Barren Luna 161

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & SIXTY ONE

Nolan's POV

When I reached the Alpha King's office, I could hear them talking from the hallway.

I stood there for another moment and listened.

"I am willing to compromise," Solon said. "Exile is the best choice."

"I agree," the Alpha King said. "Shadowclaw needs formal restructuring. Jason's actions had crossed a line. He needs to be removed and repair the damage his leadership caused by weeding out anyone supporting him."

None of this bothered me. I supported it completely.

Then I heard Talia. "I don't agree," she said.

"What do you mean you don't agree? He tried to force you back as his mate!" Solon exclaimed. "Exile is pretty damn lenient."

"I agree Jason doesn't deserve any type of leniency; however, I am looking at the big picture here," Talia responded.

There was a pause before the Alpha King said, "Explain."

"Exile might provoke retaliation from Michael. He will lash out if we act too quickly. We need to plan ahead and not give Shadowclaw's members a reason to rally behind him," Talia explained.

My wolf stirred. He was pleased but also disappointed in Talia. ‘She still thinks about the safety of wolves who do not care about her,’ he growled.

‘We cannot change who she is,’ I responded.

I understood her reasoning, even if it irritated me. She never ignored the consequences of a choice. Talia always thought about the bigger picture no matter how it could potentially hurt her.

“Then, we will protect her from herself,’ my wolf declared and I agreed.

I opened the door and stepped inside.

The Alpha King turned his head toward me immediately. “Alpha Nolan, what do you think you’re doing?” he demanded. “It is common courtesy to knock. This is a private conversation and you need to leave.”

“I could hear the conversation from the hallway,” I said. “Exile is the correct decision. Reforming Shadowclaw is necessary.”

Solon’s expression tightened when he looked at me. “Wasn’t this room supposed to be soundproof?”

“I will make sure to fix that,” the Alpha King said through gritted teeth.

“No matter if you overheard, this is a private conversation that you were not invited to,” Solon said.

“I do not need an invitation to speak about what Jason did,” I said. “He tried to force a mark on Talia. If you do not punish him properly, I will handle it myself.”

The Alpha King frowned and growled, “Are you threatening us?”

“No, I am not threatening,” I said. “It is a fact. Jason broke every rule that protects a she-wolf. The only reason he failed to mark her is because I arrived before he could do it. If you expect me to pretend this is a minor offense, you are mistaken.”

Talia looked at me with wide eyes. There was no anger in her expression. She only looked worried..

I continued. “Jason did not plan this out on his own. He is too dumb to obtain Moonlust on his own. Someone got it for him.”

“You…you think Michael is behind this?” Talia blurted out and I nodded.

Solon’s brow furrowed. “How does Michael benefit from this?”

“I am unsure of his intentions, but I know Jason. He is reckless and emotional, but not strategic. Michael has access and motive. Jason ruined the reputation of Shadowclaw by rejecting Talia. By getting her back as the Luna of Shadowclaw, that would put them second to Silverfang,” I explained. “Exile Michael and Jason. Get rid of both threats.”

Talia shook her head quickly. “We cannot make that decision yet. The elders in Shadowclaw will oppose it, and the situation will escalate. There are too many people involved for us to act without a plan.”

Solon nodded. “She is right. Removing Michael immediately could destabilize the region.”

The Alpha King raised a brow. “We will take time to discuss our next move. Jason will be punished, but exiling Michael requires more consideration.”

My wolf growled within me as he was unhappy with their hesitation.

“He almost marked her,” I said. “You know what would have happened if he succeeded.”

The Alpha King met my eyes. “We know. You are not the only one who cares about her.”

The sharpness of his tone told me to be quiet, so I forced myself to stop talking.

Aknock broke the silence.

Logan stepped inside and bowed. “Your Majesty, there is news from the dungeon.”

“What is it?” the Alpha King asked.

“Jason refuses to confess unless he sees Princess Talia,” Logan replied.

My response came before I could stop myself. “No.”

