Barren Luna 141

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & FORTY ONE

Talla's V

I changed quickly into a soft blue dress. I tied my hair back and put away the rowerest dace, My hands trembled with anxiety, not because i was excited, but because I was ready to get this over with

When I stepped out of my room, Jason was already waiting in the corridor, "You look beatiful," he s

1 rolled my eyes and walked past him. "Let's go."

We walked in silence until we reached the car, waiting outside. The ride to Kangyale took only a few minutes, yet every second felt longer than it should have, Jason sat across from me, fidgeting with his cuffs as if searching for something to say, Ikept my gaze on the passing streets beyond the window.

Relipse was one of Pangvale's most refined establishments. It had polished marble floors, crystal chandeliers, and gold- trimmed walls lined with portraits of Silverfang's past rulers. The host bowed deeply when we entered, Jason had clearly reserved one of the private rooms in advance.

He pulled out a chair for me. It was a gesture that once might have felt chivalrous. Now I felt calculated. I sat without thanking

him.

The moment the servants brought out the first course, Jason's demeanor changed completely. He served me first, carefully pouring sauce onto my plate and arranging the cutlery as if the gesture could erase years of betrayal,

"You still take your tea with honey, right?" he asked, pouring it before I could answer, "I remember you used to say sugar ruined the flavor."

1 picked up my fork but didn't respond.

He smiled, pretending not to notice my silence. "Do you remember the last Moon Festival we spent together? You couldn't stop laughing when 1-"

"Stop it," I said flatly.

He froze,

"Don't talk about the past."

The cheer faded from his face. He lowered his gaze to the table, his fingers tightening around his cup. "You're still angry at me," he said quietly.

"I'm not angry," I said. "I told you that I am done."

"Talia, I owe you more than an apology. I was wrong, and I regret everything I did. I hurt you, and I hate myself for it," Jason said.

"Regret doesn't change what happened."

"I know," he said. "But if you could give me one chance, I'd prove I'm not the same man."

I almost laughed. "You think one conversation over lunch fixes everything?"

"I think it's a start," he said, meeting my eyes again. "When I agreed to marry Viki, it wasn't because I stopped caring about you. I thought it would help Shadowclaw. I thought…"

"Don't," 1 interrupted, "Don't twist it into something noble. You didn't do it for Shadowclaw. You did it for your own pride. You don't get to try to change the narrative now that you know my identity."

Jason's expression shifted into that practiced look of sincerity that had fooled me before. I wondered how many times he had tricked me. How many times he talked about me behind my back.

"It's almost funny, isn't it?" he said softly. "After all this time, I found out you were the princess all along. Maybe fate was giving me another chance."

I set down my fork. "You think this is fate?"

"Maybe not fate," he admitted. "But it's something. A happy coincidence that makes sense. You were always meant to stand beside me. Now you can return to my side."

My appetite disappeared. His shameless tone made my stomach turm. I had to believe that the Moon Goddess was not talking about Jason when she said I still have a path to walk. I refused to go back to Jason. I would rather be mateless for the rest of my life than go back to his lying, cheating ass.

"Eat first," I said quietly. "At least make this meal useful."

Jason obeyed at first, but the silence clearly unsettled him. Halfway through the meal, he pushed his plate away and suddenly moved to my side. Before I could react, he went down on one knee beside the table.

"What are you doing?"

"Talia, please," Jason begged "Give me another chance. Don't choose Nolan or Colin. Don't make a mistake you'll regret.

I looked down at him. Before this type of gesture may have moved me, but now, it only made me sick. "The only thing I regret," I said calmly, "is marrying you."

"You…you don't mean that," Jason stammered. "You gave up everything to be with me."

“And I regret that the most,” I countered. “I missed my family’s life for three years for someone who was so unworthy. I will make peace with that eventually, but you and I are over Jason. My answer will not change.”

“You can’t mean that. We had so many good memories,” Jason argued.

“From the moment you chose Viki over me, you ruined those memories and shattered the love I had for you,” I continued. “You lied. You humiliated me. You broke your vows and your word. Only a fool would go back to you, and I am no fool”

Jason shook his head and said, “No. You still love me. I can see it!”

“Then you’re blind and delusional,” I said and wiped my mouth. “Because all I see now is a pitiful liar who wants to use the title of the Alpha King’s daughter to fix his and his pack’s reputation.”

Jason flinched as if the words were blows. For a moment, I thought he would stand, but instead, he stayed on his knees. His eyes searched mine for love that was no longer there.

“I’ll change,” he said desperately. “I swear I will.”

“Have some shame, Jason,” I replied as I rose from my seat. “This conversation is over.”

“Talia, wait, please,” he reached for me, but my guards stood in his way.

I left the private room. I could hear Jason struggling to get past my guards.

“You still love me, Talia!” Jason screamed. “You can pretend all you want, but I know you still love me! I will never let you go!”

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & FORTY TWO

Talia’s POV

I sat in the patio chair, nursing my second cup of tea. I felt relieved after the talk with Jason. It felt like this time it may get through his thick skull that there was no chance of us getting back together.

Solon approached wearing a grey T-shirt and black joggers. His hair was slightly tousled and there were bags under his eyes. He

sat down next to me.

“Morning,” he said.

“Morning,” I replied, setting my cup down on the table.

Solon gestured for an omega, who poured him coffee and left. “You look refreshed,” he said, studying my face.

“You look tired. Rough night?”

“I wouldn’t call it rough,” Solon said. “Just long. I’m surprised you don’t look tired too.”

“Why would I be?” I asked before sighing, “You heard about Jason throwing a tantrum?”

“Everyone heard,” he said. “Word travels fast when an Alpha raises his voice in the middle of Fangvale.”

“He made a scene, not me.”

“I never doubted that,” Solon said. “I assume you turned him down.”

“Yes.”

His brows lifted. “Really?”

“He proposed that I get back with him as a sales pitch. It was ridiculous. I told him there was no chance,” I explained.

“Good. I was ready to intervene if he didn’t take the hint.”

“You may still have to,” I joked. “But, in all seriousness, I can handle him.”

“I know you can,” he said, “but that doesn’t mean I like watching you deal with him.”

