Barren Luna 81

CHAPTER 81

Talia's POV

"I stopped caring about Jason the moment our bond ended," I told Nolan firmly. "To be honest, I think I really stopped caring when I realized that he agreed with how Viki felt about me."

Nolan turned away from me and focused on his drink. "You're too kind to an ungrateful fool like him," he said after a pause.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"After that kind of insult, I'm surprised you didn't at least have him beaten," Nolan replied.

He had no idea how much I had thought about it and how hard I had worked to take the higher road. Before I could say anything more, a tall Alpha approached us. He was the one Della had wanted me to talk to. Up close, he was even more handsome.

"Excuse me, would you like to dance?" He asked politely, extending his hand.

I hesitated for only a second. What harm would it do if I danced a little? I reached for his hand, but Nolan's grip closed around mine instead. I hadn't even realized he'd turned back around from the bar.

"She already has a partner," Nolan said flatly.

The Alpha glanced between us before replying, "I thought she was alone."

"You thought wrong," Nolan snapped.

The Alpha gave a stiff nod and stepped back awkwardly, retreating quickly into the crowd. Even after the Alpha had

gone, Nolan still hadn't released my hand. I swallowed hard, trying to keep my mind from wandering.

"Um… do you want to dance, then?" I asked carefully.

"I can't." He muttered.

"What do you mean you can't? Don't tell me you don't know how to dance."

"No, I've had too much to drink. Take me to the lounge," Nolan said as he stood, finally letting go of my hand.

Why did he need me to take him there? Nolan knew exactly where the lounge was. Maybe he really was drunk.

"Fine. Follow me," I muttered, leading him out of the hall and into the corridor. The music faded the farther we got. My mind started racing. What if he wanted to talk to me alone about what happened in the library? I would not be able to handle the humiliation if he brought it up now.

I was about to ask if he was making up an excuse to leave the party, when I froze and my jaw dropped. Nolan bumped into me, causing me to stumble forward. He caught me before I fell.

"Why did you stop?" He asked, irritated and I pointed to the corner in front of us.

There, in the corner, Della was locked in a kiss with Marco. One hand was on her waist, the other behind her neck, deepening their kiss. Della's leg was hooked on his waist as she clung to him,

Nolan cleared his throat and Della gasped when she noticed us. Marco released her, and she quickly tugged her dress down.

“This isn’t what it looks like,” she stammered, then winced. “Well… it is what it looks like.”

“Explain. Now,” Nolan growled.

Marco opened his mouth, but Della blurted out first, “We’re mates.

“Mates?” I repeated, stunned.

Della nodded quickly.

“How long have you known?” I asked.

“Since my birthday party. I didn’t say anything because I wasn’t sure if we were going to accept each other,” she said, rushing her words.

It all made sense. I remembered how Della acted when she saw Marco for the first time. I never would have

thought they would’ve ended up being mates.

“You kept this from me?” Nolan demanded. If I didn’t know any better, I would have thought Nolan was offended that Marco didn’t tell him.

“I was going to tell you. I just…” Marco began.

“Marco! You should have not kept this from me!” Nolan yelled.

“Alpha, just let me explain,” Marco pleaded.

“You will come with me. Now,” Nolan snapped, cutting him off.

Marco moved to obey, but Della grabbed his arm. “No! You don’t get to order him around, not like this.”

“I think you’ve forgotten, Della, that Marco is not part of Silverfang. He is my Beta,” Nolan shot back.

“You’re being unreasonable! Our bond is none of your business!” Della argued, stepping forward.

“Della, calm down,” I told her. I could feel Nolan’s aura pulsating. Even though I hated to admit it, Della was out of line talking to Nolan like this.

Nolan’s glare hardened before he used the Alpha command, “Marco. Now.”

Reluctantly, Marco pried Della’s hand off his arm. He whispered something in her ear, kissed her forehead, and then followed Nolan down the hall.

I stayed silent as Della watched Marco disappear.

“The bastard!” she finally exploded, spinning toward me. “Can you believe him? Acting like Marco belongs to him!”

“You have to understand,” I said gently. “Marco swore his allegiance to Nolan when he became his Beta. By not telling him immediately, he may have violated his oath.”

“He wasn’t hiding it from him! He just didn’t know if I’d accept him until tonight,” Della said desperately.

“Start from the beginning. Tell me everything.” I pressed.

“At first, I was furious. He ignored me at my party, and didn’t even acknowledge the bond. I thought he didn’t want me. I even hoped he’d reject me so we could both move on,” she confessed.

“But he didn’t. No matter how mean I was to him, he kept trying. I started to realize he was everything I didn’t know I needed.”

“So the argument tonight…”

“I was upset because he wanted to wait to reveal we were mates. He was worried about how Nolan would react. I should have listened. I shouldn’t have pushed him to claim me.” Her voice cracked; tears brimmed. “Now Nolan’s going to tear us apart. I can’t lose him, Talia. I just can’t.”

“We’re not going to let that happen, Della.”

I pulled her into a hug, my chest tight with her grief. I couldn’t let her suffer the same loss I had endured.

“You won’t lose him. I promise. I’ll help you, no matter what Nolan says. If he tries to interfere, he’ll have to go through me first.”

CHAPTER 82

Talia’s POV

I was three days away from the Hunting Rite and every breath I took during training was a struggle.

I threw myself into training, but I could barely maintain it. Without my wolf, every movement I felt off. My stamina dropped faster than it ever had before. I was covered in sweat and wheezing before the others even looked winded.