“For once, I agree with Alpha Nolan,” Solon said. “He has nothing she needs to hear. We can figure this out without his

confession.”

Logan nodded and said, “I agree. I would be happy with drowning the bastard if permitted.”

“He should know that his request will not happen,” the Alpha King snorted.

“He wants sympathy,” I interjected. “He is delusional. He thinks she still cares about him. He wants her to waver so he can twist

this in his favor.”

I looked at Talia, who was biting her lip. I could tell she was thinking it over. I hoped that she would agree with us but instead she said, “I should hear what he says.” (1

“You do not owe him that,” Solon said.

“I know,” she replied, “But if he gives us information about Michael or the Moonlust, then hearing him out is necessary.”

Solon frowned. “Talia, this is not wise.”

“I won’t be alone,” she said. “Guards are with me.”

The Alpha King exhaled slowly. “She has made her choice.”

“He should not see her at all,” I said as anger began rising in me again.

The Alpha King looked at me and said, “This decision belongs to her.”

My wolf fought to break free. ‘He should not be allowed near her. If she sees him again, he will say something that hurts her. You should stop this,’ he growled.

I forced myself to stand still. I could not drag her out of the room. I could not override the Alpha King. Every instinct inside me hated the situation, but I had no power to prevent it.

Talia looked toward the door and straightened her shoulders. “I should go.”

I did not say more. I could not. Anything I added would only expose how angered I was, and that would not help her anyways.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & SIXTY TWO

Talia’s POV

Nolan stood in front of the dungeon entrance. His arms were crossed, and his expression showed clear frustration. How in the world did he get here before me? It didn't matter. I was going into the dungeon whether he liked it or not.

I stopped in front of him and said, "Move."

"No," Nolan said. "You are being too lenient with him. You should not see him again."

I stayed calm. I was still shaken about what happened, but I would not let him determine my choices. "I did not ask for your opinion."

"You should think before letting him manipulate you again," Nolan added.

"I am not giving him a chance," I said. "I am getting information that we need to properly prosecute him."

Nolan stepped closer and for a moment, I thought he would pick me up and carry me away. "You do not need to handle this alone," he finally said.

"I am not alone," I said. "The guards will be with me."

"That is not enough.".

"It is enough," I said firmly. "Silverfang will resolve its own affairs. You do not need to get involved."

Nolan's frustration grew more visible, but I raised my hand before he could argue again. "Thank you for saving me," I said. "But that does not give you authority over what happens now. I can make decisions on my own. I am not a child."

He hesitated for a moment. "You still do not understand how dangerous this is," he muttered. "You do not understand how close he was to getting what he wanted."

“I understand perfectly,” I said. “Now step aside.”

When Nolan still did not move, I sighed and said, “I didn’t want to have to do this.” I turned to the guards. “Block him. He does

not enter.”

“Yes, Princess,” they said, stepping forward to stop him. Nolan exhaled sharply but did not push past them.

“You call out to me if he does anything,” Nolan said.

“Nothing will happen. He’s in a cell, Nolan, not running free,” I replied. Nolan’s eyes stayed on me as I walked through the doorway and headed down the stairs. A guard led me to the last cell.

Jason sat on the floor with his back against the wall and his eyes closed. Fresh cuts marked his arms and face, His lip was split, and one eye was swollen. Nolan nor Solon’s guards had not held back. I did not feel sorry for him. Honestly, he deserved more

than what he got.

“I didn’t think I would see you back here after what happened with Viki, but here we are,” I said.

My voice startled him. The shock in his eyes was replaced with hope as Jason scrambled to his feet when he saw me. “Talia. Please listen to me,” he started.

“I’m listening,” I said, crossing my arms, “Tell me how drugging me was a mistake.”

“I am sorry,” he said quickly. “I lost control. I never meant to hurt you. I just wanted us back to how we used to be.”

“You drugged me. That takes time and planning, Jason. You meant to do it,” I shot back.

“It was a moment of anger,” he said. “A mistake. I thought it would help us. I thought it would fix everything.”

