’t move. He stood by the door, arms crossed. “Explain?” His voice was low and bitter. “Explain how you lied to your Alpha? Faked a pregnancy? Framed his true mate? No. More like you’ll make up more lies to manipulate your way out of this situation. I don’t think so.”

I bit the inside of my cheek, letting tears spill freely. “I didn’t mean to hurt anyone. I only…”

“Save it.” He cut me off, disgust flashing across his face. “You drove Talia, our real Luna, away with your lies. You humiliated our pack with your antics. And now you want sympathy? You’re disgusting. You never deserved to be Luna. I don’t even know what Alpha Jason was thinking to believe for a second that you were better than Talia.”

I shook my head. “I loved him. I did it all because I love Jason. Please, I’m begging you…”

“You’re lucky you’re being allowed to stay in your room and not the dungeon, where you belong,” Henry interrupted.

“Please, Henry. Just let me speak to him,” I pleaded.

“Why don’t you understand?” he said flatly. “The only reason you’re still breathing is because Jason pities you more than he hates you.”

I bowed my head and sobbed louder, hoping he’d feel even a sliver of guilt. Henry scoffed and said, “Your tricks won’t work on me.” He turned toward the door.

“Henry…” I reached for him, my hand touching his back. I felt his body tense and then he spun, grabbing me by my already bruised throat.

“Keep your mouth shut!” Henry growled.

My eyes widened in surprise at Henry’s cruelty. I knew he was one of Talia’s biggest supporters, but I didn’t think he was this loyal to her. I should have convinced Jason to get rid of him when I had the chance.

“Alpha Jason already gave me permission to discipline you if you step out of line.” Henry tossed me away from him. I managed to only stumble backward and stay on my feet. “In three days, the Luna Ceremony will go forward. After that, Alpha will let you go quietly. It’s more than you deserve.”

He left my room, slamming the door and locking it behind him.

I slumped to the floor and screamed into my hands in anger and exhaustion. My wolf growled within me, angry that Henry had spoken to me like that. If the Redbone Flower toxins weren’t still in my system, she would have surfaced and made him think twice about treating us like this.

I crawled over to my vanity table and slowly pulled myself onto the chair. My neck and back still ached from where Jason had grabbed me. I unwrapped the scarf I'd tied around my neck.

The bruises were dark now, blooming purple and red along my pale skin. I traced them gently with a fingertip, then reached for the ointment on my vanity table and began applying it.

Since Jason's attempt to banish me, I've been locked away. My father wasn't even allowed to see me, not that he would. I'm sure he has written me off as a failure by now.

The only reason I was still here in the Shadowclaw pack house and not dead at the border was because I'd screamed that I'd already sent the wedding invitations.

"You can't kill me, and you can't banish me," I repeated while he choked me, "because the invitations already went out."

Jason's eyes narrowed. "You think that's going to save you?" he growled, easing his grip a little.

"If you kick me out now, before the Luna Ceremony, what do you think the other Alphas will think of you?" I asked. "What do you think your father will do if he finds out you messed up again?"

If he tossed me out now, he'd face a scandal that would ruin his name, destroy his chance at power, and humiliate his father. Jason released me, and I gasped and coughed as I inhaled the much-needed air.

"Thank you, Jason. I knew you-"

"I'm not doing this because I care about you," Jason snapped. "I'm keeping you alive to avoid political embarrassment. After the Luna Ceremony, you will leave Shadowclaw and never come back."

"Jason, please, you can't do this to me!"

"If you don't leave, I will inform the Elders. You will be declared guilty of treason for deceiving an Alpha," Jason responded coldly. "The punishment for that is hanging until death. Choose wisely, Viki."

I shivered at the memory. His voice had been calm and emotionless. My wolf trembled inside me at the thought of that rope around our throat. But I wasn't going to let it happen.

I was not defeated yet. I was going to become Luna whether Jason wanted me to or not.

I wrapped the scarf back around my neck and stood, staring at my reflection. I looked awful. I was pale, with flushed cheeks. My eyes were red, with dark circles underneath them.

This was all Talia's fault!