I kept forcing myself to match them, but each time the sessions ended with me on the ground in exhaustion. It was humiliating. I was the Princess. I was supposed to be ruling over the Silverfang, and I couldn’t even run 6

miles.

As the Alpha King's daughter, I had always been stronger and faster, but now I was looked at with pity and concern. Maybe Nolan was right. Maybe I should have had Jason beaten for the continued stress he was putting me through. If he hadn't betrayed the mate bond, I would still be a Luna and not have gone through a stressful heat that made my wolf silent.

I just wanted my wolf to come back. Every day I called her and was met with silence.

At dinner that evening, my father expressed his concern. "Talia," he began, setting his fork down, "your abilities are not what they were. You should not compete in the Hunting Rite this year. I am afraid you may injure yourself."

"The Hunting Rite does not require battle, Father," I responded. "I am still skilled in hunting. I just need to adjust my training to increase my stamina."

"Still, your healing is slowed. I'm just worried you got injured," my father countered.

"Please," I said, leaning forward. "Let me do this."

"Solon, what do you think?" my father asked.

Solon looked at me to our father before answering. "She's right. Hunting is different from battle. She can handle it."

Father sighed and said, "Very well. If this is your wish, I will not stop you. But you will not push yourself recklessly. If I see you straining, I will have you removed."

Relief washed over me. "Thank you."

"Why do you want to participate? You haven't participated in years," my father asked.

"I want to win first place."

Solon chuckled, shaking his head. “You know Father would grant your wish regardless of the outcome.”

Father gave a small nod in agreement. “He is right. You do not need to win first place for me to hear you.”

“This is different,” I said firmly. “It has to be earned. If I take first, no one can question it.”

Both Father and Solon looked at me in surprise.

“What wish is so important?” My father asked.

I took a breath. “Della’s mate is Marco.”

Solon blinked in surprise. “Marco? Nolan’s Beta?”

“Yes,” I said. “They’ve been bonded since her birthday. But Nolan does not support them, and Marco has been torn between loyalty to his Alpha and his mate. I want to win first place so that you can command Marco to join Silverfang and leave the Blood Moon Pack. That way, he can stay with Della.”

Silence followed my words. Father’s expression hardened in thought, while Solon looked at me with both disbelief and admiration.

Finally, Father spoke. “That will not be easy. Taking a Beta from his Alpha is no small matter.”

“I know,” I said. “But if I win, Nolan would not be able to refuse outright.”

I thought about the way Della’s eyes lit up when she spoke of Marco. She deserved the chance to live with him openly. I would do anything to make sure they had a chance to live the life that they deserved.

Father rubbed his chin as he processed my words. He finally sighed and said, “If you take first, I will speak to Nolan. That is all I can promise.”

Relief washed over me as I was thinking my father would have put up more resistance than this. “Thank you, Father,” I said, leaning over to hug him.

He gave a faint smile even though he still looked conflicted. “Do not worry too much for Della. Even Nolan would not defy the Moon Goddess by forcing his Beta to break his fated bond. No Alpha could.”

I wanted to be comforted by my father’s words, but I knew better. If what he said was true, why did Jason betray me?

The memory of Jason’s rejection no longer bothered me, but it was a stark contrast to my father’s words. Jason had willingly turned his back on the mate bond due to pressure from his own father and a lie. It felt almost naïve and ill advised to believe another male would not do the same.

My thoughts wandered to Nolan. I wondered if his mate had already appeared. It was doubtful because she wasn’t around. But if she had, how would he treat her? Would he resist the bond, the way I had once resisted mine with Jason? Or would he embrace it?

CHAPTER 83

Talia’s POV

The morning sun beat down on the training grounds, warm but not yet oppressive. Della stood beside me with a bow in hand.

“Focus, Talia,” she said, her tone smug as the string creaked. She released, and the arrow thudded just outside the painted ring. “Damn it.”

I chuckled and pulled my own arrow from the quiver. “You’re supposed to be teaching me, not missing on purpose.”

“Shut up. That was wind,” Della argued.

I laughed under my breath. I lifted my bow and tried to copy her stance. My fingers ached from yesterday's training, but I wanted to keep pushing. I drew back, aimed for the target's center, and released. The arrow hit outside of the painted ring as well.

"See? You're no better," Della teased.

Before I could retort, a voice interrupted us. "At this rate, you'll never hit prey."

Della stiffened instantly. We turned, and my stomach clenched when I saw Jason and Nolan approaching us.

Della's glare could have burned holes in the dirt. "You're not welcome here."

Jason raised his hands innocently. "We only came to help."

"Or are you here to continue begging Talia for forgiveness?" Della taunted. Jason's smirk dropped, and he glared at Della.

"Alpha Jason is right about one thing, though," Nolan added.

"And what is that?" Della asked, turning her attention to him.

"Your methods wouldn't bring down a rabbit. Maybe a frog, but doubtful," Nolan stated.

Della's face flushed scarlet. "Excuse me? After the stunt you pulled, you don't get to talk to me like that. You pompous ass-"

I stepped between them quickly. "Enough. If you want to argue, do it somewhere else."

"We're just stating the obvious," Jason added.

“You know what, since you two know so much, then show us. How about you two duel and let’s see who the better archer is. Whoever it is will train us.”

Jason smirked as he rolled his shoulders. “Sure.”

I rolled my eyes at his cockiness. Nolan took the bow and arrow from Della. He easily hit the center target and then waited for Jason.