We both fell silent as omegas placed our breakfast on the table. Solon thanked them with a nod and then focused on me again. “I still think Colin is the better man. He’s considerate and not trying to prove himself every five minutes. He deserves a real chance.”

I gave a small smile. “You sound like you’ve already picked a winner.”

“Just an observation,” he said. “He seems genuine.”

“Maybe he is.”

“Maybe?”

I shrugged. “I still have a week to test all of them. Of course, I will only be going through the motions with Jason.”

He nodded, satisfied, but I noticed the faint tension in his shoulders. He wasn’t here only to discuss Jason or Colin. Something else weighed on him.

“You didn’t come just to talk about the candidates, did you?”

“You always notice.”

“It’s not hard to see that you’re tense,” I said with a shrug.

Solon sighed and pushed his plate aside. “It’s Leslie.”

“What about her?” I asked.

“She still won’t talk to me,” he said quietly. “Not since the ceremony. I went to her cabin, and she refused to answer the door. She won’t answer my calls either.”

I frowned. “Something must be keeping her from talking to you.”

“I know,” he said. “I’m supposed to be her mate, yet she can’t stand to look at me. It’s…” He broke off and rubbed the back of his neck. “It’s getting to me.”

“Don’t assume the worst. Maybe she’s still processing what it means to have a mate,” I reassured him.

“It shouldn’t take this long,” Solon said in exasperation. “The Moon Goddess doesn’t make mistakes, right? So why does it feel like she might have this time?”

I understood where Solon was coming from. I felt the same and then Nolan decided to pursue me. Mate bonds were complicated especially if the other party never wanted a mate in the first place.

“Because you’re impatient,” I said, smiling faintly. “You’ve spent your whole life making people follow your pace. Leslie doesn’t move that way. You’re going to have to learn to be patient.”

“You always make things sound simple,” Solon sighed.

“Because they usually are,” I said. “Just give it time. Distract yourself while you wait.”

Solon nodded but didn’t answer right away.

Finally, he said, “Would you talk to her for me?”

I rolled my eyes. “Solon, what happened to being patient?”

“Not to convince her of anything. Just to see how she’s doing. She trusts you. If she tells you something I need to hear, maybe I can fix it,” Solon explained.

“Of course,” I said immediately. “I’ll take Della with me.”

Relief softened his posture. “Thank you. Tell Della I owe her.”

“I will,” I said.

We ate in silence for a while.

But my thoughts drifted. Nolan’s face appeared in my mind. I tried to push the image away, but it lingered.

“You’re thinking about something,” Solon said, causing me to look up in surprise. “Your brow is furrowed.”

“Someone,” I admitted, then quickly corrected myself before he could misunderstand. “Nothing serious. Just something from yesterday.”

He raised an eyebrow. “If it’s about Jason again, I’ll…”

“It’s not,” I interrupted. “You don’t need to worry.”

“Good,” he said. “Because that man’s already skating on thin ice,”

I smiled slightly and took another sip of tea. “You don’t trust anyone new around me,”

“That’s because I’ve seen what happens when people earn your trust and don’t deserve it,” he said, meaning Jason. “And as for Nolan…”

I froze but kept my expression neutral. “What about him?”

“He’s a wild card,” Solon stated. “I didn’t expect him to risk his life for you, nor did I expect him to pursue you. I don’t like him, and I don’t trust him, but I have to say he is better than Jason. But remember, just because he saved your life doesn’t mean you owe him. In my opinion, you two are even after you revealed that he had no intention of poisoning Father.”

“I think you’re biased,” I teased.

“Yes, but my points are valid. Just be careful with him. Keep the guards nearby,” Solon said.

“I will, big brother.”

“You better,” he muttered, but his tone softened a moment later. “I know you don’t need a babysitter, but I just want to make sure you stay safe.”

“I know.”

Solon glanced at his watch and stood. “I need to check on the patrol updates before the council meeting.”

“And I’ll talk to Leslie today,” I said.

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & FORTY THREE

Talia’s POV

Della and I walked the path to the cabins for temporary residents sitting beyond a stretch of pine trees, quiet and shaded from the morning sun.

“I couldn’t catch up to her yesterday. She went straight to her cabin and has been there ever since. She hasn’t answered any of my messages,” Della said as we walked. “You really think she’s planning to leave?”

“Solon said she’s been distant,” I replied. “She won’t speak with him.”

“That’s not good.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“I didn’t think she would react like this. I thought her not wanting a mate was all for show.”

“If we don’t convince her to speak with him, I think Solon may spook or worse she’ll run back to Windpaw and get the Alpha to not let Solon see her,” I said.

“Then, let’s make sure we convince her,” Della stated.

When we reached the cabin, the front door was cracked open. We could hear movement within. I cautiously pushed the door open.

Leslie stood by the bed, folding clothes into a suitcase. Her hair hung loose, and she looked pale from lack of sleep. She looked at us but didn't stop folding clothes.

"You two actually showed up sooner than I thought," she said. "Aren't you supposed to be vetting mates, Princess?"

"We were hoping you'd still be here," I said, stepping inside.

"Not for long," Leslie said. "I'm heading back to Windpaw."

"You can't be serious," Della exclaimed.

"I am. It is time for me to go," Leslie stated.

Della paused and said, "Tomorrow's the bonfire celebration. There'll be contests, the feast, the mating ritual. Everyone's going to be there. How about you stay to-"

"That's exactly why I don't want to stay," Leslie snapped. She folded another shirt and set it neatly in her suitcase. "I've had enough ceremonies and celebrations."

Della crossed her arms and said, "Stop lying. You told us you love bonfires before."

"That was before the Moon Goddess decided to take my choice away," Leslie spat.

"Leslie," I started, but she kept going.

"She must be playing a cruel joke on me, I should've known something was wrong when I couldn't even drink the herbs yesterday. I built up an allergy. Ironic right? How can a healer be allergic? It's pathetic!"

“It’s not pathetic,” I said, keeping my tone calm. “I mean it makes sense. As a healer, you should know that.”

“No, it doesn’t make sense,” Leslie snapped. “Why now? Why would I build up an allergy the day of the Sacrifice Ceremony?”

“It means this was meant to happen,” I responded, and Della nodded.

Leslie let out a bitter laugh. “Do you really still believe in the mate bond after everything that has happened to you?”

“Hope and belief are all I have left,” I responded honestly.

