Barren Luna 51

CHAPTER 51

Nolan's POV

From my seat near the edge of the hall, I had a clear view of the main aisle. Talia entered beside her brother, guiding him toward their seats. There was something about her demeanor that caught my attention.

Her posture was perfect, yet her eyes weren't on the ceremony or the crowd. She seemed to be lost in her thoughts. Her eyes kept darting to the entrance as if she was worried about something.

'She's distracted. Something happened,' my wolf said within me.

I shouldn't have cared, but I did. My gaze lingered too long, long enough for Marco to notice. He nudged my shoulder and muttered, "Careful, Alpha. If you keep staring at Talia like that, people are going to start whispering."

I didn't look at him. I swirled the wine in my glass and took a slow sip before answering, my tone flat and cold. "Of course I'd be interested in the daughter of my enemy.'

Marco's eyes went wide, and he shot a quick glance around us. "Keep your voice down," he hissed. "What if someone hears you?"

"She doesn't look right," I said quietly, ignoring his warning. "Go check the lounge. Now."

Marco crossed his arms, not moving. "You do realize how this looks, don't you? First you stepped in earlier and ruined Viki's little stunt, now you're eyeing Talia like you actually give a damn. You keep this up, and people really will think you're interested."

I turned, fixing him with a sharp glare. "Do as I say."

Marco leaned closer, his voice low and firm. “No. Not until you admit what this is. You tell me she’s your enemy, but you keep circling around her. You’re being reckless, Nolan.”

A growl rumbled in my chest. “I said go.”

We locked eyes for a long moment. Marco’s jaw flexed before he finally muttered, “Fine, but don’t expect me as your Beta to not tell you that this is ill advised.” He stalked off, weaving through the rows of guests with a scowl.

The wedding music swelled. Jason stood tall at the front, looking like a proud peacock. Viki entered in her new gown. White silk clung to her thin frame, her complexion ghostly pale under heavy makeup. She trembled faintly with every step.

‘Pathetic,’ my wolf snorted. ‘He rejected his mate for this?’ I had to agree. Viki paled in comparison to Talia’s beauty.

Jason had done well to bring so many Alphas here despite the scandal. I’d give him that much. But arrogance only carried a man so far.

Viki and Jason met and began their slow walk toward the stage. Whispers rippled through the crowd. Some admired the couple, others mocked Viki’s choice of dress, but no one voiced what I could already smell from here: the disgustingly sweet foul scent coming from her.

What was it?

Jason’s voice carried as he began the ceremonial vows, but my attention shifted when Marco returned.

“You’re not going to believe what I found,” he said. There was a glint in his eyes as he slid into the empty seat

beside me. Marco placed a small cloth pouch into my hand.

The scent hit me instantly. It caused me to grimace and my wolf snarl within me.

“Redbone Flower?” I muttered, narrowing my eyes.

“Yes, and it is fresh. Someone must be growing it in Shadowclaw,” Marco responded.

“This was in the lounge?” I asked.

Marco nodded once. “Found it tucked behind a chair in the lounge. But you’ll never guess whose scent was all over the lounge.”

“Talia?” I asked. It would make sense she would be as cunning and evil as her father.

Marco shook her head. “No. The Luna-to-be today. Her blood had stained the floor.”

My gaze flicked back to the stage. Viki’s trembling, her pale skin, and the sickly sweet perfume. It all made sense.

“She’s faking her pregnancy,” I said under my breath.

Marco nodded. “Do you want me to call her out now? End this farce in front of everyone?”

I took another sip of wine, face impassive. “No. Jason still believes we’re allies. I won’t be the one to ruin his ceremony.”

Marco scowled. “So what, we just let this slide?”

“Not quite.” I leaned closer. “Take the pouch to Solon. Tell him it was found in Viki’s lounge. He won’t ignore it. And when he reacts, he’ll be responsible for destroying Jason’s big moment.

Marco gave me a hard look. “You want to pit Solon against Jason. Make the Alpha King’s son the villain.”

“Exactly,” I said simply and handed him back the pouch. Marco slipped away again, moving as though he were just another guest moving for a better view.

Around me, the other Alphas cast wary glances my way as they saw Marco weaving through the rows to get to Solon. They rarely saw me at events like this, but my reputation followed me everywhere. Rumors said I was dangerous and unpredictable. I could read the fear in their eyes and the way they quickly looked away when I met their gaze.

I snorted. They could have at least hid their fear better. They didn’t matter in the long run. I turned my attention back to the stage.

Jason spoke with pride as he recited his vows to Viki. He had no idea the rug was about to be snatched from underneath him. It worked out for me. I needed to stoke the fire of hatred between Solon and Jason. They already had bad blood. This could be the catalyst I needed.

The ceremony continued on stage. I couldn’t help but smirk, Jason was a fool. How could he allow himself to be duped into casting aside his mate for a fraud?

‘His loss, our gain,’ my wolf said. I wanted to argue with him, but I decided against it. My wolf still believed I was going to claim Talia as my mate eventually no matter what I said.

I shifted my attention to Marco as he finally reached Solon. Solon’s eyes flicked to the pouch, his brow furrowing as Marco murmured something in his ear. He untied the cloth, leaned forward slightly, and sniffed.

I saw the shift from neutral expression to pure rage. Solon’s gaze cut toward the stage, then snapped back to the

pouch. Talia, however, did not react. She placed a calming hand on Solon’s arm.

Did she already know about the Redbone Flower? Was that why she looked so distracted? 1

“This is just getting more and more interesting,” I murmured.

I knew one thing for certain was this ceremony would not end the way Jason expected.

The show was just getting started.

CHAPTER 52

Viki’s POV

I stood on the stage in front of Jason with a smile, but every muscle in my body was tense as I fought to keep from collapsing. Each heartbeat sent a sharp pain through my limbs. My wolf whined weakly at the pain, but there wasn’t anything else I could do.