“Show off,” Jason muttered. He knocked his arrow and missed the center by an inch.

“Too bad. I guess you need more practice,” Della mocked.

Jason’s face burned red in embarrassment. He muttered something about not really wanting to help. Then, Jason

stalked off.

Nolan turned to me. “Pick up your bow.”

I obeyed without protest. He stepped behind me, so close that I could feel the heat of his chest at my back. His hand brushed mine as he adjusted my grip. My pulse jumped, and I struggled to focus on the target.

“Draw,” he commanded.”

I pulled the string back. My mind kept replaying the night in the library, how my hands were pulling at his pants.

“Release,” he commanded. The arrow veered wide, landing outside the rings again.

“You’re distracted,” Nolan said flatly. “Focus or stop wasting my time.”

I swallowed hard. I couldn’t believe that he was affecting me like this.

My heart raced faster with every correction he made. Every time his hand steadied my elbow or brushed against my shoulder. What was wrong with me?

Finally, after another failed attempt, he exhaled sharply. “Enough. Della, leave us.”

“Why?” Della asked.

“Because she needs my attention. You have already hit the center mark twice. You know what you’re doing. Now, leave,” Nolan replied, his tone final.

Della looked at me to confirm. I nodded. She huffed but obeyed.

“Now, try again,” Nolan said, taking a step away from me.

Í steadied my breathing, forced my shoulders back the way Nolan had adjusted them, and loosed the arrow. It struck just shy of the center. “Yes!” I cheered.

“Better,” Nolan said without looking impressed. “But you still need to hit the center. Again.”

Nolan and I trained until I could barely lift my arms. I felt a mixture of irritation and gratefulness towards him. Irritation that he refused to praise me for being able to hit the center and gratefulness that he was spending time training me when he could easily be training himself.

“That’s enough for now. You need a break, or you’ll hurt yourself,” Nolan said flatly. He guided my bow down for me. His hands lingered on mine longer than necessary.

“Why do you oppose Della and Marco?” I asked suddenly, trying to distract myself from how Nolan was making me feel.

Nolan’s brow furrowed as he stepped away from me to grab a bottle of water from the table where the arrows were. “They’re not suitable,” he finally said,

“How do you know that? You barely know Della and the Moon Goddess made them fated mates,” I argued.

“How did that work out for you, Princess?” Nolan shot back.

“That… that was different. It is not the same situation,” I countered.

“Yes, that is true. Their situation is worse,” Nolan spat.

“How can you say that?” I asked. “The Moon Goddess makes the best decision for us.”

CHAPTER 84

Jason’s POV

How dare she mock me!

I stormed away from the training grounds, boots crunching against the dirt. The memory of Talia’s expression replayed again and again. She looked at me with disdain as if she, an omega, was better than me. Losing face in front of her was humiliating. I would get even. I’d make her regret not accepting me back.

Henry was near the racks of Hunting Rite equipment, reviewing the list of equipment. He straightened the moment he saw me, but I could see him tense as he saw my expression.

“What happened now?” Henry asked.

“Check everything again,” I snapped, my voice carrying farther than I intended. “The bows, the blades, the spears. Every strap, every shaft, every notch. Nothing can be out of place.”

Henry’s brow furrowed, but he gave a crisp nod. “I checked them yesterday and I just finished checking them,” he said as he motioned to the document in his hand.

“Then check them again,” I barked. “If I lose so much as a single point because of a cracked string or a loose grip, it’ll be your fault. Do you understand?”

“Jason, what is going on with you?” He asked in surprise.

“Do you understand me?” I snapped, ignoring his question.

His jaw tightened, but he kept his voice even. “Yes, Alpha. I’ll see to it.”

I paced a few steps before turning back on him. My frustration wasn’t just with the equipment. “Well? Did you at least find out anything about the princess?”

Henry hesitated. I caught the flicker in his eyes before he answered, and my anger spiked.

“Don’t make me ask you again, Henry!” I growled.

“No,” he admitted. “It’s strange. For the Alpha King’s favorite and only daughter, she’s unusually well-hidden. I haven’t been able to trace her movements at all. Wherever she stays, it isn’t where the other royals are housed.”

My teeth ground together. “How is that possible? She isn’t a ghost. Everyone knows she exists. So why is it that no one sees her?”

Henry spread his hands helplessly. “I don’t know, Alpha. It’s almost as if the Alpha King has gone out of his way to keep her location guarded. Either that, or the guards are under orders not to speak about her.”

My thoughts darkened. The Alpha King shielding her so thoroughly meant she was valuable. That only made me want her more.

Before I could say more, my father’s voice thundered through the mind-link, sharp and commanding, “Jason.”

I straightened instinctively as though he stood in front of me. “Father,” I answered through the mind-link, pushing the irritation out of my tone.

“How are preparations going?” he asked.

“All is ready. Beta Henry is checking the equipment again,” I reported. “I’ve trained harder than ever. No one but Nolan poses a real threat.”

At the mention of Nolan, my father’s tone hardened. “What of him?”

“He advised he was making a move during the Hunting Rite,” I explained carefully. “He implied it might even be against the Alpha King himself.”

“Do not be a fool,” my father growled. “If you believe every word that comes out of his mouth, you will become his pawn. This is simply a test to see what you plan to do.”

“Then what would you have me do?” I asked.

“Ignore him. Focus only on the plan,” my father said. “You must win first place. This will be your only opportunity. If you win, the Alpha King cannot deny your request. The Princess will be yours and that is the fastest path to becoming Alpha King yourself.”

