Barren Luna 131

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & THIRTY ONE

Talia's POV

"Colin Ashford?" I repeated. "That sounds familiar, but I can't remember where I heard it."

"You don't remember?" Solon asked in surprise, and I shook my head. "Colin's father used to visit during the early spring festivals. You and Colin used to play together all the time."

Della nodded enthusiastically. "You two were so cute playing."

I could only nod. I didn't remember Colin, nor did I remember playing with anyone outside of Della and Solon.

"Colin is already here. You have to go see him, Talia," Della said gleefully.

Solon grinned. "Of course. I should greet him properly. It has been years since we last met."

"Okay, I'm sorry. Who exactly is he again?" I asked.

Della sighed dramatically, putting her hands on her hips. "You really don't remember, do you? You used to call him Colly. He followed you everywhere when we were little."

The memory hit me then. A lanky green-eyed boy who would offer me candy whenever he had it. He always stuck by my side even when I was being mean.

"I remember now," I said quietly. "He was sweet. I can't believe he's an Alpha now."

“I mean what did you think he was going to be, Talia. He is the son of an Alpha,” Della teased and I rolled my eyes.

“Not just any Alpha,” Solon said, amused. “He runs one of the most stable packs in the region. Moonbrook’s strength has tripled under his rule.”

“Really? We’re talking about Colin? Lanky, nerdy boy that was afraid of butterflies?”

“The very one,” Della said with a grin. “And if I recall correctly, he had a little crush on you back then.”

Solon chuckled. “More than a little. You two were inseparable. Colin tried to follow you into every meeting Father had.”

“I remember that,” Della said. “He kept yelling about how the Princess had to be protected. The guards had to drag him out of

the council chamber once.”

I felt heat rise to my cheeks. “Come on, I don’t remember that.”

“Yes, you do. He even made you a rose crown,” Solon continued.

“It was adorable,” Della added before nudging me. “You should go greet him. He’s probably already waiting for you in the main hall!”

“1…I don’t know about that,” I said.

“Come on, Talia. It would be weird if you didn’t greet him,” Della said firmly.

Solon grabbed his coat. “Let’s go. Father will already be with him by now. We shouldn’t keep them waiting.”

We made our way out of Solon's office with Della half dragging me. The closer we got, the more nervous I became. I told myself it was silly to feel nervous, but I still couldn't help but feel anxious.

When we entered the main hall, Father was already there speaking with a tall man.

"That's Colin," Della whispered into my ear.

Colin had changed a lot throughout the years. He exuded the confidence of an Alpha now. Younger me would never have

believed it.

Colin was taller now and stockier, no longer the lanky boy I remembered. His skin was fair, almost pale against his fine red hair, which he now kept closely shaved. A neatly trimmed beard and mustache framed his face to make him look older than he really

was.

I noticed how his pecs flexed as he laughed. He really did fill out.

"Close your mouth girl. You're about to drool," Della teased, nudging me. I blushed harder when I noticed Colin had finally

noticed me.

"Ah, there you are. I was wondering when you two would be joining us," Father said, finally noticing us..

Solon bowed his head respectfully and said, "We came as soon as we heard, Father."

Father turned to me and Della. “You remember Alpha Colin Ashford of Moonbrook, don’t you?”

I opened my mouth to speak, but Colin laughed softly. “How could she forget me? Though judging by her expression, I think she might have.”

Della grinned and said, “Only a little.”

“I’leave you young people to catch up. Make sure our guest is comfortable.” With that, Father excused himself.

Colin turned fully toward us, his smile warm. “It’s so nice to see all of you again. Talia, it’s been a long time.”

“Hello, Colin, welcome to Silverfang,” I said, returning the smile.

He raised an eyebrow. “Welcome? That’s all?”

I hesitated, and he leaned slightly closer, teasing, “You used to call me Colly. You can still call me that if you want.”

I laughed softly. “That was a long time ago. We were children.”

“Then I suppose I’ll have to remind you how it sounded,” he said, still smiling. “But if it embarrasses you, we’ll keep it between us. You can use it in private.”

I blushed. Was he flirting with me? The wink he gave me confirmed it for me and my face grew hotter.

Della and Solon let out a quiet snicker behind me, but I ignored them. “That might not be necessary,” I quickly said.

“It’s good to see you again,” Colin said gently. His expression softened, and for a moment, the confident Alpha faded, replaced by the boy I remembered, “I missed you, Talia.”

His words caught me off guard and before I knew it, Colin had pulled me into a hug. He held on to me as if I would vanish. I didn’t realize how much I needed this hug until I was in his arms. His warmth was comforting and I leaned into him.

“I missed you too, Colly,” I said.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & THIRTY TWO

Nolan’s POV

Marco and I crossed the training field after completing the border patrol. We had been up since dawn, checking the southern perimeter and inspecting the guard rotations. It wasn’t complicated work, but I was looking forward to sleeping.

“The prince is stirring things up again,” Marco muttered. “Every time he adjusts the patrol routes, he leaves a mess for us to clean up. If he wants to look useful, he should at least learn the difference between north and northwest.”

I ignored him, but Marco didn’t stop complaining.

“He had the guards from the east wall moved to the inner yard yesterday. I had to cover the gap myself. He’s making things harder than they need to be.”

“We wouldn’t be in this situation if you had done what you were supposed to do correctly,” I said finally. “Just let it go.”

Marco shot me a look. “You’re telling me to let it go? You, of all people?”

“With the Sacrifice Ceremony coming up, there’s more at stake than a few patrol shifts,” I said. “If the one who killed my father is still around, a full gathering like this will bring him out. We need to become familiar with every potential way someone could sneak into Silverfang.”

“You’ve been saying that for weeks,” Marco groaned in frustration. “Do you really think the murderer is going to walk into Silverfang and announce himself?”

“Not in the way you think,” I said. “He’s clever, but we don’t know what he wants. If we knew why he killed my father, then we could figure out what he plans on doing next. Since we don’t have that information, we will need to be extra cautious.”

Marco didn’t respond. I felt relieved as I didn’t have to hear him complain anymore. That moment ended up being short lived because only a few moments later, Marco said quietly, “You don’t even talk about the Alpha King anymore.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that for years you couldn’t stop blaming him for your father’s death. Every lead we followed, you tied it back to him somehow. Now you don’t mention him at all. You don’t believe he did it anymore, do you?”