“You think Solon is someone I can trust?”

“Yes,” I said firmly.

“Of course you’ll tell me yes. He’s your dear brother!” Leslie said, waving me off.

“Then, I’ll tell you,” Della said, stepping forward. “He isn’t perfect, but he’s honest. He’ll stand by you if you let him.”

“You make it sound easy.”

“It isn’t. I know that firsthand with Marco,” Della admitted. “But it’s worth trying.”

I nodded and said, “Listen to Della if you don’t believe me. I promise you it’ll be worth it in the end. You need to face this head

on.”

Leslie scoffed. “You’re one to talk about trying.”

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

Leslie crossed her arms. “Don’t act like you don’t know what I am talking about. Your first mate cheated on you and your second refuses to acknowledge the bond earlier. How can you tell it’ll be worth it in the end?”

Leslie was right. I couldn’t tell her that, but I did remember how happy I was with Jason before everything fell apart. Those memories I cherished but this was different. Solon was nothing like Jason. He wouldn’t betray Leslie.

Before I could respond, Della quickly stepped in. “No, you’re not going to do that. You are lashing out, and Talia doesn’t deserve that. She is trying to make sure you don’t end up regretting your decisions.”

“Sorry,” Leslie muttered. “It’s just a lot.”

“Then, let’s focus on something else,” Della suggested.

“Like what?” Leslie asked.

“The Bonfire,” Della said.

“No!”

“Come on, Leslie. The Bonfire night isn’t just about mates. It’s about renewal, blessings, and new beginnings. You could talk to Solon there,” Della explained.

Leslie looked skeptical. “And if I don’t want to talk?”

“Then don’t,” Della said simply. “Just come, Listen to the music, eat something, and stand by the fire. No one’s asking for more

than that.”

I nodded. “He wants to talk, Leslie. He’s just afraid of pushing too hard. You leaving now will only make it worse.”

Leslie stared at her half-packed bag. She stared at it for a few seconds before saying, “Even if I went, what would I say? Would I have to pretend I was fine and we just go straight to reject each other?”

“Don’t pretend anything and overthink,” I said softly. “Just show up.”

Leslie looked between us, her expression guarded. “Are you going?” Leslie asked.

I hesitated. The thought of being near Nolan and the other Alphas made my stomach twist. I wanted to spend some time to myself before I had to deal with testing Nolan and Colin. But if going gave Solon a chance to talk to Leslie, I had to go.

“Yes,” I said finally.

Leslie searched my eyes to see if I was lying. She sighed and sat down on her bed. “Fine. But if you back out, I’m leaving first thing in the morning,” Leslie warned.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & FORTY FOUR

Nolan’s POV

I found Marco in his room with the closet doors open and half a dozen suit jackets on his bed. Music played from the speaker on his nightstand. He went into an air guitar solo for a few seconds before hanging up a suit jacket that he no longer liked.

“You’re in a good mood,” I said.

Marco glanced back with a grin. “Preparation makes me happy, Alpha. The mating ceremony is near, and tonight will have the bonfire party and all the stuff. Which one do you think suits me well? Should I represent BloodMoon or do something else?”

“I didn’t come to talk about clothes,” I said, shutting the door.

“Then, what did you come here for?” Marco asked.

“We need to discuss Talia.” I muttered.

He paused, still holding the jacket. “What is there to discuss? You plan to pursue her, right? You’re making this more complicated than it should be, but it is better than you ignoring the mate bond.”.

I ignored the bait. “I need to make sure she chooses me,” I continued.

Marco put the jacket on the bed and faced me fully. “Wouldn’t it be better if she was with someone else?”

“Marco!” I hissed at his bad joke.

He held up both hands. “Alright, alright. What exactly are you worried about? You have the advantages.”

“I am worried she will choose Colin,” I said. “He has Solon’s approval, Alpha King’s support, you know that. He is safer than me. That matters to her right now.”

“She is your mate. No one can take her from you,” Marco reassured me. “She won’t be able to resist the mate bond.”

“The bond does not help if she refuses to accept it or worse rejects me,” I said.

He studied me for a moment. “Now I get it. You want a plan where you know for a fact that Talia will choose you.”

“Yes.” I reluctantly admitted.

He nodded toward the shirts. “First, you need to get cleaned up and put on clothes that compliment you. Second, you need to start thinking about what she wants and not what you want.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“You need to be selfless, Alpha. If you have a hard time doing that, think about what you gain by acknowledging the mate bond,” Marco explained. “If you marry her, you gain access to Silverfang without barriers which means finding the truth gets faster.”

I held his gaze. “I know. So, what is your plan?”

“You’re going to attend the Bonfire tonight,” Marco said simply.

“That is not a plan,” I said. “That is a location.”

“You’re going to charm her tonight. Stay near her, but do not crowd her. Ask about the parts of the festival she actually enjoys. Offer to get her a drink. Keep your hands to yourself unless she closes the distance.”

“You want me to play friendly and nice,” I said.

“I want you to make it easy for her to remember why choosing you is not a risk,” he said. “Colin will look gentle. Jason will look desperate. You should look steady.”

I thought about the last time Talia met my eyes. The calm there had not been indifference. She had been defensive. She noticed everything. If I pushed, she would push back.

“When Jason provokes you, and he will, ignore him,” Marco continued. “If he follows, let me handle it. He’ll attempt to ruin the night and use you as the fall guy if you allow it.”

I nodded once. “What about Colin?”

“Be respectful,” he said. “If she walks with him, you do not interfere. You wait, and when the moment opens, you take it.”

Marco made it seem so simple. Talia wanted to reject me and after I forced the kiss on her, I didn’t even know how she felt about me. I still couldn’t risk losing her to Colin.

Marco returned to his closet and pulled out a charcoal jacket and a soft blue shirt. “Try these.”

“I have my own clothes.”

“That wasn’t a request, Nolan,” he said. “Put them on.”

I took the jacket and shirt to humor him and changed quickly. The fabric fit cleanly across my shoulders without the usual

stiffness. When I stepped back into the room, Marco looked me over with a critical eye, then nodded.

“Better,” he said. “You look like a man trying to enjoy the night instead of preparing for war.”

I glared. “I can hold a conversation at least.”