I would have never had to take the Redbone Flower essence if Talia had just stayed in her place as an omega in the first place. She was supposed to just disappear, but no. She had to flaunt her relationship with Prince Solon, making others question my relationship with Jason.

But Prince Solon's spoiled plaything was my best weapon now. Talia would come to the Luna Ceremony. She'd never resist the chance to gloat.

And I would use that moment to show everyone who truly deserved to be the Luna of Shadowclaw.

CHAPTER 46

Talia's POV

Dinner was quiet at first, until Father cleared his throat and looked across the table. "The elders near the southern border sent word today," he said. "The residents speak highly of your governance, Talia. They are pleased with how you've been handling the rogue problem. They said your classification system is working."

I paused, caught off guard by the praise. "I am happy to hear that."

Solon looked at me with raised brows, clearly surprised as well. “You deviated from the original protocol?”

I nodded and answered, “I thought the procedures we currently had in place were too rigid. Not all rogues are the same. Some were forced out due to territory disputes or abandoned by their packs. They don’t deserve to be hunted like animals. Last week, a mother and her daughter crossed into one of our villages. They were just looking for food, not a fight.”

My father leaned back, watching me thoughtfully.

“I instructed the warriors to remain firm with violent rogues,” I continued. “But if someone is helpless or simply trying to survive, they should be given a chance. We have enough resources to protect our people and show mercy.”

Father gave a pleased grunt. “Good. About time someone in this family used judgment over brute force.” He raised a brow at Solon. “You could learn a thing or two from your sister.”

Solon smiled and said, “That’s why it is good we will rule together. She will cover the gaps that I missed.”

Father nodded again. I wasn’t used to being spoken of as a future leader. It surprised me how much it meant to be acknowledged.

“Speaking of appearances,” Solon added carefully, “Jason’s wedding ceremony is still scheduled for next week.”

“And why should I care about that?” Father asked.

“He sent the invitation formally,” Solon continued, removing the invitation from his pocket and placing it on the table. “The ceremony’s going forward.”

Father’s expression darkened. “I will not be attending. I won’t celebrate the man who foolishly rejected my daughter for some harlot. What Jason does is none of my business.”

“True, but as Alpha King, you have to attend,” Solon argued.

“No, I do not. But you and Talia will,” Father said.

I choked on my water. “What?”

“I will be stepping down soon, and you and Solon will be taking over. This is the perfect opportunity to show a unified front,” my father explained.

“I don’t want to go,” I said firmly. I wanted nothing to do with Jason or Viki, I was sure Viki had something planned to try to frame me. I didn’t want to be caught in their drama again.

“You will. You’ll go as the Princess of Silverfang, not the omega they thought you are. Jason, and the rest of the packs, need to understand exactly what he gave up.”

I looked at Solon for support, but he shrugged. “We’ll stay just long enough for the ceremony. Fifteen minutes, tops. I promise.”

CHAPTER 47

Viki’s POV

The scent of roses clung to everything and it made me want to gag. Jason had replanted the rose bushes and ensured the whole pack house smelled like roses. He knew how much I hated roses but still did it anyway to

torment me.

‘He doesn’t love us anymore,’ my wolf whined.

‘Don’t say that. He is just upset. After the Luna ceremony, he’ll be back to normal,’ I reassured her.

I sat in the waiting room, staring at my reflection in the tall mirror. My makeup was caked on to hide my sickly appearance. I could barely stand straight without trembling from the physical strain.

My wolf whimpered, 'We should just leave now. I'm so tired, Viki.'

'We don't have time to be tired or weak. We need to get through this with our head held high. I promise this won't be for nothing,' I told her and she only whimpered in response.

Jane, my personal maid, entered the room with a cup of hot tea and set it gently on the tray beside me. She looked nervous, her eyes darting toward the door like she expected someone to burst in and drag me away.

"Your father sent this to you," she said softly, as if afraid to anger me.

I stared at the teacup. "He plans to murder me for failing?"

"Oh no, Luna," Jane said. "There are painkillers in the tea. He instructed me to do so. Your father wanted me to remind you to be strong. Once the ceremony is done, no one can undo it. You will be Shadowclaw's Luna now, no matter what happens after."