“Again, it was not a mistake. You made the decision to drug me and acted on it. I will never forget or forgive that,” I said firmly.

Jason gripped the bars. “I did it for us. For the pack. Michael has been pressuring me for months. I just wanted to protect everyone.”

“Bullshit, Jason. You weren’t protecting anyone but yourself. You did this to appease your father,” I snapped. “When are you going to start telling the truth?”

Jason hesitated before saying, “If you had told me the truth earlier about you being the Princess, this would have never happened.”

I scoffed. “And now you’re going to blame me for your decisions? A real apology from you.”

“That’s not what I mean, Talia. I…”

“That’s exactly what you mean,” I said, cutting him off. “You crossed a line and there will be consequences, Jason.”

Jason swallowed and tried again. “I still care about you.”

“Then tell me where the Moonlust came from,” I said.

“I… someone gave it to me. I do not remember who,” Jason muttered.

“You remember every other detail,” I said. “You remember enough to apologize. Enough to blame me for your decisions. But the one part that matters, you cannot recall?”

“It does not matter where it came from,” Jason said. “I’ve already confessed.”

I shook my head in disgust. “I should have known you were only going to waste my time. You should use your time to reflect and pray to the Moon Goddess that she and my father will be merciful.”

I turned away and walked toward the exit.

I had taken only a few steps when Jason asked, “Is this because of Nolan?”

I stopped but did not turn.

Jason’s voice grew louder. “You think he is better than me because he saved you? He doesn’t care about you, Talia. Nolan is a monster. You would choose him over me?”

I would in a heartbeat because at least he is man enough to stand firm behind his decisions, I wanted to tell Jason that but I decided against it. He was baiting me and I wasn’t going to humor him.

“Of course you would,” Jason continued. “A bloodthirsty monster like him would accept someone like you. An useless barren she -wolf. You two will be the perfect pair.” 1%

Jason’s words hit with the exact cruelty he intended, but I did not let him see any reaction.

“Enjoy your cell, Jason,” I said, “You earned it.”

I left without turning back.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & SIXTY THREE

Talia’s POV

I went straight to Henry after leaving the dungeon. He was in the storage room behind the kitchen. He was sorting through crates of supplies. When Henry noticed me standing in the doorway, he froze. His eyes widened, and the guilt on his face was

immediate.

“Princess,” he said. “I did not expect you.”

“I need to talk to you,” I said. “Now.”

“What…what’s wrong, Princess?” Henry stammered.

“You know exactly what I am here for,” I said as I stepped closer. “Jason used Moonlust. Where did he get it?”.

Henry gulped and said, “Princess, I did not mean for any of this to happen. I swear it.”

“I don’t care about your apologies. I want you to answer my question,” I said. “How did he get the Moonlust? Did you get it for

him?”

“Goddess, no!” Henry exclaimed.

“Then, tell me who,” I snapped.

Henry avoided my gaze, choosing his words carefully. He had always been loyal, respectful to me when I was his Luna. I had stood by him more than once, covering for mistakes that weren’t his, and I knew he hadn’t forgotten.

Henry took a long breath, and then forced himself to meet my eyes. “It’s Michael.”

I felt my entire body go still. “His father?” I repeated. “Elder Michael?”

Henry nodded. “He told Jason it would help him fix things with you. Said it would be better for the pack if you restored the bond. I told him it was wrong, Princess. He wouldn’t listen.”

I was furious but I knew Henry didn’t have a choice. He was Jason’s Beta. He swore his loyalty to him.

“Thank you for telling me now,” I said finally.

Henry bowed his head. “Princess, I am so sorry.”

“I know,” I said. “But an apology will not undo what happened.”

He nodded again and kept his head lowered. I left him there. Every step I took away from the storage room allowed the anger to build in me. Again, Michael was interfering in my life. Jason had drugged me, but Michael set everything in motion. Michael was equally to blame.

By dinnertime, I had already decided what needed to happen.