He smiled. “Then do it with her tonight. Remember it is all about her tonight.”

I adjusted the cuffs. “And if she brings up Colin?”

“You forgot what I said earlier. Just listen first,” he said. “Then you answer without insulting him.”

“What else?” I asked.

Marco picked up a slim watch from the dresser and handed it to me. “Time yourself. Fifteen minutes with her and then step away. You do not want to come off as if you’re clingy like Jason. Let her come to you.”

“I think you assume too much.”

“She will,” he said. “And if she does not, you will still look composed. That matters to her father.”

I fastened the watch. “You are enjoying this.”

“A little,” he admitted. “I do not get many chances to coach you on anything besides tactics. Let me have this.”

I laughed as I made my way to the door. “Fine.”

“Remember to keep your tempter in check,” Marco said.

“You don’t have to keep reminding me,” I told him.

“That means your wolf too,” Marco said.

“We will remember,” I said, and my wolf grunted in agreement. We would not bare our teeth unless someone tried to harm Talia.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & FORTY FIVE

Nolan's POV

Music pulsed from the speakers set near the main fire, and the scent of roasted meat and spice drifted through the air. The flames climbed high in the pit, throwing light across the open space where wolves laughed, danced, and flirted without restraint.

I was already regretting coming. Why were all the events so loud?

Marco looked around, clearly impressed. "Silverfang knows how to throw a party," he said. "Try not to scowl too much. It ruins

the mood."

I gave him a look, and he laughed. "You'll thank me later. Just remember what we discussed. Watch your temper."

Before I could answer, someone called his name. Della appeared through the crowd. She was wearing a red dress that caught every flicker of firelight. Della smiled when she saw him.

"There you are," she said. "You promised a drink, remember?"

"I did?" he asked.

"You did," she said firmly, looping her arm through his. "Come on. I'm not letting you escape."

He shot me a helpless glance. "I'll be right back."

"Sure," I said but I knew he wouldn't be back.

She pulled him toward the food tables, leaving me surrounded by noise and strangers.

The fire cracked and popped, throwing bursts of light across the courtyard. The air buzzed with music, laughter, and the low growl of competition from the strength games near the far wall.

It was everything a celebration was meant to be, but my focus stayed on the crowd. I could not find Talia. I knew she was around, but I didn't know where. If the mate bond had weakened, I could've easily found her. 1

'You deserve this,' my wolf muttered.

'You need to help me. If she chooses Colin, then she'll be lost to us,' I told him, but my wolf didn't respond.

I moved through the space. Some recognized me and nodded politely; others stepped aside quickly as if touching them would cause them to die. I ignored them all.

Talia wasn't near the bonfire, the drink tables, or the groups playing cards along the fence.

The longer I searched, the more anxious I became. My wolf now, restless and impatient, was taking what I said to heart now." Find her,' he urged.

"I'm trying," I muttered.

A woman's voice called to me from behind. "Nolan!"

I turned and saw Leslie stumbling toward me with a cup in one hand and a crooked grin on her face. Her hair hung loose with leaves tangled into it.

"Well, well," she said, swaying slightly. "Didn't think I'd see you here."

“I’m looking for Talia,” I said. “Have you seen her?”

She took a long sip from her cup before saying, “You mean the princess?”

“Yes,” I said evenly. “Where is she?”

Leslie’s grin widened. “Wouldn’t you like to know.”

“I just asked.”

“Mm-hmm,” she said, tapping a finger against chin as she swayed. “I might tell you. But only if you play.”

I frowned. “Play what?”

She raised three fingers. “Three cups. You drink three, and then I tell you.”

“Leslie.” I frowned.

She shook her head. Leslie swayed to the left, almost falling over as she quickly stumbled forward. “Rules are rules, Alpha,” she slurred. “Don’t act like you’re above it. Everyone’s drinking tonight.”

I glanced toward the tables. Half the guests were already well past sober. Leslie wasn’t lying about that.

“This is ridiculous,” I said. I couldn’t drink tonight, but if it meant finding Talia, I would do it.

Leslie folded her arms and said, “Maybe. But, if you don’t do it, no Talia.”

The fastest way to get this over with was to drink. I picked up a nearby glass, filled it, and drank. The burn hit my throat immediately.

“One,” Leslie said cheerfully. “Two more to go.”

I did the second, then the third. The liquor was strong. It was stronger than anything I’d had in weeks. I set the glass down as I began to start feeling the warmth of liquor spread throughout my body.

“There,” I said. “Now tell me.”

Leslie nodded aggressively and said, “Right. Tell you.

I waited and I waited some more, but Leslie didn’t say anything. She just stared at me with a crooked grin as she blinked slowly.

“Leslie!”

She laughed and then pouted, “oops, I forget.”

Her cup slipped from her hand, and she slumped forward against my chest before I could stop her. I caught her by instinct.

Leslie murmured something incoherent and went still.

“Perfect,” I groaned. “Now, I’m babysitting.”

Leslie was out cold, lightly snoring.

For a moment I considered leaving her where she was, but that wasn’t an option. It would be another scandal if something happened to her and I was the last person to be seen with her. I would rather deal with another ‘punishment’ from the Alpha King.

I lifted Leslie into my arms and started toward the side lounge where several guests had already passed out on the couches.

The building was quieter inside. The music faded to a soft hum. I adjusted my hold on Leslie and pushed through the open doorway.

That was when I froze.

Across the room, near the tall windows, stood Talia.

Jason was with her.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & FORTY SIX

Talia's POV

"Please…please forgive me," Jason slurred as he wrapped his arms around me.

I grimaced as he reeked of liquor. I allowed him to hold me as he continued to mutter incoherently about how sorry he was. I almost felt bad for him.

"I appreciate the apology, but…"

"So, you forgive me! We'll be mates again!" Jason said frantically.

"No, no we won't," I told him and then he went back into begging. He continued to beg for another ten minutes. My patience was running thin. I had come to the lounge to get a break from the noise. I hadn't expected Jason to follow me and hug me.

Then, the roar ripped through the lounge. The walls shook from the force of the roar. I didn't need to turn to see who it was. " Dammit. I have the worst luck tonight," I muttered to myself.