“Stop talking nonsense,” I snapped.

He raised his hands in surrender. “Alright, forget I said anything.”

We reached the main corridor that led to Solon’s office. I planned to hand over the patrol report, but laughter from ahead stopped me. It came from the open hall near the entrance.

I turned toward it. Solon was standing near the great doors, speaking with Della and Talia. Beside them stood a tall man with shaved red hair. He was close to Talia, too close.

Talia’s laugh rang out again. I hadn’t heard her laugh like that since before everything fell apart. She never looked that at ease

when she was near me,

‘You didn’t give her a reason to be at ease with you,’ my wolf muttered.

“Who is that?” I asked.

Marco followed my gaze. “That’s Colin Ashford,” he said quietly. “Alpha of Moonbrook.”

I turned to him. “Moonbrook?”

He nodded. “Third strongest pack in the region.”

“What is he doing here so early?” I asked more so to myself than to Marco.

“Probably to meet Talia. Della said he and Talia are childhood friends. Della said Talia even nicknamed him ‘Colly’ or what.”

Talia smiled again. This time it was softer, almost endearing. She looked up at him with the kind of warmth I didn’t think she

still had in her.

I looked away. “We’ll report to Solon later,” I said.

Marco frowned. “You sure? Solon’s expecting us. He’s right there.”

“I said later,” I replied as I began walking away.

Marco studied me for a moment before nodding and following after me. “Alright. You don’t look like you want to stand there anyway.”

‘Why are you lying to Marco, to yourself?’ My wolf taunted me. ‘Tell Marco the truth as to why you don’t want to talk to Solon

now.’

I ignored him.

‘You’re jealous,’ he hissed.

“I’m not,” I muttered.

‘You are. You couldn’t even look at them for more than a minute,’ my wolf said.

“Enough,” I said under my breath.

Marco gave me a quick glance but didn’t comment.

‘You hate that she looks at him that way,’ my wolf continued. ‘You hate that she smiles for him when she barely looks at you.’

“I said enough,” I growled.

‘Admit it,’ he said. ‘You want to tear him away from her. You want to remind her who she belongs to.’

‘She doesn’t belong to anyone,’ I responded. ‘We’re giving her up. That’s what is safe for her.’

‘You don’t believe that,’ my wolf said. ‘If you did, you wouldn’t still be thinking about her every night.’

I clenched my fists in frustration. I pushed him down. I didn’t want to hear anymore of his taunts.

“Nolan, are you sure you’re alright? You’ve been muttering to yourself,” Marco said.

“I’m fine,” I said flatly.

He hesitated. “You look ready to start a fight.”

“I’m not,” I said. “Go make yourself busy, Go talk to Solon. Report to him. Give him whatever excuse you can think of why I am not with you.”

“Understood,” Marco said, turning around and going back from where we came.

I made my way through the gardens to get back to my room. I purposely avoided Talia’s garden. I wanted fresh air and not the scent of roses to remind me of her. The fresh air didn’t help anyway. The memory of Talia’s smile lingered in my mind, and the sound of her laughter wouldn’t fade.

‘You can pretend all you want,’ my wolf said, quieter now. ‘But you’re jealous that someone is getting attention that should be for us.’

I clenched my hands until my claws dug faintly into my palms. “I’m not jealous,” I said again. “I’m furious.”

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & THIRTY THREE

Talia’s POV

Over the past few days, it had become clear that my father and Solon were trying to push me and Colin closer together. Colin had been given a guest suite only a few doors from mine. Every time I went for a walk in the gardens or stopped by the training grounds, somehow Colin was already there, smiling and ready to talk.

At dinner, Father often invited him to sit beside me. When I asked Solon about it, he just smirked and said it was “good for diplomatic relations.” Della, of course, found the whole thing entertaining.

“Face it,” she said one morning as she lay slouched on my couch. “You and Colin look perfect together. I mean come on, he followed you around like a lost puppy when you were little.”

“We were kids. That was so many years ago,” I said.

Della grinned. “It doesn’t matter. He still likes you. You can’t tell me you don’t see that.”

I sighed. “He’s kind, and I like spending time with him, but that doesn’t mean he’s my mate.”

“No, he’s not,” Della said, “but you have to agree that having a chosen mate that wants to be with you is better than having a destined mate that doesn’t want you.”

Her words hit harder than I wanted to admit. Della only knew about Jason. She had no idea that Nolan also didn’t want me either. “Sorry, Talia. I didn’t mean to upset you,” Della apologized after seeing my solemn expression.

“It’s fine, really,” I said with a shrug.

The next day, Colin stopped by the rose garden while I was trimming the vines. “You’re working too hard,” he said as he took the shears away from me.

“Do you know what you are doing?” I asked.

“Of course I do. It was you that taught me how to take care of them,” Colin replied. “and almost cut off my thumb in the process.

I couldn't help but laugh at the memory. I had been so upset after he butchered one of my bushes that I put him through a crash course on how to take care of rose bushes.

"So, what are you doing out here?" I asked.

"I thought you might like to get out for a while," Colin answered as he put the shears down. He looked faintly embarrassed as he rubbed the back of his neck. "I was hoping to visit the previous waterfall. The one we used to play at. Thought you might want to come along."

The memory made me smile. "The one near the ridge? I haven't been there in years."

"Then it's settled," Colin said. "We can leave after lunch. See you then, Talia."

I watched him leave before I decided I needed to go inside to bathe. I found Della lounging in my room. She noticed my flushed face and said, "No way. He made a pass at you, didn't he?"

"What…what are you talking about?" I stammered.

"Unh-uh, don't play dumb with me. He asked you out on a date, didn't he?"

"It's not a date," I said quickly.

"Oh my goddess, he did!" she exclaimed. "Where? When? Give me all the details."

"We're just going to the waterfall we used to play at when we were kids. It's not a big deal," I answered.

"You just happen to be going to a romantic waterfall with the boy who's always liked you," Della said. "That's a damn date. Go shower. Now we have to think about your entire wardrobe."

"No, I am keeping it simple. This is not a date," I told her firmly.

“Sure, if you say so,” Della teased.

After lunch, I met Colin near the stables. He was already waiting with two horses saddled. “I thought we could switch it up,”

Colin said.

