Barren Luna 151

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & FIFTY ONE

Jason's POV

I woke to a sharp pain behind my eyes and pain in my back. The sunlight that slipped through the curtains made my head throb. I realized I was on the floor, and I didn't know how I got back to my room.

My memories came back slowly as I brushed my teeth. I remember begging Talia to take me back. Then, Nolan choked me. I could see the bruises on my neck were slowly healing.

There was a knock at my door.

"Alpha Jason?" Henry said as he entered.

"Yeah," I said, sitting up slowly. "Come in."

"You look terrible," he said.

"You always know how to brighten a day," I muttered, rubbing my temples.

"How much did you drink?"

"Enough to regret my decisions," I groaned. "What's going on? Why are you here so early?"

"It's 2pm." Henry crossed the room and placed a folded note on the table. "Your father left for Shadowclaw before dawn. He told me to remind you of your purpose here."

I grunted. "Let me guess. Win Talia back.".

“Yes. He expects you to make sure she marries you,” Henry said.

“Of course he does.” I leaned back, the headache pulsing again. “Does he ever get tired of giving orders?”

“Never,” Henry said as he reached into his jacket and handed me a small, wrapped package. “He also told me to give you this.”

I frowned and tore open the paper. Inside was a small glass vial filled with pale green liquid. A faint scent came from the vial. It was sweet but it made me slightly dizzy.

“Careful,” Henry said quickly. He took the vial and placed it on the table. “You don’t want to breathe that in.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“It’s called Moonlust,” he checked and finally said.

“I’ve heard of that before,” I said, “Isn’t it a banned aphrodisiac? Why would my father give me this?”

“Yes, it’s an old herb mixture used by healers generations ago,” Henry explained. “A few drops can trigger heat in a she-wolf.”

I stared at him. “And my father sent this to me?”

“He did,” Henry said. “He said it would help.”

I looked at the vial again. “Help how?”

“If Talia drank even a small amount, she would be more compliant. You mark her while it was in her system, the mate bond could return,” Henry said. “Permanently,”

I sat there, staring at the glass with a smile, “Then, she would stop being angry with me.”

The bond would no longer be vacant from my mind. I would feel whole again. Talia would no longer be resentful. Our bond would be solid. The competition would end there. Colin’s patient smiles erased, and Nolan’s dark looks would be meaningless.

Henry shook his head and said, “You’re forgetting that she hated you. So, I’m afraid-”

“Can’t you not kill joy for one second?” I groaned.

“I’m serious, Jason. If she found out you drugged her, she…”

“She won’t,” 1 interrupted him. “Once the bond is back, she’ll understand.”

“Understand what?” Henry asked. “That you used a banned herb to take away her choice?”

“She loved me once,” I said quietly. “She still does. I just know it.”

Henry exhaled. “Jason, that isn’t love. It’s guilt and pride. If you use this, she will never forgive you.”

“Shut up. You don’t know that.”

“I do,” he said. “She doesn’t forgive deceit. You would be no different from Viki.”

The accusation stung and I growled, “Watch what you say. I’m nothing like that bitch.”

“How is what you’re planning not any different from Viki? You’re using deceit to get what you want,” Henry argued.

‘He has a point. It would be hypocritical of you to do this to our mate,’ my wolf muttered.

‘Don’t tell me you’re against me too,’ I responded.

‘I want her back as much as you do, but not like this,’ my wolf said.

I rubbed the bruise on my neck. “If I do nothing, she’ll end up with Nolan or Colin,” I said.

“This is not how you handle this. This isn’t you, Jason. Maybe…maybe it is time for you to put your father in his place. You’re the Alpha now and you should not let him dictate your actions.” He pointed toward the vial. “Throw it out before it destroys what’s left of your dignity.”

I didn’t move.

Henry sighed. “You asked me once why I stay by your side. It’s because I remember who you were before all of this. Don’t prove me wrong for doing that.”

He turned and left the room. I looked at the vial again. I picked it up. The liquid swirled inside.

Maybe Henry was right, but I still wanted what my father wanted. I wanted Talia beside me.

I placed the vial back into its box and slid it into the drawer. For now, it will stay there.

I couldn’t shake the memory of Talia at the bonfire and the way she looked at me when I apologized. She hadn’t pulled away when I hugged her. That meant something.

Maybe she still cared. Maybe she could forgive me once the bond returned.

For now, I will wait. But if the next conversation didn’t go the way I wanted, I knew exactly where that vial would be.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & FIFTY TWO

Talia's POV

The afternoon sun hung high when I reached the training grounds. At the far end, Solon stood alone. Sweat glistened on his skin as he drove his fists into a wooden target. The dull thud echoed through the field again and again. Each strike harder than the last.

As I approached, I could smell his blood on the wind. "Solon," I called, but he did not stop.

Blood streaked from a split across his knuckles, and his chest rose and fell in short bursts. His arms were covered in bruises. I watched for a moment before I approached him.

"That is enough," I said firmly.

He ignored me and threw another punch. The wood cracked.

"Solon." I caught his wrist. "You will break your hand."

He pulled away but did not strike again. Sweat slid down the side of his neck, and his breathing remained uneven. He didn't meet my gaze as he slowly walked over to his bag to grab his water bottle.

"What do you want, Talia?" he asked flatly.

"I came to check on you," I said.

"I don't need you checking on me," he replied. "I'm fine."

"You have been out here for hours."

“I needed a distraction.”

“Thinking about Leslie?”

“No.”

“Liar.”

I studied him quietly as he drank his water. When he finished, he dropped the bottle to the ground.

“Has she already left Silverfang?” Solon finally asked.

“No,” I said. “She is still in the hospital.”

He gave a short, bitter laugh. “That is a surprise.”

“I convinced her to stay,” I said. “She agreed to get to know you slowly.”

“You should not have interfered. She told me how she really felt,” Solon stated. “If you had not stopped us, the rejection would have been complete by now.”

“You don’t mean that.” I snapped.

“I do,” he said quietly. “You cannot force someone to love you,”

“I am not forcing anyone,” I said, “I am giving her time to think without pain clouding her judgment.”