Startled, Jason stepped back from me as if I had burned him. We both looked at Nolan. Leslie hung limply in his arms. Jealousy began building up in me, but I pushed it down. I knew nothing was going on with Leslie and Nolan. It was just the mate bond making me feel like that.

“Nolan, this is not what it looks like,” I told him, but his full attention was on Jason.

His eyes were filled with anger. I could feel his Alpha aura rolling off him.

“Jason was just apologizing,” I said as Nolan entered the room and lowered Leslie carefully onto the couch.

I came over and kneeled next to Leslie. She was completely unconscious. “What happened?” I asked.

Nolan didn’t answer. He was on Jason as soon as I closed my mouth. Nolan caught Jason by the throat as Jason attempted to flee

the room.

“Nolan!” I shouted. “What are you doing?! Stop it!”

He didn’t respond. Jason gasped for air as Nolan tightened his grip. Jason swung at Nolan’s face before gripping Nolan’s wrist as

he tried to break free.

“Let him go!” I grabbed Nolan’s arm, attempting to pry his hand from Jason’s neck. “You’re choking him.”

The tendons in Jason’s neck strained as he struggled to breathe. Jason’s face was starting to turn blue.

“Nolan!” I exclaimed as I pulled harder at his arm. “You’re going to kill him!”

The words seemed to finally get through to him. Nolan blinked as if coming out of a daze. He released Jason with a hard shove, Jason hit the floor and coughed violently as he clutched his neck.

“Get out,” Nolan growled. “Now!”

Jason looked up, breathing hard. His eyes were wide with fear. Then, Jason pushed himself up and stumbled toward the door.

Nolan followed him to the doorway. “Stay away from her,” he warned. “Or I won’t stop next time.”

Jason didn’t argue. He quickly scurried away. Nolan closed the door again.

“What were you thinking? You could’ve killed him,” I said.

“Why didn’t you push him away?” Nolan asked with his back to me.

“What?!”

Nolan turned around and said, “You let him touch you at will. Why didn’t you stop him?”

“Because he was drunk,” I said. “He wasn’t trying to hurt me. He wanted to apologize.”

“Apologize?” Nolan scoffed. “Is that what you call what he was doing?”

“That’s what it was,” I said firmly. “You’re reading too much into it.”

“You’re naïve if you think that,” Nolan retorted. “Have you forgotten what he tried to do before or did you not care this time?”

The memory of Jason trying to force his mark on me came back. How dare he throw that back up! I took a step towards Nolan.

“Don’t talk to me like that,” I snapped.

“Or what?” Nolan growled, taking a step toward me. The space between us felt smaller. His scent filled my senses. I wanted to step back, but I couldn’t back down now.

“This is Silverfang territory. If you try to hurt me, you’ll regret it…”

Nolan didn’t flinch. “I’m not afraid of any consequences.” I felt his aura spiking. It didn’t slam into me as if he had done an Alpha command, but it was pushing against me.

“Nolan,” I said quietly, “don’t use the mate bond to force my choice.”

“Who said anything about force?”

Nolan moved closer, and I finally stepped back. My back hit the door and I realized I had nowhere to go. Nolan pressed his hand beside my head against the door. He leaned down. His face was inches from mine.

“Let me leave,” I said.

“I’m not holding you here,” Nolan responded.

My hands pressed against his chest, trying to create space, but touching him was a bad idea. The mate bond pulsed with intensity. I wanted to feel more of him. I wanted to kiss him.

“Nolan…”

He leaned forward and kissed me the next second. I attempted to push him again, but he didn't budge. His other hand gripped the back of my neck. I gasped in surprise and Nolan took the opportunity to deepen the kiss.

I turned my face away, breaking the kiss. "Stop it," I whispered, but it sounded weak, almost pleading for him to continue.

Nolan didn't move back. His hand rose to my jaw, tilting my face toward his again. "Tell me you don't want this," he said quietly. "Tell me you don't want me to kiss you again."

"I am not going to play this game with you," I whispered.

"You can lie to yourself all you want, but not to me," Nolan said, "I can smell you, Talia. I know you liked it as much as I did."

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

"Talia?" Solon called from the other side of the door. "Is Leslie in there? Open the door!"

I felt relieved hearing my brother's voice, but that was short lived. I expected Nolan to back away, but he stayed where he was. His breath was hot against my skin.

Solon knocked again, louder this time. "Talia? I know you are in there!"

I tried to step forward, but Nolan shifted, blocking me completely. I felt his breath on my neck and a chill go up my spine. What was he planning to do?

CHARITA ONE HUNDRED & FORTY SIX

"Remember who you belong to," he whispered.

“Don’t do this,” I said, tears burning in my eyes.

“Promise me you’ll remember you’re mine,” he murmured, his mouth moving down to my neck.

From the hallway, Solon’s tone hardened. “Talia, I’m opening the door…”

“Please move,” I begged. “You’re crossing a line.”

Nolan nibbled at my neck, and I bit my lip to keep from moaning.

“I will if you don’t say it,” Nolan muttered as he ran his tongue up my neck.

The metallic sound of a key slid into the lock.

My heart jumped, and the tears I’d been holding back finally fell.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & FORTY SEVEN

Talia’s POV

The door burst open.

Nolan let go of me in the same instant and stepped back as if nothing had happened. I wiped my tears quickly. My hands trembled, but I hid them behind my back.

“What’s going on in here?” Solon asked as he stepped into the room.

Leslie stirred on the couch, mumbling faintly. Nolan adjusted the blanket around her shoulders and checked her pulse as though the last few minutes had never happened.

“Leslie? What’s wrong with her?” Solon asked. His eyes were fixed on Nolan. I could hear a low growl coming from Solon.

Nolan noticed as well. With a raised eyebrow, Nolan backed away from Leslie. I stepped in between Nolan and Solon.

“Leslie had too much to drink,” I said quickly. “She got upset because you were late, and I brought her here to rest.”

Solon frowned, glancing between Nolan and me with suspicion. “You brought her here?”

“Yes. She didn’t want to go back to her cabin,” I added. “Nolan was already here when I arrived.”

I didn’t like lying to Solon, but I had enough drama for one night. I had to keep Nolan and Solon levelheaded. Both were in overdrive with their mates around. Silverfang didn’t need a scandalous situation.

“I just saw Jason walk out of here,” Solon said flatly.

“Yes, um, he was apologizing again,” I explained casually.