My father was right. I could not allow Nolan to distract me. No matter what he did during the Hunting Rite, I would adapt to it. I would make sure the Princess was mine. The throne, the power, that would belong to me no matter what Nolan did.

“You are Shadowclaw’s future,” Father said firmly, “Do not fail me. Do not fail our pack.”

“I will not fail. I swear it,” I confirmed.

The link severed, leaving me standing in silence with Henry.

“What did your father say?” Henry asked cautiously after a moment.

“That it doesn’t matter what Nolan plans,” I answered. “What matters is that I win. Nothing else matters.”

“And if Nolan tries something during the Rite?” Henry asked. “He’s a wild card and he refused to tell you what he was planning.”

“Then I’ll deal with him,” I said with a shrug. “The Alpha King may be watching, but so will everyone else. If Nolan wants to humiliate himself by making a move, I’ll be ready. Let him hang himself with his own arrogance. We will take advantage of the situation and look like loyal subjects to the Alpha King which will win us even more favor.”

“Do you really think the Alpha King would allow you to marry his daughter? Even if you win?” Henry asked.

“What is your concern, Henry?”

“Everyone knows about your relationship with Talia. The Princess is his favorite. Do you really think he will agree to your request?”

“He won’t have a choice,” I said sharply. “The Rite is bound by tradition. Every Alpha here will expect him to honor it. If I win, the Princess is mine. And once she is mine, the throne is within reach.”

Henry didn’t argue, but his silence grated. I stepped closer, lowering my voice. “Don’t ever doubt me again. Shadowclaw’s future rests on this. I won’t fail,”

“I am not doubting you, Alpha. I am simply concerned,” Henry responded,

He then bowed his head quickly. “Of course, Alpha.”

I would not be humiliated again.

I would win.

CHAPTER 85

Talia’s POV

The banquet hall pulsed with music and voices. Warm light shone across stone walls and silver platters. Wolves from every territory were in their finest suits and ball gowns, while servants wove between them with trays of food and wine.

At the head stood my father, the Alpha King. Even on such a relaxed night, people turned toward him, waiting for him to speak. When he raised his glass, the room went still.

“Tonight, we celebrate strength, but also unity,” he said. “The Rite reminds us we are bound not just by rivalry, but by the Moon Goddess and by one another through alliances and friendship.”

Applause followed. Others believed while some had practiced smiles. Yes, the Rite was about deepening friendships, but this was also an opportunity for others to gain the advantage on other packs.

I stood with Solon and Della near the center of the hall. Solon’s posture was rigid as if he was overthinking an issue. He leaned toward me and said, “Talia, you should withdraw from the Rite.”

I glared at him and said, “Father already approved.”

“Still, you are not at full strength,” Solon added.

“Say that again, and I’ll assign you every southern case for the next three months. You’ll drown in work before you even make it midway through the first month,” I warned.

Della laughed, nearly spilling her champagne. “She’s right, Solon. You know Talia doesn’t change her mind once it’s set.”

Solon pinched the bridge of his nose. The familiar gesture softened me for a moment, but his tone stayed weary. You two are impossible.” His eyes cut back to me, sharper now. “I am only saying it because I have a bad feeling about it. At least promise me that you’ll monitor your stamina. Don’t push yourself past your limits.”

I was not used to Solon being worried, especially not for me. I wanted to argue with him, but I could tell from his expression that he really needed me to promise him. I nodded and said, “I promise.”

“You better be telling me the truth, Talia. If not, I will drag you back to the infirmary myself,” Solon warned.

I rolled my eyes and asked, “Would you really embarrass me like that?”

“Of course, even if it means keeping you safe. Don’t test me, Talia,” Solon answered.

“Fair enough,” I muttered. I didn’t need any additional humiliation.

“(

Across the room, Jason stood with Henry and two of his warriors. Once again, he looked arrogant and overconfident. He never learned from his past experiences. Not far away, Nolan leaned against a marble

column. A wine glass in his hand as his gaze swept the crowd. He was watching like a predator sizing up prey.

Unease curled in my stomach. Both were dangerous. Both had reason to be here for the Rite, If either moved against the other, or worse against my father, the celebration would go up in flames. I would have to keep my eye on both and hope our security was vigilant,

I turned away, meaning to set down my glass and focus on food, but a shadow at the far doorway caught my

attention.

Someone lingered just outside the light. The posture was very familiar. The person moved and I could clearly see

them before they drifted back into the shadows.

Viki?

No, it couldn't be her. She was supposed to be dead.

This had to be a trick of the light, but I had a nagging feeling that it wasn't. I was without my wolf, but I wasn't

blind.

"Solon," I said quickly. "I need to step out for a bit."

He turned, already frowning. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"I need some air." I set my glass on a passing tray before my hand betrayed its shake. "Just a moment."

“Now? In the middle of the banquet?”

“Yes. I’ll be back quickly. I just need a moment.”

“Are you not feeling well?” Solon asked suspiciously.

“No, it’s not that. I just need air,” I replied.

Solon motioned to a nearby guard. The guard approached and bowed slightly to Solon, “Yes, Prince Solon?”

“Escort her. Do not leave her side,” Solon ordered.

The guard bowed. “Yes, Prince Solon.”

I wanted to fuss at Solon. I didn’t need a guard, but I didn’t want to cause a scene. If it was Viki, having a guard wasn’t a bad idea.

“I’ll return before anyone notices I’m gone,” I said.

