Barren Luna 91

CHAPTER 91

Talia's POV

"Viki? Why are you doing this?" I asked.

"You have no idea, do you?" she said. "We've been watching you all along. My people knew the moment your wolf went silent. And now with the Hunting Rite, everyone is too busy to worry about you. It was the perfect opportunity for me."

"Your people?" My voice was hoarse. "Who are they?"

Viki smirked. "It doesn't matter. You won't live long enough to need to know. Tonight, you die, and with you, every mistake of mine gets buried. I'll have a clean slate."

I pressed my back against the wall, trying to make myself as comfortable as possible despite the silver chains cutting into my wrists. "So, this is about revenge…"

Her eyes gleamed. "Of course. Do you know what you cost me?"

"Viki, you did this to yourself," I retorted.

"Shut your fucking mouth." Her voice cracked into a snarl. "If you had not run your mouth, Jason wouldn't have despised me. Michael wouldn't have tried to hang me!"

"You want to blame me for your mistakes?" I asked, though my voice trembled with exhaustion. "I didn't tell you to lie, nor did I tell you to poison yourself with the Redbone Flower."

Her chest heaved. Her lips twisted between a laugh and a sob. "Do you have any idea what you ruined for me? My wedding was perfect. I was meant to be Luna. It was mine, Talia! Mine. And you just couldn't keep your fucking mouth shut."

“Viki, what are you talking about?” I responded.

“You really are going to keep lying to me?” she asked in disbelief. “My father DIED because of you! If you had kept your promise, he wouldn’t have died. After everything, he loved me. He didn’t see me as just a tool. Do you understand now? I have to do this for my father.”

“I didn’t tell anyone anything!” I retorted but Viki didn’t hear me.

“NO!!! Everything fell apart because of you. And now I finally have my chance to take it back.”

I frowned. I hadn’t told anyone that Viki was taking the Redbone Flower. Solon found out through Marco. So, it’s Nolan? “I didn’t tell anyone. Solon found out through…”

“You expect me to believe that you didn’t tell? Do you think I’m a fool?” Viki snapped, cutting me off.

Her fingers dented the bars as she trembled with rage. Her voice cracked as she spoke. “Don’t you dare sit there acting innocent over and over again. You’ve always been a cunning little snake.”

“You’re projecting. You’d do something like that,” I countered. “Not me. Even with you insulting me day in and day out as Luna, I did nothing to you when I could have gotten you disciplined. So why would I hurt you now when I could’ve easily done it as Luna?”

Her eyes darted. For a moment she looked uncertain, but the clarity quickly vanished. She returned to looking unstable.

Viki began muttering maniacally, “Just shut up! If you disappear, I can fix everything. I’ll tell Jason I was wrong.

I’ll apologize and cry and beg. He’ll take me back as his Luna. He always should have. Not you. Never you.”

The venom in her words made me cringe. She was unraveling. Her rage, her grief, and the toll of her body breaking was finally getting to her. Viki was having some type of psychotic break.

I forced myself to meet her eyes. “Jason turned from you because you lied to him. He would’ve chosen you in the end anyway because he’s vain and power hungry. You faked a pregnancy. This isn’t on me. This is on you.”

The arrogance drained from her face. She looked as if she wanted to cry before her face contorted into a vicious snarl. “You told Solon about the Redbone Flower, didn’t you? You poisoned me against Jason before I had the chance to explain. Didn’t you?!”

“Again, I never told him anything,” I said, but my voice was low, tired.

Her hands trembled as they clutched the bars tighter. “Liar.”

I bit back the urge to argue again. Nothing I said would cut through the frenzy in her eyes. Explaining would not matter. She had already written me as the villain in her mind. I let the silence hang, though inside, I prayed that Father or Solon would find me.

My eyes flicked to the cell door, desperate, searching for movement beyond the hall. Viki’s gaze caught mine.

A cruel smile spread across her face. “I know what you’re thinking. Oh, Prince Solon will come save me.”

I didn’t respond. I just glared at her while mentally preparing for what she had planned next.

“You really think he’ll come for you? You’re just an omega, Talia. No one is going to come for you.” (1)

She unlocked the cell door and swung it open with a scrape that echoed down the corridor. “Look around. This is all you deserve.”

I forced myself not to shrink back. Panic had slowly turned to fear as I realized how unstable Viki was. My instincts screamed for me to fight and do whatever I could to get free.

“Still being stoic? Let’s fix that,” Viki smirked and clapped her hands.

Two rogues slunk forward from behind her. They entered the cell, shoulders rolling, and their eyes gleaming yellow. Their clothes were tattered, bloodstained, and caked with mud. The stench of sweat, blood, and bile hit my nose and made me gag. One grinned. His teeth were yellow and broken with bits of rancid meat in between. The other’s mouth was smeared with blood as if he had just finished mauling someone.

“Evening, Lady Viki,” the one with the yellow teeth said, bowing his head to her before looking at me. “You brought us a gift.”

Their gazes swept hungrily over me. My throat tightened as bile began rising. I never felt so weak until today. I called out to my wolf again, but still no response. Only silence,

Despair surged in me, but I held her stare. If this was the end, I would not beg.

CHAPTER 92

Talia’s POV

“She’s Prince Solon’s little plaything. Do what you like with her,” Viki said lazily to the rogues.

“Sure thing,” one of the rogues said while the other growled. Excitement shone in their yellow eyes as they stepped closer.

“I can’t wait to get a taste of her,” one of them licked his cracked lips as he began fumbling with his belt buckle.

“No!” I yelled, my voice cracking from the strain. “Viki, stop! Wait!”

Viki turned back and said, “Stop. Be patient. I want to hear what she has to say.”

“If you do this, viki, Solon will never forgive you,” I warned. “It doesn’t matter if I die or survive, Solon will never let you go. Trust me.”