Solon turned his focus on Nolan and asked, “And why was the door locked, Alpha Nolan?”

“The lock jammed,” Nolan said as he shrugged. “I tried to fix it. It must’ve caught from the inside.”

Solon didn’t look convinced. His eyes narrowed slightly, but he didn’t press the issue. He walked over to the couch and crouched

beside Leslie,

Solon glanced up at Nolan. “I don’t know why you decided to volunteer to be my sister’s mate, but my warning to you doesn’t change. You need to stay away from her I think.”

“Prince Solon that is up to the Princess,” Nolan responded with a sneer.

“Nolan, this will be the last time I warn you,” Solon said firmly. “Stay away from Talia.”

Nolan looked as if he wanted to respond, but he thought better of it.

Solon carefully gathered Leslie into his arms and turned to me. “I’m taking her to the hospital wing. She’ll be fine after some rest.”

“I’ll come with you,” I said, slipping past Nolan.

As we moved toward the door, Nolan didn’t say another word. He sat down on the couch as if nothing had happened between us. His calmness unnerved me more than his anger had.

Solon walked ahead. Leslie’s face was nuzzled into Solon’s neck causing him to blush.

“You don’t need to come all the way,” he said gently, “I’ll take her from here. You should rest. Long night, huh?”

I forced a smile. “Yes, but I’ll be fine.”

“Still,” he said, “go back to your room. You’ve had enough excitement for one night.”

“Alright, that’s true,” I said.

“Good night, Talia,” Solon said as he headed down the corridor toward the hospital wing.

I stood there for a moment, wondering what to do. Nolan's warning kept repeating in my mind. "Remember who you belong to."

I didn't know if I wanted to cry or scream in excitement.

I hated that it still made my heart race.

He'd said he wouldn't mark me, that he wouldn't claim me the way other Alphas would, but he still found a way to remind me that I was "his." I didn't understand what he wanted. If he truly meant to let me go, then why keep pulling me back?

"He is giving so many mixed signals. Does he think the mate bond is a game?" I muttered to myself, feeling frustrated.

I couldn't go back to my room. Not yet. I would only toss and turn all night.

The bar near the courtyard was still open. The air smelled of citrus and smoke when I stepped inside. A few wolves sat around the counter, talking quietly. I took a seat at the far end.

"Something strong, please," I ordered.

The bartender slid the glass toward me, and I stared at the amber liquid for a long time before drinking. I coughed hard as the burn felt like a punch to the neck. It was much stronger than I expected, but I welcomed the burn. It would temporarily get my mind off Nolan.

For a while, I just sat there.

My reflection in the mirror behind the bar looked almost normal. My hair was slightly messy, eyes were still red, but otherwise I looked composed.

"Talia?"

I turned. Colin stood at the entrance. He looked relieved to see me. He walked over quickly and sat down next to me with a concerned smile.

“There you are,” he said. “I’ve been looking everywhere. Are you alright?”

I swallowed hard and forced a small nod. “I’m fine.”

Colin frowned the next moment. “You’re not. Your eyes are red. What happened?”

“Nothing,” I said too quickly.

“Talia.” His voice softened. “Please don’t shut me out. Talk to me.”

Something about his concern and his calmness broke through the wall I’d been holding up all night. The tears I’d tried to stop returned, slipping down my cheeks before I could wipe them away. Why couldn’t Nolan be like Colin? Why couldn’t Colin be my mate? 1

“Talia,” he said softly, gripping my hand tightly. “What happened?”

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & FORTY EIGHT

Talia’s POV

“Talia,” he said gently, “you’re safe now. Just tell me what happened.”

I shook my head. “I can’t. It’s too much. I don’t want to burden you with this.”

He didn’t press. He just waited. He continued to hold my hand gently.

I finally whispered as he wiped my tears, “Nolan. It was Nolan.”

Colin’s brow furrowed. “What about him? What did he do?”

“He’s my second chance mate,” I admitted. “He should’ve rejected me, but he didn’t. He… threatened me instead.”

“Threatened you?” Colin repeated.

I nodded, staring down at the counter. “He told me to remember that I belong to him. He said it like it was an order.”

Colin exhaled slowly. “Is that all he said?”

“He thinks the bond gives him permission to do whatever he wants,” I continued. “That it’s his right.”

“It isn’t. You know that, right?” Colin said. “A mate bond is not a command. It’s a choice.”

“It doesn’t feel like that to me,” I whispered. “It doesn’t feel sacred. It feels like it’s binding me to someone I can’t fully trust yet.”

Colin stared at his drink. He sighed deeply before saying, “He’s wrong for you.”

“I know.”

“Then, why not reject him?” Colin suggested.

“Because I can’t stop thinking about him,” I admitted finally, and hated myself for that. “Even when I’m angry. Even when I hate what he says. There’s something in me that still reaches back.”

“That’s the bond,” Colin said softly.

“Probably,”

“But that doesn’t mean it owns you,” he said. “You still decide what to do with it,”

“I want to believe that,” I said. “But I just want to ignore it.”

“Don’t ignore it. You confront it. You look at it for what it is. Yes, it is sacred, but it is not a command from the Moon Goddess.”

I turned my glass slowly between my hands. The melted ice shimmered in the low light, distorting my reflection. “You make it sound easy,” I complained.

“Probably because I am not the one going through it,” Colin said with a shrug.

I smiled faintly. “You always know what to say.”

“I’ll try,” he said.

The bartender passed by and refilled a drink two seats away, pretending not to notice us. The smell of citrus peel and alcohol hung in the air.

“If he ever threatens you again,” Colin said after a moment, “I’ll make sure he regrets it.”

I looked up sharply. “No. Don’t do that.”

“Then at least promise me you won’t be alone with him,” Colin said.

“You sound like Solon,” I said flatly.

“And Solon is right. You can’t trust someone who uses fear to get what they want.”

I nodded slowly. “I’ll be careful.”

He seemed to relax a little. “Good. That’s all I needed to hear.”

For a moment, we sat quietly. I finished my drink and sat the glass down. Then I said, “He told me he wouldn’t mark me. That he didn’t want to force me. But then he keeps saying I’m his. Why say that if he doesn’t even want me?”