Solon gave me a confused look. “She felt pain? How did I hurt her? She’s the one lashing out.”

“No, that’s not what I mean,” I said. “Her pain does not come from you. It comes from what happened before.”

“Before? Goddess, am I being punished for the decisions of an ex-lover?” Solon huffed.

I shook my head. “Worse. Her father betrayed the mate bond with her mother. Her father even forced her mother to save his lover which ended up killing her mother.”

Solon’s eyes widened. “She told you that?”

“She did,” I said. “That is why she does not trust mate bonds. It is not you. It is what she saw growing up. She is afraid the bond will turn her into her mother, who was devoted to someone who might one day choose to betray her.”

Solon sank onto the bench beside me and rested his elbows on his knees. “Is her father still alive? I’d like to punch him in the throat.”

“That I do not know,” I laughed.

“No wonder she looked terrified when she realized I was her mate,” Solon sighed.

“She was trying to protect herself,” I said. “You should not take it personally.”

“That is easier said than done,” Solon stated. “Goddess, I feel like an asshole now.”

“Don’t. You didn’t know,” I said. “And for what it’s worth, she doesn’t think you’re an asshole. Leslie’s just scared to let anyone in.”

“I suppose I owe you for stopping me earlier,” Solon said.

“Yes, yes you do,” I responded with a laugh.

He nodded and stared at the training ring. “Do you think this will really work?”

“As long as you don’t rush this, it will. You have to be open and honest about everything even if you think it is insignificant,” I explained.

“I can do that.”

“I know you can.” I stood. “Now go see the healer.”

“They’ll heal on their own anyways,”

“Not if they get infected. Now, go.”

Solon groaned but stood anyway. “Yes, Princess.” He began walking away, then he stopped and turned around. “Thank you, Talia.”

I smiled and nodded. If I could ensure that Solon was happy and this worked out between him and Leslie, that would be enough for me.

When Solon finally left, I stayed a moment longer and let the breeze cool my skin. I should have dressed in my workout clothes. Sparring would really help with clearing my head. I turned toward the rose garden.

The scent of roses thickened the closer I came,

From a distance, I noticed movement near the gate. Two guards stood at the entrance. Their posture was stiff and alert. Nolan and Jason stood nearby. Their voices were raised, and they were clearly arguing.

Even from across the path, I could hear Jason’s tone sharpen, and Nolan’s reply matched it. The guards looked uneasy, caught between stepping in and pretending not to hear.

“You idiot, she already told you her decision,” I heard Nolan growl.

“What I talk about with the Princess is none of your damn business,” Jason barked back.

I rolled my eyes. What is going on now? Why couldn’t they just stay calm for one day?

I sighed and walked toward them. When I reached the gate, both of them turned.

“Shut up,” I said. My voice was calm but firm. “What do you two want from me?”

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & FIFTY THREE

Talia’s POV

Both men fell silent at my words. The guards stood alert while keeping a careful distance. Jason responded first saying, “Hey, I came to ask you out.”

“Out of the question,” Nolan growled.

Jason did not look at him when he said, “I was not asking you.”

I could feel Nolan’s Alpha aura rolling off him. The guards exchanged a glance. I was not interested in watching them fight each other.

“Why? You have already apologized multiple times. What’s more to say?” I asked.

“There is something that I need to tell you in private. We can go into Fangvale. It’ll be neutral ground,” Jason replied.

“It is ridiculous. She already told you no. You need to go home,” Nolan interjected.

I frowned at Nolan trying to control the situation. I remembered Colin's plan when he said: "Keep your distance from Nolan. He'll reveal his feelings in time." This was my chance to show him I could hold the boundary, no matter how confusing his signals were.

"Since I already spent time with Nolan at the bonfire," I said. "Today I am going with Jason."

Nolan's eyes narrowed in disbelief, but he did not speak. I held his stare for a moment to make sure he understood that I was serious about this. Then, I turned my attention back to Jason.

"Really? Are you serious?" Jason asked.

"Hurry up or I'll change my mind," I snapped, walking past him. I decided that we would walk to the nearest café. It would help me calm down and hopefully, Jason would just tell me what he wanted to say on the way there.

Unfortunately, I was not lucky. Jason stayed silent the entire time we walked. It took us about 15 minutes to get to Fangvale. People moved in pairs and small groups as they entered and exited shops.

Jason guided me to a modern cafe. Inside, soft jazz played. A host greeted us and led us to a booth with half-height privacy panels. The cushions were firm and clean. A ceiling vent kept the air cool.

We sat across from each other. A server arrived with two bright drinks in tall glasses, one pink and one gold, each with thin slices of fruit floating near the top.

"What is it?" I asked.

"A house mix," Jason said. He picked mine up and took a sip. Then, he took a sip from his drink. "See. Safe,"

I kept my hands folded and said, "Drink more than a sip."

He took a longer drink and set the glass down, “Do you trust me now? I would never hurt you,”

I lifted the glass and tried a small sip. It tasted sweet at first, and then floral. A gentle warmth moved down my throat. I set the glass back on the coaster and watched him.

“This is not a date, you know it,” I said. “I am not promising you anything.”

“I understand,” he said. “I am grateful for the hour.”

“What do you want to talk about?” I asked.

“You look different,” Jason said. “You look stronger than before.”

“Nothing about me has changed, Jason,” I responded. “I am just exhausted.”.

“You are still beautiful,” Jason continued and I rolled my eyes. Compliments from him didn’t come without a price.

I took another sip from my drink. “Let’s get to it, Jason. What do you want?”

“Can’t I compliment you?” Jason teased.

“No, you cannot,” I responded. “You’re wasting my time.”

He did not argue. He traced a finger along the rim of his glass and looked up again. “I am sorry for what I did. I have said it, but I will say it again because it matters. I was selfish. I listened to the wrong people. I hurt you.”

The apology sounded genuine this time. I hated to admit that his apology moved me this time. I refused to accept it out of

stubbornness.

“You said you wanted lunch,” I said. “Order something.”

Jason smiled faintly and said, “I will. Only if you stop overheating in that jacket.”