Viki laughed again. “You’re just so pathetic. How many times are you going to rely on Solon? Why can’t you stand on your own feet?” she said, stepping closer with a predator’s calm.

“Release me and I’ll show you how,” I growled.

Viki tsked and wagged her finger in front of my face. “I don’t think so. Do you think I’m stupid? You may not have a wolf, but I know Solon has been training you. I can’t risk you getting away and then these fine gentlemen won’t get the reward they deserve.”

“Viki, I’m serious. You really need to think about this carefully.”

She sneered. “And so am I.”

“Prince Solon-”

“Enough!” Viki snapped, cutting me off. “Solon probably has another she-wolf as we speak. And let’s say, he does care for you. After those rogues are finished using you, Solon will be disgusted by you. Men don’t choose ruined women, Talia.”

“By that logic, Jason wouldn’t want you either,” I shot back. “You don’t have a real bond with him.”

“Screw the fucking mate bond!” Viki snapped, causing me to gasp.

“Viki, you can’t say that,” I told her.

“I’ll say whatever the fuck I want. The mate bond is just a bunch of superstitious bullshit. Why would the Moon Goddess bond you to Jason instead of me? The Moon Goddess is such a disappointment. If she is real, she should be ashamed of herself,” Viki continued.

My breath hitched. I couldn’t remember a time I had ever heard such words spoken aloud. Even rogues knew better to speak ill of the Moon Goddess.

“Have you lost your mind?” I exclaimed. “How dare you speak about the Moon Goddess like that and mock the mate bond? She will punish you for this, Viki. You and everyone who still cares about you.”

For a brief second, I saw the crack in her mask. I saw doubt in her eyes. Then it vanished, replaced with anger.

The first slap snapped my head sideways. Pain exploded across my face as my cheek split open.

The second came harder. It was hard enough to make my vision blur.

The third split my lip and Viki continued slapping me until I could barely lift my head.

“Beating me…” I muttered and spat the blood from my mouth. “won’t change the truth, Viki,”

Viki scoffed, “You think you still matter? After you’re gone, I’ll tell Solon and Jason that I tried to save you. I’ll weep for you, Talia.”

Viki grabbed me by the throat and forced me to look at her. Her claws digging into my neck. “Jason will believe me. He wanted me, not you. He only turned because he didn’t have a choice. I’ll show him I was always his Luna. And Solon will not waste his pity on an omega slut who couldn’t even keep her wolf alive.”

The words stung, but I forced myself to not break in front of her. She wanted me to cry, to beg, but I wouldn’t give her the satisfaction.

“You’re lying to yourself,” I rasped. My throat ached. “Jason hated you because you lied. Solon will see through you. If I die, you’ll die too.”

Her eyes flared wide, then narrowed. “No, Talia. The only person that is dying tonight is you. Because they’ll never choose me while you breathe. That is why you must die.”

For one heartbeat, pity tangled with my hatred. Viki was the true pathetic one here. She was fighting for a crown that would never be hers no matter what she did.

“Don’t look at me like you’re better than me!” Viki snapped as she slammed me hard into the wall before releasing me.

“You’ll damn yourself for this. The Moon Goddess will never forgive-”

“Enough with your Goddess,” she snapped. “If she cared, she would have saved me from suffering. She would have saved my father. She would have made me Jason’s Luna!”

Viki reached into her purse and pulled out a syringe. The filled glass caught the light. It smelled like wolfsbane. Overdosed, it would finish me today. I tried to scoot further away from her.

“No!” My voice broke.

“No point in resisting,” Viki mocked. Her hand shot out gripping me by the neck again. She tilted my head to the side as she drove the needle in. I gasped as the liquid shot through my veins.

I couldn’t move!

Terror and pain finally took hold in my chest. I tried to scream, tried to claw at the air, but nothing moved. My body had become a coffin.

Viki leaned closely, her lips brushing my ear. “This is my final gift to you. Now, enjoy your final moments. Goodbye, Talia.”

She turned, laughing, as if the act had satisfied her. The rogues lunged at me, growling hungrily.

I closed my eyes, tears streaking my bloodied face. My last thought tore through me- I would never see my brother or my father again.

CHAPTER 93

Nolan's POV

A wave of despair struck my heart. My wolf rose inside me and roared until my vision narrowed. 'SHE IS IN DANGER!'

The message cut through every other thought. I reached for the pendant at my throat and tore it free. The mate bond snapped into place. I could feel Talia's fear and pain.

My wolf strained against my control. 'Hurry! HURRY! I will never forgive you if we lose her.'

I did not fight him. I gave him one order that was simple and absolute. "Track her scent.'

My wolf accepted the command with a fierce surge as he took over our body. We ran at full speed and followed a faint trail that led east through pines and across a slope of wet stone. Branches raked our shoulders. Brambles snatched at my legs. None of it slowed us.

We vaulted over a stream and landed on the far bank. The scent grew stronger and then thinned until we almost lost it. My wolf began to pace restlessly at the thought of losing Talia. I regained control and continued on. I refused to slow my pace. The slope steepened. A sign stood at the base of two trees. The paint had peeled but the words were clear.

"No Entry."

I scented the air, but I could not smell Talia here. Right when I turned to go back in the direction I came, Talia's scent drifted past the sign like smoke. My wolf bared his teeth in my mind and leaned forward.

I crossed the line.I followed the scent down a seam in the ridge and found a low opening under an old fall of rocks. I slid through the opening and dropped into a narrow corridor.

The corridor widened and then turned. A grate in a ceiling slit let in a seam of gray light. I tasted the air and gagged. Wolfsbane was in the air. Someone had used it to choke this place. I wrapped my arm across my mouth and nose, but kept moving.

I reached the chamber. There were only a few hanging light bulbs that cast a dull glow. The light picked out chains, stone, and a set of rusted bars on a side cell. In the center, Talia hung from silver shackles fixed high on the wall. Her head slumped. Her hair stuck to her face with sweat and blood. The skin at her wrists was raw where the silver had burned it. Her dress had been torn by claws.