“Because he doesn’t know the difference between wanting and possessing,” Colin explained. “He’s used to obtaining things through power.”

I didn’t know if I believed that. “Maybe you’re right,” I muttered.

“I know I am,” he said lightly, trying to soften the weight of it. “You don’t have to let him define what the bond is for you.” “I wish it were that simple.”

“It really is that simple. You’re the Princess. You should be dictating the relationship, not him.”

I sighed. “You make it sound like I’m braver than I am.”

“You are,” Colin said simply. “That’s why I like you. You just forget sometimes. If I were your mate, I’d never treat you like that. I’d treasure you.”

The words caught me off guard. I looked at him, unsure what to say.

“Colin…”

He smiled faintly, “Don’t worry. I know the Moon Goddess didn’t exactly check with me before deciding fates.”

I laughed. “You always ruin serious moments.”

“It’s a defense mechanism,” he said, smiling more easily now.

We sat there for a while longer. I could feel the exhaustion setting in. Talking to Colin had calmed my mind and now I needed to sleep.

“You know you don’t have to deal with this alone,” Colin said.

“I’m used to it,” I said quietly.

“See, that’s the problem. You shouldn’t be used to it,” Colin countered.

I hesitated, “Then what do I do?”

Colin studied me for a long moment before saying, “You stop reacting to him. You start getting proactive.”

“Proactive?”

He nodded. “You can’t spend the rest of the week letting him get to you. The King will expect you to make a choice on your own not because you were bullied into a decision. You need space to assess and make the best decision for yourself.”

“Again, how am I supposed to do that?”

Colin smirked and said, “If Nolan’s one of the Alphas in this contest, then he’s playing to win. You might as well stop playing defense. Go on the offensive. Make him work for it.”

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & FORTY NINE

Talia's POV

The guest wing was quiet other than the sound of birds chirping from the open windows. I had planned to visit the hospital first thing in the morning. Leslie hadn't left my mind since last night.

Halfway down the hall, the door to Marco's room and Della stepped out. She looked surprised to see me, then smiled wide and bright. I could see a fresh mate mark on her neck.

"Oh, Talia, what are you doing over here in the guest wing?" Della asked.

"Seems like you had a wild night," I replied. "Congratulations."

Della touched it instinctively and grinned. "Is it that obvious?"

"Yes," I said. "So, did Marco take the initiative? Or did you make this happen?"

"He did. He damn near pounced me last night," she said, laughing under her breath. "I was just on my way to grab breakfast before he wakes up again."

"I'm happy for you both," I said honestly.

"What are you doing over here and up so early? You're walking like you have somewhere serious to be," Della asked again.

"I'm going to the hospital to check on Leslie," I said.

Della's smile faded and she asked, "What happened to her?"

"She drank too much last night at the bonfire," I said. "Nolan found her before she collapsed and carried her into the lounge. After everything that happened, Solon took her to the hospital to rest."

Della frowned. “Poor thing. I didn’t even see her there. I would’ve stopped her if I had seen her.”

“She wasn’t near the crowd,” I said. “I think she wanted to be alone and overdid it.”

“That sounds like her,” Della said quietly as we started down the corridor together. “I still don’t understand why she keeps holding Solon at arm’s length. He’s patient and kind. You can tell he loves her.”

“I think she knows that. I think she’s more worried about the bond,” I said.

Della glanced at me. “You think she’s scared?”

“I think she’s uncertain,” I suggested. “After suppressing it for so long, I am sure the pull from the bond is overwhelming. She has been on her own for so long. Leslie’s probably afraid she’ll lose herself to the bond.”

Della nodded slowly. “Then maybe we can help her understand it and not fight against it.”

“That’s what I was hoping,” I said.

We reached the hospital wing later and signed in at the reception desk. Nurses moved quietly from room to room. The receptionist smiled kindly and said, “Healer Leslie is in Room 224.”

As we approached her door, we could hear muffled voices from inside the room.

“You’re not leaving yet,” a nurse said gently but firmly.

“I’m fine,” Leslie responded: “I don’t need to stay here.”

Della opened the door, and we stepped inside.

Leslie was sitting upright on the bed. Her hair was a tangled mess on her head. The blanket and sheets were thrown haphazardly

off the side of the bed. A young nurse stood near the monitor, holding a clipboard.

“You shouldn’t even be out of bed,” the nurse said firmly. “Your vitals still haven’t stabilized.” The nurse finally noticed Della and me. Her eyes lit up with relief.

“Good morning, Princess. Please tell her she can’t leave just yet,” the nurse pleaded.

I nodded to the nurse. “You can leave now.”

The nurse quickly left the room to let Della, and I handle the situation.

“Good morning,” I said, turning my attention back to Leslie. “We came to check on you.”

Surprise crossed her face before Leslie sighed and said, “You didn’t have to.”

“We wanted to,” Della said quickly as she sat down. “How are you feeling?”

“I’ve felt worse,” Leslie said dryly. “Barely a headache.”

“Why did you overdo it? You were supposed to hang out with us last night,” Della said.

Leslie looked toward the door instead of answering. “Has Solon already left?”

“He went to meet with the healers about your results,” I said. “He didn’t want to wake you.” “That sounds like him,” Leslie murmured. “Quiet, polite, and impossible to shake.”

Della smiled faintly. “He was worried. That’s not something to apologize for.”

“I didn’t ask him to worry,” Leslie muttered as she pushed her hair back and avoided our eyes.

“You scared him last night,” I said gently. “You had alcohol poisoning. You could have stopped breathing before anyone found you.”

“I didn’t mean for it to go that far,” Leslie explained. “I just wanted everything to quiet down for a while. And, he’s late…”

Della’s tone softened. “Hey, you’re supposed to come to us if you need to vent or need a break. You didn’t have to deal with it on your own.”

“That’s the problem,” Leslie said as she rubbed her hand over her face. “The more time I have to think, the more I realize I’m not built for this place or for him,”

“You don’t mean that,” Della and I said at the same time.

“You care about him. You wouldn’t be this torn if you didn’t,” Della continued and I nodded.

“Caring isn’t the same as wanting. You can care about someone and still know you can’t give them what they need,” Leslie responded.

Her words struck a chord with me, I began thinking about Nolan and I quickly suppressed the thoughts. I needed to focus on helping Leslie.

