Barren Luna 111

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & ELEVEN

Nolan's POV

I did not mean to keep kissing her, but I couldn't resist her. The moment she leaned in again, I responded without thinking. The taste of wine was faint on her lips. Her hands stayed tight in my shirt, and she pulled me closer a second time. Part of me wanted to stop it there. Another part pushed for more. My wolf was loud in my head, pressing me to tell Talia the truth.

'Tell her,' he urged. 'Tell her what she is to us.'

I forced a breath through my nose and tried to slow everything down. I would not blame her for the Alpha King's choices, but I had not changed my position. I had not forgotten why I came to Silverfang or what I owed to my father. I would not pretend that any bond erased what stood between me and her family.

She drew back just enough to look at me.

"Will you mark me?" she asked, her voice soft.

I felt my wolf surge forward again, ready to answer for me. I stepped back instead.

"I have things to handle," I said. The words sounded rough even to me. "I need to go."

"Notan?"

I did not give her the chance to continue. I turned and left the garden as quickly as I could. I didn't want to do anything I would regret because I submitted to the pull of the mate bond.

My wolf did not let it go.

‘Coward,’ he said. ‘She accepted us and you chose to run.

‘It is just the mate bond. She would’ve been like this with anyone,’ I answered. ‘You know it. I know it. I will not let it make my choices for me.’

‘And what is wrong with that?’ he shot back, “There is nothing wrong with having a mate.’

‘Enough,’ I growled.

He kept pressing, throwing every memory at me: the night of her heat, the way she had said my name in the hospital bed, the way she had pulled me down in the garden. He would not stop until I shut him out. I put up the wall I used in battle and forced his voice back into silence. The quiet that followed was necessary. I needed a clear head.

I reached my room to find Marco inside, flipping through a stack of patrol reports he had collected while I was gone. He looked up the moment I came through the door. His eyes focused on my neck.

“What happened to your pendant?” he asked.

“Talia threw it into the pond.”

Marco stared at me in shock. “She what?”

“She pulled it off and threw it.”

His eyes widened and he said, “Then she knows. She knows you’re her mate.”

I said nothing.

He set the reports down and stepped closer. “Nolan, listen to me. If she knows, you do not have much time. You must either claim her or reject her. If Prince Solon or the Alpha King find out before you decide, the decision will be made for you. You know how they see you. They will call you a threat and kick you out of Silverfang before you can get close to the truth about your father.”

“I am aware,” I said.

Marco paced once, then faced me again. “Do you plan to claim her?”

“No. If I did, they would say I did it to gain power here,” I answered. “The King would never accept it at face value.”

“Then reject her,” Marco said, spreading his hands. “It will hurt you both, but it solves the immediate danger. You will stay in Silverfang and keep working on what you came here to do.”

I stood at the table and braced my hands on the edge. “A public rejection will not solve the situation.”

“What do you mean?” Marco asked.

“They will see it as an insult and probably quick me out of the Silverfang. So, rejecting her isn’t the answer either.”

Marco sighed and rubbed his face. “Then what other choice do you have? You cannot keep pretending nothing happened. The pendant is gone. Talia will feel the bond more strongly now, and so will you. Solon is already suspicious of you. The King tolerates you because of what you did for Talia. One rumor is all it will take to turn that tolerance into a demand that you leave.”

“I know,” I said again.

He dropped his hand and lowered his voice. “I am not asking what you want in your heart. I am asking what keeps us here long enough to find the truth. Your father’s name will not clear itself. We need time, and time requires that we do not become the center of a scandal.”

“There is a third way,” I said.

Marco frowned. “What is the third way?”

“We can still mute the bond until I finish what I came here to do,” I said.

“How?” he asked. “The pendant is lost in a pond. You cannot just find another one in a drawer. Those charms are rare.’

“I know,” I said. “Which is why I am not going to request a pendant.”

He stared at me a second longer. “Wait,” he said. “You cannot mean-”

I cut him off with a single word.

“Leslie.”

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & TWELVE

Talia’s POV

The next moming, I woke late. I blinked at the sunlight spilling across my bed and realized I had overslept. My body still felt lighter than it had before, though the tiredness clung in places.

The door opened a moment later, and Della walked in. “Great! You’re finally awake,” she said, heading straight for the bed.

I’m not sure if I like this new Talia who sleeps until noon.”

“Well, you’ll just have to get used to it,” I muttered, propping myself up.

”

She sat on the edge of the mattress and gave me a look that could have rivaled a healer’s exam. “You’re not hung over, are you? If you are, I can send someone to make you something greasy.”

“I’m fine,” I said. “Just a little tired.”

That did not stop her from pressing her hand to my forehead. She let out a long breath, as if she had been holding it in. “Good. I was starting to worry you’d drift off again and sleep for another week.”

Her fussing made me smile. “You’ve been checking on me a lot, haven’t you?”

She gave a small shrug. “Of course. I felt awful I wasn’t there when you first woke up. So I decided to make up for it. Today, I’m spending the whole day with you. No excuses.”

“You don’t need to feel guilty,” I said softly.

“Too late.” She smirked. “Besides, I want to.”

Della swung her legs up onto the mattress so she could face me properly. “Do you know what irritated me most? When Father found out Leslie was the one treating you, he banned me from the hospital. He said I’d only disturb your rest.”

I stared at her. “I don’t believe that. Beta Logan wouldn’t ban you.”

Her head bobbed. “Well, technically he did.”

“What did you do?” I asked, wary of the answer.

“I snuck Nolan into your room,” she said.

“You did what?!” My voice shot up.

“Yeah. He wanted to check on you, so I brought him in. Then your father caught us. It didn’t matter. I still snuck back in to check on you anyway.”

I gaped as my mind tried to process what she was telling me. Nolan had actually risked Father’s anger just to see me? That did not make sense. He was impossible to figure out. One moment he was cold and distant, acting like I meant nothing, and the next I was finding out he had risked himself for me more than once.

“Why did he want to sneak in? What happened?” I pressed.

“Solon and your Father were furious. They thought Nolan had harmed you, so they banned him from seeing you until you woke up,” Della explained.