Two rogue wolves stood next to her. Viki stood near the open cell. She watched with a greedy calm that twisted my stomach. Her hands rested on the bars as if she had come to see a play.

“Smart idea to hang her up like this,” one of them chuckled. “Gives us a better view. A shame she’s unconscious now.”

The other ripped open Talia’s dress revealing her lingerie underneath. “I know how to fix that.”

Seeing Talia like that, rage took over me.

I moved. The first rogue turned in my direction. He barely had time to register what was happening. I crossed the space between us before he could snarl. My hand caught its jaw and drove it sideways. Bone cracked and the noise echoed. The second rogue leaped for my throat. I caught him by his wrists. With a single squeeze, I crushed them. He howled in pain as he crumpled to the ground. I kicked him in the chest until his chest caved in.

I looked at Talia to be sure her chest still rose. It did. Her breath was shallow and strained. Her scent stood almost smothered under the wolfsbane. I wanted to wrench the chains free and carry her out at once.

“Alpha Nolan! I didn’t expect you here.” She tried to sound calm.

“Don’t you think that was a little extreme for an omega?” Viki sneered from behind me.

I turned, low growl rumbling in my chest.

She backed away from me, but there was nowhere to go as I blocked the exit. “Alpha Nolan, please…… just calm down.”

I snapped my hand around her throat and lifted her. Her fingers clawed at my wrist. Panic overtook the arrogance

on her face.

“She showed you kindness, even empathy and this is how you repay her?!” I snarled.

‘Kill her!’ my wolf demanded. ‘She hurt our mate!’

‘We need answers first,’ I responded.

“Who helped you do this? How much wolfsbane did you inject her with?” I demanded.

Viki tried to speak, but my grip was too tight. I loosened my hand a fraction because I wanted answers more than I wanted to see the life drain from her eyes. Viki dragged in air and coughed

“Let me warn you before you speak,” I growled. “If you lie to me, I will know and I will do so much worse to you than I did to those rogues. Do you understand?”

“You’re doing all of this… for a stupid barren omega. What is wrong with you?!” Viki spat.

I tightened my grip again and slammed her hard into the wall, enough for the stone to crack. Viki's gaze flicked to Talia and then back to me. This time she was truly afraid that I would kill her. Viki's legs kicked in small jerks as she attempted to flail to get me off her.

"Listen," she gasped. "You cannot kill me… or Talia will die!"

CHAPTER 94

Viki's POV

Nolan's grip on my throat tightened by the second, and just when I thought I was a goner, he finally let go.

He flung me to the ground. I slammed hard into the stone floor, knocking the little breath left in my lungs out. I coughed and clutched at my neck.

"You have five seconds to explain to me why I shouldn't rip your throat out right now," Nolan demanded as he checked Talia's pulse.

"I injected her with… wolfsbane," I said quickly before he changed his mind.

"How much?" Nolan asked. "How much did you inject in her?"

"Lethal amount," I replied, and Nolan snarled. He looked ready to pounce and I quickly screamed, "I have what you need to keep her alive for a little longer!"

Nolan's eyes were narrowed, and his lips were curled back into a snarl. "You expect me to believe you, a liar?"

I pushed myself up to my knees and held up both hands to show I had nothing hidden. “I have a counteragent. It cannot cure her, but it can slow the spread of the poison. Without it, she may not last more than a few minutes.”

“Show me,” he said. “Do not make me repeat myself.”

I moved slowly, picking up my purse from the floor. My fingers closed around the syringe. I pulled it out carefully and held it where he could see. The glass caught the dim light and the orange liquid sparkled in the light.

“This will buy her time,” I explained. “She was poisoned by the injection and by breathing it in. The counteragent will neutralize some of the wolfsbane, but not all of it.”

Nolan did not move. His gaze flicked to Talia and then back to me. His silence was unnerving as I could not read his expression.

“Give it to me,” Nolan demanded.

“We need to discuss terms,” I told him.

Nolan scoffed. His eyes flashing as he pushed his wolf down. “You are an enemy of Shadowclaw and Silverfang. You have nothing to bargain with.”

“You need me,” I blurted out. “I was once a high-ranking member of Shadowclaw. I know every name that matters there. I know where the hidden supplies are kept, and which families cannot be trusted. With my help, you could take Shadowclaw without war.”

Nolan gave me a cold smile, “And why would you think I’d be interested in Shadowclaw?”

“You want power,” I said. “With Shadowclaw under your command, you would control two major packs. From there, the throne of Alpha King would already be yours. The Alpha King would not be able to oppose you. You could take it without much effort.”

“And what about Jason?” Nolan asked.

“He betrayed me. Our relationship is over,” I replied, gritting my teeth.

“And what do you demand in return?” Nolan asked, flatly.

“You will make me your Luna,” I said.

His eyes hardened and his nose flared. “What right do you think you have to become my Luna?”

“The right of being useful,” I smirked. “Talia is a barren omega. She will never give you an heir. She will be a waste as your Luna.”

“Who said she was going to be my Luna?” Nolan asked as he circled me like prey.

“You came running to save her. I assumed you had a reason to save her,” I replied with a shrug, “I can give you what she never will. I can give you Shadowclaw, and with it, the influence you need to become Alpha King”

Nolan stepped closer until I could feel his Alpha aura rolling off him. He was less angry, but still angry. ‘Be careful with him,’ my wolf warned me. ‘He’s unpredictable.’ z

“You betray one pack and offer another. Why would I trust a traitor?” Nolan spat.

“You do not have to trust me,” I reasoned. “Bind me by oath. Guard me. Test me. Use me as you will I only need the chance to prove that I can give you what you want.

“You think highly of yourself.”

“I know my worth,” I said.