“I haven’t ridden a horse in a long time,” I said.

Colin beamed at my response. I couldn’t help but blush. We followed the trail leading out of the main gates.

It felt peaceful as I listened to nature and the sound of hoof beats. Colin talked about Moonbrook, about how the pack was thriving after a difficult winter. I listened, genuinely enjoying the conversation. Then, halfway down the forest trail, a voice called from behind.

“Talia!”

I cringed at the voice. Why couldn’t he just leave me alone? I turned and saw Jason approaching. His eyes were wild with rage.

“What do you want now, Jason?” I asked.

He stopped a few feet away, glaring at Colin before turning his attention to me. “I could ask you the same thing. Why are you with him?”

“Because I can,” I said.

“You just jump from one Alpha to another. Do you have any shame?” Jason snapped.

“Excuse me?! I don’t know how many times I have to tell you this, but who I associate with is none of your business,” I growled.

“It is my business,” Jason said. “You’re my mate!”

“Watch your mouth, Alpha Jason,” Colin growled. It was low and deep, a tone I had never heard from him before. “You should be careful what you say. That’s quite the accusation.”

Jason’s glare shifted to him. “You need to stay out of this.”

“Jason,” I said sharply, “you need to stop this. We are over.”

“You heard her,” Colin chimed in. “Besides, shouldn’t you be worrying about your own pack? From what I hear, Shadowclaw’s influence is fading fast. Moonbrook might surpass you soon.”

“That’ll never happen,” Jason fumed,

“Whatever you say, Alpha,” Colin said. “Now, leave us alone. You’re ruining our date.”

Jason’s jaw clenched as he watched us leaving.

“I’m sorry,” I said softly. “You didn’t need to be dragged into that.”

Colin waved it off. “Don’t apologize. If anything, I’m glad I was here. He shouldn’t speak to you like that.”

We continued the ride in silence after that. The trail wound through the forest until we reached the clearing by the waterfall. Mist rose from the water’s edge and sparkled in the sunlight.

“It hasn’t changed much,” Colin said, dismounting. “Still as beautiful as I remember.”

I smiled, looking at the sunlight reflecting off the water. “It feels smaller now.”

“Maybe we just got taller,” he said with a grin.

I laughed. “Maybe.”

We sat near the rocks with our horses grazing nearby. After a while, I broke the silence. “It was smart to tell him it was a date. I am sure Jason is still angry about it now.”

Colin laughed nervously and said, “Well, I thought it sounded better than just saying I wanted to spend time with you.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“When I heard you’d married Jason, I was angry, mostly at myself. I should’ve told you how I felt back then, but I didn’t. I kept overthinking it and by the time I wanted to, it was too late.”

His honesty startled me. “Colin…”

“I can’t change the past. All I have is the present. I want to be with you, Talia. Not out of pity, not because of your title, but because I’ve always cared about you. Let me make you happy. Be my mate.”

I looked at him, unsure what to say. Part of me was touched, and another part afraid. I really wish my wolf was back. She would know what to say.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “So much has happened. I need time.”

Colin nodded, smiling gently. “Then I’ll wait. I’ve waited this long already. A little longer won’t matter.”

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & THIRTY FOUR

Nolan’s POV

I couldn’t wait for this day to be over.

I had been assigned to go on patrol with Solon. It was clear neither one of us wanted this. Even though I made peace with the Alpha King, Solon still held a grudge.

Solon walked beside me, scrolling through something on his phone before tucking it into his jacket. “You know,” he said, breaking the silence, “you were supposed to file your last report two days ago.”

“I was busy,” I replied. “The western fence sensor was down. I stayed behind to fix it.”

He sighed. “You don’t need to do everything yourself, Alpha Nolan. That’s why you have patrol teams. You could’ve told someone else to handle it.”

“That’s how mistakes happen. I saw it, I fixed it. Your warriors need to learn how to do that as well,” I said simply.

Solon muttered something other than his breath. I decided not to antagonize him. I focused on the birds chirping in the trees.

We walked a few more steps in silence before he added, “You’re lucky my father’s in a good mood. After tomorrow, once the ritual’s done, you’ll be free to leave Silverfang.”

I stopped mid-stride. “You think I want to leave?”

He shrugged. “You’ve done nothing but glare and antagonize at us since you got here. Trust me, no one’s going to stop you.”

Before I could respond, the wind picked up and it brought a familiar scent. Solon noticed it too. He turned around to see someone stepping out from between the trees. It was Jason. He looked annoyed as he approached us.

“Alpha Jason? What are you doing here?” Solon asked, clearly irritated. “You’re supposed to be with your pack, not wandering through restricted areas.”

“Do you know where Talia is?” Jason asked. “Because I do.”

I felt my pulse quicken. “What about her?”

“She went out with Colin, the Alpha from Moonbrook. They’re at the waterfall together. He called it a date,” Jason replied.

My stomach tightened. “A date?” I repeated slowly.

“I’m not talking to you,” Jason said coldly.

‘The little rat. We still need to make him pay for setting us up,’ my wolf growled. Before I could respond, Solon cut in.

“So, what is the problem?” Solon asked.

“You should probably send guards to check on her before it gets dark. That trail isn’t exactly safe,” Jason snapped.

“She’s fine,” Solon said firmly before I could speak. “Alpha Colin knows the area. I trust him.”

“You trust too easily. What if…”

“It doesn’t matter what you think, Jason,” Solon snapped, cutting him off. “You need to learn to mind your own business. Aren’t you supposed to be getting ready to try to pursue my sister? How are you supposed to do that if you keep running in behind Talia?

Jason's face turned a deeper shade of red. He turned and disappeared into the woods without another word. Solon and I continued patrolling, but I couldn't get my mind off the fact that Talia was on a date.

"You trust Alpha Colin that much?" I asked.

"Yes," Solon said. "He's one of the few Alphas who's reliable, loyal, and level-headed."

"Sounds like you admire him."

"I respect him," Solon corrected. "He's been a friend to this pack since we were children. If he becomes Talia's mate, I'd welcome it."

My wolf bristled immediately. 'He is talking about giving our mate away,' he growled.

"You really think handing her off like that makes her safer?" I asked.

"The alternative is allowing Jason to mark her again and I refuse to let that happen," Solon replied and for once, I agreed with him. "Colin would cherish and treat her the way she deserves. Talia deserves to be happy. She's been through enough."