“I’m sorry I stressed everyone out,” I murmured.

“No need to apologize. We all know you’d have done the same, and probably more, for us,” she said firmly.

“I always felt like someone was near me, even when I didn’t hear voices,” I admitted.

“That would’ve been me. I rotated with Solon to make sure you had someone watching over you. I cooled you down when your fever spiked.”

I reached out and squeezed her hand. “Then I didn’t dream about it. I felt someone near me. That must have been you.”

Her cheeks turned pink, and she laughed awkwardly. “Well, it wasn’t easy. But I wasn’t about to let Solon think he could handle everything himself. Besides, I wanted to be there when you opened your eyes. A shame I missed it.”

My throat tightened. Gratitude, guilt, and comfort all pulled at me at once. I had not realized how much I leaned on her presence, even without remembering it clearly.

The tension broke when my stomach growled loudly.

Della burst out laughing. “Now that’s a good sign. Your stomach’s ready to make up for lost time.”

I laughed too. “That was louder than I expected.”

She tugged at my arm. “Come on. Enough lying around. You need food.”

With her help, I got up and dressed. Together, we walked to the dining hall. The smell of eggs and bacon reached us before we even stepped inside.

A man stood at the long table and put tray after tray of food in place. He wore a clean white coat and bowed low when he saw us.

“Good afternoon, Princess Talia. I have been waiting for you,” he said. “I am Chef Jordan. Prince Solon has appointed me to ensure you are meeting your nutritional requirements. I promise to only prepare the best to ensure you recover quickly.”

I looked at the spread. I had expected a simple breakfast and instead there was roasted chicken, steak, warm biscuits, vegetable dishes, and fruit.

I said to myself, “This is crazy.” I would have preferred Solon to be here. “Isn’t this a bit much?” I told the chef.

The chef bowed once more. “You need to get better, Princess, and eating well is a part of that. I’ll make you something else if these dishes don’t meet your needs.

Solon always overreacts about everything. Even when we were kids, if I got a scrape on my knee, he would shower me with gifts, food, and anything else he thought would help. It was annoying, but I couldn’t help but like the attention. Solon didn’t know how to hold back, but he did care, and that was what mattered.

Della sat down in the nearest chair, picked up a knife and fork, and cut into a thick steak before I could say anything. She smiled and took a bite.

She said, “This is so good,” with her mouth full. “You really have to try this, Talia.”

I shook my head and sat down next to her. “At least you’re getting special treatment.” I pushed one of the plates toward her. ” Eat more. You deserve it. You helped me when I couldn’t move.

Her eyes lit up, “Sure, I’ll do it.”

I started eating too, and I loved how sharp the flavors were after weeks of bland broth and medicine. I looked at her halfway through. “Will you help me take care of my rose garden after this?” It’s likely a disaster by now,

She smiled while she chewed. “Of course. Together, we’ll fix it.”

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & THIRTEEN

Talia’s POV

The afternoon sun sat high over the courtyard when Della and I carried our tools to the rose garden. The beds had gone unchecked while I was in the hospital, so we started with the row that had the most dead blooms and weeds. Della constantly grumbled about how hot it was and how she should’ve never agreed to this.

“So,” Della said as she yanked out a weed, “is Leslie an old lady? Be honest. I keep picturing a tiny woman in ten shawls with a stick.”

“She is about our age,” I said. “A year older, maybe two. No shawls. No stick.”

Della lowered her shears. “You’re serious?”

“Very,” I said. I nudged mulch into place with my boot. “She does act like she’s older. She has an authority about her. She speaks her mind freely. Probably because she knows she’s the best at her job.”

Della nodded. “That is not the healer I imagined.” Her face lit up with a smirk. “Introduce us. I want to meet her.”

“I will,” I said. “She plans to stay through the Sacrifice Ceremony, so you will have time.”

“Good. That makes this easier to ask,” Della said as she yanked out another weed with a grunt before launching it into the mulch pile.

“To ask what?” I asked.

“Marco and I want to hold our mating ceremony after the ritual,” Della answered as she blushed.

“Okay and why would you need to ask for permission about that?” I asked.

“I worry Nolan might object,” Della admitted.

Nolan was many things, but I didn’t know him to be a liar at least not to me anyway. I can’t see him going back on his word especially if it would negatively affect his relationship with Marco.

“He already approved your bond. If he gives his blessing, he will not block your ceremony. Set your date and send the notices,” I reassured her.

“You think so?” she asked. “He can be strict.”

“He can,” I said. “He is also fair. If he has agreed, he will stand by it.”

Della picked up her shears again. “I needed to hear that.” She cut three spent blooms and dropped them into the bucket between us. “People say that he is cold and uncaring.”

“People say many things,” I said,

“He is not like the rumors,” she said. “He visited you while you were unconscious. More than once. And the transfusion, he made the decision to be the one to save you.”

I stopped moving. “Wait, what do you mean? Leslie said that his wolf was the strongest.”

Della paled and mumbled, “Shit.”

“No, don’t shut down on me now. Explain,” I said,

“He told me not to tell you. He said it was not my place. But I think you should know,” Della continued.

My chest tightened. “Then, tell me.”

“I overheard the conversation. It was either Nolan or Jason that could help you. Jason…Jason didn’t volunteer. It was Nolan,”

Della explained.

I thought I would feel pain from knowing that Jason once again did not fight for me, but I felt nothing. I felt my heart ache more so for Nolan. The fact that I was the daughter of his enemy and he still chose to save me meant something.

“Then, the night that Leslie started treatment, Nolan sat by your side the entire time. If you ask me, he likes you. Why else would he do that?” Della added.

Heat rose in my face. “Della.”

“I am not teasing,” she said. “I mean it.”

I looked down at the bed of roses and picked a dead leaf off a healthy stem. “He does not act like someone who likes me,” I muttered.

“What do you mean?” Della pressed.

“Last night I asked him a question, and he did not answer. He left,” I replied.

“Okay…what did you ask him?”

How could I tell her I practically begged him to mark me? The memory of it made my cheeks burn hotter. “It doesn’t matter now,” I said quickly, taking my frustration out on another weed. “He still has his reservations. I do not know how to face him after what happened.”