Nolan stepped closer to me. He pulled me to my feet. Nolan lifted his hand, and I flinched back. But he didn't slap me. Nolan let his knuckles brush my chin. A faint smile touched his mouth, though his eyes were unreadable.

Nolan smirked and said, "You always had a smart mouth."

His hand slid to my cheek. My pulse beat faster, not only from fear but from something more. I could never resist a male with power and that was Nolan even more so than Jason. Jason couldn't hold a candle to Nolan.

'Viki," my wolf growled a warning, 'You can't trust him. He only cares about himself.'

'Shut up,' I snapped at her. 'We need him.'

The risk did not matter. Nolan was cruel and so was I. He should understand my drive to secure my position next to the most powerful. I was only loyal to those that were loyal to me.

Nolan's gaze did not waver. He leaned closer, and his smile grew sharper. This was perfect. No man could resist me in the end.

"You will see the worth in me," I said seductively. "Give me the chance, and I will give you Shadowclaw."

His thumb traced along my jawline. His smile was calm and dangerous, but I chose to see only what it promised. I believed in the bargain I had offered. I believed it had been accepted.

A thrill moved through me as he leaned closer, and in that moment, I knew-I had won.

CHAPTER 95

Viki's POV

For a moment, I thought Nolan was going to kiss me. His face was so close that I could feel his hot breath. My pulse hammered in my ears. I lifted my chin, ready for the moment.

Instead, his mouth moved close to my ear, and he said, “You are delusional.”

“What?”

Nolan quickly slapped me across the face, causing me to stumble back and clutch my cheek in shock. “You… you hit me!” I stammered. “I am trying to help you!”

“I do not need you to take the throne. I can take it on my own,” Nolan said. “Your very presence disgusts me. Do you think I am a fool like Jason? There are some men that can see through your bullshit, Viki.”

I gaped at him, trying to think of something to say. Before I could respond, he reached down and snatched the syringe from my hand. He walked back over to Talia.

“I’ve got you. This is going to help. Just hold on a little longer,” I heard him whisper to her.

Why did everything turn out in Talia’s favor? Why did everyone care so much about her? She was nothing but a lowly, filthy slut of an omega.

“Snap out of it!” my wolf snarled. “If he gives her the counteragent, our lives will be forfeited. We need to get out of here. RUN!”

I turned to flee. The door to the corridor was only a few steps away. But his voice froze me in place.

“You take one step out of here,” he said without even turning his head, “and you are dead.”

I stood still. My wolf paced restlessly inside me, demanding that I run. I wanted to listen to her. It was not as if he could focus on Talia and chase me at the same time. But the mangled bodies of the rogues on the ground and the certainty in Nolan’s tone destroyed any courage I had left.

I watched Nolan work at the locks around Talia's wrists. The chains rattled and fell away. He caught her before she collapsed onto the stone floor. Talia drifted in and out of consciousness, muttering incoherently.

"Shh, don't speak. Preserve your strength," Nolan hushed her as he lowered her to the ground. He lifted her carefully, as if she were something precious, then laid her across his lap and pressed the syringe into her shoulder.

Talia's body trembled. The shallow rise of her chest grew steadier. Her lips parted as she began to breathe more evenly.

Jealousy coiled through me. It intensified with every second I watched. Rage soon replaced it. I had offered him power and a future no one else could give, least of all Talia. Yet even he, cold and detached, could not resist her.

What did she have that I did not? She was barren, weak, and marked by failure. Yet even Nolan, whose heart seemed made of stone, chose her over me. The sight made me sick.

Nolan stood with her in his arms. Talia sagged against his chest. He looked down at her with an expression that made me gasp. It was something Jason had never even shown me: love.

Hearing me gasp, Nolan looked at me. The loving expression vanished, replaced by cold hatred, as if he were seconds away from dropping Talia and mauling me. I swallowed, waiting for his decision.

Nolan finally looked at me fully. His eyes were sharp, filled with warning. He stepped closer, his voice low but

edged with authority. "You will disappear. If I see you again, I will not hesitate to kill you."

"Listen, I meant what I said. You can keep Talia as your plaything. I won't mind. But I can help you. I…"

"You do not get to bargain with me again," Nolan snapped, cutting me off. "You will leave Silverfang territory and never return."

I forced a sneer onto my face, though fear pulsed in my veins. “And if I refuse?” I asked.

His silence stretched long enough that I could hear Talia’s faint breaths. Then he said, “Refusal would be foolish.”

“Do not threaten me,” I snapped, my voice shaking with fury. “I was born to be Queen!”

He raised an eyebrow at my outburst. I could not tell if he thought I was brave or simply pathetic.

“All I see is a grown woman throwing a tantrum because she could not get her way,” Nolan growled. “Obey or not obey. I could care less.”

Nolan began walking past me. I let out a sigh of relief, but it was short lived. Before I could react, Nolan’s claws slashed across my cheek. The hit snapped my head back. I screamed in pain as I clutched my face.

“You told me you wouldn’t kill me!” I screamed.

“Did you think I would let you walk away without punishment? You are lucky that I don’t have much time to deal with you,” Nolan sneered.

“You clawed my face! What is wrong with you?” I exclaimed.

“This is your punishment,” Nolan continued. “You will spend the rest of your miserable life with the reminder of your poor decisions and a warning to others to never trust a traitor like you.”

My vision blurred with tears. My breath came in sharp bursts, half sobs and half rage. Nolan sneered and said mockingly, “A Queen doesn’t sob like a spoiled child.” Nolan left the dungeon with Talia.

“You can heal this, can’t you?” I asked my wolf.

She did not immediately respond. I expected to feel relief, but the wound still throbbed painfully.

“Can’t you?” I demanded.

“I am sorry, Viki. I cannot. He used some of his Alpha aura to deliver the wound,” my wolf explained.