“I am not hot,” I said:

“The air here gets heavy in the afternoon,” he said. “Let me help you with it.”

“No.” I said, frowning.

Jason lifted both hands and settled back. “Alright.”

I reached for the menu and then paused. Heat began to rise across my chest and neck. It started as a mild flush and then grew. The vent above us still pushed cool air, yet my skin felt warmer with each breath.

I brushed my hair back from my face. “Why is it so warm in here?”

“I told you it gets hotter,” Jason said. He nodded toward my glass. “It might help to drink more.”

The heat spread lower. My heart began to beat faster. The edges of the room looked too bright. I gripped the table as I tried to steady myself. I had felt this before.

“What is wrong?” Jason asked.

“I do not know,” I said.

“Do you want me to call the server? I can get you some water.”

I shook my head. A pull gathered low in my stomach. I crossed my legs as I began to throb. I knew this feeling. It felt like the onset of heat, and it should not have been happening now.

Jason studied my face. “You are flushed,” he said. “Take off the jacket.”

“I said no,” I answered.

“Let me help,” Jason said as he stood. He walked over to me and reached toward my sleeve.

I pulled back. “Do not touch me,” I growled.

He set his hand down again and lowered his voice. “Talia, you are safe. Breathe.”

The heat continued to climb. My pulse pounded in my ears. The cafe did not feel warm. My body did.

I looked at the drink. The color was bright and innocent on the table. I met his eyes. He did not look away.

My vision blurred at the edges. I pushed my chair back. The legs scraped against the floor.

“What did you order?” I asked as I stood.

“The same as you,” he said. “It is on the menu.”

“Then why do I feel like this?”

“Maybe you skipped breakfast,” he said. “Maybe you are stressed.”

“This is not stress,” I said.

Heat rolled through me in another wave. My throat felt dry. The need to be touched was unbearable.

“Here, drink some more,” Jason said, offering me the drink. I knocked it away from me.

“Did…did you drug me?” I demanded. 1

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & FIFTY FOUR

Talia’s POV

Buttons scattered across the floor. Jason’s hands gripped my shirt with rough impatience. The fabric tore easily beneath his fingers. My shirt fell open, and I gasped at the cool air on my skin.

“Stop it, I…”

His mouth closed over my breast. The pressure jolted through me. I gasped and gripped his shoulders without thinking. The only things I could feel were his breath, the scrape of his teeth, and the heat rolling through my body. I knew this was wrong, but the thought felt distant and out of reach.

“Once our mate bond is restored,” Jason said, his voice low against my skin, “you’ll forgive me. Everything will be back to

normal.”

His voice sounded distorted as if he were speaking underwater. I forced myself to focus on his face, but my vision kept blurring.

“We’re fated mates,” he said. He moved to the other side, and I couldn’t help but moan.

“Stop. This isn’t right,” I managed to say.

“But this IS meant to be. Your body knows it. Your body remembers my touch.”

I tried to push him away, but I only held onto his shoulders tighter. I tried to focus but all I could focus on was the increasing pleasure. My body responded to his touch and shame twisted in my stomach. Even that shame felt muted.

Jason’s hands slid lower over my stomach and hips. Each touch sent a new jolt through me. My back arched without permission. I felt him pulling down my pants.

“That’s it,” he whispered. “Submit to it. Submit to me. My mate…”

His scent did not match the memory my instincts tried to reach for. The wrongness grew clearer, but I could not hold onto the thought long enough to act. It had to be him. It couldn’t be anyone else doing this to me.

Heat and confusion blurred everything. I reached for that voice in my memory and held on to it. I needed it to be him.

“Nolan,” I whispered. “Are you… you going to mark me?”

He was still for a second above me.

Then he kissed me with sudden desperation. His mouth crushed mine, and his teeth caught my lower lip hard enough to sting.

“Yes,” he said against my mouth, “I’ll mark you right now.”

His kisses grew frantic. His grip tightened on my hips, holding me in place while he pressed against me. The heat inside me flared, but my panic increased somehow,

Nolan wouldn't treat me like this. He was never this rough and rude. Even though I knew that I still couldn't do anything. I just needed the heat to stop.

"Please…please make it stop," I moaned.

"I'll make it stop," he growled as he leaned back and fumbled with his belt. "I'll make you forget everyone but me, my love."

Then, the door slammed open with a loud crack.

Nolan's POV

Ten minutes.

I stood across the street from the café staring at the entrance like an idiot for ten full minutes. I could feel my wolf pacing, but he

seemed amused by my predicament.

'You look like a stalker,' he said. "This is pathetic, even for you.'

I shoved my hands into my pockets. The sun pressed against the back of my neck, but I barely felt it. My focus stayed fixed on that door and the fact that she still had not walked out. It doesn't take ten minutes to formally reject someone for good.

"This is what you deserve,' my wolf added. 'You threatened her, cornered her and gave her orders. You made her fear you. Now, she'll choose someone else because of your stupid actions.'

'And you think marking her while in heat was a better option?' I shot back.

‘Yes, she wanted it. You were too much of a coward and-

“Enough,” I muttered, cutting him off.

He was not wrong. I remembered the look in her eyes that day. Anger, defiance, and fear all tangled together in her eyes. I had wanted her to understand the consequences of making herself vulnerable. If she ended up fearing me but she learned to be more careful, I was fine with that.

I checked my watch again. Fifteen minutes. The restlessness under my skin sharpened and then the bond pulsed. It felt like a warning.

My wolf responded immediately. ‘Go inside! Something is wrong!’ he growled.

I crossed the street without looking for cars.

I moved through the entrance with a single purpose: to find Talia. The café smelled like roasted coffee beans, cinnamon, and polished wood. Jazz played quietly from hidden speakers. It only irritated me more.

Then, the sweet scent of roses hit me..

I followed the trail past the counter and into the hall that led to the private booths.

A host stepped in front of me. “Alpha Nolan, it is lovely to have you here, but if you do not have a reservation…”

I ignored the host as he talked. I focused on Talia’s scent. It mixed with something heavy and artificial. The new layer hit my senses like a slap. It was lust.