The painkillers Jane had put in my tea earlier were barely enough to take the edge off. Anymore I would be unconscious. Tomorrow, I’ll stop using the Redbone Flower. It didn’t matter that my stomach churned, I was seeing double, and my hands trembled just enough to make holding my bouquet a challenge.

I just had to make it through the ceremony.

Michael, Jason’s father, stood at the center of the stage. “I want to thank you all for coming to this joyous occasion.” Alphas, Betas, and honored guests clapped and cheered at the greeting.

Jason leaned slightly toward me, his hand brushing mine in what the crowd would assume was affection. His voice, however, was far from tender. “Did you change your perfume?” he muttered under his breath. “Whatever that sweet scent is, it’s making me nauseous.”

I forced a smile and whispered back, “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize.”

It was easier to let him believe it was perfume than risk explaining that the faint metallic sweetness was Redbone Flower clinging to my skin. He told me not to cause any problems. I planned to keep my end of the bargain.

Michael finished his opening remarks, and Jason straightened. His chest puffed slightly, and a confident smirk curved his lips as he addressed the audience.

“Today,” Jason declared, his voice loud and clear, “Viki Mayers will officially become my mate and Luna.” He paused for effect, letting his gaze sweep the crowd before continuing. “And soon after, she will give birth to our heir.”

There was polite applause. My father, seated among the front rows, nodded at me with a rare look of approval. That look was worth every lie, every dose, every night of pretending I wasn’t slowly poisoning myself.

The ceremonial claim was seconds away. Jason would say the words, I would accept, and my title would be secure. I could almost feel the relief building in my chest.

“I, Jason Dalton, take you, Viki Mayers as my…”

“Wait!”

The single word froze the room. Heads turned toward the source, and my heart dropped into my stomach. Prince Solon strode forward. His gaze was on me and I swallowed hard. Why was he stopping the ceremony? Did Talia told him?

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Talia’s reaction. She was wide-eyed with surprise. Clearly, she didn’t know why Prince Solon was stopping the ceremony either. What was going on?

Jason stepped forward to intercept Prince Solon, irritation flashing in his eyes. “Your Highness, this is highly irregular-”

“You’ll want to hear this unless you like being played like a fool,” Solon said, cutting him off.

“What…what are you talking about?” Jason stammered.

Prince Solon turned his attention to me. “Bold. That is what I would call you, Viki. Bold and foolish.”

I forced a polite, confused smile. “I’m not sure I understand, Your Highness.”

“Are you sure you want to play this game? I am giving you an opportunity to tell the truth,” Prince Solon warned.

“I’m sorry. I really don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said, keeping my face neutral but my heart was beating so hard I thought it was going to rip through my chest.

Solon reached into his coat and withdrew a small cloth pouch. He held it up for the audience to see. “This was found in your lounge,” he announced. “Do you know what this is Viki?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” I clenched my fists.

“It’s a banned substance, Redbone Flower,” Prince Solon stated and I paled. The crowd erupted into gasps and

murmurs.

No! This couldn’t be happening. I ordered Jane to get rid of everything

“We also found traces of poison on discarded bloody clothing in the same room. It appears you have been using this substance for some time.”

I could feel dozens of eyes staring at me. My wolf pushed against my control. ‘You need to run, Viki. We have to get away,’ she urged.

“I—I can explain,” I began, forcing my voice to rise above the whispers.

Solon didn’t give me the chance. “There will be no tolerance for deception. Not from a future Luna, and certainly not when it involves the falsifying of a pregnancy to secure status among the packs.”

“This is all a misunderstanding! It’s not like that-”

The crack of Michael’s hand meeting my cheek silenced me.

“How dare you?!” He snapped, cleaning his hands.

The force of the blow snapped my head to the side, causing me to fall over. Blood trickled from my lip.

Panic began to settle in. Everything I had worked for, everything I had sacrificed, was shattering. I couldn’t allow everything to go to waste. I had to find a way to get out of this.

I turned to look at Jason. His eyes were cold, his jaw clenched. I stood up slowly and limped to him. I grabbed his arms. “Please Jason, you have to help me,” I whispered.

Jason opened his eyes. He looked at me with disgust and I knew then he wasn’t going to help me. Jason shoved me back so hard I nearly fell again. “You lied to me,” he said, voice low but laced with venom. “You ruined everything.”

I tried again, voice shaking now. “Jason, you can’t do this to me. I’m your Luna! If the Prince…”

“Enough,” Jason barked. “Shut your mouth!”

I felt the Alpha command slam into me forcing me to close my mouth and stay quiet. My eyes widened as I realized he was making sure I didn’t reveal he already knew the truth. He was going to allow me to take the full brunt of this just to keep from being punished. The truth was out. There was no need for him to play along

anymore.

Michael cleared his throat before saying, “Ladies and gentlemen, the Luna ceremony is canceled. For this

CHAPTER 53

Talia’s POV

Two guards took hold of Viki by her arms and dragged her away from the stage. She struggled before giving up. Her heels scraped the floor, and her hair hung loose, now out of its elaborate updo. Her tears streaked her makeup into dark smudges, revealing her pale skin and dark circles under her eyes.

I felt sorry for Viki. She was so close to getting what she wanted. My wolf huffed, ‘She’s getting what she deserves. Don’t forget she threatened to kill us.’ I hadn’t forgotten and it didn’t make me feel any less sorry for her.

When Viki reached the aisle where I stood, her head whipped toward me. “This is all your fault!” she hissed, her voice now hoarse from screaming. “You promised me! You swore you’d let me have this! You’ll pay for this, Talia!” T

I wanted to argue, to defend myself, but it wouldn’t matter. Viki wouldn’t believe me. There was nothing to say, nothing I would give her in return that would make this situation right for her. So, I stayed quiet, my gaze flat as she was dragged past me, her sobs fading in the distance.

From the opposite side of the hall, Nolan rose from his seat. He looked at the watch on his wrist before saying, ” Well, since this ceremony is cancelled, I have other matters to attend to.” Without another glance at Jason, he turned and left the hall. Marco followed right after him.

The remaining Alphas exchanged glances. Some with faint smirks while others had visible disdain. One of them stood, straightening his jacket.