I screamed in frustration. Why was this happening to me? I should be the Alpha Queen! How could I live with this disgusted scar on my face?

I would never forgive Talia or Nolan for what they had done to me.

They would regret this! I swear it!

CHAPTER 96

Rudolf’s POV

The forest was silent except for the crack of branches as my guards spread out in a wide formation. Their eyes scanned the shadows and their nostrils flared for even the faintest scent. Solon moved beside me.

Still, there was no sign of Talia.

How could my daughter vanish from our own pack? I had layered protection around her since the day she was born. Yet despite every precaution, she was gone. Each moment without her only intensified the fear I felt. And because her wolf was dormant, I couldn’t even feel her.

“Why did you allow her to go on her own?” I growled at Solon.

“She said she needed some air and I sent a guard,” Solon responded, “I had no reason to believe she was in danger.”

Solon was right. The danger had been in the room with us. With Nolan right in front of me, who would have a grudge against me?

We pushed deeper into the woods. Solon dropped to a crouch. He ran his hand through the dirt, sniffed it before he shook his head in defeat.

“There is no scent. No tracks. How is that possible?” he muttered as he stood up.

I ground my teeth. “Keep searching. There has to be a trace of her. People don’t just disappear. We do not stop until she is found.”

Then, movement caught my eye. Someone broke through the tree line from the direction of the restricted area and was sprinting towards us. My body became rigid as recognition struck.

Nolan.

And in his arms was Talia.

Her dress was ripped open, and she was covered in her own blood. Her body was limp like a broken doll in his arms. Was she dead? But I noticed the rise and fall of her chest and relief washed over me. Talia was alive, but barely.

“What did you do to her?!” Solon rushed forward, but I grabbed his wrist to stop him.

I stepped forward myself, my voice sharp and commanding. “Nolan, hand her to me now.”

His head snapped up. His eyes were flashing as he was struggling to control his wolf. “Get out of my way! She has been poisoned with wolfsbane. I need to get her to a hospital right now,” Nolan stated in between ragged breaths.

My guards immediately drew in closer, forming a half-circle/around him. Their claws extended, their bodies poised to strike. Nolan had emerged from the restricted grounds, carrying my injured daughter. How was he able to find her when we could not?

“I said hand her to me,” I commanded again with the Alpha command.

Nolan didn’t submit and give in to the command. He shifted Talia higher in his arms as if shielding her from me. Nolan bared his fangs at me as he growled low, a clear warning for me to back off.

“I will not hand her to you,” he snarled. “You fools couldn’t even keep her safe.”

His response surprised me. What did he mean by that? ‘It doesn’t matter what he means. We will not tolerate his open defiance!’ my wolf snarled. With a flick of my hand, the guards tightened the circle.

Solon drew his blade. He lunged forward before I could stop him. His sword struck Nolan’s shoulder. The blade cut deep, and blood splattered onto the ground. Nolan didn’t flinch and only held Talia tighter.

“Release her!” Solon shouted. “Tell me why we should believe you are not the one who put her in this state.”

“I don’t care what you believe,” Nolan snarled. “I don’t need to prove anything to you. She is mine!”

“She is the daughter of the Alpha King,” Solon snapped. “She belongs to her family and her people, not to you.”

Nolan’s eyes narrowed as he pulled Talia tighter against his chest. “No one will take her from my arms but a doctor.”

“Arrogant fool,” Solon spat.

He raised his blade again, but I roared, halting him. “Enough!”

My voice echoed across the woods. Solon dropped his sword.

I stepped closer, glaring at Nolan. “How dare you refuse the command of your King!”

Nolan met my gaze, his eyes unflinching. “I will defy anyone who wastes time while she dies in my arms.”

The fury in his words struck me hard, but beneath them was something else. He was not lying. I knew the look on his face. He had the same fear in his eyes that I had when I tried to get my mate to safety. For the first time, I

hesitated.

Finally, I drew in a slow breath and gave the order. “It will take too long to get her to the hospital. Take her to the infirmary.”

Nolan’s eyes widened, but he did not hesitate. He ran past me without saying another word.

“Father, what are you doing?” Solon protested. “You cannot let him go. We don’t know how he was able to find Talia. We do not know what role he played in this.”

“I will not gamble with her life,” I said firmly. “If she has been poisoned, then every second matters. Follow him. Watch his every move, but do not stop him. Do you understand?”

“But Father,” Solon attempted to argue.

“Put your pride aside and whatever grudge you have toward Nolan. This is about Talia. We will do what is best for her and figure out the rest later,” I continued.

Solon looked as if he wanted to continue arguing, but he said nothing else and bowed his head. “As you command, father.” He sheathed his sword and hurried after Nolan.

I turned to my guards, who were waiting on my command. “Search the restricted grounds, I want every passage uncovered. Do not rest until you know who harmed her,”

“Yes, my King,” the guards answered, scattering at once into the trees.

I would have answers. Whoever dared to harm her, whoever set foot in that dungeon, would pay with their life.

CHAPTER 97

Nolan’s POV

The hospital doors burst open as I carried Talia inside. Nurses rushed forward at the sight of her limp body.

“This way,” one of them said, guiding me down the corridor. “What happened?”

“She was poisoned with wolfsbane. She has been provided with a counteragent,” I answered as I followed them.

I laid Talia on the nearest bed. I was reluctant to release her, but I forced myself to do so. She looked so fragile. Her condition had worsened as her lips tinged with blue.

The moment I stepped back, doctors and nurses crowded around her. I was pushed aside and escorted out of the room as nurses began cutting away what remained of her bloodstained dress.

‘You should’ve killed Viki when you had the chance,” my wolf snarled as I stalked toward the waiting room. “She dared to hurt our mate. She sent rogues to do it. Her throat should’ve been crushed!’

I clenched my fists. ‘I spared her only to give Talia a change of vengeance. Viki is a rogue. If Talia doesn’t deal with her, life will do it for her.’