“Be quick about it before Father notices,” Solon said.

I turned before he could press further. The shadow at the door was already moving. I caught a last glimpse of her slipping out of the venue.

Each step away from the crowd made my heartbeat louder. I wanted to believe that stress from training was making me see things, but as soon as that sickening sweet perfume hit my nose, I knew the truth.

It was her.

And I had to follow.

CHAPTER 86

Nolan's POV

Voices rising and falling, laughter and clinking glasses were grating on my nerves. I forced myself to remain calm even though I clenched my jaw any tighter, I may pop out of my tooth. Every Alpha was gathered here in Silverfang. It was the perfect opportunity to show who the Alpha King truly was.

I noticed Talia slip away earlier. I hated to admit that I felt relieved. If the Alpha King lost control, she would be in danger. And if he was the wolf who I believed he was, he would die by my hands tonight. At least in this way she would be spared seeing her father bleed out in front of her.

I leaned closer to Marco, keeping my voice low, and asked, "Is it ready?"

"It is stable," he confirmed, "but Alpha… are you sure this is wise?"

"You question me?" I asked. Ever since Marco had found his mate, he continued to question me about my plan. He was slowly becoming a liability.

"I question the risk," Marco replied. His gaze flickered toward Della, who was laughing with Solon across the hall. "If you dose him in front of every Alpha and it goes wrong, what then? If the King shifts and it isn't the wolf you saw, the others will unite against you. They won't care about your reasons."

I tightened my jaw. "They won't find out it was me if this was done correctly."

Marco's voice dropped lower. "All eyes are on us and the Alpha King. They will assume. And if the truth isn't what you want? If the King shifts and shows no mark, no resemblance? What then, Nolan? Will you accept it, or will you still make him your enemy?"

My wolf growled inside me, furious at the suggestion. “What’s wrong with you, Marco?! Why did you change your mind all of a sudden?” I accused, tilting my head toward Della. “Have I not been honorable in the way I do things?”

“She has nothing to do with it,” Marco retorted.

“You are my Beta, not hers,” I reminded him. “Do you need to be reminded that you pledged your loyalty to me, not her? You’re letting the mate bond cloud your judgment. I thought you were better than that.”

Marco glared at me, then reached into his coat and pulled out the vial,

“Take it,” he said. “I have never doubted you, Nolan. I am only concerned.”

I took the vial from him and Marco didn’t say anything else. “Go be with your mate,” I told him. “If you are nowhere near me, you will not be blamed.”

Marco’s eyes widened in surprise, and I stepped away before he could say anything else.

I moved through the hall, weaving between groups of Alphas. Their conversations lulled as I passed. Whispers followed me.

I reached the bar where a servant carried a tray of Rosefall. I took two wine glasses off the tray and quickly tipped the vial into it without anyone noticing. The toxin vanished instantly, indistinguishable from the rich crimson liquid.

I carried the glass across the floor; my focus locked on the Alpha King. His eyes focused on me as I approached. He looked surprised at first before he composed him.

“A toast, Alpha Nolan?” He asked, accepting the glass.

“A toast to you,” I replied, lifting my glass. I clinked it with his.

He lifted it, about to drink. This was it. I could already picture it: his frame twisting mid-shift and his bones cracking into the black wolf I remember. The three pale streaks on its forehead. The blood on its muzzle. The moment I had been waiting for all these years. If it was him, I would rip his throat out in front of them all.

But before he could drink, Jason pushed forward. “A toast, if I may!”

The Alpha King paused, lowering the glass. Jason was grinning too wide. The idiot was already drunk and basking

in the attention.

“Jason, what are you doing?” I growled, my voice low but edged with warning.

Jason ignored me and lifted his glass to the Alpha King. “Your Majesty, this wine is unmatched. May it honor your strength and the legacy of Silverfang.”

The King chuckled and set the glass down untouched. He clapped Jason on the shoulder. “It is his first meeting, Alpha Nolan. Allow him the courtesy.”

Jason turned and smirked at me. Rage coiled tight inside me, but I forced myself to smile. I could not allow this fool to ruin my plans. I only needed to be patient.

Jason spoke again, “Your Majesty, if I may ask… will the Princess join the Hunting Rite?”

The King said firmly, “No. She will not participate.”

A ripple of disappointment moved through the hall. Many of the unmated wolves had been looking to meet her, to try to win her over. The very thought of that angered me even though I had no intention of claiming her.

“But,” the King continued, raising his voice, “this will be my final year hosting the Rite. Next year, my son Solon will take my place. I hope you all enjoy yourself.”

The room erupted in applause.

“To Prince Solon,” he said.

The King lifted the glass of Rosefall once more. My wolf surged forward, ready and waiting for the moment to strike.

But Jason, desperate for attention, leaned forward again, his arm swinging wide. His elbow clipped the stem of the glass, sending it tumbling. It shattered across the stone floor, the red liquid spreading like blood.

CHAPTER 87

Nolan’s POV

The sound of shattering glass echoed through the banquet hall. All conversation ended as everyone focused on me and the Alpha King. Because of Jason’s clumsy elbow, my plan was ruined.

Marco’s voice flooded my mind through our link. “Alpha, please, just leave it alone. We can try another time.”

There would not be another time. This must happen now. I would drag the truth out into the open one way or another.

I sneered at the Alpha King and said, “You’re growing old and feeble, old wolf.”

Gasps spread through the room. The Alpha King’s eyes widened at my accusation. Jason immediately moved away from us.