I didn't respond immediately. I fought back tears. I thought my father had abandoned me, but he was still supporting me. I couldn't disappoint him then.

"Thank you, Jane," I muttered.

Father was right. Once the ceremony was completed, it would seal my place in Shadowclaw's records, in the eyes of the Council, and before all attending Alphas. Jason would need to inform the Council and the Alpha King to banish me since he was having a formal Luna ceremony.

Jason would have to admit he misled the Council and the Alpha King and accept punishment. There was no way he would do that. I had sufficiently cornered him. He would just have to accept me as Luna.

There was a loud knock on the door and the door creaked open. “Luna, it is time,” a warrior called to me. I drank down the tea and slowly stood with the help of Jane.

I walked down the side hall, back straight, chin high, all the while my body throbbed with pain. The double doors to the hall opened slowly, and murmurs filled the air as heads turned toward me.

I scanned the crowd and found Jason standing near the stage, greeting guests with that fake smile he always used in public. His eyes barely acknowledged me. Instead, they focused entirely on Talia and Solon,

Prince Solon and Talia were both dressed in Silverfang’s silver colors. Talia looked calm, radiant even, as if she belonged here more than I did. Even though I knew she would come, it still infuriated me to see her here. She had ruined everything and I was going to make her regret coming.

I approached them and bowed my head politely. “Prince Solon, Talia. I’m so glad you both could attend.”

Solon gave a brief nod, but Talia just blinked, surprised by my sudden civility. “It is a…pleasure…to attend,” Solon said with a fake smile and Talia nodded.

“Talia, I remember you used to help the older maids with the gardens. I recall you had an eye for flowers. Perhaps you’d like to inspect the bouquet I chose?” I motioned casually toward the arrangement set up on the stage. “It would mean a lot.”

“Viki,” Jason’s voice was sharp and strained behind me. “This isn’t the right time.”

Surprisingly, Talia sighed and said, “Sure. I’ll take a look.”

The corner of my mouth lifted. I knew she wouldn’t refuse, not with all these Alphas watching. She couldn’t risk me causing a scene. Talia had an image to maintain, especially in front of Prince Solon.

We ascended the stage together. I stumbled slightly after the third step as pain shot through my body with each step. Talia actually looked at me with concern.

“Are you okay? Talia asked once we were out of earshot and on the stage. “You look really pale. Are you ill?”

I gave her a practiced smile. “I’ve never felt better because I’m becoming Luna today.”

Talia didn’t respond to my jab and turned her attention back to the floral arrangement. “I am surprised you chose roses. I thought you hated them.”

“I thought it would be a nice touch to remind Jason how he upgraded.” I sneered and Talia turned to face me. You must be jealous that Jason never even formally made you Luna. It’s quite sad that he never took you seriously, but can you blame him?”

Talia’s calm expression didn’t change. “I mean, one woman’s trash is another woman’s treasure.”

‘Excuse me?”

“I’ll say it simpler so you can understand,” Talia said. “Jason is garbage. I don’t want him. You can have him, ok?”

I stepped closer. “Cut the crap. I know you’re only here to gloat because you’re with Prince Solon now, but you’ll regret it.” My voice dropped to a whisper. “Today is your end.”

And with that, I let my knees buckle.

I screamed loud enough for every guest to hear, then collapsed right on cue like the perfect victim.

CHAPTER 48

Jason’s POV

Talia looked like a goddess draped in silver.

The fabric clung to her perfectly. She was the very image of a future queen. For a second, I thought back to the times she would wait for me to return from Alpha duties, lounging in bed, ready to please me. My wolf stirred restlessly, aching to go to her.

'She's ours. We should never have rejected her,' my wolf said. 'We have to win her back.'

I agreed, but she stood beside Solon. She looked happy, happier than I had seen her in a long time. Solon placed a hand on her shoulder as if he had every right to touch her. Rage flared in my chest.

He was filling her head with lies, manipulating her into believing she didn't belong to me anymore. But she did. No matter what she said, no matter how far she ran, she was still mine.