Della moved to the next bush and worked quietly for a minute. “Everything is fresh for you both,” she finally said. “You barely left the hospital. Give yourself time.”

I nodded, though I still didn’t feel any better about the situation.

Della cleared her throat and changed the subject. “About Leslie, do you think she would show me some of her herbs?” she asked. “I want to learn what helps with fever. I felt useless when yours would spike.”

“She will show you if you ask,” I said. “She likes people who are direct. Tell her exactly what you want to learn.”

Della smiled. “I can do that.” She glanced at me again. “And thank you for agreeing to introduce us.”

“You are welcome,” I said. “She helped me. You helped me too. It is right that you meet.”

We worked without speaking for a while. The breeze shifted and brought the kitchen’s midday smells across the yard. My appetite had returned and my stomach growled loudly.

Della broke the quiet. “Do you think the Sacrifice Ceremony will be crowded this year?”

“I think so,” I said. “Father told me several neighboring packs plan to attend. Many will bring young wolves to seek their mates.”

Della huffed a small laugh. “Then our ceremony might feel small,”

“Small can be good,” I said. “Less opportunity for issues.’

She bumped my shoulder with hers. “You always say things like that and make me feel better.”

“It’s the truth,” I said.

She opened her mouth to answer, then stopped. She lifted her nose a little, the way a wolf does when trying to place a scent. I had already found it. It reached me before the sound of steps on the gravel path. It was Nolan.

I kept my head down and focused on the plant in front of me. If I did not look up, maybe he would keep walking.

Della watched me for a second, then followed my line of sight to the path. She saw him too. I bent closer to the bush and pretended to check the underside of the leaves. My cheeks felt hot. I was not ready to talk to him after last night.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & FOURTEEN

Talia's POV

"What are you doing? Don't call him over here!" I hissed at her.

"I'm helping you get over this awkwardness," Della responded with a grin. "I'll prove that he likes you."

"No, wait, Della," I started but the damage was done. The guards had already opened the gate to the rose garden to allow Nolan in. He moved with his usual calm stride. He scanned the garden before focusing on us. I forced myself to look indifferent.

"Alpha Nolan," Della greeted first.

"Good afternoon," I greeted, trying to sound calm.

Nolan didn't take his eyes off me. I maintained his gaze. Right when I was starting to feel uncomfortable, he nodded and said, Princess. Miss Della."

"

Della smiled. "No need to be so formal. I haven't had the chance to thank you properly," she said. "You saved Talia's life. We all owe you."

"There's no need to thank me. I did what anyone in my position would have done," Nolan responded.

Hearing him say that again made me think about last night. He might as well have rejected me again. "You make it sound so simple," I said softly.

Nolan didn't respond right away. I could've sworn he looked guilty for a moment. "I need to leave. The Alpha King requested my presence."

"So you weren't visiting?" Della asked.

"No, I was only passing through," Nolan stated before walking away. He paused and looked back at me. "But it's good to see you're recovering." Nolan continued back toward the gate.

"Thank you," I managed to say.

Nolan didn't turn around but raised his hand in goodbye.

I watched him leave. He was distant today. The warmth and care he briefly showed during my recovery was gone. I wonder if the mate bond affected me more than him.

"He's acting strange today," Della said, bringing me out of my thoughts. "I guess that was one hell of a question you asked him last night."

I nodded slightly. "Perhaps, He could just have a lot on his mind. Meeting my father does stress him out." Deep down, I knew it was more than that. By forcing him to admit to the mate bond, I felt as if I pushed him further away.

Before I could dwell on it further, a familiar voice called out. "Talja!"

I turned and saw Jason approaching from the main path. I could hear Della growling next to me. I gripped her wrist and shook my head.

"Fine," she muttered. "If he does one thing, I mean one thing, I'm kicking his ass."

"Alpha Jason," I said. "What are you doing here?"

He stopped in front of me, his eyes sweeping over me. I resisted the urge to cringe. “I came to see how you’re recovering. You look much better,” Jason said.

“I’m fine,” I said. “And I heard you found Healer Leslie. Solon told me everything. Thank you for your help.”

He gave a self-satisfied smile. “Yes, I was the one who found her. I had hoped you’d hear it from me, though.”

Della crossed her arms and scoffed, “We’ve been busy keeping her alive. You’ll have to forgive us for not sending a thank-you note.”

Jason chuckled awkwardly. “I understand.” His tone shifted, becoming more serious. “Actually, I didn’t come just to check on you. There’s something important I need to tell you.”

“Oh, here we go,” Della groaned.

I glanced at Della. “If it’s important, she can stay. I trust her.”

Jason hesitated before saying, “It might be better if we spoke alone.”

“No,” I said firmly. “Say it here.”

“Fine, but don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

He stepped closer, lowering his voice. “You need to be careful around Nolan.”

“You’ve said things like this before. What is your reasoning this time?”

“Do you know why your wolf disappeared? It wasn’t an accident. Nolan ordered Marco to take her from you,” Jason answered.

I stared at him, speechless. “That’s impossible. Nolan wouldn’t do that.”

Della moved between us, she pushed him back and away from me. “You’re absolutely disgusting, Jason! You’re such a liar! Nolan saved her. We saw what he did.”

Jason glared at her before turning his attention back on me. “I’m not lying. Nolan told him to use the Nightveil herb on Talia to suppress her wolf. That’s how the rogues managed to take her.”

My heart raced. I shook my head slowly. “You’re twisting things. Nolan risked his life for me. Why would he do that if he planned this?”

“Because he’s trying to cover his tracks. He knew saving you would clear suspicion. That’s what makes him dangerous,” Jason explained.

Della took a step forward, glaring. “That sounds like something YOU would do, not Nolan.”

“Talia,” Jason said, ignoring Della. “Listen to me. I once wanted to marry the princess because of duty. I wanted to unite Shadowclaw and Silverfang, but the truth is, that isn’t where my heart is. I care about you. I want to protect you from him.”

“You got to be kidding me?” Della groaned, rubbing her temples.