“Move,” I said. My voice dropped low enough to make him step back.

He lifted his hands. “Sir, I really must insist…”

I set a hand on his shoulder and moved him aside. I did not shove him, but he understood the warning. He stumbled into the wall as I passed.

I reached the end of the hall. I did not touch the handle. I drove my shoulder into the door. It flew open with a loud crack.

Jason stood inside with his pants down. Talia lay beneath him with one of her legs up on his shoulder. Her blouse was torn. Her hair stuck to her forehead from sweat. Her skin was flushed from heat and confusion. Her eyes were glazed over and half closed.

I reached Jason in two steps. My hand closed around his throat before he could speak. I hauled him off her and slammed him into the wall. The impact knocked the air from his lungs. He clawed at my wrist, but it did not matter. I pulled my fist back and drove it into his jaw. Blood splattered across the wall. I struck him again and again. His head hit the panel behind him.

“What do you think you’re doing?” I snarled.

He tried to speak. Blood pooled at the corner of his mouth. “We’re… mates…”

“She is drugged,” I roared, interrupting him.

I drew my arm back for another hit. Talia made a faint sound behind me.

I turned toward her. The scent hit me fully. My body immediately responded. I.wanted to go to her, to claim her. I released Jason and went to Talia. Her body shook and craved my touch. Her movements were uncoordinated. She tried to sit up, but her arms

gave out.

“We are going to the hospital,” I said.

I pulled off my jacket and wrapped it around her shoulders before lifting her into my arms. She pressed her burning face into my neck. Talia began kissing and nibbling on my neck. I could feel myself hardening, but I forced myself to focus.

“Stop, Talia. This isn’t right,” I told her.

“Please,” she whispered. “I need something… anything…”

“I know,” I said, keeping my voice calm. “We are leaving now.”

“Nolan,” she breathed, clinging to me. “Mark me. Please. It hurts.”

My step faltered. Instinct surged through me so fast it almost took my breath away. My wolf roared inside me with a force that rattled my composure.

I could not give her what I want right now. She was drugged and not in her right mind. I wanted her to be fully aware when she

accepted me.

“Not like this,” I said. My voice roughened. “Never like this.”

I pulled her closer and carried her out of the booth.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & FIFTY FIVE

Nolan’s POV

I used the mind link the moment I stepped out of the café with Talia in my arms. Marco answered immediately. ‘Alpha?’

‘Find Solon and Leslie. Tell them to meet me at the hospital right now,’ I said. ‘Talia is in trouble. Then, come to the café and get Jason’s drink. You need to bring it to the hospital for a checkup.’

‘What happened?’ Marco asked.

‘Jason drugged her,’ I responded. ‘He forced her heat to come early.’

I could feel Marco’s anger through the link and he responded, ‘I will handle it.’

I closed the link and focused on carrying Talia to my car. Her skin burned against my neck, and her breath shook with each inhale. She had stopped kissing me and had fallen unconscious. Talia continued to mutter my name. Every part of me wanted to bring her back to my room and claim her, but I knew she would never accept me if I took advantage of her.

Two guards met me in the parking lot and escorted me to the hospital. They opened the doors the second they saw us. I stepped inside without slowing down. A group of nurses ran toward us as soon as I called out to them.

One hurse noticed Talia’s ripped clothing. I noticed the judging looks and ignored them. “The Princess needs help.”

“Alpha Nolan, why is Princess Talia…

“She has been drugged,” I said, cutting her off. “Her heat was forced. She needs help now.”

One of the nurses guided me to an exam room. A stretcher waited beside a set of monitoring equipment. I lowered Talia onto it carefully. They placed cold packs onto her body and checked her vitals. Her eyes opened halfway, but they could not focus.

“Nolan…” she whispered. “Don’t go. It hurts.”

“I know. It’s going to be okay now. They are going to help you,” I reassured her.

A doctor inserted an IV into her arm. Another placed sensors across her chest and checked her temperature. Her whole body remained flushed with heat, and her breathing came in shallow bursts. The staff moved quickly, but it felt like they weren’t

moving fast enough.

The door opened behind me, and Solon rushed into the room with Leslie right behind him. Both froze when they saw her on the

stretcher. I braced for Solon to lash out.

“What happened?” Solon asked.

“Jason drugged her,” I said. “It forced her into heat.”

Solon’s wolf pushed against the surface as I saw his eyes flash with anger. “Did…did he…”

“No, I got there in time,” I said,

Solon looked relieved for only a second before he turned his attention to Talia. “Is she conscious? Can she hear us?” he asked.

“No, she is still unconscious,” the doctor replied,

Leslie walked past him and approached the bed. She looked at the monitor and frowned before placing a hand on Talia’s forehead. “Her temperature is still too high. If we don’t get it down, we risk her getting brain damage,” she said.

“What do you recommend, Healer Leslie?” the doctor asked.

“She needs cooling and a full diagnostic scan. Begin ice therapy and start a cooling agent through the IV,” Leslie replied.

The nurses moved into action. Cold packs were adjusted across Talia’s arms, legs, and torso. The doctor at the foot of the bed

prepared the scan.

Solon looked at me again and asked, “Where is Jason? Did you kill him?”

“Unconscious at the café. I left you the honor of dealing with him,” I answered. “Marco will bring him up along with any evidence.”

As if on cue, the door opened again. Marco stepped inside with a sealed evidence bag with a paper cup sat inside it.

“I brought this straight from the booth,” Marco said. “No one touched it.”

Leslie opened the evidence bag and sniffed it. Her brow furrowed before she handed it to the doctor. “Take this to the lab. Tell them to test for any herb that induces heat,” Leslie ordered.

The doctor ran out with it.

“The drink smelled like Moonlust,” Marco said once the doctor and nurses were out of the room.

Leslie whipped around and said, “Is it true? I didn’t want to believe what I smelled.”

“That’s what I think,” Marco said. “It is my job to identify these things.”

Leslie nodded once and said, “If it is Moonlust, her symptoms will be severe. We will need to get the antidote into her, or someone needs to mark her.”