“I think I’ve seen enough,” he said curtly. “I’ll follow Alpha Nolan’s lead.” Nolan and the Alpha seemed to have a ripple effect as more Alphas got up to leave.

One by one guests rose from their seats and followed their Alphas out. They offered no farewells, no empty pleasantries. This was an embarrassment on a grand scale. There was no fun in gossiping about this.

“Wait, there’s still food and…”

Jason’s attempt to keep them from leaving was on deaf ears. I noticed Michael, his father, was barely containing his rage. As soon as everyone left, Jason would be feeling the brunt of his rage for this disaster of a luna ceremony. Michael met my gaze, and I could see hatred within his eyes. My wolf bristled, ‘I think it is time to leave.’

‘I am not afraid of him,’ I responded. I was no longer the she-wolf that shrank under his gaze. Michael could torment Jason, but I wouldn’t allow him to torment me again.

‘No, but we don’t need to cause any more scandals tonight,’ my wolf warned, and she was right. There would be repercussions for this due to Michael being a very vindictive man. I turned away and left the aisle.

“Talia, are you leaving too?” Jason asked.

Solon stepped forward to stand beside me. “Why are you still concerned with Talia’s whereabouts? Are you not upset about your fiancé? Your father just sentenced her to death.”

Jason frowned. “She deceived me. She is no longer my fiancé.”

Solon’s brow furrowed. “That’s a little harsh even for you, Jason. Did you truly not know she was taking the Redbone Flower?”

“Honestly, I sensed something was wrong with her. I thought she was stressed or having a stressful pregnancy, but I didn’t think she would go so far as to fake a pregnancy. I would never have continued with the ceremony if I

had known,” Jason replied.

“So, that’s it. You’re not going to speak for her?” I questioned.

Jason exhaled sharply and glared at the doors where Viki had been taken. “She deserved it.”

I kept my expression neutral, but I didn’t believe Jason. He was too calm, too rational. Jason should have been in complete rage right now unless his love for Viki wasn’t real.

I recalled the last time Jason apologized to me. His words had felt empty and rehearsed, and again his words right now felt as empty as they did before. Except this time, I didn’t care whether he was telling the truth or not.

I turned toward Solon. “Let’s go.”

Solon nodded and began leading me to the exit. Before we reached the exit, Jason moved quickly to block our path. I felt Solon tense.

“I’m getting sick of this,” Solon muttered only low enough for me to hear.

“Jason, is there anything else?” I asked.

“Talia, wait. I need you to believe me this time. I didn’t know,” Jason pleaded.

I met his gaze. “Whether you’re telling the truth or not doesn’t matter to me anymore. That is between you and Viki.”

“Talia, please just listen.”

“No, I have listened enough, Jason. I need you to understand that we’re done. We are no longer mates, and we will never be mates again.”

For a moment, something like pain flickered in his eyes, but I stepped around him before he could speak again. Solon quickly escorted me to his Rolls Royce and we both got in before Jason could beg me to stay again.

As we were pulling out of the parking lot, I finally asked, “How did you know about the Redbone Flower?”

“Because Marco gave me the pouch,” Solon answered. “He asked me to stop the wedding.”

I stopped short, my mind racing. “Marco? Nolan’s Beta?”

“Yes. He found it in Viki’s lounge and said it would be better coming from me,” Solon explained.

I frowned. “Better for who? Certainly not for Jason.”

Solon raised an eyebrow. “Wait, don’t tell me, you wanted me to wait until Jason was bound to Viki where it would have almost been impossible for him to break the mate bond with her. That’s vicious, little sister.”

I shook my head. “No, that’s not what I meant.”

I had so many questions. Why would Nolan care enough to interfere on Jason’s behalf? Nolan was not a man who acted out of compassion. Everything he did was for a reason.

So, what game was he playing?

CHAPTER 54

Jason's POV

The heavy oak doors of my father's office shut behind me with a low thud. I could feel my father's Alpha aura rolling off him. His aura and anger pressed down on me like a physical weight that I had to focus on not kneel. My wolf paced restlessly within me.

My father sat behind his desk. His eyes fixed on me with a glare so intense that if looks could kill, I'd be dead

twice over now.

"I was very clear the last we spoke," my father said, "to not embarrass me again, wasn't I?"

"Father, I…"

"You let yourself be deceived by that whore," my father spat, interrupting me. He stood up slowly, walking from behind his desk. I had known this confrontation was coming. My instinct told me to flee but I stood my ground.

"Father, I was doing what's best for the pack." I explained. "The Luna Ceremony can't be cancelled because she sent the invitations long ago, so-"

"Wait. Did you know it?"

"What? I just…" I'm struggling to find the proper words.

"Don't play games with me, son. Did you know about her taking the Redbone Flower to fake her pregnancy?" my father snapped.

I swallowed hard. “Yes.”

The vein in my father’s forehead pulsed as his eyes narrowed.

I held his eyes for a heartbeat and then dropped them, because I remembered exactly how many bones he had broken in me as a child after teaching me not to hold a stare too long.

His Alpha aura intensified, and I felt my wolf cower within me.

‘Move!’ my wolf warned but his warning came too late. My father’s fist connected with my chin. My head snapped back as blood sprayed. I stumbled backward. Before I could block, my father punched me again in the torso causing me to gasp for air.

“You dare to lie to me!!” he snarled, his voice booming causing the windows to rattle. “You knew she lied and still paraded her like a Luna.”

He continued to punch me until I was on my knees in a bloody mess.

I spat the blood out and looked up at my father. “Exposing the lie or cancelling the ceremony would cause damages. I intended to resolve it privately and quickly.”

My father slapped me in the back of the head. “Tell me, genius, do you think you can fool the Elder Council, the Alpha King all along? Your idiotic decision would have doomed us!”

“I never thought Solon would find it…” I replied.

“Redbone Flower is a banned substance. Solon is bound to report it to the Alpha King. Other packs will question our strength, our leadership, because you could not see through the lies of a desperate, she-wolf,” my father signed.