I pushed the thoughts away and forced my expression into something neutral. I was surrounded by Alphas and Elders. I had to keep up appearances, shake hands, and offer the same practiced smile.

After this ceremony, Viki would be gone. I'd banish her quietly and then go to Talia. I would apologize, take back my rejection, and beg if I had to, to get her to come home. Talia would understand. Once she saw Viki out of the picture, she'd come back.

Then, I noticed Viki approaching Prince Solon and Talia. My eyes narrowed. What was she planning now?

I interjected, "Viki, this isn't the right time.'

Much to my surprise, Talia sighed and said, "Sure, I'll take a look."

I wanted to stop her, but they were already walking toward the stage. I turned my attention to Prince Solon and said, "Thank you for coming."

"Wouldn't have missed it for the world," Solon responded with a smirk. "Especially for something so… genuine."

From his tone, it was obvious he was being sarcastic. Did he know that this was just a sham of a ceremony?

Before I could respond, I heard Viki's scream.

The room silenced instantly, every head turning toward the stage. Talia stood, arms crossed, her expression cold. Viki, in contrast, was crumpled halfway to the floor, only being held up by someone.

Alpha Nolan.

He held her upright with one arm. He looked annoyed. But I didn't care about that. What I cared about was what he had on. He wore a silver suit. It was nearly identical in color to Talia's dress.

My wolf growled low, pushing forward in my chest. 'Why is he matching our mate? Is he trying to pursue our mate?'

'No. He wouldn't do that. Talia is an omega. He would never want an omega,' I reassured my wolf. This had to be just a coincidence. Even so, seeing him with her as if they were a couple, even more so than her with Prince Solon infuriated me.

I clenched my fists and walked quickly across the hall toward the stage. Guests whispered behind me, likely talking about the sudden drama. I ignored them.

By the time I reached the base of the platform, Viki was standing upright again, shakily brushing off her dress as she put some distance between herself and Nolan.

"What the hell happened?" I demanded, looking at both of them.

"Is that how you speak to someone who just saved your mate?" Nolan questioned.

I cleared my throat. "My apologies, Alpha Nolan. I am just concerned."

“She nearly fell,” Nolan explained. “I was walking in and saw her wobble. She would have fallen off the stage if I had not caught her.”

I turned to Viki. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes darting to the guests behind me before meeting my gaze.

“Well?” I pressed. “Is that what happened?”

“Yes. Why would you think otherwise?” she said, awkwardly laughing. “I… I tripped. I didn’t mean to cause a scene.”

I didn’t believe her. I knew there was more to it than that, but I would get answers later. The last thing I needed was this turning into more gossip that would tarnish our reputation.

“Thank you,” I said to Nolan, though it nearly choked me to say it. “For stepping in.”

“Don’t thank me. I expect better of you, Alpha Jason,” Nolan scolded. He leaned in just slightly, lowering his voice but not his intensity. “Keep a better watch on your Luna. If she causes another disruption, the Council may think you have lost control of Shadowclaw. You don’t want a scandal, not today.”

My wolf bristled at the veiled threat combined with a warning. I barely kept from growling in return. I nodded stiffly. “Understood.”

Nolan turned and walked off without another word.

I turned around with a fake smile. “False alarm, everyone. Everything is okay,” I called out, and the guests slowly returned to socializing. I roughly grabbed Viki and carried her down the steps. Touching her made bile rise in my

throat.

I walked us to a quiet corner and released her, almost dropping her to the floor. Viki managed to catch her balance by gripping the wall. “Be careful, Jason. You almost ruined my dress,” she complained.

“I don’t give a damn about that dress. If I could, I’d have you walking around in rags,” I hissed.

“I’m not going to do this with you right now,” Viki said. She tried to walk past me, but I gripped her chin, forcing her to look at me.

“What did I tell you, Viki? I said to behave and to stay away from Talia. Do you not understand simple instructions?”

“I didn’t do anything,” Viki argued, trying to get free of my grasp, but my grip only tightened.

“Do you think I’m an idiot? You wanted her to look at flowers? Ridiculous,” I said, releasing her.

Viki rubbed her sore face. “I am telling the truth. I didn’t do anything,” she repeated.