He gave a nervous laugh and said, “I think you had too much to drink, Alpha Nolan.”

I ignored him and continued, “Tell me, is it guilt that makes you tremble? Or do you remember the blood you spilled?”

Solon slammed his hand on the table as he stood. He snarled, “Nolan! How dare you insult the Alpha King! If you can’t handle your liquor, return to your room but do not cause a scene. It will not be tolerated.”

I didn’t break eye contact with the Alpha King, which only angered Solon more. “There is only one true Alpha King, and my father is already dead.”

Solon snarled, his Alpha aura flaring. I finally met his gaze. “Did I say something wrong?”

“You will not spit on this Rite with your conspiracy theories! This is a sacred gathering, not a stage for your tantrums. You dishonor every wolf in this hall with your reckless accusations,” Solon berated. “The Elders closed this case long ago. You would dare to call them liars before all of us?”

“Yes, I dare! The Elders closed the case too quickly, and you know it. They buried the truth to protect someone. If the Alpha King is innocent, then let him prove it. Show us all he has nothing to hide,” I argued.

Solon’s fury only intensified as his voice boomed, “You insult not just the Alpha King but the Elders themselves. Their judgment is the backbone of our law. Do you think your grief gives you the right to overturn everything we stand for?”

My jaw tightened. “Is the Council infallible? Is the Council not above being reviewed? We are all mortal. We make mistakes.”

I could tell the wolves were pondering my words. We had spent too long trusting in a Council that could be swayed by money or favors. Even if the Alpha King didn’t fall for my trap, it would still begin the revolt against him. It was a win-win situation for me.

“If the King is innocent, let him prove it before every Alpha here. Or is your precious order worth more than justice for my father?” I continued.

The Alpha King rose slowly. His Alpha aura flared throughout the roll, applying pressure to submit to him. I stood against the pressure and glared back at him. I would not submit to a murderer.

“You were only a child when this tragedy struck. I understand your grief and anger as a child. As an adult, this has become ridiculous, Alpha Nolan. How can you even believe your own eyes as a child?” he questioned.

I let out a bitter laugh. “I was a child, but even then, I knew what I saw. A black wolf with three white streaks across its head. It had my father’s blood on its teeth. If you were not that wolf, prove it. Why hide behind closed records and silence?”

“Because he doesn’t have to prove himself to an insolent ungrateful wolf like you, Nolan,” Solon snapped, cutting back in.

The room buzzed with unease. Wolves shifted in their seats, exchanging wary glances. The challenge I had thrown down was clear. If the Alpha King refused, suspicion would stain him forever.

“Do you think this circus honors your father’s memory? You accuse without proof, you blaspheme against the Elders’ judgment, and you drag this entire Assembly into your bitterness. Do you not see how shameful this is?” Solon taunted.

I narrowed my eyes and growled, “Do not speak of my father. Do not lecture me about shame, Solon.”

The Alpha King’s patience snapped. He stepped forward, his power rising like a tidal wave. “You insolent whelp. You come into my territory, insult me before my people, and accuse me of blood I did not spill, I should end you here.”

I spread my arms slightly, daring him. “Then do it. Shift. Let them see what you are. If you are innocent, there is nothing to fear.”

The King's chest rumbled with a growl so deep the floor seemed to vibrate beneath it. He bared his teeth, fury burning in his eyes. "You want punishment, boy? I will give it to you myself."

And in that moment, as his aura flared higher and his muscles tensed to shift, I braced for the reveal.

At last, he would show himself. At last, I would know.

CHAPTER 88

Jason's POV

Nolan thought he was clever. He thought he could slip poison into a goblet of Rosefall in full view of the room, and no one would notice. But I noticed. I watched the faint tilt of his wrist, and the liquid vanishing into the crimson wine. He carried it toward the Alpha King with that calm arrogance he always wore, as though he already owned the room.

Poison. In public. He had to be insane. Did he think the Alphas would rally to him after such a stunt?

They would tear him apart before the Alpha King even raised a hand. And Nolan was not useful to me. That was why I acted.

My elbow "slipped" just as the goblet neared the Alpha King's lips, shattering Nolan's plan along with the glass. A few murmurs of surprise rose around us, but no one dared to challenge me openly. To them, I was just drunk, perhaps a little overeager in my attempts to flatter the King.

If Nolan wanted chaos, I would give him disappointment. And if he decided to go further, provoking the Alpha King openly, I would separate myself from Nolan and play the loyal subject to the Alpha King while I watched them tear each other apart.

'He is not going to let this go,' my wolf warned. 'We need to distance ourselves.'

Nolan was so predictable. Not even a second later, Nolan sneered across the table at the Alpha King, “You’re growing old and feeble, old wolf.”

Gasps rippled through the room. The Alpha King’s eyes darkened. Solon was on his feet in an instant, voice booming with outrage. He accused Nolan of dishonor, of spitting on the Rite itself.

But Nolan only pressed harder, his gaze fixed on the King like he meant to tear him down with words alone. He demanded the truth, demanding the King reopen the case of his father’s death. His defiance was reckless, dangerous, but part of me admired the boldness.

If he won, he proved the Alpha King guilty and I would kill him in the chaos. If he lost, the King would crush him. Either way, I benefited.

Alphas muttered, warriors shifted uneasily, and the elders frowned in shock. The air grew heavier with every word. The King rose, aura flooding the hall, forcing silence. Fury burned in his eyes. He looked ready to shift right there in front of us, to rip Nolan apart.

And then the moment broke.