I fought against my wolf, who begged me to lower my head further. I kept my posture rigid as I slowly stood. I had learned that showing submission or fear in front of him only prolonged the lesson as it was unbecoming of an Alpha.

“I accept responsibility,” I said. “I will fix it, Father.”

“You will not ‘fix it’ with more delays and idiotic decisions,” my father said as he sat back down at his desk. “You will end it.”

“Henry!”

His doors opened at once and Henry walked in. Henry took in my appearance only for a second. His eyes flashed with concern before turning his attention to my father. His jaw flexed as he attempted to keep his expression neutral. Henry always hated seeing my father abuse me, but there was nothing he could do to help me.

“Where is the bitch Viki Mayers?” my father asked.

“In the dungeon,” Henry replied.

“Take Viki Mayers to the courtyard,” my father ordered. “Raise the gallows and hang her for all to see, so everyone will understand what happens to traitors to the pack. Do not listen to anything she says. If she weeps, if she begs, if she claims pregnancy again, if the Moon Goddess comes down herself, ignore all of it. The order stands.”

Henry bowed his head in submission. “Yes, Sir.” He turned and left.

“Father, executing her like this will cause unrest. Her father will….”

“Will obey,” he said coldly, cutting me off again. “Because Roy will follow the lead of his Alpha. You have been too lenient, too accommodating. You are Alpha not this low-level filth. Only Henry seems to be loyal to you, but that could change if you don’t get a grip on the situation.”

I swallowed back the urge to challenge him.

“As for you, you will contact the Alpha King.”

The shift in topic caught me off guard. “What? Why?”

“You will find a reason to visit Silverfang. I will oversee Shadowclaw while you are gone. That’s the plan to fix › your mistake.”

“The plan?” I got even more confused.

“The Alpha King’s daughter,” my father said, his tone casual but deliberate. “She’s been out of the public eye for years… the one person he guards like a treasure.” His gaze sharpened. “You’re lucky she wasn’t here to see you embarrass yourself. That means you still have a chance.”

I frowned. “Father, you want me to marry her?”

“Exactly,” he said, leaning forward, “If you can win her, make her your Luna, you won’t just restore Shadowclaw’s honor. You might put yourself in line for the Alpha King’s throne without bloodshed.”

Such a union could lift Shadowclaw higher than any alliance we’d ever dreamed of-higher even than my father’s reign. The thought sent a rush of heat through me, though my wolf’s voice cut in, low and accusing. She’s not our

mate…

My chest tightened. “And what about Talia?” I asked, the name tasting like a betrayal. 1

My father’s expression turned cold, slicing through the air between us. “That ship has sailed. She offers you nothing but sentiment-and sentiment will not raise this pack from the ashes.”

“I understand,” I said finally. My wolf dipped his head in submission, mirroring my outward compliance.

My father stared at me for a long moment, trying to determine if I was lying, He finally nodded and said, “Good. Do not disappoint me again, Jason. We cannot afford another display of weakness.”

“Father, I won’t disappoint you this time.” I bowed, ready to do whatever it took

CHAPTER 55

Jason’s POV

Night settled in with steady rain against the windows. I had my wardrobe open and a suitcase on the bed. Shirts lay folded in stacks. A suit for formal calls sat on top. I checked the laces on my boots, then rolled two belts and set them near the edge.

Earlier, I heard the commotion from outside, knowing that Viki had just died. I didn’t feel pity for her. She had fooled me. Thankfully, the Luna Ceremony hadn’t been completed. The Luna link never formed, so the death shock would not pass through the mate mark

The door burst open without a knock causing me to jump in surprise. Henry stood in the doorway looking frazzled. His chest rose and fell quickly and water from the tips of his hair pooled on the floor as if he came running in from the rain.

“What the hell, Henry?” I scolded.

“Alpha… Jason,” he gasped, struggling to catch his breath. “Viki… she escaped.”

“What? What did you say?”

“She escaped,” Henry repeated. “The body in the dungeon isn’t her.”

My stomach dropped. I grabbed my jacket that was hanging on the back of my chair. “Take me there now.”

We moved fast down the stairs. The lower corridor was colder than the rest of the packhouse. Two guards stood at the dungeon door with their eyes down and their shoulders tight. When they saw me, they stepped aside.

Henry opened the door, and we entered the first cell. A body lay under a blanket near the wall.

I walked over to the body. The outline matched what I expected to see: small frame, slight shoulders, a dress pulled tight across the stomach. I crouched and lifted the edge of the blanket.

“Jane,” I said. “This is Viki’s personal maid.” Jane and Viki looked as if they were sisters. Probably why Roy made her Viki’s personal maid. But a thin scar below her left ear confirmed it was not Viki, but Jane.

“Log her death through the infirmary and release her body to her family,” I ordered.

Henry nodded. “Yes, Alpha.”

“Explain how it came to this,” I commanded the guards.

One of them swallowed. His scent spiked with fear. “Alpha, we did as ordered. We put the hood on Viki. We took her to the gallows. Lord Roy arrived and said he wanted a final word with his daughter. I stepped outside the cell to give them privacy.”

“Lord Roy walked Viki out himself, saying that he wanted to send his daughter off to the Moon Goddess himself. for We watched him placing the rope around her neck. After the execution, we brought her back here to prepare her burial. When we removed her hood, we realized it was not Viki,” the other guard continued.

“You imbeciles,” I growled. “You allowed him to be alone with his daughter.”

“Sorry, Alpha,” the first guard trembled. “He said he wanted to give her peace and be the one to do it. He signaled us and we pulled the lever.”

I let silence sit between us until both guards started to shift their weight. My wolf pressed forward, wanting to maul the two guards in front of me. I took a calming breath.

“You should never have stepped out,” I said. “Did you really think Roy would willingly allow his daughter to be executed?!”

“Alpha,” he said. “I take full-”

“Shut up! Just shut up!” I snapped, seizing him by the throat. “Go find Roy immediately and execute him on the spot now!”