“What is Moonlust?” Solon asked. “I never heard of that.”

“It is an herb that forces a she-wolf into heat,” Leslie said. “It should never be used without medical supervision. The effects can be dangerous if misused.”

“That son of a bitch,” Solon growled. “You should’ve killed him, Nolan.”

Solon had no idea how much I wanted to, but what mattered more was getting Talia to safety. Before I could answer, the doctor returned with a clipboard. He offered it to Solon. “The drink contained a high concentration of Moonlust.”

“We need to treat her immediately. She is stable for now, but once another wave of heat hits her, we will have to start over. We need to get the antidote into her now,” Leslie said.

Solon moved closer to the bed. “Let me stay with her.”

“No,” Leslie said firmly, “She needs space and calm. You all have to leave the room.”

Solon hesitated, but then he nodded. “Please take care of her. I’m trusting you with my sister.”

“I will,” she said.

My wolf pressed against my control. He didn’t want me to leave Talia alone. I pushed him down. Talia needed care and I would

not allow him to interfere.

The doctor gestured for us to step out. I followed Solon and Marco into the hallway. The door closed behind us, and the noise

inside the room became muted.

Solon began pacing as soon as we were out of the exam room. “I should have never let her leave with him,” he said. “He should not have been anywhere near her.”

“He will not be near her again,” I said.

“What do you mean? I thought you said you didn’t kill him,” Solon said.

“No, I didn’t, so you can’t allow Talia to show any more kindness towards him. He doesn’t deserve it. He never deserved it,” I

said.

Solon turned toward the guard at the desk. “Detain Jason and put him in the dungeon immediately,” he said. “Hold him until further notice. No visitors.”

The guard nodded and left to carry out the order.

Marco crossed his arms. “They already moved him downstairs. He was unconscious after the beating Nolan gave him.”

Solon did not comment on that. He stared at the hospital room door instead. “I do not want to imagine what could have happened.”

I stayed silent. The memory of seeing Talia underneath Jason kept replaying in my mind. Solon didn’t need to know how close I was to being too late.

We waited in silence until the door opened again. Leslie stepped out. Her expression was neutral but exhausted.

“She is stable,” Leslie said. “The suppressant is working. Her temperature is going down.”

Solon let out a breath. “Can we see her?”

“Not yet,” Leslie said. “Let her rest. I will tell you when she wakes up.”

The hallway fell quiet again, and for the first time since arriving, I relaxed.

And I remained surprised that Solon had believed me without hesitation.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & FIFTY SIX

Talia’s POV

My eyes fluttered open. I winced at the bright light from the ceiling. It felt as if someone had wrapped my entire body in weighted blankets. The scent of antiseptic told me immediately that I was in the hospital.

“What the hell happened this time?” I muttered as I blinked to allow my eyes to adjust to the light. I was really getting tired of waking up in the hospital.

A chair scraped softly beside me. Solon leaned forward and rested his arms on the edge of the bed. He looked exhausted. His hair was messy, and he had bags under his eyes.

“Thank Goddess, you’re awake,” Solon said.

I tried to sit up, but my body protested. I felt weak and my arms slightly numb. I rested against the pillow again and shut my eyes for a moment.

“What… happened?” I asked.

My mind felt sluggish, but pieces of memory flashed in and out. I remembered talking with Jason. Then, heat pulsed through my body. Hands were on my body and then someone was kissing me. Did my heat start again?

“What do you remember?” Solon asked.

“I remember going with Jason to the cafe,” I said slowly. “We were in one of the private booths. He bought me something, and he told me it was safe.” I paused and pressed my hand to my forehead. “Then, I felt dizzy. I thought the liquor was too strong. My body got hot, too hot. I couldn’t think straight. I couldn’t stop anything.”

Solon listened without interrupting, but his face darkened.

“I thought Nolan showed up,” I continued quietly. “I think… I think I kissed him. Or maybe he kissed me. I can only remember bits and pieces. I assumed it was because I was in heat. I don’t remember anything after that.”

I looked away in embarrassment and shame. My cheeks burning at the memory of Nolan’s kiss-the thrill I shouldn’t have felt still lingering on my lips. I never thought I would have to talk to my brother about this. Could this get any worse?

Solon took a slow breath before saying, “Talia. It wasn’t Nolan kissing you.”

I looked at him sharply. “What?”

“It was Jason,” Solon said,

“Impossible… What are you saying?”

“He used Moonlust, Talia,” Solon answered.

Hearing the word made nausea rise in my stomach. I covered my mouth and shook my head. “No, no, no no,” I said with my voice cracking. “He…he wouldn’t do that.”

“But he did, Talia. I’m so sorry. I know you don’t want to hear that but it is the truth,” Solon continued. “He caused your heat. Then he tried to force the mark on you to restore your mate bond. He wanted to claim you before anyone could stop him.”

Shame and anger tightened my chest. I had given Jason so many chances and every time he proved how stupid it was to give him

any.

“So… Nolan never…?” I started and paused. I then looked at my lap. A wave of nausea hit me. My hand reached for my neck. There was no mark there and I sighed in relief.

Solon shook his head. “Nolan arrived just in time. He pulled Jason off you before he could mark you.”

“How do you know it was Moonlust? It could’ve been something else,” I reasoned.

“No, we are sure. We got the drink tested. The doctor and Leslie confirmed it was Moonlust,” Solon answered.

“Where is Jason? Did he run again?” I asked.

“No, Jason has already been detained. Father will deal with him,” Solon replied.

I wanted to believe that Jason wouldn’t stoop this low, but I remembered how he tried to force the mark before. I felt shame because Nolan warned me. Nolan told me not to trust Jason and I ignored his warning.

“I was a fool. I should’ve banished him like everyone said,” I muttered.

My heart pounded in my chest. The memories that felt blurred suddenly made sense in the worst way possible. Jason waited until I was vulnerable.

A tear slipped down my cheek before I could stop it. Then, another. Before I knew I was sobbing.

“I’m sorry,” Solon said quietly. “If I could take the memories away, I would.”