“You’re a filthy liar. You don’t know what the truth is, Viki, You’re lucky this didn’t blow up worse. If you pull another stunt like this, I’ll make you regret the day you were born. Don’t test me again,” I warned.

Surprisingly, Viki didn’t try to argue. She nodded and said, “Yes, Alpha.”

At that moment, Father appeared at my side. His eyes swept between us before landing on Viki.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“Nothing,” I answered quickly. “We’re preparing for the ceremony.”

He grunted, clearly not convinced. He turned his attention to Viki. “Good. Then you’ve got twenty minutes. Don’t be late. You’ve caused enough delays as it is.”

As Father turned away, I noticed the sweat beading along Viki's hairline. Her hands trembled slightly. Her scent, even though covered with that sickeningly sweet perfume, still came through, but it was off. It smelled like chemicals.

"Go clean yourself up," I ordered, grimacing at her scent. "You're not embarrassing me again looking or smelling like that."

CHAPTER 49

silent greeting. He was just observing.

'We should thank him,' my wolf suggested.

'Do we have to?' I pouted inwardly at my wolf.

'He kept Viki from making a scene. It's the right thing to do.'

I hated that she was right. I didn't want to thank him. I didn't want to owe him anything. But even as my pride screamed at me to stay put, my feet betrayed me as I walked over to him.

Nolan didn't look away as I approached. For just a flicker, curiosity softened his stare, but it was gone before I could be sure I'd seen it. His face settled back into his cold, neutral expression.

"I wanted to thank you for what you did, Alpha Nolan," I said, forcing the words out.

He raised his glass slowly, taking a sip before replying. His voice was flat as though the entire matter bored him. " I don't know what you're talking about."

Was he really going to make me spell it out? It almost looked like he was smirking behind the wine glass. I took a calming breath before saying, "You saw what Viki was doing. You caught her before she could…"

“Don’t mistake my actions for concern,” he cut in smoothly. “I was just passing by and she’s in my way. Her schemes are your problem, not mine.” His gaze slid past me, dismissing me as though I was nothing more than a distraction from his drink.

Heat burned across my cheeks. Why had I even bothered? I should have stayed silent, invisible, the way I’d planned from the start. Talking to him had been a mistake.

“Do you need anything else, Princess?” Nolan sneered, bringing me out of my thoughts.

“This arrogant prick,’ I cursed inside. Before I could reply, Solon appeared at my side, his hand brushing lightly

over my arm.

“You alright?” he asked, leading me away from Nolan.

I nodded. “Just thinking that Viki’s behavior was strange.”

Solon scoffed. “She’s always strange. She’s just trying to get under your skin. Ignore her.”

“Right,” I said. “I am going to head to the restroom.”

“Make it quick. The ceremony’s about to begin,” Solon said.

I nodded and headed toward the restroom. The corridor past the lounge was silent, almost too still.

Then a scent hit me-sweet and sharp. My wolf growled a warning.

Redbone Flower.

CHAPTER 50

Talia's POV

Redbone Flower.

I froze. The pungent, metallic-sweet scent coated the hallway air. It was faint enough to confuse it with poorly made perfume, but my wolf caught it instantly. I had heard about the herb, and I knew it was a banned substance, but I didn't know exactly what it was.

'It's a rare, poisonous herb,' my wolf growled. 'In small doses, it can bolster stamina and sharpen energy. But long -term consumption causes the body to rot. It swells the belly; it makes it look like a pregnancy. It destroys the body slowly and painfully.'

"Where?" I asked.

"The lounge. Someone carried it through here.'

I stared down the hallway toward the lounge. My pulse kicked up in my throat. Who would dare to use it?

The closer I stepped, the stronger the stench became. Peeking through the thin crack of the slightly ajar door, my breath caught. Viki was hunched over a table, her body shuddering violently as she vomited onto the floor.

"Hurry up, I need to change," Viki hissed.

"Yes, Luna."

A maid knelt beside her, desperately scrubbing at the dark spatter staining the floor. At first, I thought it was wine. Then the smell hit me: iron. It was blood.