“You deserve someone who values you, not someone who treats you like a tool,” Jason continued.

Della scoffed, “That’s rich coming from you. If Viki hadn’t been a fake, you wouldn’t even be worrying about Talia right now. Why can’t you just leave her alone?”

“I’m telling the truth,” Jason said again. “I don’t care if you believe me, but Talia, please believe me.”

I shook my head. “No, you have lied so many times.”

“If you don’t believe me, ask Marco yourself. Ask him who told him to use the Nightveil herb on you. You’ll see I’m right,” Jason suggested.

I felt cold all over. Jason had that smug smile on his face. He only smiled like that if he knew he had the upper hand. Did Marco really poison me?

Della placed a hand on my arm as if she knew what I was thinking. “Don’t listen to him. He’s trying to drive a wedge between you and Nolan,” Della reassured me. “He’s just a jealous asshole. Ignore him. Guards!”

“Think what you want, but I’m the only one telling you the truth.” Jason quickly turned and left before the guards came.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & FIFTEEN

Nolan’s POV

I knocked once before stepping into the Alpha King’s office. He was sitting behind his desk, staring out the window like he’d been lost in thought for a while. When he finally turned, he gestured toward the chair in front of him.

“Come in, Nolan,” he said. “Have a seat.”

I sat down across from him. His tone wasn’t cold or hostile, which was unexpected. It made sense. After everything that had happened, after saving Talia twice, I didn’t think he’d treat me like an enemy this time.

“You wanted to see me?”

“Yes,”

," the Alpha King said. "I thought it was time we spoke properly."

He opened a drawer and pulled out a folder, setting it on the desk. Inside were a few photographs. He spread them in front of me. The first showed him with my father. They were younger, probably around my age now, both smiling like brothers. The next was a family photo of my father, my mother, and me, with my father's hand resting on my shoulder.

Seeing those pictures brought up bitter sweet memories I'd buried deep. They were from my first trip to Silverfang. Back then, the pack had started to feel almost like a second home.

"Do you remember those days?" he asked quietly.

"I do," I said. "I never forgot."

A faint smile crossed his face. "You were a quiet boy back then. Always following your father. I remember you once told me I was the man you admired most after him."

I remembered that too, right up until the day he betrayed us. "Is that why you called me here? To reminisce?" I asked.

The Alpha King chuckled, which made me frown. "What's so funny?"

"You sound just like your father when he is angry," he said.

I crossed my arms. "If this is just about the past, you're wasting your time. I won't look back."

"I'm not trying to waste your time, Nolan," he said with a sigh. "I wanted to talk before the Sacrifice Ceremony. There's something you should know."

"And what's that?"

“Your father’s memorial day is coming up,” he said. “It’ll fall right after the ceremony. I thought maybe we could commemorate it together.”

That caught me off guard. I hadn’t expected him to bring up my father, much less suggest honoring him.

“I haven’t observed his memorial day in years,” I said. “There’s nothing to commemorate while his killer is still out there.”

“You still believe there’s more to it than what was reported?” he asked.

“I don’t believe it,” I said firmly. “I know. My father was accused of crimes he didn’t commit. Until I uncover the truth, I can’t celebrate anything.”

He studied me for a moment. He looked sad, maybe disappointed. “You’ve carried that resentment for a long time,” he said.

“And I’ll keep carrying it,” I said flatly. “Until I bring him justice.”

He didn’t respond. He just gathered the photos, tucked them back into the folder, and slid it into the desk drawer.

Finally, he said, “If you want to keep investigating, I won’t stop you. You have my permission.”

I narrowed my eyes. “There’s a catch, isn’t there?”

“There is,” he said. “You’ll stay away from Talia.”

I stared at him, unsure I’d heard him right. “Excuse me?”

“I want you to keep your distance from my daughter Talia,” he said, his tone steady. “She’s been through enough. Whatever is going on between you two, it ends now.”

My wolf's voice rose furiously, and I winced. 'Don't agree to this. He doesn't get to decide what we do with our mate.'

I clenched my jaw. "You're assuming there's something between us," I said carefully. "Talia and I are nothing more than

acquaintances."

"Acquaintances don't risk their lives for each other," he said. "I saw your face when she was unconscious, Nolan. I'm not blind."

My hands tightened on the armrests and said, "I saved her because it was the right thing to do."

"I don't care why," he said. "I care about keeping her safe. If you plan to stay in Silverfang, promise me you won't pursue her."

He didn't use an Alpha command, but the authority in his tone made it clear there was no argument to be had.

My wolf growled again. 'He knows she is our mate! How dare he make us promise!'

"You're asking for a promise I don't need to make," I said. "Talia is your daughter. I know my place."

"Then promise me," he said again.

I met his gaze.

"And if I don't?"

“Then you’ll leave Silverfang before the ceremony,” he said without hesitation. “And you won’t return.”.

My wolf snarled in protest, but I pushed him down. Leaving would mean giving up on clearing my father’s name, and that wasn’t something I could live with.

“Fine,” I said finally. “You have my word.”

He studied me for a long moment before nodding once. “Good. That’s all I needed to hear.”

I stood. “If that’s all, I’ll be going.”

As I reached the door, his voice followed me. “Remember your promise, Nolan.”

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & SIXTEEN

Talia’s POV

Della and I went straight to the gym where Marco usually trained. He was sitting near the equipment racks, dripping with sweat. When he saw us, he smiled, but his expression quickly changed when he caught sight of Della’s glare.

“Marco,” Della said sharply, “we need to talk.”

He stood up quickly looking confused. “What happened?” he asked.

“Wait,” Della said as she looked around to make sure no one else was in the gym. She gave me a nod when the coast was clear.

“Marco, I need you to be honest with me,” I said. “Did you give me the Nightveil herb?”

Marco's eyes widened. For a second, he froze and then said, "Who told you that?"

"Jason. Now answer the question," I answered.

"Yes, I did," Marco said.

"Marco! What the hell? How could you do that? Talia has always been nice to you!" Della exclaimed.