The guard managed to weakly say, “Yes, Alpha.”

I dropped him to the ground. My eyes returned to Jane. She had always been attentive and caring to Viki. It was a shame that her loyalty ended with her death.

“I am in a forgiving mood,” I said. “If you fail again, my father will decide your fate. Do you understand?”

The guards paled and nodded quickly. “Yes, Alpha.” They all but ran out of the dungeon to look for Roy. Henry waited until they passed through the door before looking back at me.

“What about the position of top warrior?” he asked.

“My father will handle it,” I said. “He will find a good replacement.”

Henry acknowledged the decision with a short nod. My father would pick a worthy replacement. He would ensure a sense of order would remain.

“Do you want me to send a team to look for Viki?” Henry asked. “In her condition, she wouldn’t have made it too far. ”

“Viki is not worth pursuing. She is a rogue wolf now without allies and money. She will not last long,” I responded.

“Good riddance,” Henry said. “I actually don’t know what you saw in her, Alpha. I never liked her.”

“I know. You have told me at least a thousand times,” I sighed as we exited the dungeon and went back to the main floor. I would have to report the failure to my father and the corrective action taken.

“And you should have listened to me. You wouldn’t be in this mess now,” Henry scolded.

“Talia is a weak omega, even without Viki, I’ll need a stronger Luna,” I spat.

Henry sighed, “Physical strength isn’t everything. That is why we have mates. So our other half can fill in the areas that we lack.”

I let a low, dangerous growl escape. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were in love with Talia.”

“No. I just think she’s a good Luna,” he said with a shrug.

“Just shut up and go pack,” I said, letting my gaze linger on him a moment longer than necessary. “We leave for Silverfang at dawn.”

Henry’s brow furrowed. “Silverfang? For what?”

A dangerous sneer curled my lips. “The Alpha King’s throne.”

CHAPTER 56

Father nodded. “Back then, Nolan’s father and I were close. Nolan often visited. He was quiet, timid even, nothing like he is now. You two were inseparable. People used to joke that you two might be fated mates one day.”

My heart skipped. I couldn't believe that I was that close to Nolan when I was young.

"But after his father died," Father continued, "he grew distant and cold. He resented the world. He resented me. I always blamed myself for not finding the truth behind Ryker's death."

I touched his arm gently. "You can't blame yourself. That wasn't your burden to bear."

I had never truly known what happened the night Nolan's father was killed. I had been too young, but one thing I did know: my father would never have killed him. If Nolan truly believed otherwise… then there had to be some terrible misunderstanding.

Father let out a low sigh and set the basket aside. "It doesn't change the fact that Nolan has hidden motives now. He wouldn't come to Silverfang without reason. And now Jason is coming here too."

A groan of frustration slipped out of me. "Why is he coming?"

"He claims to be sorry for the chaos at his wedding and says he wants to study warrior tactics here," my father said, his tone dry. "I don't believe a word of it. Both he and Nolan came here for reasons they won't admit."

"You believe me now," I pressed.

"I always believed you, Talia," my father said firmly. "But you must also trust that I know what I am doing."

I nodded, letting out a breath. He had been right so far about Nolan. He hadn't harmed me–if anything, he had protected me. "I know, and I do."

"You must still be careful, Talia. Neither of them can be trusted fully," my father said. "There is no telling how Jason will react once he realizes you are the Silverfang princess."

I forgot that I never revealed my identity to him. Solon made him leave during my banquet. I would have to be very careful, especially now Viki is dead.

“I’ll be careful,” I promised.

Father gave me one last look before turning back to the basket of petals. “That’s enough for tonight. Come, I’ll show you how to make Rosefall.”

But as I left the garden, one thought gnawed at me: if neither Nolan nor Jason could be trusted, then who would strike first?

CHAPTER 57

Jason’s POV

Henry and I reached Silverfang by late morning. The guards stepped aside immediately, lowering their heads as I passed. Servants along the path bowed low, their eyes fixed on the ground, careful not to meet my gaze. Their submission pleased me. This was the way it should be.

I was the battle-harden Alpha Jason of Shadowclaw. I fought wars and bled for dominance. I had clawed my way into power with strength that few could match. I demanded respect and here, in the Alpha King’s territory, I intended to have it.

Nolan had nothing on me. He thrived on cruelty, but I was more deserving of the Alpha King’s favor.

Even with Solon’s report about Viki and the Redbone Flower, the King had allowed me to enter his territory. That alone gave me hope. If he meant to ignore me, he would have barred me from the gates. Instead, I was here. That had to mean something.

At the entrance of the main hall, Beta Logan waited. He looked at me with a neutral expression. He didn’t bow to me, which irritated me. Even though I wasn’t his Alpha, he still should respect my title.

“Alpha Jason,” he greeted. “The Alpha King is occupied and cannot meet you at this time. Guest quarters have been prepared. If you wish to observe warrior training, the grounds are open to you.”

That was all. There was no feast, no welcome, not even a false smile to soften the blow.

“I appreciate the courtesy, Beta Logan.”

Logan inclined his head once more, then gestured to a servant to escort us. He turned away before I could say another word.

“This way, Alpha Jason and Beta Henry,” the servant said. We followed him without saying another word. My wolf paced restlessly in me, seething at how Beta Logan had dismissed me like I was nothing.

The guest quarters were grand enough with fine furnishings, carved wood, heavy curtains, but the luxury did little to soothe my pride. As soon as the servant left, I finally let my smile drop. I rounded on Henry. “What the hell was that? You told me the Alpha King had no issue with me coming.”

“He didn’t. He accepted your request within 24 hours,” Henry replied.

“Then explain to me why he treated me like I was nothing! This must be due to Prince Solon. The Alpha King still must be upset about Viki. Her lying and using a banned substance had nothing to do with us. She disgraced us!”

Henry stayed calm and placed a hand on my shoulder. “I think you need to calm down, Alpha. This could be so much worse than it is. So, just take a breath.”

I shrugged Henry’s hand off and said, “I don’t need to be appeased. I need to be respected!”