“That is not enough,’ my wolf snapped. ‘She is a threat to our mate. She will never keep her word. She will try to harm Talia again and if she does it will be your fault.’

‘That will not happen,’ I growled.

My wolf continued to rage. ‘What is the point of you saving our mate if you didn’t follow through? You had Viki. You should have done what Jason failed to do for the mate bond.’

I did not save Talia because she is our mate! Do not twist my motives. Marco made her wolf go dormant. That weakness led to her kidnapping. I had a responsibility to correct what his mistake caused,’ I countered.

‘Lies!’ my wolf scoffed. ‘You can lie to yourself, but you cannot hide the truth from me.’

I ignored him. My gaze fixed on the door that now separated me from Talia. I strained to hear what was happening

in the room.

The time dragged on. My shoulder bled freely beneath my torn shirt, but I refused to move. No one came around, not even Della, but a nurse who scolded me about bleeding all over the floor.

“Alpha Nolan, you should have gotten this looked at,” she said as she bandaged me up.

“Sure, thanks,” I said.

The doors to the infirmary slammed open. I stood up quickly. The nurse amped up to scold, but thought better of it when Solon stormed in. The Alpha King followed. His Alpha aura filled every corner. Guards surged in behind

them. Their eyes fixed on me as though waiting for the command to tear me apart.

“Prince Solon, there are patients here. Show some decorum,” I taunted and winked at the nurse, who looked as if she wanted to fade away.

“Don’t give me that shit!” Solon snarled. “Where is she? Where is Talia?”

“She is being worked on by the doctor right now. Please Prince Solon, calm down,” the nurse answered.

Solon gave a curt nod, but he spoke again, “If she has any lasting damage, I will…”

“You’ll do nothing but shut your mouth,” I cut him off. “You’re making a scene.”

“Say that to my face, you bastard,” Solon growled. He grabbed me by the collar and prepared to punch me while I smirked at him. Once his fist connected, I’d break every bone in his body.

Before Solon could land his punch, the door to Talia’s room swung open. The doctor stepped out, his coat streaked with blood, yet his expression remained calm. The Alpha King moved swiftly to the doctor’s side, and Solon instinctively released me.

“How is she?” the King demanded.

“She is out of danger, for now. It is good you brought her when you did, Alpha Nolan. The Princess will need rest,’ the doctor explained. “She will need to stay overnight for supervision, but she will pull through.”

Relief rippled through the corridor. I saw it flash in Solon’s eyes before he masked it with rage. Even the Alpha King relaxed as his Alpha aura wasn’t as oppressive.

Then he stepped in front of me, locking his cold eyes on mine. “Explain yourself, Nolan. You deserted the Hunting Rite. And you dare return with my daughter poisoned and broken in your arms. Tell me what you have done!”

I didn’t like his tone, but this wasn’t the time or place to argue. “I encountered rogues with Viki. I killed them and brought Talia back,” I said. A small lie, but it didn’t matter.

The King’s eyes narrowed. “Viki? Who is this woman?”

Before I could answer, Solon answered for me. “She is the she-wolf that tricked Jason with the Redbone Flower, but that woman is dead. She was executed for her crimes.”

“Then explain why I found her alive in the dungeon, letting rogues torture Talia,” I shot back. “Clearly, Jason didn’t kill her.”

“You lie,” Solon spat, stepping closer. “You did this to Talia.”

I sneered, “As if I would stoop so low to harm a she-wolf.”

“You think you can hide your treachery with lies. You hate my father. You regard him as your father’s murderer. You provoked both of us before the Hunting Rite began, and now you want us to believe you saved Talia from the goodness of your heart? You’re not fooling anyone, Nolan,” Solon snarled.

Arguing with Solon was grating on my nerves and getting increasingly exhausting by the minute. “You are simple -minded. You think because you shout louder your words become true. Just admit you cannot imagine that I acted for reasons beyond your narrow suspicions.”

Solon blushed at the insult, and he growled, “What did you call me?”

“Are you deaf now too?” I asked, watching as Solon’s hand went to his hilt. “You’re simple-minded, Prince Solon.”

“You expect us to believe you just happened to be there?” Solon barked. “That you fought rogues by chance and stumbled across her? No, this is just another one of your schemes. You harmed her yourself and now you parade yourself as her savior!”

I growled low in my chest. “Believe what you want. But if I had not been there, she would be dead while you and your guards wandered the forest like fools.”

“Enough!” The Alpha King’s fury filled the room, silencing even my wolf. His gaze pierced me. “Then why did you save her?”

CHAPTER 98

Nolan’s POV

“Do I need a reason to save someone?” I asked.

“Don’t get smart with me, Nolan. You’re on thin ice,” the Alpha King warned.

‘Do not tell him the mate bond,’ my wolf warned me.

‘Of course. Do you think I am a fool?’ I responded.

“I despise rogue wolves,” I said aloud. “They are lawless and destructive, and I do not tolerate them. I warned you before that Silverfang’s borders were weak. I told you rogues could slip through, and yet you did not believe me. Now here we are.”

The Alpha King frowned, and Solon continued to seethe with rage next to him. “Tell me the truth,” he said, his voice low and dangerous.

“That is the truth,” I responded. It was a half-truth, but it was good enough for the time being. If he found out that I was Talia’s mate, he would have thrown me out before I could prove to everyone that he was a murderer.

“My wolf can tell you are not telling the full truth,” The Alpha King growled. I kept my expression neutral, but I did not respond. Taunting him right now would not be advantageous to me

“What advantage do I gain from harming the Alpha King’s daughter?” I asked. “Think about it. How would that benefit me?”

Solon’s voice cut in, sharp and accusing. “You are nothing but a viper who hides his venom until the strike. Do not think for a moment we will be tricked by you.”