Rage burned through me and I turned away so Solon couldn't see my expression. My nose flared as I took calming breaths. I had already accepted that we wouldn't be together. I needed to let this go.

"You should focus on your duty," Solon said. "My father said that he wanted your help to pick a mate for Talia, but we don't need your help. We appreciate you saving her, but you shouldn't concern yourself with her anymore."

Solon's voice faded into background noise. My wolf's voice grew louder. 'You hear him? He's trying to remove you from the equation. Are you going to let him do that?'

'Be quiet,' I growled.

‘You can’t ignore this,’ my wolf pressed. ‘She’s ours. If you let her go, you’ll regret it for the rest of your life. I will make you regret it.’

‘She made her choice. She doesn’t even want me anymore,’ I said, though I didn’t even believe it.

‘Liar.’

Solon kept walking ahead, muttering something about finishing the route. I stayed behind for a moment, staring through the trees. The forest was calm, but my mind wasn’t. Every instinct screamed at me to find her.

“We’re almost done. Don’t start something you’ll regret, Nolan. You’ve already caused enough trouble,” Solon said, bringing me out of my thoughts.

I didn’t answer.

“Nolan,” he said again, turning toward me. “Whatever’s going through your head, stop it.”

I gave him a curt nod, “Understood.”

But as soon as he turned away, I took a step off the trail, then another. The scent of her lingered faintly in the air. I could picture her already. Her hair catches the soft rays of sunlight. Her eyes reflected the water. And beside her, Colin, smiling like he had no right to. The thought filled me with rage.

I didn’t think. I just moved. My feet hit the dirt path faster and faster until the trees blurred past me.

“Nolan!” Solon’s voice echoed faintly behind me, but I ignored it.

My wolf pushed harder, his voice clear in my head. ‘Don’t let him take her. She’s ours!’

I clenched my fists as I ran.

No one would take her from me.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & THIRTY FIVE

Talia's POV

After taking a shower, I collapsed onto the bed, letting the cool sheets soothe me. The day had left me tired. Colin and I spent the rest of the afternoon catching up at the waterfall. We even went swimming. I should have been exhausted and ready for sleep, but my thoughts refused to calm down.

"I can't change the past. All I have is the present. I want to be with you, Talia. Not out of pity, not because of your title, but because I've always cared about you. Let me make you happy. Be my mate," Colon had told me.

His confession continued to echo in my mind. It had been simple and straightforward, better than Jason's terrible marriage proposal. But, Colin had always been the straightforward type.

Finally, a man was choosing me. I should have felt relief, maybe even excitement, but I didn't feel anything other than being

flattered.

Being around Colin was easy. I could laugh freely. I did not have to worry about watching my tone or what I said. Everything about him felt safe. Still, my heart didn't race when I was with him.

I pressed my palms against my face and sighed. "Maybe it'll come later," I told myself. It was known that chosen mates did come to love each other so much that their bond felt like a fated bond.

If my wolf were still with me, she could tell me what to do. She'd know whether Colin was truly meant for me or if this strange pull toward Nolan wasn't the actual mate bond.

I turned onto my back, placed a pillow on my face, and screamed into it. I thought about Nolan again, even though I didn't want to. No matter how hard I tried to ignore or avoid him, he was always there either physically in front of me or taking up space in my mind.

I groaned softly and threw the pillow to the floor. "I have to stop doing this," I muttered. "He's not thinking about me. He agreed to give me away to another Alpha, so why am I still thinking about him?!"

A knock interrupted my thoughts.

"Come in," I called, expecting Della.

Sure enough, she appeared with her usual burst of energy. She held two long garment bags over her shoulder. "Good, you're not asleep. We have work to do."

"Work?" I asked, sitting up slowly.

"Outfit testing," she announced as she laid the bags on the bed. "The Sacrifice Ceremony is tomorrow, and I am not taking any chances. We're going to make sure everything is perfect. We don't have time for last-minute disasters,"

"Della, the ceremony doesn't even start until 10am. We can just get up early in the morning," I said.

"No, we're doing this right now," she said, unzipping one of the bags. "If something doesn't fit or needs adjusting, I can fix it tonight. You don't want to be panicking in the morning."

I sighed. "You're taking this too seriously."

Della grinned and said, "Not at all. I am your Beta, and this is part of my duty. Someone's got to make sure you, the princess, looks perfect."

She pulled out the first gown. It was an ice-blue dress with a fitted bodice and delicate silver beading that shimmered in the lamplight. “Try this one first. The seamstress said the previous Luna often wore this color.”

The idea of my mother wearing this gown made me smile. I wanted to ask Solon about it but never got around to doing it.

I slipped into the gown. The fabric was breathable and soft against my skin. I turned toward the mirror and gasped. The gown fit

perfectly, emphasizing every one of my curves.

Della clasped her hands together. “You look incredible!”

“You think so?” I asked, turning slightly.

“I know so,” she said proudly. “Now try the other one before I change my mind.”

She handed me the second dress. It was a silver-white gown. It was elegant and something I normally would wear.

“Why do I have to? I want to wear the blue dress,” I told her.

“You always need a backup plan,” Della stressed. “You could wake up bloated or something.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes, now try it on!”

As I started to unzip the blue dress, Della suddenly gasped. “The belt! I left it in my room. I’ll be right back.”

“You can grab it later,” I said, but she was already halfway to the door.

“I’ll be quick!” she called over her shoulder.

The door clicked shut behind her, leaving me alone. I hung the blue gown carefully over the chair and then grabbed the silver gown. I stepped into it and pulled it up over my shoulders. I heard the door open.

“That was fast,” I said as I struggled to reach the zipper at my back. I was able to get it halfway up, but now it was out of reach. Della, a little help, please.”

There was no response, and Della didn’t come over to help.

“Della? What are you doing? I need help. This was your idea, remember,” I said.

Footsteps approached behind me. I felt the zipper slide up my back.

“Thanks. What were you doing? Did Marco link with you or something?” I asked as I turned back to the mirror. “You always get distracted when he…”

The words caught in my throat. My heartbeat quickened as I stared at my reflection.

Right behind me wasn’t Della.