Henry walked away from me, rubbing his temples. “Jason, as your Beta, listen to me. Don’t make something out of nothing.”

“What are you saying? You’re supposed to be on my side!” I exclaimed.

“I am on your side, Jason!” Henry snapped. “That’s why I am telling you to let this go. You are overthinking it.”

“Was he the same way with Alpha Nolan?” I asked.

Henry paused. He rubbed his hand over his face before saying, “Why is that relevant? What the Alpha King did or

didn’t do for him does not matter.”

“Henry,” I growled. “Answer my question!”

“Fine. When Nolan arrived in Silverfang, the Alpha King held a banquet in his honor,” Henry said flatly.

My fists tightened until my knuckles ached. “A banquet… for him?” I spat the word like poison. “Nolan gets treated like royalty while I am dismissed like a common guest?”

My father’s voice echoed in my head. Never let them make you look weak. And yet, that was exactly what had happened here.

“They think I am beneath them.” I said through gritted teeth. “They’ll regret this. One day, I’ll sit on that throne, and they’ll bow to me. Every last one of them. The King, Nolan, all of them.” (1

Henry spun around and hissed, “Watch what you say, Jason. What if someone is listening. Do you want to fail before you even get started?”

My wolf bristled and snarled within me. He wanted to punish Henry for talking to us like that, but Henry was right. Anyone could be listening to our conversation right now.

Henry continued, “You need to be patient. Have I ever stirred you wrong?” 1

“No.”

“Then listen to me. The Hunting Rite will be held in a month. You know the tradition. Remember the plan.”

If I won the Hunting Rite, the Alpha King would have to grant me a reward. It didn’t matter what that reward was as long as it didn’t go against the rules of the Council, the Alpha King had to grant it. I would ask to marry the Princess as a reward and the Alpha King would have to allow it.

“You’re right,” I said, breathing deep. “Thanks for bringing me back to my senses.”

Henry nodded. I stepped closer, lowering my voice. “Find out where the Princess lives. I want to know everything about her.”

“Yes, Alpha,” Henry bowed and left the guest quarters to investigate.

I walked out onto the balcony to get some fresh air. The garden below stretched wide, green paths bordered by blooming roses and tall hedges. My gaze swept across the garden and then I froze.

There, sitting on a stone bench beneath the shade of an oak tree, was a familiar figure. A book rested in her hands, her head bent as she read, and the breeze picked up as strands of her hair.

Talia.

She looked calm, happy even. She looked happier than I have seen her in a long time. She looked radiant in the garden.

Excitement surged through me.

I would make sure she wouldn't slip away from me this time.

CHAPTER 58

Talia's POV

I sat in the quiet garden, the last of the day's sunlight soft against my shoulders. A pack management book rested in my lap. Solon had recommended it, insisting it would sharpen my leadership skills.

"I have enough leadership skills as a Luna," I told him.

"Yes, to a pack that used you as an event planner. This is different. Just read the book, Talia," Solon stated, ruffling my hair.

"Fine," I pouted.

Solon was right about the book. I had only finished the first chapter and felt like I had learned so much. Right when I was getting ready to start the next chapter, my wolf growled a warning.

'Jason is here.'

"What?!" I frowned.

I snapped the book shut and started to gather my things. If I moved quickly enough, maybe I could avoid him altogether. But before I could rise from the bench, he was already there, blocking my way.

Damn it.

Jason looked different than the last time I'd seen him. There was the faintest trace of exhaustion on his face. But the arrogance in his eyes was still there, so Viki's lies hadn't humbled him.

“Talia,” he greeted, his voice deliberately soft. “I came to apologize.”

“You’ve already apologized. There’s nothing you could say that I want to hear,” I said, clutching my book in front of me like a shield.

“Please just hear me out, Talia,” Jason pressed. “I hurt you because I was deceived. Viki poisoned me with lies. She tricked me, and I was too blind to see. But now-” He spread his hands like a man offering a gift. “Now that she’s gone, nothing stands between us.”

“Did she manipulate you when you slept with her?” I asked.

Jason opened his mouth and then closed it quickly as he tried to think of what to say.

“You were cheating with her long before she told you she was pregnant, weren’t you?” I continued.

“Only because she lied to me about you. She said…”

I raised my hand, interrupting him. “You trusted an outsider over your fated mate. That is more disrespectful than cheating. Nothing will change our past now. We’re no longer mates. You made sure of that.”

His jaw twitched, but he forced a thin smile. “Do you remember the nights we shared? Do you remember what it felt like to be in my arms? I could give that back to you. I could give you everything, Talia.”

I raised a brow. “Everything? Can you return the years I wasted? Can you remove the humiliation I felt? Or what about the title of Luna? Or does your father still forbid that?”

For the first time, his confident expression faltered. “My father wants me to marry the Alpha King’s daughter. It’s politics, nothing more.”

So, that was what he was here for. My wolf chuckled, ‘He’s an idiotic fool.’ I couldn’t wait to see his face when he realized I was the Alpha King’s daughter.

“But don’t think that means I don’t love you. I do. I always have. I always will. I can give you everything but the title. You’d still have my heart,” Jason stated.

I scoffed. “How generous of you to offer me the position of mistress while you crown another woman. No need and no thank you, Jason. Solon can give me everything I want, and he doesn’t have to lie to me to do it.”

His eyes narrowed and he finally let his mask fall. “You think Solon loves you more than I do? You think he’d give you more than I can?”

“Nope. I just know it,” I smirked.

I stood and turned to leave, but Jason moved faster than I expected. His hand shot out, yanking the collar of my shirt down roughly, exposing the skin of my shoulder.

“What the hell are you doing?” I exclaimed.

Jason’s grip tightened as he searched my neck and shoulder. He was looking for a mark that wasn’t there. Jason laughed. His lips twisted into a feral grin. “I knew it. I knew you wouldn’t let him mark you. You still love me. You’re still mine.”

“I’m not yours,” I spat, jerking away from him and pulling my shirt back up. “I will never be yours again!”