I sat across from my father and Solon at the long dining table. The dishes were untouched. My father waited patiently. He

wanted to hear what I had found out. Solon glanced between us nervously.

“Come on, Talia, tell us what you found out,” Solon finally said,

I set my fork down. “I spoke with Henry this afternoon.”

Father's attention sharpened. "And?"

"He admitted that Michael gave Jason the Moonlust," I said. "Michael told him it would help repair the bond between Jason and me. He framed it as a solution for Shadowclaw."

Solon answered first. "So Michael was behind all of this. I am not surprised."

Father's face darkened, and his eyes cooled. "It fits his personality. He has always been a problem."

His tone surprised me. Father was normally cordial with Michael, but there may be some bad blood between the two even more so than I thought.

"Jason is not fit to lead a pack," I said. "He cannot control himself, and he is too easily influenced. Shadowclaw needs a new leader."

Solon nodded once. "I agree."

"Silverfang should take responsibility for the transition," I continued. "We cannot leave a pack in the hands of a man who uses Moonlust freely. But we also cannot move carelessly. If we act too fast, Michael's supporters will push back."

"Right. We need to make a wise plan." Father said.

"I suggest we wait until I choose a mate," I said. "Once my position is settled, we can bring Shadowclaw under Silverfang's guidance. And we will have another powerful alliance to support us."

"Choosing Colin may be the best outcome we can build after this mess," Father said and nodded.

"I think so. There aren't any other candidates that are trustworthy," Solon added.

The way they said it told me everything. They were already planning around Colin. They were already building a future on the idea that I would choose him. Neither of them said it directly, but the assumption was there.

I knew they were both right. With Colin involved, everything would be easier. The elders would see a balanced arrangement instead of a sudden overthrow. It was the logical choice. But when I pictured myself standing beside Colin as his mate, I felt

empty.

I trusted him. I liked him. I felt safe with him. I knew he would never harm me or betray me for power. Colin would give me a peaceful life, but my mind kept going back to Nolan.

I took a sip of water to keep my voice even. “I support Colin to stabilize Shadowclaw,” I said firmly. “but honestly, I haven’t made my decision on who my mate will be.”

“You don’t have to go through the motions,” Solon said.

“I don’t know…” I said as my mind struggled.

Father nodded. After a moment, he said, “Talia, how about you invite Colin to dinner tomorrow night?”

I felt a flicker of resistance, but I could not find a good reason to refuse him.

“Sure,” I said.

“Good. We will talk about then,” Father added. He picked up his glass again. “Also invite Healer Leslie.”

Across the table, Solon stiffened. His gaze snapped to Father. “Leslie?”

“Yes,” Father said. He watched Solon closely. “Do you have an objection?”

Solon's mouth opened, and then closed. He looked down at his plate, and then let out a quiet breath. "No, Father."

At that very moment, I wish I was able to mindlink with Solon. Father seemed to already know Leslie was his mate. He had probably known since the day they met. Nothing stayed hidden from him for long.

And if he had seen that so clearly… I had to wonder if he knew about Nolan and me.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & SIXTY FOUR

Talia's POV

I went to Della's room right after dinner. I needed to talk to her. I owed her an apology and I wasn't going to put it off.

I knocked at her door. "Who is it?" she called.

"It's me, Talia."

Della didn't respond. For a moment I thought she might ignore me, but the door opened. Della stood in the doorway with her arms crossed as she glared at me.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"I came to apologize," I said.

She opened the door a little wider but did not move aside. "You yelled at me and told me I would never understand you. Do you think you can say sorry and it all goes away?"

"No," I said. "I want you to let me explain and then decide if you can forgive me."

Della stepped back and let me in. I walked inside while she closed the door.

“Speak,” she said.

I took a breath. “I thought I had moved past everything with Jason. I was so very wrong. When I saw you trying to help, it reminded me that you still have something I lost, and I took that out on you. You did nothing to deserve it.”

Her expression softened a little. “You told me I would never understand.”