It was Nolan.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & THIRTY SIX

Talia’s POV

For a moment, I couldn't move. I stood frozen staring at Nolan. His presence was so unexpected that my mind struggled to catch up.

"Alpha Nolan," I said quietly, my voice barely steady. "What are you doing here?"

He didn't answer right away. His eyes were dark with anger and something else I couldn't name.

"You shouldn't have gone with him," he finally said.

I frowned. "What?"

"With Colin," he snapped. "You shouldn't have gone into the forest with him. Do you have any idea how dangerous that was?" "How do you even know about that?" I asked, startled.

"Jason told me. He said you went to the waterfall with Colin, on a date. I searched the entire forest for you. For hours," Nolan replied.

I blinked in disbelief. "You searched for me?"

"Yes," he said. "Anything could have happened to you."

My pulse quickened at the thought that Nolan cared that much to look for me. Then, I mentally cursed myself. Why was I getting flustered over this? Nolan didn't want me. He basically was acting like Jason.

"You didn't have to do that," I told him. "I know Colin. I was fine with him."

"That's not the point," he snapped. "You went off with another Alpha without telling anyone. That's reckless, even for you."

"You don't get to lecture me. You're not my Alpha. You're barely even…" I stopped midsentence. I didn't want to be rude. I just wanted him to leave.

His eyes narrowed. “Barely even what, Talia?”

I hesitated, then said, “Barely even my mate.”

Nolan took a sharp breath, but before he could respond, I added, “You should leave.”

He ignored me and stepped closer instead. “Was it really a date?”

“It’s none of your business,” I said, stepping back to maintain space between us.

“The hell it isn’t,” Nolan growled.

“You lost the right to ask questions like that when you decided we’d reject each other,” I snapped.

“I never agreed to that,” he shot back.

“You said you wouldn’t mark me!” I exclaimed.

“That’s not the same thing,” Nolan said.

“Then what is it?” I demanded. “You’ve done nothing but push me away, and now you’re angry because I spent time with someone else?”

Nolan didn’t answer. His chest rose and fell faster now. Again, he wasn’t telling me the truth, and I didn’t want to deal with him any longer.

“Just go,” I said quietly. “After tomorrow, we’ll be done. You’ll get what you want.”

“You really think that’s what I want?” Nolan demanded. “That’s really what you think?”

Before I could respond, he closed the distance between us. His hand caught the back of my neck. The warmth of his hand made me jerk, but he kept a firm grip on my neck.

“Nolan, what are you…”

Then he kissed me.

I froze at first, stunned, but then the bond ignited like fire under my skin. I tried to push him away, but my body betrayed me. My fingers curled into his shirt instead.

Every breath I took filled with his scent. It was impossible to resist. I hated how my body responded, how every part of me ached

for him even when I didn’t want to.

Nolan deepened the kiss, and for one terrifying, thrilling second, I stopped fighting. He pushed me up against the mirror. His free hand gripped my hip tightly.

Then, a scream stopped everything.

“What in the Moon Goddess’ name is going on here?!”

Della’s voice cut through the haze like a blade. I jerked back, breaking the kiss. Nolan froze too..

Della stood in the doorway, eyes wide with shock and disbelief. “You two… you two are mates or what?!”

Before I could even think of a response, she strode across the room and shoved Nolan hard in the chest. “Get out!” she shouted.

Nolan didn't resist. His expression flickered between guilt and anger. He hesitated in the doorway.

"GET.THE.HELLOUT!" she snarled.

Nolan looked at me once, like he wanted to say something, but I couldn't meet his eyes. After another moment of silence, he turned and walked out. The door shut behind him with a heavy thud.

Della spun toward me and yelled, "Are you kidding me right now?"

"L.."

"How long have you been hiding this from me?" she demanded. "You and Nolan? When were you planning to tell me? Never?"

"It's not what it looks like," I said weakly.

She gave a disbelieving laugh. "Oh, it looks exactly like what it looks like. I walk in and find you two making out before the biggest ceremony of the year!"

"Della, please," I said, lowering my voice. "You don't understand. We're not…"

She crossed her arms. "Not what? Mates?"

I sighed, rubbing my temple, "We are. But it doesn't even matter. We're going to reject each other after the ceremony."

Her eyes widened in shock. "Reject each other? After what I just saw?"

My face burned with embarrassment. "I don't know what got into him. He kissed me. I didn't kiss him."

Della threw her hands up. “He was not acting like a man that wanted to reject his mate. What are you doing, Talia?”

“I don’t know,” I said quietly. “I thought that rejection was the plan, but now I don’t know anymore.”

She frowned, her tone softening. “Talia, do you even know what you want?” she asked.

“I don’t,” I admitted. “Everything’s a mess. I thought I wanted to move on, to make things simple, but he keeps doing things that confuse me.”

She exhaled slowly, watching me. “You want to know what I think?”

“What?”

“He’s jealous.”

The word caught me off guard. “Jealous?”

“Yes,” she said, her tone matter of fact. “You went on a date with Colin, and suddenly Nolan’s storming in here, acting like you belong to him. He’s definitely jealous.”

I stared at her. “No, that can’t be it. He doesn’t even want me.”

Della raised an eyebrow. “You really believe that? Actions speak louder than words, Talia.” She stepped closer and placed a hand on my shoulder. “I’m not saying he’s right for you. I’m just saying, maybe think about giving him another chance.”

For the first time in a long while, I had no idea what I felt.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & THIRTY SEVEN

Talia's POV

The morning of the Sacrifice Ceremony arrived faster than I expected. I barely got any sleep as I couldn't get the kiss with Nolan out of my mind. Della brought me coffee and had applied makeup to expertly hide the bags under my eyes.

She stood behind me, adjusting the final curl in my hair. "Hold still," she said as her tongue stuck out slightly as she

concentrated.

"You've been saying that for an hour," I groaned.

Della glared at me through the mirror. "That's because you keep turning your head. I swear if you keep moving I will start over."

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Try me," Della said with a smirk. I stayed completely still and after another ten minutes, Della stepped back. "There. Done."

Before I could respond, there was a knock at the door.

Della went to open it. Leslie stood in the doorway wearing a red gown that stopped just above her knees. Her bright hair was tied into a high ponytail, and her usual carefree expression had been replaced with a confident smile.

“Well, don’t you look amazing,” I said honestly.