Fury flashed in his eyes. He lunged, grabbing me with both hands. His mouth crashed against mine. It was no kiss. It was teeth and rage. His fingers tore at my shirt, nails grazing my skin.

“Did he do this?” Jason demanded between breaths. “Did Solon touch you the way I did? Did he try to mark you?”

Get off me!” I snarled, shoving at his chest with all the strength I could gather. My wolf surged forward, lending me power. My claws tore at his chest, drawing blood.

Jason growled, he shook me hard as if he could shake the defiance out of me. “You are mine, Talia! I’ll prove it. I’ll mark you again, and you’ll see. You’ll remember who you belong to.

I fought him with everything I kicked, clawed, and twisted my body to break free. My wolf snapped inside me, snarling encouragement, pushing my limbs to strike harder. But I couldn’t break free of him.

“Stop fighting me!” he snapped. “Stop pretending! I know you still feel it! I can see it in your eyes!”

“You see nothing but your own madness!” I spat back, my teeth bared.

Jason forced me back down against the bench. One hand clamped around my throat while the other painfully wrenched my head back by my hair. He ignored my punches as he pressed his weight over me. His face was buried in the crook of my neck.

“You’ll thank me for this,” he hissed in my ear. “You’ll see that no one can love you the way I do.”

I thrashed harder, my claws slashing into his chest. I opened my mindlink with Solon and Della, desperate, hoping they could get to me before this maniac marked me again.

And then, a voice, sharp and cold, cut through the night air.

“Alpha Jason, what are you doing?”

CHAPTER 59

Talia’s POV

I shoved Jason away, my chest heaving as I scrambled to fix my torn shirt. My hands shook as I yanked my shirt back into place, but no amount of tugging could erase the humiliation I felt right now.

I knew Jason was capable of many things, but not this. I never thought he would do something as vile as this. I felt stripped bare by the shame of having been pinned beneath him.

And then I saw who had spoken.

Nolan.

He stood just beyond the garden path. He wore a black jacket with jeans. His expression was neutral as he walked up the garden path towards us.

Of all people, why did it have to be him who found me? This was his second time saving me. My humiliation tripled.

Jason straightened, clearly caught off guard. I took the opportunity to get off the bench and put distance between Jason and I. Jason reached for me, but I stepped back further.

Jason frowned but turned his attention back to Nolan. “Alpha Nolan, did you need something?” Jason asked casually as if he hadn’t been about to take advantage of me in broad daylight.

Nolan didn’t say anything to Jason. He walked past him and shrugged off his black jacket. Without asking, he draped it over my shoulders.

The weight surprised me. It was heavier than I expected, and warm from his body heat. My pulse slowed just a fraction; my wolf settled at the comfort of it. He placed one steadying hand on my back. The gesture was simple, but it shocked me. Nolan wasn’t known for kindness, yet I was thankful all the same.

Jason cleared his throat and said, “What a surprise! It seems you know Talia as well.”

The pause was deliberate.

Nolan's gaze flicked to him, then back to me. "Of course I know her. I am a guest in Silverfang. Why wouldn't I know the Alpha King's…"

Panic surged through me, and I quickly blurted out, "Guest! Yes, a guest just like him."

Nolan looked at me in surprise. His brows furrowed, his sharp features softening just for a heartbeat before his expression became neutral again. He studied me, as though silently demanding an explanation.

Nolan then turned his attention back to Jason and asked, "What are you doing here, Alpha Jason? Why didn't you inform me you were coming?"

"I didn't think I needed to. I came here to study Silverfang's warrior training techniques," Jason smirked.

I wondered what was going on between Jason and Nolan. What was their relationship? It was odd that Nolan felt that Jason should check in with him.

Jason cleared his throat and said, "Seems like you're more than a guest to Nolan, Talia." He gestured to Nolan's hand still on my back. Nolan raised an eyebrow but didn't remove his hand.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said.

Jason moved closer, puffing his chest with arrogance that barely masked his unease. "Alpha Nolan, I would appreciate it if you would remove your hand from her. Talia is my fated mate, my Luna."

Before Nolan could respond, I snapped, "Oh my goddess, Jason, would you just stop with the lies? We ended that bond for a long time. There is no mate bond between us. I am not your Luna. You need to accept that!"

Jason's jaw tightened. For a moment, his arrogant façade cracked. He looked hurt and frustrated, but he quickly forced a smirk onto his face.

“You’re just being stubborn. I told you me and Viki are over. You can come back home,” Jason said, continuing his delusion.

Nolan let out a short, humorless laugh. “From where I’m standing, it seems she’s already made it clear what her relationship with you is. And it isn’t Luna.”

Jason’s aura flared. Nolan cocked his head slightly, smirking at him, daring Jason to try something. To my surprise, Jason didn’t lash out.

“This is between us, Nolan. You don’t need to interfere,” Jason said in a strained voice.

“That’s where you’re wrong, Jason. You don’t get to tell me what to do,” Nolan responded firmly.

Like the coward he was, instead of fighting with Nolan, Jason turned to me. “You get around, don’t you, Talia?” he hissed.

“What is that supposed to mean?” I frowned.

“First Prince Solon, and now Alpha Nolan? You just open your legs to anyone who gives you attention, don’t you?” Jason spat, his words sharp and cruel.

My wolf growled inside me. He had already humiliated me, and now he dared to shame me as if I were the whore.” That’s cheap coming from you. I’m not the one that allowed a cheap floozy to manipulate me! You let Viki fool you into thinking she was pregnant with your pup. What kind of Alpha can’t even tell the difference between a real and a fake pregnancy?” I shot back.

Nolan coughed, clearly trying to smother a laugh, which only made Jason’s face flush hotter with rage. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. You wouldn’t…”

“I don’t care about your excuses for why you couldn’t keep it in your pants,” I snapped, cutting him off, pulling Nolan’s jacket tighter around me. “We have no relationship, Jason. Who I am, or am not, with is none of your business.”