I turned my gaze on him, my lips curling into a bitter smile. “Trust from you was never worth much. You think because I don’t bow down and kiss your feet means I am guilty. I give respect when it is received and deserved. You see treachery in every step I take, but you see nothing of your own failures. While you chased trails that led nowhere, I saved her, and you have yet to thank me for that.”

“You expect us to believe that?” Solon snapped. The veins in his neck bulged with rage. “You appear from a place sealed for years, holding her half-dead, and now you claim you fought rogues and stumbled into a rescue. You insult us with this story. Admit it. You harmed her yourself.”

“Believe what you will,” I growled. “But the fact is you failed your sister, and you can’t accept it, so you’re projecting your anger onto me. Shameful for the future Alpha King.”

Solon barred his teeth and stepped forward. “Enough. I will make you submit.”

He took a step forward, and instantly half a dozen guards moved with him. Their eyes were fixed on me as though waiting for the chance to tear me down. I refused to back down and awaited the attack.

The Alpha King’s aura slammed into everyone in the waiting room. The guards and Solon dropped to kneel in front of him. I gripped the chair hard enough to leave a dent, but I didn’t kneel.

“We cannot prove that you were involved. But if Talia says your name when she wakes, if she claims this attack was tied to you, I will not let you walk free. You will not leave Silverfang. And I will punish you in place of your father Alpha Ryker,” the Alpha King finally said.

My blood boiled at the mention of my father. My eyes narrowed, and I stepped forward despite his oppressive Alpha King aura. “Do not speak of him!” I hissed. “You have no right to speak his name as you are the one who

murdered him!”

“Leave now! You are forbidden to see Talia again,” the Alpha King ordered.

“I refuse,” I snapped. “I’m innocent, and I won’t let you wrong me!”

His glare was sharp. I could tell he had never faced anyone who openly defied his decree. Yet I didn’t flinch. Even if we came to blows, he wouldn’t strike me without risk to himself.

Solon caught off guard by the collision of our auras-two forces clashing, neither willing to yield.

“Our men searched the dungeon already. They found two dead rogue wolves, but no trace of a third person. No trace of this woman you claim was there,” the Alpha King stated.

“She was there. I am not lying,” I said through gritted teeth.

The Alpha King continued, “If you insist on saying she was behind the kidnapping, then bring me evidence. Catch her yourself. Until then, you are forbidden from seeing Talia.”

“As you wish, my king,” I said with disdain.

There was nothing more I could say that would change his mind. The King’s command was absolute. The guards shifted, ready to enforce it with claws if I resisted.

I forced myself to swallow my rage, though my glare never left his face. Without another word, I turned sharply on my heels and exited the infirmary.

CHAPTER 99

Talia’s POV

When I opened my eyes, I was surrounded by darkness.

I floated in an empty void where the only company I had was silence and fractured memories. I called out to the void, but no one responded. Had I died?

Then, a memory tore through me. The rogues' hands had been rough against my skin. Their claws were tearing at my dress while Viki watched with delight. I remembered the one that sank his claws into me, relishing in my scream. His eyes glowed with hunger and his breath was hot on my face.

I felt as if I was being tortured all over again. The sound of ripping cloth and the echo of Viki's cruel laughter repeated until I thought I would go mad. Fear gripped me so tight that I was choking on it.

Then, suddenly, the pain and the fear vanished. But, I still floated in darkness. This had to be death. Perhaps this was best. Yet, the thought of never seeing anyone again brought tears to my eyes.

I thought of my father's sharp and commanding voice that was filled with love when he spoke to me. I thought of Solon and his protectiveness. Then, I thought of Della's laughter. And then I finally thought of my wolf, who was now lost to me.

I covered my face as I cried. "I miss you," I whispered. "I am going to miss all of you."

'I am here.'

The voice caused my head to snap up as I turned in circles. I knew that voice. It was my wolf. Then, I felt her presence. It was weak, but it was there.

"Where are you? What happened to you? I am so sorry," I cried. "I failed you. You were hurt because of me. If I had been stronger, you wouldn't have…"

'Do not say that,' she interrupted gently. 'This was not your fault. I was wounded, and I need time to recover. I will fight to return to you.'

Then, I felt something brush up against my leg. I looked down to see a black wolf with purple eyes staring back up at me. I dropped down and wrapped my arms around her neck. She leaned into my hug.

“Promise me,” I whispered. “Promise you will come back.”

‘I promise,’ she said, her voice firmer now. ‘I will fight to come back. And so must you.’

The darkness shifted then and began breaking apart with threads of light. My wolf disappeared in the darkness. I reached for her, not ready for her to leave. But, a bright light made me wince. Then, it eased into a soft glow that spread before me, filling the void with warmth.

And in that glow, a woman appeared. She wore a flowing dress the color of sunrise,

“Mother?”

“Yes, my darling. You have grown up. I am so proud of you,” she said, floating to me. Her face was the same as I remembered. She opened her arms, and I collapsed into them.

“Am I dead?” I cried into her shoulder. “Please tell me I’m not dead. I am not ready.”

Her hand stroked my hair, soothing me in the way that I remembered. “Not yet, my daughter. It is not your time yet.”

“I messed up everything, Mom. I lost my fated mate. I lost my wolf,” I muttered. “I am a failure.”

My mother pulled back and cupped my face. “Oh, my dear pup. You are not a failure.” She placed a kiss on my forehead. “You are a strong Luna and will be an even stronger Alpha Queen.”

“I don’t know. I don’t feel like it,” I pouted.

“Do you doubt the Moon Goddess?” my mother asked and I shook my head. “The Moon Goddess doesn’t make mistakes. She has chosen you for something bigger. You have a mission that you must complete.”

“What? What mission?” I asked.

“That is all I can tell you, my darling. You must be brave and take control of your fate,” my mother replied. “You are stronger than you know.”

“Please tell me. I don’t know what to do,” I pleaded.