Leslie smiled, twirled once, and said, “I try.”

“Wow. Red suits you. I didn’t even know you owned a dress that didn’t have a pocket full of herbs,” Della said.

“Funny,” Leslie said with a grin. “I left them at the cabin. Figured I should look like a normal person for once.”

I gestured toward the vanity. “Come in. We were just getting ready.”

Leslie stepped inside, eyeing my gown with an approving nod. “So, you’re going with the ice blue one. Good choice. It makes you look radiant.”

“Thank you,” I said. “You look like a femme fatale with that red on.”

“I figured if I’m going to spend the evening watching wolves hook up with each other, I might as well look gorgeous while doing it,” Leslie explained.

“You sure you didn’t dress like this to lure yourself a mate?” Della teased.

Leslie smiled mysteriously. “Maybe I am. I didn’t take my herbs today.”

“You didn’t!” I gasped.

She nodded. “That’s right. I thought it might be fun to see what happens if I let fate decide.”

Della gasped dramatically. “The great Healer Leslie willingly taking a chance on the mate bond? I thought I would’ve never seen. the day.”

Leslie laughed. “Don’t sound so surprised. I’m not completely against the idea of a mate. I just don’t like the idea of being told what to feel.”

“Oh, you say that now. But when you meet your mate, the bond will change everything. It always does,” Della warned.

“You sound like you’re speaking from experience,” Leslie said.

Della grinned. “Maybe I am. It took me a while to admit it, but the Moon Goddess knows what she’s doing. Sometimes you just have to let go and trust.”

I nodded quietly. “That’s true. Not all bonds make sense right away.”

Leslie looked at me and then smiled knowingly. “Seems like something happened to you.’

I couldn’t help but blush. Della quickly jumped in, much to my relief, and pivoted the attention away from me. “I’m telling you, Leslie, when it happens, you’ll be the same way.”

Leslie chuckled. “We’ll see about that.”

Della turned back to me. She picked up a small velvet box from the table. “Now, for the final touch.”

She opened it and lifted out the Rosecrest necklace. The silver chain glimmered in the light, the small moonstone pendant catching faint hues of blue and gold. It was the same necklace my mother had once worn during her own ceremony. (2)

Della clasped it around my neck. “Perfect. Now you’re ready.”

Leslie let out a low whistle before saying, “You’re not a Princess today. You’re a Goddess!”

Della nodded in agreement. “Absolutely. You’re going to have to beat the Alphas off you.”

I laughed, shaking my head. “You two are ridiculous.” I almost believed them. The woman staring back at me looked calm and composed, nothing like the confused mess I’d been just days ago.

There was another knock on the door.

“Come in,” I called.

Solon entered. He was dressed in a formal black suit with a silver crest pinned to his jacket. He looked me over and gave a small approving smile. “You look beautiful, little sister. The ceremony’s starting soon. Father’s…”

Solon stopped in midsentence. “Solon?” I asked as I turned to look at him.

His mouth was agape. His eyes were on Leslie. His nose flared and his eyes widened.

I looked at Leslie, who also had a deer in the headlights expression before swearing under her breath. “Fucking hell.”

“Mate…” Solon blurted out and walked towards Leslie. 1

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Leslie muttered as she put her hands out to stop Solon from getting closer to her. “I need air. Or maybe a cliff to jump off.”

“Leslie, wait,” Della said, reaching after her, but Leslie was already halfway out the door. The door closed behind her, leaving

the rest of us in stunned silence.

Solon looked at the door. I could tell he was fighting the urge to run after Leslie. “Della, go check on Leslie. Make sure she’s okay,” I said.

“Got it,” Della said quickly. She grabbed her clutch and hurried out of the room.

When she was gone, I placed a hand on Solon’s arm, breaking his focus on the door. He looked down at me, looking conflicted. I felt for him. I knew how it felt to have a mate that didn’t want the mate bond at first.

“I know this is a lot right now, but we need to go,” I said gently. “The ceremony is about to start.”

“This day just keeps getting longer,” he sighed.

“Come on,” I said, linking my arm with his. “You can panic after the ceremony.”

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & THIRTY EIGHT

Nolan’s POV

The ceremony grounds were already full by Sam. Every Alpha from the major packs had gathered. Their banners displayed along the outer walls in multiple shades of silver, gold, crimson, and blue. Strings of lights hung between the old pines. Their glow catching on polished stone and silver decorations. The stage had been rebuilt since the last celebration. Its wide steps leading to an altar were covered in white cloth and bowls of moon lilies.

I sat in the front row.

Around me, people were talking. I didn’t need to listen closely to know what they were saying. Word of me poisoning the Alpha King spread quickly, and the fact that I was still alive seemed to unsettle them. No one dared to meet my eyes for long.

I'd grown used to the way people looked at me with fear, curiosity, and barely concealed distrust, so I didn't care.

Then. Jason and Michael walked toward the front. I felt my wolf bristle within me. I ignored him. We would play nice today.

"Alpha Nolan," he said lightly as they approached. "A grand place, isn't it?"

I didn't look at him. "That depends on how you define grand," I said.

Michael chuckled and took the seat to my right, with Jason beside him. "It's good to see you. I trust there are no hard feelings after the inquiry?"

I turned my head just enough to meet his gaze. "You mean the inquiry you staged to have me executed?"

His smile faltered for half a second, but he recovered quickly. "Business between Alphas can get messy. No need to dwell on the past."

"I am not dwelling," I told him. "A shame that Jason forgot what I told him when we first became allies."

Jason shifted uncomfortably but said nothing. I would get even with them. If they thought they were safe, they were fools.

I focused my attention back on the stage, ending the conversation.

The murmurs around us quieted as another Alpha made his way down the aisle. It was Alpha Colin.

He carried himself with the same calm confidence I remember from the first time I saw him: confident, charming, and far too composed. His pack's crest gleamed on the shoulder of his tailored coat. When he reached my row, his eyes flicked toward me, and then down to the empty seat on my left.

“Mind if I sit here?” he asked.

“It’s a free seat,” I replied evenly.

He smiled and sat down. “Good. I was beginning to think everyone was afraid of you.”

“They are,” I said without humor.

He chuckled softly, unbothered. “Fear and respect often look the same from the outside.”

I didn’t respond. His tone was too light. I knew that type of confidence. It was the kind born from inheriting power versus working for it. It irritated me more than it should have.