He raised both hands as if to defend himself. "I didn't mean any harm, I swear! It was only meant to make your wolf dormant for a short time. Nolan said it would help stabilize you. He thought your wolf was unstable after what happened in the library. I was just following his orders."

My stomach twisted. "Just following orders? You took away my wolf because someone told you to?"

Marco's face went pale. "It should've worn off in hours. I never meant for you to…"

"You never meant for me to lose her?" I cut in. "Because that's exactly what happened. I was left defenseless. The rogues nearly killed me, Marco."

"I'm sorry," he said quickly. "I didn't know that this would happen neither did Nolan. He genuinely thought he was helping."

"Did he tell you exactly why he wanted you to do it?" I demanded.

Marco hesitated before saying, "He said you needed rest, that your wolf was too strained."

Della crossed her arms. "And that was enough for you? You didn't think to ask any clarifying questions??"

“I did, Della, but,” Marco said quietly. “He’s my Alpha. I can’t challenge him.”

I clenched my fists. “Tell me the truth. Did Nolan say I affect him?”

Marco blinked. “Affect him? What do you mean?”

Della stepped closer. “You heard her. Did he say anything about her wolf affecting him?”

“I don’t understand what you’re asking,” Marco said quickly.

He looked genuinely confused, but I didn’t need to have my wolf to know that he was lying. The pieces began to fit together. The transfusion, the way Nolan avoided me, the distant look whenever our eyes met, it all made sense now.

He had known.

Nolan had known we were mates from the beginning.

The realization hit hard. My chest tightened, anger and hurt rising together. He’d known and said nothing. He’d kept me in the dark while acting as though I meant nothing to him.

I turned to leave to find Nolan, but Della stepped in front of me. She gripped my shoulders and said, “I am not going to let you make a rash decision. You’re angry. You need to calm down before you make any decisions.”

“This has gone on long enough,” I said. “He treated me like a burden, like I was in his way. If that’s what he wants, then I’ll give it to him.”

Della shook her head and argued, “You’re not thinking clearly. At least wait until you’ve spoken to him calmly.”

“I am calm,” I said, shrugging Della’s hands off me.

“No, you’re not,” Della countered. “Don’t forget. I know you.”

“Fine. I’ll wait here for him to come back. We’ll settle this today,” I huffed.

“Don’t start a fight,” Della warned. “You’ll regret it.”

“I won’t,” I said firmly. Della looked like she wanted to argue but finally sighed. “Fine. But promise me you won’t do anything reckless.”

“I promise,” I said and then turned and left Della to argue with Marco.

I went back to my garden and sat down on a bench to calm my nerves. He would have to pass the garden to get back to his room and I wouldn’t let him until I spoke to him.

I waited for Nolan to return.

One hour passed and then another. The sun had begun to set and Nolan still didn’t show.

Marco approached me. The side of his face was a bright shade of pink from where I assumed Della had slapped him. Guilt was written all over his face.

“Talia, you should go into your room to rest. It is about to rain,” Marco said softly.

I didn’t respond and stared past him.

“Please,” he said quietly. “You’ve been through enough for one day. Let me talk to him first.”

I finally met his gaze. I searched his eyes to see if he was lying. He looked exhausted and ashamed.

“You really thought you were helping me?” I asked.

He nodded. “I did. Nolan said it was the safest option. I never thought it would end like this.”

I let out a bitter laugh. “The safest option nearly killed me.”

Marco lowered his head. “I know. I’m sorry. If I could undo it, I would.”

“Then tell him to stop running from me,” I said. “Tell him to face what he’s done.”

“I will,” he promised. “I’ll speak to him tonight. He’ll come to you tomorrow.”

I stared at him for a long moment, then nodded. “Fine,”

He looked relieved. “Thank you.”

But as I turned to leave, my anger began to rise again. Nolan had known. He’d kept me in the dark, acting as if our bond was a mistake. Why did my second chance mate have to be an insensitive jerk too?

If Nolan didn’t want to feel the mate bond, fine. I didn’t want to feel it either and knew exactly who I needed to speak to make that happen.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & SEVENTEEN

Talia’s POV

Healer Leslie’s temporary home was at the edge of Silverfang territory. It was one of the cabins we used to house rogues while we decided whether to include them in the pack or let them recover and move on. Smoke rose from the chimney, so I knew Leslie was home. I walked up to her door and knocked.

It opened almost instantly. Leslie stood in the doorway wearing a loose shirt and mismatched socks. Her hair was pulled up into a ponytail. Her eyes widened when she saw me. “Talia? You found me already?”

Before I could answer, she grabbed my wrist and pulled me inside, saying, “Come in before someone sees you,”

The cabin smelled of herbs. Then I froze as a familiar scent hit me. Nolan was standing near the table, looking just as shocked to

see me.

I hated the fact that I had the urge to go to him, to pull him down by his shirt and kiss him. I forced myself to stay where I stood. My shock and yearning for him turned to anger as Leslie walked past me and I noticed her attire again.

What was going on between them?

As if she could read my thoughts, Leslie quickly said, “I’m not sleeping with him, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

My attention locked on Nolan. “Then what are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same thing,” Nolan replied.

“Do you think this is a game?” I asked.

Before I could say anything more, Leslie clapped her hands and said, “The Moon Goddess must be laughing at me right now.”

I turned to her. “What do you mean?”

“You two are mates,” Leslie answered.

Nolan shot her with a warning look. “Leslie.”

“You told her, but you couldn’t tell me?” I shot back at him.

“What? Don’t glare at me,” Leslie said, waving Nolan off. “Talia, you’ve got it all wrong. He didn’t tell me anything. I figured it out days ago. It doesn’t take a genius to put it together.”

My cheeks burned with embarrassment.

“Nothing to be embarrassed about,” Leslie said easily. “I tried not to say anything at the dinner but watching you both avoid each other was painful.”

She picked up her mug and took a sip of tea. “Honestly, I’m surprised it took you this long to come here,” she continued, leaning against the wall. “Usually, one mate runs to me begging for a solution while the other tries to pretend nothing is wrong. Today, I got both of you at once. It must be my lucky day or the Moon Goddess’s sick joke.”