The doors slammed open. A guard stumbled in. His blood covered his armor and his face was pale and stricken, All attention went to the guard.

“My King,” the guard gasped, falling to one knee. “Forgive me. I… I failed. Lady Talia… she chased a shadowed figure into the forest. I followed, but I was struck down. When I woke… she was gone.”

The Alpha King’s face contorted between surprise and panic. “How could you have allowed this to happen?” he demanded.

The rage in him was greater than anything Nolan had provoked. But why for Talia? Why did she matter this much? She was a lowly Omega. Did he truly see her as Solon’s future Luna? Or was there something more to her, something even I had missed? 3

The guard could not answer as he had passed out from blood loss. Chairs scraped as wolves leapt to their feet.

Warriors surged forward, rushing out of the room on an order that I could not hear.

“Alpha Nolan, we will continue this conversation at another time, but do not think I will let this insult go unpunished. You will get the truth you seek even if it isn’t what you wanted,” the Alpha King stated.

He snapped his attention to his Beta. “Logan, you will keep the Hunting Rite on track for this afternoon. I will search for myself.”

Logan nodded and said, “Yes, my King.”

Solon didn’t hesitate. “I will assist you. We cannot have anyone going missing during the Hunting Rite. I withdraw from the Hunt,” he declared.

Della quickly added, “Me too. We need to find her as soon as possible.”

The room buzzed with whispers as the King stormed out with Solon and Della on his heels. Nolan stood silent. He wore a calm expression, but his clenched fists gave him away. He was seething that he had lost his prey.

Henry approached me and asked, “Are you not going to help look for Talia?”

“No,” I said firmly.

“But…”

“I must win the Hunting Rite, remember.”

Henry frowned but didn't say anything else. I knew he didn't approve, but Talia was the past. The Princess was the future for our pack. 1

"When the room clears, collect the shards of Nolan's glass. Test them. I want to know exactly what he tried to slip to the King," I told him through our mind link.

Henry nodded and said aloud, "Yes, Alpha."

Satisfied, I turned my eyes back on Nolan. His composure was almost perfect, but I knew better. He had lost his moment, lost his chance to control the field. And now I would remind him of it.

"Tell me, Alpha Nolan," I said lightly, just loud enough for nearby ears to catch, "will you still join in the Rite? Or has this little spectacle drained your appetite?"

CHAPTER 89

Nolan's POV

The news of Talia's disappearance put my wolf into a rage. He began clawing at my resolve, demanding we go into the forest to find her. 'She is OURS! She is in danger! Go to her now!' he snarled.

I forced my wolf down, but it was getting harder. The pendant on my chest was barely holding him back now. "She is safe," I muttered under my breath. "I would feel it if she were not."

'Safe? How?' my wolf snarled. "This pendant you have placed on us has dulled our senses. You are heartless. She could be bleeding right now while you stand here pretending control matters more than her life.'

Jason walked up to me looking smug as if he had conquered me. The urge to snap his neck was almost too strong to resist. "Tell me, Alpha Nolan," he drawled, "will you still join in the Rite? Or has this little spectacle drained your appetite?"

“Of course I join,” I answered coldly. “Why wouldn’t I?”

His smirk widened as he said, “Just checking. Some wolves might be distracted, with Talia missing and all.”

“And yet here you stand, not lifting a finger to look for her. Interesting. You want to win her back, don’t you? Shouldn’t you be rushing into the forest with Prince Solon right now?” I asked.

Jason’s eyes witched, but he shrugged, still with that dumb smug grin of his. “She’ll be fine. This is Silverfang. No rogue could sneak far into these borders without being caught. With the Alpha King and Prince Solon searching, she’ll be found in no time.”

‘He mocks her suffering,’ my wolf growled inside me. ‘Selfish. Useless bastard. He would let her die or kill her himself if it gave him a chance at power. Disgusting.’

I agreed. My hatred for Jason had only increased, but wasting energy on him was pointless. The Rite was only hours away, and I needed every ounce of focus.

When the crowd dispersed, I left the banquet hall and returned to my quarters. My plan had failed earlier, my patience was thinning, and I told myself rest was needed for the Rite. I needed to be ready by 2pm.

But rest never came. My wolf prowled inside me like a caged beast. He was getting even more restless by the minute. ‘She is out there. She needs us. We need to find her NOW!’

For once, I couldn’t silence him nor could I push him down.

Then Marco entered my room. He looked distraught and tired.

“What are you doing here?” I demanded. “You should be resting.”

“I can’t,” he admitted. “Alpha, we need to search for Talia.”

“Why? Why the sudden change now?” I asked.

“We just need to,” Marco replied.

I frowned. “You have been constantly reminding me not to take risks, urging me to be patient, not to show any outward care for Talia and now you want me to look for her? Is your mate pushing you to do this?

Marco lowered his gaze. “No, it’s not just because of Della.”

“So, it is about her,” I pressed. “You think you’re using Talia’s plight to win favor with your mate?”

“No. That’s not all of it!” Marco snapped, frustrated at my accusations.

“Then, what is it then? Why should I care about Talia now?”

“That day after the incident in the library, I gave her an injection like you asked me to. But I miscalculated. The dosage was too much. I believe it caused her wolf to vanish,” Marco explained.

I froze as I processed his words. My wolf roared inside of me. My Alpha aura slammed into Marco causing him to drop to his knees in submission.

“What?” I roared in anger.