Colin glanced sideways at me, and I returned his gaze. “Is there something on my face, Alpha Colin?”

“You look tired, I have to say.”

“Long night.”

“You should drink Moonlight Spring water when this is over. It helps.”

I frowned slightly and asked, “What are you talking about?”

“The water they use during the ceremony,” Colin explained. “Each year, the Alpha King collects it himself from the Moonlight Spring during the full moon. Only a few flasks are ever drawn. They say it’s blessed by the Moon Goddess. It restores strength, purifies energy, that sort of thing.”

“And we’re supposed to drink it?” I asked.

Colin nodded. “At the end of the Sacrifice Ceremony, every Alpha receives a cup. It’s symbolic of the Moon Goddess blessing her chosen leaders.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You actually believe that?” I asked.

Colin smiled faintly. “I’ve seen stranger things in this world.”

I didn’t answer. Instead, I looked toward the altar, where attendants were preparing the ceremonial table. The faint silver gleam of the sacred water caught my eye.

“Don’t look so skeptical,” Colin said. “It’s an honor to be part of this ceremony. Even for you.”

“Even for me?” I repeated.

He shrugged lightly. “Your reputation precedes you, Bloodmoon Alpha. Most wouldn’t have been invited after an investigation like that.”

“Maybe the Alpha King wanted to keep his enemies close,” I said dryly.

Colin chuckled again and said, “Maybe.”

His calm made me feel uneasy. There was something disarming about him. His personality made you want to like him. I could see why the Silverfang court liked him. I could also see why Talia smiled so easily when he was near.

The sound of the ceremonial bell rang through the courtyard, silencing the crowd. Every Alpha, Luna, Beta, and Elder turned their attention to the grand staircase as the Alpha King emerged. He wore ceremonial robes of deep silver trimmed with white fur.

Solon followed closely behind him. He was in a black suit with the Silverfang crest on his chest. He looked confident, but there was something in his eyes. He looked off.

Then I saw her.

The ice blue gown shimmered as Talia walked beside Solon. Her steps were graceful, her expression serene, but my wolf became restless the moment I saw her. She looked not just beautiful, but divine. My wolf growled softly inside my head, a mix of awe and admiration.

Colin straightened beside me. I didn't need to look at him to know his gaze was fixed on her too.

I pushed my anger down. This wasn't the time to pick fights even if my wolf urged me to do so.

The crowd erupted in applause as the Alpha King reached the altar. He raised his hands, calling for silence.

"Welcome, brothers and sisters," he began. "Today, with the blessing of the Moon Goddess, we renew our vows of loyalty and sacrifice. This marks the bond between our packs: a unity of strength, blood, and spirit."

He turned slightly toward Solon and Talia. "To open this ceremony, my children, the prince and princess of Silverfang, will present the Moonlight Spring water to the altar."

A murmur of excitement rippled through the crowd.

Solon and Talia stepped forward. For a moment, she looked directly at me. Then, Talia focused on her task as though I meant nothing to her. I hated to admit that it made my heart ache.

'What did you expect?' my wolf growled. 'You did everything but reject her. You deserve her ignoring you.'

The applause rose again as she and Solon placed the silver chalice upon the altar.

Beside me, Colin clapped politely. Jason and Michael looked at Talia in disbelief. Then, Jason began turning a dark shade of red.

Seeing Jason's humiliation soothed the ache in my heart just a little.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & THIRTY NINE

Jason's POV

I stood frozen among the gathered Alphas, unable to take my eyes off Talia. The same woman I had humiliated and rejected stood before us wearing the royal crest of Silverfang. And it seemed like everyone knew but me.

The lies, the secrecy, the unexplained protection she enjoyed, all of it made sense now. Talia was never a plaything for Solon. He was simply looking out for his sister.

'You made assumptions and insulted her,' my wolf growled. 'You deserve to be lied to.'

I swallowed hard and forced myself to breathe evenly. Around me, the other Alphas kept their composure. I met Nolan's gaze. His mouth twisted in something between amusement and disdain. I could almost hear his unspoken thought: that I, Alpha Jason of Shadowclaw, was once again the fool in the room.

Embarrassment burned through me, but it was quickly replaced with rage. My father's voice echoed in my head. 'Calm yourself, ' he growled. 'You will not embarrass me by throwing a tantrum here.'

The Alpha King raised his hand for silence. Everyone obeyed instantly. "Today, we give thanks for peace and the promise of unity,' he began.

One by one, the Alphas knelt. Solon and Talia joined the Alpha King in prayer. I lowered my head, not in reverence, but to hide the storm gathering behind my eyes. How the hell could she not tell me she was the Princess? I would have never allowed Viki to

seduce me.

‘And if she had told you, she’d never have learned that your love for her was conditional,’ my wolf snarled.

‘Shut up,’ I told him.

‘You only want me to shut up because you know it is true,’ my wolf growled. ‘I warned you about Viki, but you wouldn’t listen to

me.’

I ignored him and tried to focus on the prayer. My mind was racing. All the signs were there, and I had missed them all.

Talia had helped Shadowclaw so much as Luna. I should have known that no omega would be able to handle the pack affairs so well. Why didn’t I see it?

‘Because you didn’t want to,’ my wolf whispered.

When the prayer ended, attendants carried out trays of crystal flasks. Solon passed them first to his sister. Talia moved down the line of Alphas, offering each a small vial of Moonlight Spring water.

I wanted to talk to her. I wanted to apologize to her, but she didn’t look at me as she gave me the vial. She acted as if I was a stranger, not even worth a second glance.

My father’s voice filled my mind again. ‘Calm yourself. Do not make me tell you again.’

‘I’m trying.’

“Try harder. We will deal with this later. I will request a meeting with the Alpha King,’ my father said. That did comfort me a little, only until I realized that the Alpha King knew about me cheating on Talia and rejecting her. He would never agree with her being my mate again.

The Alpha King lifted his cup and declared, “To the Moon Goddess. May her light guide our hearts and strengthen our bonds.”

The hall erupted in cheers. Dozens of voices echoed back the blessing. I drank. The water was cool on my tongue, but it did nothing to calm the anxiety building in me. The ceremony was over. I would be able to talk to her. I would properly apologize. I’d do anything she wanted if it meant getting her back.