I ignored her sarcasm. “Then you already know why I’m here. I want the herbs you talked about that night. The ones that suppress the mate bond.”

Leslie looked between us, then grinned. “Oh, this just got more interesting,” she hummed.

“Can you give them to me or not?” I asked firmly.

“You don’t need them,” Nolan cut in.

“You have no right to tell me what I need,” I snapped.

Nolan didn't respond, but his brow furrowed. I scoffed. Instead of telling me what he was thinking, he stayed silent.

Leslie let out a long sigh. "Alright, this conversation is going nowhere." She walked back to the table, shooed Nolan aside, and reached under it. Leslie pulled out two small packets wrapped in brown paper. "Here. One for each of you."

Nolan frowned. "Both of us?"

She nodded. "You'd be surprised how often I have to give them in pairs. Makes things easier when neither side wants to admit they care."

I reached out and took the packet. "How does it work?"

"Simple," Leslie said. "You add it to tea. It should start working in twenty-four hours. The herbs suppress a mate's scent and dampen the bond for a while. It won't make the bond disappear, but it'll make it easier to ignore. However," she added, pointing a finger at both of us, "the effect fades with time. The only way to truly break the bond is through rejection."

Nolan's eyes flicked toward me. "Rejection?" he repeated.

"Yes, you know, the official rejection," Leslie said with a shrug. "I, Leslie, reject you,' and so on. That's the only permanent way to stop being affected by the mate bond. The herbs only delay the inevitable decision of whether you'll accept or reject it."

I tightened my grip on the packet. "Thank you, Leslie."

"You really think this is the answer?" Nolan asked.

I glared at him. "What else is there? You've spent all this time pretending the bond doesn't exist. I'm just returning the favor."

Leslie glanced between us and muttered, “Maybe you should talk before making any permanent decisions.”

“There’s nothing to talk about,” I said quickly.

Leslie raised an eyebrow. “Really? Because you’re both here asking for the same thing. That means you still care enough to fight

about it.”

“I don’t care,” I said.

“Neither do I,” Nolan replied right after me.

Leslie laughed. “Sure. Keep telling yourselves that.”

She handed Nolan his packet and leaned against the table. “If you two are serious about this, you should at least discuss what comes next. Otherwise, the herbs will wear off before you even make up your mind.”

I turned toward the door. “I don’t need to talk,” I repeated.

Leslie caught my wrist and leaned close. “You do. Trust me. If you both walk out now, you’ll just end up back here again,” she whispered. “He saved your life, so at least hear him out.”

I stared at her, unsure if she was trying to help or just amuse herself.

“Fine,” she said finally. “If you won’t talk here, go outside. I have things to do, and I don’t need you two sulking in here.”

She pushed us gently toward the door. As soon as we stepped outside, she called out, “And do it away from my house.” Leslie closed the door before either of us could respond.

I wanted to just go back to my room and sulk, but Della, Marco, and now Leslie were all saying the same thing, Nolan and I needed to talk. There was nothing to talk about. He didn’t want me, and I didn’t need him to say it, but a small part of me still

wanted to hear him out.

With a sigh, I said, “Alright. Let’s talk, Alpha Nolan.”

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & EIGHTEEN

Nolan’s POV

I didn’t know why I was offended.

I didn’t expect Talia to come here to get herbs to suppress our mate bond. I shouldn’t have cared, but I did. My heart ached that she didn’t feel our bond, but who could blame her?

Talia stood in front of me. Even without her wolf, I could feel her anger. She glared at me with her arms crossed. Even while angry, she was still beautiful.

“Alright. Let’s talk, Alpha Nolan,” she said.

I tried to think of a reason, any excuse that would explain why I had come for the herbs, but nothing sounded convincing. “I came because…” I started.

“Don’t bother lying,” Talia said, cutting me off. “I already know you ordered Marco to give me the Nightveil herb.”

For a moment, I couldn’t speak. My wolf’s voice roared in my head. ‘I told you it was a terrible idea. She must hate us now!’ “Talia,” I said finally, “you don’t understand what happened.”

“I understand perfectly. You told Marco to suppress my wolf. He admitted it. So tell me what was your reason for doing this?” Talia demanded.

I clenched my jaw, trying to control the rising frustration. Marco had been careless. He didn’t even warn me that Talia found out. ‘You cannot blame him for this,’ my wolf said.

“The hell if I can’t,’ I responded.

I had trusted Marco to act with restraint, to behave like my Beta. He made a mistake and gave her a stronger dose than necessary. Marco was not supposed to expose the truth before I was ready to explain.

“Marco wasn’t supposed to tell you,” I muttered, not looking at her.

‘You should’ve never ordered him to do it. She’s right to be angry with us. You need to apologize to our mate,’ my wolf scolded

She gave a bitter laugh before moving to force me to look at her. “That’s all you have to say? That he wasn’t supposed to tell me?” Talia demanded.

I finally met her gaze. She was no longer angry. She looked disappointed which was worse.

I tried again. “I never meant to hurt you. I…”

“No, you don’t get to feel sorry for yourself,” Talia said, cutting me off. “You hurt me. You took my wolf away. You left me helpless. If you hadn’t found me in that dungeon, I would be dead. Why, Nolan? Were you that afraid of me?”

“No, that’s not it,” I said.

“Then what was it?”

I stayed silent. There was no answer that would make her understand.

Talia sighed and threw her hands up in frustration. “You could have told me the truth from the beginning. But you didn’t. And now, you can’t even say why.”

Her calm tone only made it worse. I wanted her to scream, cry, or even hit me. I wanted her to do anything but stare at me with such disappointment in her eyes. I could deal with her anger, but not this.

Then, Talia asked softly, “Are you ever going to mark me?”

I didn’t look at her when I answered. “No.”

For a moment, neither of us said anything. I didn’t look at her. I didn’t want to see her expression. I focused on the faint rustle of the trees nearby.

“Fine,” she finally said. “Then let’s complete the rejection now. Let’s end both of our suffering.”

Hearing her wanting to reject me made me snap. “You think the full moon hurts?” I asked harshly. “You don’t know pain, Talia. You don’t know what it’s like to watch your father die right in front of you.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You’re being hypocritical.”