Before I could stop myself, I pushed the door open fully. The wood banged softly against the wall, making the maid jump. Viki's head snapped toward me.

I stepped inside, shutting and locking the door behind me. Viki's eyes darted to the door, then back to me. Fear flashed in her eyes only for a second.

"What do you want, Talia? Get out!" Viki snapped.

"You've been taking Redbone Flower, haven't you?" I asked, getting straight to the point.

Her eyes narrowed into slits. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do," I said coldly. "I can smell the rot on you. You've been taking the Redbone Flower, pretending to be pregnant."

"That's none of your business! Get out!" she screamed, her voice cracking.

"It became my business the second you dragged me into your pathetic little schemes," I shot back, anger hardening every word. "You wanted the Luna crown so badly, you poisoned yourself for it. Do you even realize what you've done? You risked your own life for a title, for attention, for something that will never make you worthy. That's not strength, Viki. It is just stupid and pathetic."

Her face burned red, lips trembling, eyes glinting with rage as if she might strike me. Instead, she let out a furious growl. "You think you're better than me? You walk around with your nose in the air, acting like you're something special just because you have Prince Solon's attention. Eventually, Prince Solon will get bored and put you in your place because you're still an omega, Talia. Omegas don't get to be proud. Omegas don't get to stand above their betters."

I stepped closer, meeting her glare. "And yet, here I am. I didn't lie and cheat my way to climb ranks. I'm here because I've proven myself to be better than you every time. That's why you'll never be more than a fraud."

"You don't get to judge me," Viki growled. "You had the privilege of having everything handed to you."

I barked a bitter laugh. “You call publicly insulted, and humiliated a privilege? You call seeing my mate actively cheat on me and choose someone else, a privilege?”

“You could walk away from him,” she said, her eyes watering.

“And you can too! He’s not worth your life, Viki,” I exclaimed.

“You just don’t get it. Just leave, Talia,” Viki warned.

I frowned, turning away from her to unlock the door. “Fine. I’ll go get the pack doctor. At least he’ll keep you…’

“No!” Viki yelled. Her voice was raw and panicked. “Please. Don’t tell anyone. This… this is everything I’ve worked for. My whole life has been for this moment. My father drilled it into me from the time I could stand that being Luna was my only honor, my only value. I wasn’t allowed to fail.”

I stepped closer, glaring down at her. “Am I supposed to care about your tragic home life?”

“Don’t mock me, Talia,” Viki growled.

“I am honestly trying to understand all of this,” I said. “Tell me, Viki, when you were ordering the maids around, when you were sneering in my face, was that you trying to prove your worth? Or was it just you enjoying tearing someone else down like your father tore you down?”

Viki dropped her head, letting out a sigh. “Maybe both. Maybe I hated you because you reminded me of how much free-will I would never have.”

“Then you wasted your hate,” I said flatly. “I understand the weight of expectations. You forget I was your Luna for years. I understand what it means to have your worth rested entirely on a title and for you as a person not matter anymore after one mistake. I get it, Viki. I really do, but Jason isn’t worth your life.”

Viki let out a short, ugly laugh. “Easy for you to say. You have Prince Solon now. Quite the upgrade from Jason.”

“Don’t deflect, Viki. That’s not the point, and you know it. You could’ve just waited for your fated mate. You didn’t have to do this,” I argued.

Viki shrugged. “It doesn’t matter anymore. If I don’t go through with this, I’ll be discarded like trash.”

“Better discarded than dead,” I snapped.

Viki looked away, coughing into her blood-soaked handkerchief. “You don’t understand. After today’s ceremony, we’ll never see each other again. So, just let me have this.”

I thought seeing Viki at her lowest would bring me some sense of satisfaction, but I hated that part of me felt pity for her. Viki was manipulative, cruel, but I would’ve never wished this on my worst enemy.

My wolf huffed in my mind, torn between disgust and reluctant empathy. ‘She chose this path.’

I sighed, “Fine. I won’t tell anyone.”

I unlocked the door and stepped out into the hall only to nearly collide with Solon.

“There you are,” he said sharply. “I’ve been looking for you everywhere.” His eyes flicked past me toward the lounge door. “What were you doing in there?”