Then, the Alpha King raised his hand again to silence us. This was different. Usually, the rest of the ceremony was mingling with

other packs.

“This year’s blessing carries special meaning,” he said. “My daughter stands before you as Silverfang’s princess. The Moon Goddess will guide her hand in finding a mate worthy of her.”

The announcement silenced the hall. The words hit me like a punch to the gut. The Alpha King was looking for a mate for Talia. He was replacing me!

He continued, “Those who believe they are fit to stand beside her may step forward. You will remain within Silverfang for one week. At the end of that time, my daughter will announce her decision.”

My pulse pounded in my ears. All I could think of was the memory of her walking away from me and now she stood before us as a prize to be claimed. My jaw clenched in anger. I would not allow anyone to touch. She was my mate.

‘What are you doing?’ my wolf snarled. ‘Step forward. Win our mate back!’

“Me,” I blurted out as I stood up. “Consider me.”

The Alpha King’s gaze rested on me. I stood tall under his gaze. He looked calm but there was anger in his eyes. I had already hurt Talia once, but the Alpha King could not deny me a chance to win her back.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Colin stand. He stepped forward next. “It would be my honor to be considered,” he said with a bow. The King nodded to him with faint approval.

No one else moved. Some of the Alphas shifted uncomfortably, clearly unwilling to risk the King’s disfavor if they failed to impress his daughter.

Then, a voice rang out.

“I wish to be considered.”

I stared in disbelief as Nolan stood up and stepped forward too.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & FORTY

Talia’s POV

I hadn’t expected Nolan to step forward.

For a moment, I thought he might stop halfway, but he didn’t. Della, once again, had been right. I didn’t know what Nolan was thinking, but it was starting to look like he had no intention of rejecting me.

My father’s posture stiffened beside me. Solon’s expression was more telling. His eyes narrowed in silent warning. Both men kept their composure, but I could feel their disapproval as clearly as if they had spoken it aloud.

“So be it,” my father said.

“Thank you, your majesty,” Nolan replied with a smile.

My father didn’t respond to Nolan and addressed the remaining Alphas. “You may enjoy your time here in Silverfang, but please leave after nightfall. May the Moon Goddess forever bless your path.”

The hall slowly emptied. I knew this would be all over the tabloids today. Three of the strongest Alphas were vying for my affection. I should have felt excited, but all I felt was anxiety. I stepped off the stage and began walking towards the exit when a

voice called out behind me.

“Talia, you could have told me,” Jason said.

I looked at him, surprised by his boldness. Was he really going to get into an argument with me in front of my father and Solon? His boldness always bordered on recklessness.

“About what?” I asked, feigning ignorance.

Jason’s eye twitched and his face became flushed. He took a calming breath before saying, “That you were the Silverfang princess. You lied to me.”

“I had planned to tell you,” I responded. “But you made it clear that you didn’t need to hear anything from me when you chose to betray the mate bond by cheating on me.”

The color drained from his face. Michael stepped forward and said, “Jason was deceived. I understand that is no excuse, but I have punished him on your behalf. I assure you, Princess Talia, he deeply regrets his mistakes.

Disgust rose in my chest. His attempt at diplomacy made my skin crawl. “Deceived?” I said, keeping my voice level. “He wasn’t drugged when he slept with Viki, knowing it would cause me pain. He was fully aware when he humiliated me and allowed Viki to humiliate me multiple times.”

Before Michael could reply, my father interrupted. “The past is finished,” he said coldly. “If Jason intends to court my daughter now, he will do so with respect. It will be up to my daughter to decide whether he has another chance to be her mate again.”

“Then I’d like to request time alone with her. As part of my Hunting Rite reward, I’m owed a personal favor,” Jason requested.

“That reward was not meant for this purpose,” Father said.

“It’s still mine, Your Majesty,” Jason said firmly.

My father weighed his response carefully. He was worried about how it might look if he refused, Jason and Michael would surely tell anyone who would listen that he was biased, which would cause unnecessary problems for him and Silverfang.

Before he could speak, I said, “I agree.”

All eyes turned toward me.

“Talia, you don’t have to agree to that,” Solon stated.

“There’s no harm in conversation,” I responded. My father’s mouth thinned into a line, but he nodded once. Solon exhaled audibly beside him. Nolan’s expression darkened.

“I am so glad that you are reasonable, Princess. I…” Michael started.

“Don’t push your luck. If you keep talking, I will change my mind,” I warned.

Michael nodded, bowed, and left. Colin maintained his calm expression. He gave a polite smile, bowed, and quietly excused himself. Nolan gave a quick glare at Jason before he left as well.

Solon pulled me over to him and whispered, “You don’t have to do this.”

“I know,” I said.

“Then why agree?”

“Because Father would rather not appear partial in front of the other Alphas,” I replied. “Jason and Michael would cause a scene if I didn’t agree.”

“Then, I will chaperone this lunch,” Solon suggested.

“No.”

“No?” Solon frowned. “You’re sending me away?”

“You need to find Leslie and check on her,” I reminded him.

Solon paled. With everything happening with me, it seemed as if he had forgotten that we all found out that Leslie was his mate. He hesitated before saying, “I would rather not.”

“Well, you don’t have a choice. Go. Find her. Sort it out,” I told him. “Or would you want another male to claim her?”

Solon sighed, defeated but unwilling to argue in front of our father. “Fine, but you will keep guards with you.”

“Of course,” I said.

Solon bowed to our father and left the hall. When he passed Nolan, they exchanged a brief, tense look before they both left the hall together. I only hoped Solon would go to find Leslie and not pick a fight with Nolan.

“I will leave you under the care of the guards,” Father said and I nodded. He squeezed my hand before leaving as well.

The moment we were alone, Jason’s confidence returned. He had that smug smile on his face that I had come to hate. I resisted the urge to grimace and stared blankly at him.

“So,” he said lightly, “since you’ve agreed, how about lunch? It’s been a long day, and I’d rather not spend it competing for your attention in front of everyone else.”

I studied him carefully. “Lunch?” I repeated.

“Yes. Just a meal,” he said quickly. “I only want an honest conversation.”

Honesty. The word sounded strange coming from him. All he knew how to do was lie and twist the truth to benefit himself.

“Fine,” I agreed. “Let’s have lunch.”