“Am I? Do you think losing Jason could even compare to losing a parent?” I demanded.

“I lost my mother, so don’t try that,” Talia countered.

“From illness! Your mother wasn’t framed and murdered!” I snapped.

“You’re trying to distract me. This has nothing to do with our mate bond,” Talia said firmly.

“It has everything to do with this,” I shot back. “You want to end the bond because you’re hurt? Fine. But don’t stand there pretending you understand what loss feels like.”

“So you want me to stay bonded to you out of pity? You think that’ll make either of us stronger?” Talia demanded.

I took a step closer. “You’re not rejecting me. I’ll be the one to end this when the time comes. You don’t get to decide when or how.”

Talia didn’t cower from me. She glared right back at me. “You’ll reject me later? Fine. I look forward to it,” Talia responded.

Something about the way she calmly said it only fueled the anger burning in me. I wanted her to match my anger, but she didn’t.

Instead, Talia turned her back to me and said, “Then we’re done here.” She began walking away.

“Talia…”

She stopped but didn’t look back. “No. I gave you a chance.”

I stood there, watching her disappear down the path until she was gone.

‘You’re an idiot,’ my wolf growled inside me. ‘You could have told her everything. You could have fixed this.’

“She wouldn’t have listened,” I said.

‘You don’t know that,’ my wolf argued. ‘She was listening right now. All you had to do was tell her the truth.’

I shook my head. “If she hates me, she’ll stay safe. The moment she cares, she’s in danger,”

My wolf’s anger rose again, and he growled, ‘You’re lying to yourself. You hurt her to protect yourself.’

“That’s enough,” I snapped out loud.

‘You know I’m right,’ my wolf huffed.

“Maybe,” I muttered. “But it doesn’t matter anymore.”

‘Go after her. Apologize. She’ll accept it. She wants you to run after her,’ my wolf demanded.

The urge to follow her was almost unbearable. The bond pulled at me, demanding I go to her, explain everything, and tell her

she was wrong about me. But I couldn’t. I made a promise, and I needed to clear my father’s name.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & NINETEEN

Talia’s POV

I spent most of the afternoon in my room, trying to calm down, but it was useless. I couldn’t stop crying. I wish my wolf was here to talk to, but I was left with only my thoughts that seemed to be torturing me.

I had trusted Nolan. I had let myself believe there was something real between us. But he had discarded the moment I opened up to him. I wiped the tears from my face, but more kept coming.

‘Why am I still crying over him?’ I thought bitterly. ‘He doesn’t care!’

My reflection in my mirror didn't help either. My eyes were swollen and puffy. The corners of my nose were red. I sighed and splashed cold water on my face.

I couldn't keep hiding in my room. Father and Solon were expecting me for dinner. Avoiding dinner tonight would only worry them.

"Pull yourself together, girl. You can get through this," I told myself.

After applying some makeup, I checked my reflection again. I looked miserable, but at least I didn't look like I'd been crying for hours. I took a deep breath, left my room, and walked toward the dining hall.

When I entered, the table was already set. The table was barely visible with how many plates of food on it. It was too much food for three people.

Solon and father were already seated and waiting for me.

"Talia, you're just in time. Come and sit down," my father said, pulling the chair next to him out for me to sit.

"Hey Dad. Thanks," I greeted softly, taking my seat. Solon gave me a small nod from across the table.

"You've prepared too much food," I said quietly. "Was this your idea, Solon?"

"You got me," he laughed.

"You've only just recovered from wolfsbane poisoning. You need proper nutrition," Father added.

Did they expect me to eat all of this? Even with my wolf, I wouldn't be able to eat all of this. I smiled weakly and said, "I appreciate the gesture, but this still is a lot of food."

"Come on, Talia, eat. You must be hungry. You missed breakfast and lunch," Solon urged.

I reached for my fork and knife. I cut into a piece of chicken while Solon and father talked about patrols. I hid my grimace behind my hand. The chicken tasted like nothing to me.

“You’re quiet tonight,” father said. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I replied, though it sounded unconvincing even to me.

“Are you sure? We asked you a question three times and you didn’t hear us,” Solon stated, looking concerned.

“Oh, I am sorry. I zoned out a little,” I apologized.

“No… You’ve cried earlier, right?” Nolan asked suddenly.

My head snapped toward him. “What?”

Solon pointed to his eyes. “Your eyes are still a little red. What is it?”

“I wasn’t crying,” I lied.

“Talia, you don’t have to lie to us,” Father said. “What’s wrong? Why are you upset? Is it Jason again?”

“No, it’s not Jason. I was thinking about my wolf. I miss her,” I answered.

Father’s expression softened and he pulled me into a side hug. “You’ll see her again soon. Leslie said your wolf is recovering slowly, but she’ll return when the bond is strong enough.”

“I hope so,” I murmured, hugging him back.

The conversation quieted for a while until Father set down his glass and said, “Talia, I wanted to ask something.”

“Yes?”

He looked at me with a serious expression, “What do you think of Alpha Nolan now? He risked his life to save you. I’d like to know your opinion.”

I hesitated. The question caught me off guard. I knew Nolan wouldn’t tell Father the truth about us. So, I wouldn’t either. I didn’t want the additional drama from it, and we were going to reject each other anyway.

“I’m grateful he saved me,” I said carefully. “But that doesn’t change what I think of him. He’s still cold and… harsh. I hate him.”

Solon nodded in approval while Father seemed relieved by my answer.

“I see. Well, perhaps it’s better that you see him like that,” father said.

I wanted to ask him what he meant by that but before I could, he continued talking.

“You’ll have a chance to move forward with your life at the Sacrifice Ceremony,” he continued.

“The ceremony?” I asked.

“Yes,” Father said. “When the time comes, you’ll meet many potential mates. Being marked will bring your wolf back and protect you from the next full moon’s heat.”

I nodded, trying to hide my unease. “I understand.”

“This will be good for you, Talia. You deserve someone who makes you happy,” Solon added.

I forced another smile. “Thank you, Solon.”