“It’s not your fault,” I managed. “I just… I feel disgusted. I don’t even know what happened after that.”

“You don’t need to remember right now,” Solon said. “Leslie said you need rest.”

I covered my face with my hands. Tears slipped through my fingers faster than I could wipe them away.

Solon stood and stepped closer but didn’t touch me. I appreciated that because I didn’t want to be touched right now.

When I finally lowered my hands, I avoided his eyes. “I want to take a shower, brother,” I said. “I need to wash all of this off.” Solon nodded slowly.

All I wanted, more than anything, was water and silence.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & FIFTY SEVEN

Talia’s POV

I sat on the edge of the hospital bed and hated Jason with a passion I had never felt before. The anger sat heavy in my chest and made it hard to breathe. Every part of me felt wrong, and I could not shake the memory of his hands on me or the way my body had responded while I had no control.

Goddess, I wish it had been Nolan touching me.

I wanted to get out of bed and leave the hospital for a shower, but when I pushed myself up, my legs gave out. My knees hit the mattress instead of the floor only because Solon reached me in time and pulled me back up.

“You’re not steady yet,” he said.

“I don’t want to stay here,” I said. “I need to leave. I need to shower. I need-”

I collapsed again and hated how weak I felt, but the weakness made my decision even stronger. I needed to go home. I needed to wash every trace of Jason off my skin.

“I’m calling Della,” Solon said. “You shouldn’t go anywhere alone.”

I nodded. I stared at the floor and tried to breathe steadily. The longer I sat there, the more uncomfortable I felt. Every second in this room reminded me of what happened.

Della rushed in a few minutes later. “Marco told me everything. Are you hurting anywhere?”

“I’m fine,” I said even though I didn’t feel fine at all. “I want to go home and shower.”

She looked at Solon before asking, “Are you sure you don’t want to rest here longer?”

“I can rest at home,” I said.

“Leslie said you should rest here.” Della suggested.

“I don’t care what Leslie said. I can rest in my damn room,” I said through gritted teeth.

“Alright. I’ll drive both of you. Della stays with you, no exceptions,” Solon added.

“Fine.”

Della moved beside me and helped me stand. My legs wobbled again, but she held my arm and waited until I found my balance. Solon walked beside me on the other side. The walk through the hallway felt longer than usual. My body felt heavy, but I forced myself forward. I didn’t want to sit in that hospital bed another minute.

We reached the car, and Solon opened the back door for me. I sat carefully and leaned into the seat. The car felt quiet as he started driving. I watched the road through the window and tried not to think about Jason.

“Do you need anything?” Solon asked from the front seat.

“No,” I said. “I just want to get home.”

When we reached the estate, Solon parked and stepped out first, He opened my door, and Della helped me out of the car. Solon watched us closely as we walked toward the entrance.

“Call me if anything changes,” he said. “Please.”

“I will,” I said quietly..

Della closed the door behind us and kept her hand on my arm as we walked to my room. My legs still felt unsteady, but I forced myself to keep walking. Pack members watched us as we walked by. I didn’t meet their eyes. I didn’t want to see the pity on their faces. I just wanted to get to my room.

As soon as the door closed, I began pulling my clothes off.

“Let me help you get into the shower,” Della said gently.

I followed her to the bathroom. She turned on the water and waited while it warmed. I didn't look at anything else until I accidentally glanced at the mirror.

I gasped at my reflection.

My eyes were swollen and red from crying. My lips were swollen. The faint marks on my neck stood out clearly against my skin. Seeing them made me start crying again.

"Talia," Della said softly. "Don't look at that right now."

I shook my head and wiped my eyes even though the tears kept coming. "He almost marked me. Bastard!"

Della stepped closer and placed a hand on my shoulder. "Why didn't you have someone go with you? You should have never trusted him again. I told you many times…"

Her words stung, and I flinched. I knew she wasn't trying to hurt me, but it still hurt to hear her reprimand me.

When she guided me to the bathtub, her voice sounded even more tense.

"He didn't deserve another chance," Della said firmly. "I told you he was no good. You shouldn't be anywhere near him."

"That isn't fair," I said sharply. "You don't understand what I've been through."

"Talia, you knew what he did to you before," she said. "You knew what he was capable of, and you still let him close. What am I missing?!"

"You haven't been rejected by your mate!" I snapped. "You don't understand anything I feel! You don't know what it's like to have your mate choose someone else! You don't know how any of this feels because you're lucky!"

Hurt flickered across Della's face before it shifted into anger. She stepped back.

"I think you need space," she said and walked out of the bathroom. The door slammed behind her.

The sound echoed through the room and I flinched. I lowered myself into the tub and pulled my knees to my chest.

I stayed curled in the water with tears slipping down my face. I didn't want to cry anymore, but the tears wouldn't stop.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & FIFTY EIGHT

Talia's POV

I regretted yelling at Della almost as soon as she left the bathroom.

The more I thought about her face when I shouted at her, the harder it became to hold myself together. I continued to sob. Each one made my chest hurt a little more.

I stayed in the bath until the water turned cold. I did not have the strength to get out until I began to shiver from the cold. When I finally stood, I wrapped myself in a towel and moved slowly back to my room.

Goddess, I wish my wolf was back. I really needed someone to talk to. She would reassure me or at least tell me what to do.

I slipped on a large T-shirt. I looked at my reflection again. I looked better, but I was still pale. I groaned in frustration and threw my chair across the room before I started sobbing again.

"Why? Why was this happening to me?" I sobbed.

None of this would have happened if I had my wolf. I couldn't even be upset with Nolan about it because he saved me. All I could do was blame myself for being foolish. I should have listened to Nolan and Della that made me feel worse.

I got into bed and pulled the covers up to my chin. I wanted the world to disappear for a while. I closed my eyes and allowed myself to drift off to sleep.

Someone knocked on my door about an hour later.

"Talia?" Solon called softly.

"Solon," I said. "Please….just let me rest."

"Alright," he said. "I'll check on you later."

I heard his footsteps fade down the hall. I turned onto my side and closed my eyes again.