“Your mate will help and walk the path with you,” my mother finally said.

“My mate?” I repeated, confused.

She nodded, but her form was already fading. “Be brave, my darling, and always know that I am with you.”

“Wait! Mom!” I screamed, reaching for her. “Who is he? Tell me!”

But she vanished, leaving only the lingering glow.

What did she mean by my mate?

I thought of Jason, but he couldn’t be the one she was talking about. Jason betrayed me and the fated mate bond. I doubted the Moon Goddess would tie me back to him. He could not be the one my mother spoke of.

Did I have a second chance mate that I haven’t met yet?

Then, another thought came to my mind: Nolan.

The memory of him on the full moon night returned. In my fevered state while in heat, had I not called him my mate? Could it be true?

“No, couldn’t be,” I whispered, yet doubt gnawed at me.

Another voice brought me out of my thoughts.

“Talia, my girl, please open your eyes.”

It was my father’s voice. His deep, commanding voice was filled with desperation that made my heart ache.

Then, Solon’s voice rang out, “Please wake up, Talia, Don’t leave us.”

“I’m trying!” I yelled as I tried to follow the sound of their voices. “Please keep talking!”

But the voices faded, leaving me alone again.

CHAPTER 100

Nolan’s POV

Three days had passed, and Talia still had not woken up. The reports were always the same. She was stable, but she remained unconscious.

‘We need to be with her. If we were by her side, she would wake,’ my wolf pouted.

I hated feeling helpless.

I gritted my teeth. The memory of my hand wrapped around Viki's neck haunted me. I should have killed her right then and there. I had chosen to spare her, believing she would not live long as a rogue, certain the Silverfang warriors would find her. Unfortunately, they were more incompetent than I thought. Now, Viki was free, hidden, and still dangerous while Talia still lay unconscious in her hospital bed. Regret gnawed at me each time I replayed the moment.

'You will eventually learn to listen to me, you stubborn fool', my wolf scolded.

The Alpha King had been true to his word. He stationed guards at every entrance to the hospital, making it impossible for me to enter. His orders were strict, not only against me but against anyone who disturbed her

recovery.

I found some satisfaction in the fact that Jason had been turned away by Solon too. The guards had spoken of it quietly.

"You missed it," one chuckled.

"Yes, Prince Solon flung him out of the doors like trash," another laughed.

"Serves the pompous fool right. He was unworthy of our Princess," another added.

The gossip died down quickly when they noticed me listening.

Not long after, Marco came to me, frustrated but with more information than the Silverfang warriors had managed to gather.

"What did you find out?" I asked.

"Viki must have used a spray to hide her scent," Marco explained. "It is an herbal tincture used by rogues to move between pack territories. That is why no one can track her."

So, Viki must have made ties with a rogue pack. The thought unsettled me. There was no telling what other schemes she had planned.

“Inform the Alpha King of what you found. They should know the tactics that rogue wolves are using,” I said.

“I will report to him now,” Marco replied before leaving.

Another day passed without change. The lack of good news about Talia left me restless, each hour dragging longer than the last. I couldn’t keep waiting-I had to see her with my own eyes.

I went to Marco’s room in the morning. If anyone could find a way to help Talia, it would be him. His knowledge of herbs and medicine often uncovered solutions others overlooked.

I stepped inside without knocking and was surprised to see Della seated at his table in a nightgown. She fumbled quickly to put on a robe and snapped, “Do you know how to knock?”

Marco greeted me as he exited his bathroom. He sat down next to Della, looping an arm around her waist. “Good morning, Alpha Nolan,” he said and then noticed my expression. “You look restless. Did something happen?”

“I came to speak with you,” I replied. My gaze flicked briefly to Della. “But I came back at another time.”

Seeing I intended to leave, Della rose to her feet. “No, you stay. I was just going,” she said.

“You do not have to leave,” I told her.

“I am not leaving because of you,” she spat as she made her way to the door.

“Wait,” I said. It came out sharper than I intended.

Della froze and turned to look at me. She looked scared and annoyed that I yelled at her. “What do you demanded.

“I need your help,” I said.

want?” she

“Wait, what? Um, Marco pinch me. I must be dreaming if the great Alpha Nolan is requesting my help,” Della said.

“Can you arrange for me to see Talia?” I asked, ignoring her taunt.

Her brow furrowed. “Why should I? Why would I go against my Alpha’s orders for you?”

“Because I want to help Talia. She has helped me many times before. And if you help me now, I will not stop Marco from seeing you.”

Her eyes flicked to Marco, uncertain. “Are you lying to me?”

“I swear on my honor as an Alpha that if you help me, I will not interfere with you and Marco’s mate bond,” I said.

Della bit her lip. She was still suspicious of me, and I did not blame her. I would have been suspicious as well in her place. After a moment, she nodded. “Fine, I will help you, but you better not go back on your word.”

“I will not,” I reaffirmed. “Now, tell me how you will do it.”

“Tonight, I will switch shifts with Solon. Once I confirm it is safe, I will open the window for you. You can enter then, but only briefly. If you are caught, I will…”

“I understand,” I said, cutting in. “I will take full blame if I am caught. I will say you had nothing to do with it.”

She nodded once more. “Don’t make me regret this,” Della said and then left the room.

When the door closed, Marco smirked. “You really do care about Talia. Admit it.”

My wolf stirred at his accusation, eager to agree, but I silenced him quickly.

“You are mistaken,” I said coldly, “I am only doing this because your carelessness weakened her. Her wolf disappearing allowed her to be taken. If she succumbs to the wolfsbane or worse, dies, my own wolf will suffer because of you.”

Marco’s smirk faded as guilt shadowed his features. “You are right,” he said softly, “I should have been more careful. For that, I am sorry.”

His words did not erase the damage, but the sincerity in his voice lessened my anger.

“I know,” I said and left his room.

Tonight, I would see Talia and nothing would stop me.