Father leaned back slightly and looked at Solon. “You’ll assist during the ceremony as well. I trust you can help ensure everything proceeds smoothly.”

Solon nodded with a smile. “Of course, Father. I will help Talia to find the best mate ever.”

I forced my face to stay neutral. Was Nolan really going to stand there and watch me bond with another man?

Father looked satisfied. “Good. Then it’s all settled.”

The conversation shifted to preparation plans for the ceremony, but I barely heard them. I was focused on trying not to cry in front of them. I had no appetite, and I really wanted to just go back to my room and never come back out.

By the time dinner ended, I quickly excused myself saying I wasn’t in the mood for dessert. The moment I was back in my room. I grabbed my pillow and screamed into it.

‘I’m going to choose the best mate, and it won’t be Nolan,’ I thought bitterly. ‘Maybe it’s for the better…’

But deep down, I knew it wasn’t.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & TWENTY

Jason’s POV

Father's message came early that morning, just after sunrise. The Sacrifice Ceremony was approaching, and he wanted to arrive in Silverfang ahead of time to "assist" with my preparations. I knew better. My father rarely involved himself in ceremonies unless there was something to gain.

By noon, I was already on my way to meet him at the southern border, accompanied by Beta Logan and Henry. When we arrived, Father was already waiting near the checkpoint, leaning casually against his car.

"Jason," he greeted with a polite smile as he opened his arms. "You've been busy, haven't you?"

I smiled politely and hesitated only for a second. My father didn't do acts of affection, but this had to be for Beta Logan's benefit. I stepped forward to hug him. "Busy, yes. But it's good to see you, Father," I said.

He pulled back and said, "You look well. The Silverfang climate seems to suit you better than Shadowclaw's mountains."

"Perhaps," I said.

Father looked past me to Logan and greeted him. "Beta Logan, always a pleasure."

Logan bowed his head respectfully. "Michael. Welcome to Silverfang territory. The Alpha King has already arranged your room in the guest wing."

"Excellent," Father said. "I appreciate your hospitality."

We made our way back to the pack house. Father's presence alone seemed to attract attention; every warrior we passed stood straighter. Once we arrived, Logan gave instructions to a few attendants, ensuring Father's luggage was taken to his room.

After everything was arranged, Logan turned back to us. "The Alpha King wanted me to let you know that he'll be hosting a dinner tomorrow evening. It's meant to welcome you properly to Silverfang before the Sacrifice Ceremony."

Father smiled knowingly. “That’s very kind of him. You’ll extend my gratitude, of course.”

“I will,” Logan said.

Father paused thoughtfully, then added, “If I may, Beta Logan, I believe it would be appropriate to invite Alpha Nolan as well. After all, he’s been serving Silverfang loyally these past months. I’d like to meet him again in a more formal setting.”

Logan considered this for a moment, then nodded. “That’s a good idea. I’ll make the arrangements.”

“Perfect,” Father said.

Once Logan left, the polite mask dropped. Father turned to me, his expression serious. “I see you are nowhere near becoming the Princess’ mate.”

“I’m working on it,” I replied,

“How hard can it be to find a she-wolf?” Father growled.

“They are keeping her identity secret until the Sacrifice Ceremony,” I explained.

“Then, you better find her and mark her before anyone else does,” Father warned. “Or do I need to remind you what happens when you fail me?”

“No, I understand,” I responded.

So,” he said, “tell me, how has our ‘ally’ been managing these days?”

“Still chasing ghosts. Nolan’s been investigating his father’s death since the day he arrived. No progress so far.”

“How predictable. It is a little disappointing though. I thought he would have done more by now.” He stepped closer, lowering his voice. “You know, Jason, perhaps it’s time we gave him a little push.”

“You mean provoke him into conflict with the Alpha King?”

“Precisely,” Father said.

“Actually, I already have a plan, father.”

“Oh?” His eyes gleamed with interest. “Do tell.”

“I have real proof of Nolan’s recklessness. Henry, bring the report.”

Henry, who had been standing quietly nearby, nodded and left the room.

Father arched an eyebrow and asked, “What kind of proof?”

“Do you remember the gathering before the Hunting Rite?”

“Of course,” he said. “Everyone attended. What about it?”

“I saw Nolan pour the King’s wine himself. It looked innocent enough, but something didn’t feel right about it,” I explained.

“So, you didn’t knock over his glass like a drunken fool. I didn’t think you were that stupid to embarrass me,” Father said. ” What did he put in the wine?”

“There were traces of a toxin that would trigger an uncontrollable shift. A werewolf poisoned with it becomes unstable and dangerous even to their own pack. In extreme cases, it could even be lethal,” I continued.

“So, he tried to murder the Alpha King in his own home?” Father asked. For once, he looked surprised.

“I can’t prove intent,” I said carefully, “but I can prove the toxin was there. The report is detailed. Once the Alpha King sees it, he’ll doubt Nolan’s loyalty. That’s all we need.”

At that moment, Henry returned and handed Father the report. My father read through it, nodding in approval,

“This is perfect,” he said, giving the report back to Henry. “Even if Nolan didn’t put a lethal dose into the wine, no one will believe him.”

“Yes,” I confirmed. “and his relationship with the Alpha King has been tense ever since Nolan challenged him publicly. This will only worsen it.”

‘Are you not going to tell him how he saved Talia’s life?’ my wolf asked.

‘He doesn’t need to know that right now,’ I responded.

‘If he finds out that you withheld that information, he’ll…’ my wolf started.

‘He won’t,’ I cut him off and pushed him back down.

“Good. Then tomorrow, during dinner, I’ll announce it in front of everyone. The Alpha King and his hot headed idiot of a son will demand to see the proof, Once that happens, Nolan’s fate will be sealed.”

“You really think the Alpha King will believe it?”

“The Alpha King has always been a fool. He has always jumped to conclusions before investigating. He will let his pride guide him,” Father answered.

“Should I prepare additional copies of the report, sir?” Henry asked.

“Yes,” Father said. “I want to ruin Nolan. I want to make sure everyone knows he is a traitor. Maybe even slip it to the news.”