More time passed. I wasn't sure how long. I drifted in and out of sleep. Each time I opened my eyes and became aware, I replayed the same thoughts on a loop. I couldn't cry anymore, and I just sat in my bed thinking of ways I could've avoided the situation.

I finally started drifting off to sleep again when there was another knock at my door.

I groaned and pulled the blanket over my head. "Solon, please, leave me alone," I said. "I want to rest,"

The knocking continued.

"Solon, stop," I said louder, "I said I want to rest."

The knocking continued, I threw the blanket off and climbed out of bed even though my legs still felt weak. I walked across the room and opened the door angrily.

“Solon, I said I wanted to rest. Why are you…”

I stopped in midsentence, Colin stood in the hallway with a dinner tray in his hands. My previous annoyance vanished at seeing

him.

“Um,” I said awkwardly. “Hi.”

“I thought to check on you to see how you were doing,” Colin said. “And I was right. Talia, you look terrible.”

“Gee thanks,” I muttered.

“You know I don’t mean it like that,” Colin said as he stepped inside without waiting for an invitation, set the tray on my desk, and turned back toward me. “Della asked me to bring this. She’s worried about

My eyes filled with tears instantly. I covered my face with one hand and tried to stop myself from crying again, but the tears came too fast.

“I shouldn’t have yelled at her,” I murmured. “I didn’t mean it. Can you tell her I’m sorry?”

Colin stepped closer and brushed the tears from my cheeks with his thumb. “She knows you didn’t mean it. She will forgive you,” he said quietly.

“I don’t know about that,” I said, turning away from him.

“Well, I do. If she hadn’t forgiven you, she wouldn’t have urged me to send food to you,” Colon reasoned.

“I guess you’re right,” I muttered.

Colin nodded. “Eat first. You’ll feel better.”

I nodded and sank onto the edge of the bed. He pulled the small table closer and set the tray in front of me. I picked up the fork with an unsteady hand and took a bite. The food tasted bland, but I forced myself to eat.

Colin sat in the chair beside me. He waited without rushing me. When I finished, he took the tray and set it aside.

“Do you want to talk?” he asked.

I stared at my hands for a long moment before I nodded.

“Tell me what happened,” Colin said.

“Jason almost marked me today,” I said and Colin’s eyes flashed, but he remained quiet as he allowed me to continue. “I thought Jason was harmless. I thought that since he knew I was the Princess, he wouldn’t try again. I was wrong, so very wrong. He drugged me, Colin. He made me go into heat. I tried to push him away, but I couldn’t…”

Colin looked furious but he still didn’t say a word.

“I feel ashamed,” I continued. “I thought Nolan was the one kissing me at first. I thought he was going to mark me. But Jason…” “Talia,” Colin said gently. “None of that is your fault.”

My voice cracked again. “But… I thought it was Nolan. For a brief second, it felt real. It felt… right. And when Solon told me the truth-that it had been Jason-I just… I wanted to disappear.”

Colin studied me, concerned, “Why did you feel ashamed when you knew it wasn’t Nolan?”

I stared at him. “What do you mean?”

“Do you want Nolan? So you’re disappointed it’s Jason?” Colin asked.

“Am I…?” I whispered, and the question hit me so hard my mind went completely blank.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & FIFTY NINE

Talia’s POV

I stared at him as I did not know how to respond.

“Do you want Nolan?” Colin asked again.

“I don’t know… I lost control of myself. It wasn’t right,” I muttered.

“That’s not what I asked you,” Colin said.

My mouth opened, but no answer came out. I had no idea how to explain it. For a moment, I couldn’t look at him.

“I… am not sure,” I said finally.

“You do not have to answer now,” Colin said. “I only want you to think about it. Ask yourself why you felt ashamed when you realized it was Jason and not Nolan.”

I looked down at my hands. I forced myself to relax. Colin wasn’t judging me. He just wanted to help me sort out my thoughts.

Colin went on, “It is a right thing that Nolan is the one who saved you.”

I looked up again. “Why would you say that?”

“Because he did what a decent man should do,” Colin said. “He pulled Jason off you and brought you to the hospital. He did not touch you while you were vulnerable and in heat.”

I frowned. I didn’t even remember Nolan rescuing me actually. All I had were the fragmented pieces of Jason assaulting me.

“Let me ask you something else,” Colin said, bringing me out of my thoughts. “If Nolan had been the one who drugged you and tried to take advantage of you, would that make you feel better about what happened?”

The question hit me like a slap.

“No,” I said immediately. “Of course not.”

“Exactly,” Colin said. “If he had drugged you, that would mean he planned to hurt you. Would you be able to forgive that?”

“No,” I answered almost immediately.

“Then do not wish he had been the one in that room,” Colin said. “If it had been him kissing you in that state, it would mean he chose to be like Jason. That is not the man you want him to be.”

I had not thought of it that way. The idea of Nolan planning to drug me and force a mark just seemed absurd especially after he has tried so hard not to mark me.

“So, you are saying it is better this way?” I asked. “It is better that it was Jason who did this and not Nolan, because it proves who they really are?”

“Yes,” Colin said, “Remember I said to test Nolan. Well, treat this as a test too.”

“What?”

“Nolan had every chance to take advantage of you. He brought you to safety instead. If you decide to choose him as your mate, I will support you.”

There was no hesitation in his tone. No resentment. Just calm acceptance.

“Thank you,” I said.

He gave a small nod. “You should rest now. We can talk again when you have had time to think.”

Colin stood and picked up the empty tray from the table. For a moment, I thought he wasn’t going to leave. His conversation had distracted me enough that I didn’t want to be alone.

“Sleep if you can,” he said. “And remember what I asked you.”

“I will,” I said.

Colin left the room and closed the door behind him.

I lay back on the bed and pulled the blanket over myself again. I stared at the ceiling and thought about his questions.

I hated that Jason had touched me at all. I hated that my body had responded to him and the fact that there was nothing I could do about it. I felt ashamed only because when I thought it was Nolan, I had accepted it.