“I was wrong about that too,” I said. “You understand more than I wanted to admit. You have always tried to stand by me. You were there when I needed help. I was cruel because I was hurting. I am sorry.”

She held my gaze for a long moment, and then sighed, “You know I can’t stay mad at you. Now tell me everything. Is Jason getting the punishment he deserved?”

“Not yet. Jason is locked in the dungeon,” I said. “Henry admitted that Michael gave Jason the Moonlust. Father and Solon plan to exile Jason and restructure Shadowclaw after I choose a mate. Silverfang will take over to stabilize things.”

Della let out a low whistle. “So your bonding situation turned into a political solution.”

“Something like that,” I said. “And one more thing, I need your help with Leslie. Father asked me to invite her to dinner tomorrow. It is obvious he already knows Leslie is Solon’s mate,”

“Come on. She listens to me until the topic is Solon,” Della muttered, rolling her eyes.

“Then we involve Colin, he often has great ideas,” I said,

Della thought about it and then nodded slowly, “Alright. We bring Colin. Between the three of us, we might get her to say yes.

“That is what I was hoping for,” I said.

After leaving Della’s room, I texted Colin about dinner tomorrow-and asked if he could help invite Leslie too. He agreed right

away.

We met him outside the courtyard and then walked together to Leslie’s cabin. Della and Colin chatted about strategy. My mind kept drifting to the worst outcomes. What if Leslie didn’t agree? There was nothing I could do about her.

When we reached her cabin, Della knocked on the door.

“Who is it?” Leslie called from inside.

“Della,” Della answered. “I brought company.”

There was a short pause, and then the door opened. Leslie stood in the doorway. Her eyes moved from Della to me, then to Colin.

“What are you three doing here?” Leslie asked.

“Well, I came to thank you,” I said. “For saving me at the hospital. If you had not acted, I might not be here.”

Leslie shrugged and said, “Someone has to keep you alive. You get yourself into trouble too easily.”

She stepped back and let us in, though her posture stayed stiff.

“Actually, we’re here to make you have some fun,” Colin said. “Up for a game?”

Leslie folded her arms. “I don’t have time for games. I’m packing and-

“Tonight you do,” Della cut in, already pulling an empty bottle and a bottle of wine from her bag like a magician revealing a trick. “We walked all the way here. Humor us… please?”

I glanced at Colin. He picked up the hint smoothly.

“Truth or Dare,” he suggested. “Nothing complicated. We just have a good time and talk.”

Leslie hesitated. I could almost see her weighing her options. Her gaze moved between the three of us. Finally, she huffed.

“Fine,” she said. “But if this turns into a trap, I am throwing all of you out. Clear?”

We nodded and sat around the small table. Leslie sat across from me, Della to my right, and Colin to my left.

Leslie grabbed shot glasses and filled them with wine.

Colin placed the empty bottle in the middle of the table and spun it. It stopped, facing me. “Truth or Dare?” Colin asked.

“Truth,” I said and instantly regretted it as I noticed Colin seemed almost too pleased with that choice.

“Alright,” he said. “Do you want me as a friend or as a potential mate?”

Heat rushed to my face. Leslie's eyebrows shot up. Della grinned and said, "Oh this is getting good and we just started."

"Colin," I said. "That is not a fair question."

"Your choice," he reminded me. "Those are the rules. If you refuse to answer, you can drink."

I did not want to lie, but I was not ready to have that discussion especially not in front of Leslie.

"I am not answering that," I said and reached for the drink Della had set on the table. I knocked it back and placed it back on the table. Della filled it again.

Leslie let out a low laugh, "Oh, I'm getting interested."

My heart thumped harder than it should have, but I forced myself to focus. "My turn," I said and spun the bottle. It landed on Leslie. Leslie quickly said, "Dare."

"I dare you to agree to have dinner with my family tomorrow."

Leslie shrugged, a playful smile spreading across her face. "Alright. Easy enough. I was getting tired of making my own meals anyway."