“Maybe this isn’t the time to decide anything,” I said. “You just woke up.”

“This is exactly the time,” Leslie argued. “When you see things clearly, there’s no one left to convince you otherwise.”

Della stepped forward. “Leslie, please. Whatever you’re thinking, don’t do it while you’re still in pain.”

“I’m not in pain,” Leslie said softly. “I’m just tired. There’s a difference.”

There was a knock at the door. The door opened and Solon entered. Seeing Leslie awake, Solon’s eyes lit up.

“Thank the Moon Goddess, you’re awake,” Solon said. “Wait. Are you getting up? Do you need help getting to the restroom or something?”

“I am getting ready to leave Silverfang,” Leslie responded.

“You can’t. You haven’t fully recovered,” Solon said.

“You don’t get to tell me what to do!” Leslie snapped.

“Leslie, I’m just trying…” Solon started but Leslie interrupted him.

“I, Leslie of Windpaw, reject you, Solon of Silverfang, as my fated mate!”

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & FIFTY

Talia’s POV

For a moment, no one spoke. Della and I just stood there, too stunned to speak.

“Say it,” Solon said, breaking the silence. “Say it again.”

His eyes were unfocused. He was taking deep, ragged breaths as he managed the pain of feeling his mate reject him.

“I don’t need to,” Leslie stated. “You heard me.”

Solon took a step forward and growled, “Say it!”

“Solon, stop!” I moved between them, raising my hands. “You need to leave.”

Solon eyes flicked toward me. His wolf was close to the surface, ready to take control. There was hurt in his eyes that made my

heart ache.

“She rejected me,” he said, disbelief twisting his tone. “What have I done to deserve that?”

“She doesn’t mean it,” I said quickly. “She’s panic. You can’t make decisions right now.”

“I have to accept it,” he said, shaking his head. “If the bond’s gone, it’s gone.”

Panic tightened my chest. Accepting a rejection in anger could destroy him and her. “No! The bond is still there. Until you accept it, it will be weakened but it will remain.”

Della caught on immediately. She slipped to his side and took his arm. “Solon, come with me. Let’s get you outside. Please.”

He didn’t move at first. His gaze stayed locked on Leslie, who sat motionless. Then, slowly, he let Della steer him toward the

door.

“I’ll talk to her,” I said, meeting his eyes. “I promise, brother. Just breathe, ok?”

Solon nodded before leaving with Della. The door shut quietly behind them.

“What the hell were you thinking?” I asked.

Leslie glared at me and said, “That’s my question for you! You shouldn’t have stopped him.”

“Yes, I must. Of course, I wasn’t going to let him decide before he even has a good conversation with you,” I argued.

Her eyes flashed. “It was my choice.”

“And it was his too,” I said, keeping my tone calm. “But choices made in pain sometimes become regrets,”

“You don’t get to lecture me, Talia,” Leslie snapped, “I saved your damn life, remember? You need to learn to mind your own business and stop overstepping!”

“Yes, you saved my life, and I owe you more than to stand by and let you ruin yours,” I countered.

Leslie’s eyes narrowed. “So now you think you know what’s right for me?”

“No,” I said. “But I know what it looks like when someone gives up before trying.”

Leslie let out a bitter laugh. “Spare me the speeches, Talia, You sound like everyone else who thinks the bond fixes all problems.”

“It doesn’t fix everything,” I agreed. “But it can be a beautiful thing if you accept it.

“Like Jason?” she asked sharply. “Was the mate bond with him beautiful?”

I kept a neutral expression, but the words stung. It was a low blow, but I knew she was just lashing out. “At first, it was. Or perhaps I was just blind to his lies,” I responded truthfully. “That’s why I can tell the difference now. Solon isn’t like him.”

“You can’t know that,” Leslie argued. “He’s good to you because you’re his sister.”

“I know that. I have known him my entire life,” I said. “Solon has had every reason to give up on people and never has. He still

believes in others even when it hurts him.”

“I don’t believe you,” Leslie muttered.

“You don’t have to. You can ask anyone here in Silverfang. You can even ask Jason,” I said. “He’s stubborn, yes, but not cruel. You don’t have to love him right now. You just have to give him the chance.”

“I can’t,” Leslie said.

“Yes, you can. Why are you so afraid….”

“Because my father betrayed my mother!” Leslie burst out, tears spilling before she could stop them.

I froze, caught off guard. I hesitated only for a second before attempting to hug her. She pushed me away. “Don’t.”

I nodded and stepped back, giving Leslie space. I waited quiet, patient until she found her voice.

“My parents were destined mates,” Leslie began. “My father was a warrior. Strong, respected. Everyone said the bond would make any wolf loyal, but no, not my father. He fell for someone else: a damn rogue. Can you believe that? He forced my mother to save her when she was injured, made her use her healing

ability, even her own blood to do it. It drained her. She died a week later. He told me it was the Goddess's will and that bonds can break when hearts change. I stopped believing that stupid bond that day."

I wiped away the tears that I didn't realize had fallen. "I'm sorry, Leslie."

She laughed softly, the sound hollow. "You don't have to be sorry. Just don't tell me destiny means anything."

"I never said anything about destiny," I said. "I said to give the bond a chance. You can't believe all men are cheaters like your

father."

"Prove me wrong then," Leslie said defiantly.

"My father, for instance, never took another mate after my mother died. He never cheated on her," I said.

Leslie didn't answer right away, so I continued.

"Solon isn't your father. He would rather die than betray the mate bond. You don't understand how much he has been waiting for his mate, for you."

"I can't go through that again," Leslie said finally. "I can't watch someone I care about turn into a monster again."

"You won't know unless you give him the chance," I said. "You don't owe him love. Just time. One week:"

"One week?" Leslie repeated skeptically.

“That’s what I’m giving my suitors, you know it,” I said. “A week to prove they’re worth trusting. If I can do it, so can you.”

Leslie studied me for a long moment. Her eyes softened slightly. “You really think he’ll wait for me?”

“Of course. What’s another week for someone who has been waiting for all his life?” I answered.

Leslie finally leaned back against the pillows. Her body relaxed into the bed as she released the tension.

“One week,” she murmured. “Then we’ll see,”

I nodded, a quiet smile tugging at my lips. “That’s all I ask.”