“I thought it would calm her heat. But instead…” Marco looked sick. “Her wolf has gone silent. Without it, she is just…”

“A fragile human,” I finished, the realization burning into me. Talia was now a fragile human, wandering into the forest, possibly being hunted by a rogue.

Panic gripped me like I hadn't known in years. The mate bond roared in my veins. All I could think of was how she was alone and defenseless being tracked by Goddess knows what.

I lunged at Marco. I slammed him hard into the wall. My forearm pressed hard against his neck. His eyes widened in fear, but he didn't move to defend himself.

"If anything happens to her," I snarled, "I will never forgive you. Do you hear me, Marco? Never!"

"I know," he whispered. I knew he was ashamed, but it couldn't compare to the guilt I felt for telling Marco to inject her in the first place.

I didn't wait for another second.

I bolted for the door, shoving it open so hard it struck and dented the wall. I ran, my wolf howling in triumph at finally being unleashed.

'We need to find her,' he ordered. 'Nothing else matters. We find her and kill anyone who stands in our way or

hurts her.'

Nothing else mattered.

CHAPTER 90

Talia's POV

I woke up in darkness. I tried to sit up, but my wrists and ankles burned every time I moved. The pain shot up my arms and legs. I knew the pain immediately. I was shackled in silver chains.

My head throbbed. I looked around to see that I was sitting on a grimy floor of a dungeon cell. How in the hell did I get here?

I closed my eyes and reached inward. I called my wolf. I desperately needed her right now.

'Please. Please wake up. I need you right now. I don't know what to do,' I called out within me, but I received no response. The emptiness I felt only made my anxiety increase.

"Focus. I need to remember how I got here, so I can figure out how to get out," I told myself.

I remembered the Hunting Rite gathering. My brother was at my side and then I noticed a flash of movement outside the banquet hall. It was the silhouette of a person that was familiar. A face that I will never forget.

Viki.

I told myself I was mistaken. She was dead or at least supposed to be dead. I excused myself because I had to be sure and crossed the courtyard with a guard at my shoulder. Solon had insisted I keep them close since the night in the library. With my wolf silent and my healing slowed, I knew I needed them. I told myself that this was Silverfang land and that nothing would happen to me with patrols so close.

"If something happens, I need you to alert the Alpha King and Prince Solon as soon as possible," I told the guard. If this was Viki, she probably did not have any good intentions for being here! 1

"Yes, Princess," the guard confirmed.

I followed the silhouette into the forest. The music from the hall was long gone now replaced by the creaking of branches in the night breeze. I kept going until the trees grew dense enough to block the last of the lights from the pack house. That was when I saw her.

Viki was tied to a tree. Her dress hung in shreds; her hair was matted against her face. She still had on the dress from her failed Luna ceremony. She looked like someone who had drugged her a long distance.

I hated her, but Viki didn't deserve this. No one did.

"Viki," I said, standing in front of her. "Look at me."

Her eyes fluttered open and focused on me. She winced like her entire body hurt. "Help me," she whispered. Talia Please. They thought I was a rogue. They tied me up and ran. Please."

It did not make sense. Guards in Silverfang did not abandon a tied rogue in the dark. They did not leave women bound to trees. Every instinct I had told me to wait and call Solon or Beta Logan,

Viki swallowed and tried to lift her head. "Please, Talia."

I looked at the guard beside me. He did not like this either. He stepped forward to check the knots and then flicked his gaze at me for a decision. I hated that I could not ask my wolf if this felt wrong. I hated doubting every decision I made. 1

I knew one thing was that I was not leaving her tied to this tree.

"Hold her steady," I said to the guard. I worked at the knots. They were tight and dug into her skin.

"The knots are too tight. You risk cutting her with your claws. I almost have it," I said. The knots came loose a few minutes later. Viki leaned onto me, and she was shaking. I awkwardly patted her on the back.

"Thank you. I knew you would not leave me." She said and giggled.

Something pricked the side of my neck and at first it felt like a bee sting. Then the burn hit. It spread fast and hot under my skin. My knees gave out as I gasped in pain.

I saw the metal glint as she pulled her hand back. She held a small syringe in her hand. Viki grinned down at me. “Go! Alert the Prince,” I tried to say, but I barely managed to get the words out. My vision began to blur from the pain.

“You were always so predictable,” Viki taunted.

The guard turned toward me. I heard him shouting and then a cry of pain. There was nothing I could do. I can still remember the color of the dirt against my cheek and the way I tried to push to my feet only to slam back on the ground. Then everything went black.

“That bitch,” I muttered as I tested the chains. I had been poisoned with wolfsbane. That was what it had to be, as wolfsbane would’ve killed me. The dose was enough to keep me weak. If I had my wolf, I would have purged it from my system by now.

Anger pushed up through fear. I had fallen for another one of Viki’s tricks again. I had let her take advantage of the leftover pity I had for her. If I had waited half a minute and called for backup, she would be in the dungeons, and I would be in this situation. 1

“Stupid. Stupid. I had to be better than this,” I muttered to myself.

Then, I heard footsteps approaching. They didn’t sound like footsteps of a guard, but of someone who wanted to be heard without hurrying. The person stepped up to my cell.

Viki looked nothing like the beat down woman that I took pity on. She was dressed in a simple black dress. Her hair was neatly combed and pulled back. Her skin was clean and no longer bruised. There was color in her cheeks. She looked nothing like the woman dying from the Redbone Flower.

She wrapped her fingers around the bars and smiled like we were old friends meeting after a long trip.

“Hello, Talia,” she said. “Did you miss me?”