When I focused on the fact that Nolan had pulled Jason away from me and carried me out of there, I felt a different kind of emotion. It was not fear. It was a mix of gratitude and sadness that once again Nolan didn’t mark me.

“This is ridiculous,” I muttered.

Colin was right to say this was a test for Nolan. If Nolan had been the one who slipped something into my drink, I would never want to see him again. Instead, Nolan didn’t act selfishly.

Jaseh, on the other hand, had taken every opportunity to do the worst thing he could. He had known exactly what he was doing.

Fear crept in when I forced myself to picture Jason’s face over mine again. My heartbeat picked up, and I squeezed my eyes shut until the image faded.

By morning, I felt exhausted as I had only slept for a few hours.

I pushed myself out of bed and went to the bathroom. My reflection still looked tired. My eyes were a little less swollen, but the marks on my neck and shoulders had not faded yet. I refused to stand there and stare at them. I brushed my teeth and washed my face.

After that, I changed into comfortable clothes: a grey T-shirt and sweatpants. I didn’t have the energy for makeup or anything formal.

When I finished dressing, I picked up my phone. Solon left me alone yesterday, but I knew he was worried and waiting for me. I

mindlinked him.

‘I’m awake, brother.’

Solon replied almost immediately. ‘How do you feel?’

I thought for a second before answering. ‘Still tired, but better.’

A few minutes passed, and then another link came.

‘Father wants to meet. We need to discuss how to handle Jason. Can you come to his office now? If you need more time, I can-‘

‘I’m on my way,’ I cut him off, ignoring his concern.

I knew this conversation would happen, but I didn’t expect my father to act this quickly which meant there would be no mercy.

This time, Jason wasn’t just in trouble. He was done

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & SIXTY

Nolan’s POV

I woke up with my heart pounding and sweat clinging to the back of my neck. For a moment, I didn’t know where I was. It took another second before the nightmare faded enough for me to think straight.

It wasn’t about my father this time. It was about Talia. She was on the ground, pinned beneath Jason with his teeth at her neck. In the dream, I arrived too late. I saw his fangs sink into her skin.

Rage burned in my chest at the very idea of Jason marking her.

I pushed myself upright and ran a hand across my face. My wolf snarled inside me. He was restless and angry.

‘You should have killed him,’ my wolf growled. ‘You should finish what you started before he gets free.’

“No,” I muttered. “I will not take away Talia’s chance for vengeance.”

‘No, he is too much of a threat,’ my wolf growled.

I ignored him and stood. The cold floor shocked my senses, allowing me to focus. I dressed quickly and stepped out of my room. Marco was waiting in the hall instead of entering my room.

Marco glanced at me before offering me his cup of coffee. “You look terrible. Rough night?” he said.

“Nightmare,” I said.

“About your father?” he asked.

“Not this time,” I answered.

Marco raised an eyebrow, but he didn’t push. “Jason is locked in the dungeon. Solon made sure he was held without visitors.”

My wolf let out a low sound of satisfaction at that, but it wasn’t enough. Jason needed to be dealt with before he could come up with a plan with his father.

‘Rip out his throat,’ my wolf suggested. “Then, we will know he’s handled.’

I pushed him down again. If I let him keep talking, I would stop thinking clearly. “I need to know if Talia is alright,” I said.

Marco nodded. “She was emotionally unstable when she woke up yesterday.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“She cried a lot which is understandable given the situation,” Marco explained. “She demanded to leave the hospital, Solon and Della had trouble calming her down.”

The urge to go to her to comfort her was strong, but I knew she needed space. I couldn't rush in and force that type of intimacy." Where is she now?"

"On her way to the Alpha King's office, She looked calmer," Marco said.

"That means she is going to decide what to do with Jason," I said.

"That is what it looked like," Marco said. "It is a good thing they're moving fast on this,"

"Not fast enough," I growled. "If I was the Alpha King, his head would be on a spike right now."

"Given her personality, she would probably fight you on that. She is too kind for her own good. I am sure she is going to ask for leniency on his behalf for the sake of alliances," Marco continued.

Of course she would. Even after everything she had been through, Talia never put herself first. She was the one who had been

taken advantage of. Talia didn't need to worry about alliances. Everyone would understand her wanting her pound of flesh from Jason.

'You should kill him before she forgives him,' my wolf suggested.

"I am not going to kill Jason in Silverfang," I said. "Not when it would put Talia in an even worse position."

'You always act like you know what is best for her,' my wolf snorted.

"And you're not any better," I shot back.

‘At least I don’t lie about it. You don’t even listen to her,’ my wolf argued.

“Enough,” I snapped.

Marco cleared his throat. “You’re talking to your wolf aloud again.”

“We are not in agreement on this,” I said.

“Clearly,” Marco stated, “You two should not get involved with Silverfang’s internal decisions. Prince Solon is protective of her. The Alpha King will make the final call. If you interfere, they will take it as an insult.”

“I am not interfering with the decision,” I said. “I just want to ensure that he doesn’t break out. I want guards assigned to the dungeon. Not Silverfang, ours. I want at least three men watching the entrance at all times. No one gets close to Jason.”

“Nolan,” Marco said again. “This is a bad idea. You can’t order our guards into Silverfang. Prince Solon will see this as overstepping. He already does not like you.”

“I know,” I said. “But I do not care. After what Jason tried to do, I refuse to allow him to escape again.”

Marco sighed. “I will assign the guards, but you are causing trouble for yourself.”

“Your concern is noted.”

“Where are you going?”

“I am going to see the Alpha King myself,” I said as I brushed past him.

Marco grabbed my arm. “Think before you say anything in there.”

“I will.”

He gave me a look that said he didn’t believe me. “You always end up talking impulsively when it involves Talia,” Marco said. ” Just let them handle it.”

I pulled my arm free. “I will only give my statement.”

“Nolan, you can’t…”

I ignored him and headed down the hall. I would not allow Marco to delay me. I was going to the Alpha King’s office to ensure that they or she won’t put herself in danger again.

‘You’re going because you’re trying to control the situation again,’ my wolf growled.

“I’m going because Jason is her problem now,” I said, jaw tight. “And her problem is my problem.”