“I’m the only one who would ever truly want you. You’re a useless, barren omega. You serve no purpose other than a plaything,” He gestured at me like I was nothing more than a discarded rag. “Did you really think Solon ever loved you? He pitied you, Talia. You were just a sad charity case. And Nolan? Don’t be stupid. He wouldn’t be interested in you. You need to accept reality and accept your place in the world.”

“Shut your fucking mouth!” I snarled. My outburst surprised Jason as I normally didn’t curse but he had pushed me to the breaking point. “I didn’t belong to you then and I don’t belong to you now! I will NEVER be your mate again!”

Jason’s shock was replaced with rage, but before he could speak again, Nolan spoke up, “Who says I am not interested in her?”

My head whipped toward him, my mouth falling open in shock.

Nolan smirked, reached out, and with a finger under my chin, closed my mouth with a subtle push.

CHAPTER 60

Nolan’s POV

Talia and Jason were staring at me, waiting for an answer.

Honestly, I hadn’t expected the words to come out of my mouth either.

I hadn’t come here to interfere. When I first noticed Jason cornering Talia, I had no intention of stepping in. Watching and waiting was safer, but my wolf didn’t see it that way. He was pacing impatiently inside me.

‘Do something. Don’t let him touch what’s ours,’ he growled within me.

“She isn’t ours,” I responded. “This is none of our business.”

‘She is ours. She has always been. Another male’s hands on her is an insult,’ my wolf howled angrily.

Jason leaned closer, fingers clutching her collar. My wolf pushed hard inside me, and before I knew it, my feet were moving. Anger flared as I watched him pin her to the bench. That bastard was trying to forcibly mark her. Even if I hadn't planned to mark Talia, I would never let another Alpha force himself on her.

The way Talia allowed me to put my jacket on her and how she kept it on made me feel good in a way that I hadn't expected. Even with the charm on my chest, the instinctual need to protect her, and the need for her to allow me to, was still present.

'Because she's ours and this is our role as her mate and her Alpha,' my wolf reminded me.

"What did you just say, Alpha Nolan?" Jason pressed.

"What if I am interested in her?" I sneered.

Jason blinked, startled, and then scrambled to hide his surprised expression. For a moment, he even looked fearful. He chuckled nervously and asked, "You're joking, right?"

"Relax," I said evenly, almost bored. "She looks like she'd make a good maid."

My wolf bristled instantly. 'You insult her to hide what she really means to us. You're pathetic!'

I ignored him, but the desired effect was immediate. Jason's shoulders dropped, and I could see the relief on his face. He stood, fixing his shirt.

"Of course, of course. She did manage Shadowclaw well when she was my Luna," he said quickly, eager to seize the lifeline. "She kept the pack in order. Probably would make a fine maid." His voice hardened at the end, reminding both of us of where he thought Talia belonged.

I could feel Talia stiffen, but I didn't remove my hand from her back. Jason was still a threat to her until he left." Your Luna? That's how you talk about her now?"

Jason puffed his chest. “I can talk about her all I want to because she’s mine. She always was. If you want maids, I’ll send you ten better than her tomorrow.”

My wolf slammed against my ribs, teeth bared. ‘Kill him. Right here. Tear his throat out.’

I kept my face neutral. I could feel Talia’s angry eyes on me. I could tell she was barely keeping her composure.

“I don’t need anything from you,” I said, voice low and sharp. “You’ve just arrived in Silverfang. Behave yourself. Focus on why you’re here. This territory has rules, Alpha Jason.”

Jason’s smirk faltered. My aura pressed down on him, and I saw the flicker of unease in his eyes. He swallowed, forcing a quick nod. “Of course,” he said. “I’ll keep to my purpose.”

“See that you do,” I snapped.

Jason’s eyes darted to Talia again before he turned and stalked away. I stepped away from Talia as I watched him leave. When he was out of hearing distance, I finally looked at Talia.

Talia’s chest was still rising fast, her fists clenched around the edges of my jacket. For a moment, I thought she might keep it. But then Talia tore the jacket off.

“How dare you!” she growled and threw it at me. The jacket hit my chest. I caught it without hesitation. “I don’t know what sick fantasy you have in your head about me, but I will NEVER be your maid!”

I folded the jacket over my arm. “Interesting,” I said. “Are you upset that you thought I actually liked you?”

Talia scoffed, “Don’t flatter yourself.”

“You kept my jacket long enough,” I goaded.

Talia’s jaw tightened as fury flashed in her eyes again. “I needed a barrier from him, not from you. Don’t think this means anything.”

“You lie very well, Princess. You should think about my offer. It’ll keep Jason away,” I responded.

“Are you serious right now?” Talia asked with narrowed eyes.

“What if I tell Jason who you really are? I only need one sentence, and you’ll never get rid of him,” I explained.

Talia stepped toward me with her chin lifted. I could feel her Luna aura flaring. “Go ahead and try,” she said coldly. “But if you dare threaten Silverfang, I won’t let it slide.”

Then she turned and stormed down the path without looking back.

I stood where I was, the jacket still in my hand. My wolf growled, ‘We need to mark her. End this foolish game.’

“No,” I said under my breath. “I told you I refuse to be distracted. We are so close to our goal. I won’t let a little she-wolf ruin what I worked so hard to get due to instincts and hormones.”

I replayed the exchange out of habit. The maid line had served its purpose. It gave Jason a way to retreat without having to admit defeat. Men like him cling to a petty insult because it spares them from facing their own failures.

Jason praised Talia to convince himself he still held the higher ground. He held the delusion that he still had control. He offered ten maids just to flex. But in the end, like the coward he was, he obeyed my order instead of fighting. That was all I needed to see. He was still the obedient pup I needed him to be.

‘You insulted her to move him,’ my wolf said, unimpressed. ‘Saying the truth would make you vulnerable. You’re as delusional as him.’

Another set of footsteps approached from behind me. Marco stepped into the garden from the hedge path. His eyes scanned the scene. His eyes went to the clawed bench. Marco stopped a few paces away, reading the tension in my shoulders.

“What happened?” Marco asked.