"That…that was much easier than I expected," Della giggled,

But in the next instant, Leslie's smile froze. "Wait! Solon is your brother, right? He'll be there too?!"

"Of course." I said, flashing her a satisfied smile.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & SIXTY FIVE

did she want more herbs to suppress the mate bond again?

“Yes,” he said. “Della told me before she left. Talia wanted to check on Leslie after everything.”

“Why?” Marco asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I… um, I’m not feeling well. I should have her check me,” I lied, trying to sound casual.

Marco studied me for a moment, then smirked. “Wow… that was a terrible lie.”

I did not deny it. “I should go.”

“So, you’re still going to stick to that lie?” Marco chuckled.

“I want to speak to Leslie too,” I said, refusing to give in fully.

“Look, it’s just you and me here. You don’t need to lie about wanting to see Talia,” Marco said.

“How about you come with me?” I asked.

“No,” he said without hesitation. “If Della, Talia, and Leslie are talking, I am staying far away from that cabin.”

“You could still come,” I insisted.

“No,” he repeated. “I am not getting involved if you invoke their wrath.”

I gave him a sharp look. “You’re getting a kick out of this, aren’t you?”

“Just a little bit,” Marco said. “I hate to say it but I told you so. Next time listen to me.”

Despite his tone, his bluntness helped. My frustration eased a little. I turned and left the field.

Leslie’s cabin sat near the edge of the trees. The closer I got, the clearer the voices inside became. I slowed when I reached the small porch.

I heard laughter. It was unmistakably Talia’s. She had not laughed once around me since the night at the bonfire. Hearing her laugh now, freely and without hesitation, made my heart ache.

‘You need to remain calm. No threatening her. No sarcasm. Just calm,’ my wolf said.

‘Hypocrite,’ I muttered as he was the one normally pushing me to do reckless things.

‘She is comfortable here. We do not want to ruin that for her,’ my wolf continued and I agreed. I would keep my temper in check or leave if it got too much for me to handle.

I placed my hand on the door handle. I told myself I had every reason to see how Talia was doing after the stress of yesterday. Maybe showing her I cared would change her feelings toward me.

I pushed the door open.

Della sat on one side of the low table. Leslie sat across from her. Colin sat beside Talia. None of them noticed me at first.

Talia leaned close to Colin. Della’s eyes widened. Leslie lifted an eyebrow but said nothing. Colin did not pull away.

Then, Talia pressed a kiss to his cheek. Fury rose in my chest. My wolf snarled within me.

I stepped fully inside. The door hit the wall behind me. All four of them turned toward me at once.

Talia froze. Her eyes widened. The color drained from her face.

“What on earth is going on?” I growled.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & SIXTY SIX

Nolan’s POV

I crossed the room in a flash and grabbed Colin by the neck, rage flooding every nerve. What infuriated me even more was that he didn’t fight back. He only looked at me with that same calm expression except his eyes told a different story. His eyes glinted with deadly intent.

‘Rip his throat out for touching our mate!’ my wolf snarled.

Talia stood immediately and shouted, “Let him go. If you don’t, I will ask my father to exile you. I swear!”

I turned my head to look at her. She wasn’t bluffing. The fact that she was threatening to exile me to protect Colin made me more frustrated.

“Nolan!” Talia exclaimed. “Put him down!”

My grip loosened. Reluctantly, I let him go. Colin sucked in a breath and straightened his shirt. Instead of looking shaken, he smiled. It felt smug. It looked as if he already knew she would protect him every time and saw no reason to hide it.

Talia rushed over to him and asked, “Are you hurt?”

“I am fine,” Colin said as he rubbed his neck.

Della stood between us with her hands raised to show she wasn't a threat. "It was a game, Alpha Nolan," Della explained. "We were playing Truth or Dare. Talia only kissed him because it was her dare. Don't make a fuss."

"A game?" I repeated. "You are drinking and kissing people because of a game. I'm not stupid!" 1

"It was harmless fun," Della answered. "No one was trying to provoke you, if that is what you're thinking."

"Why are you even here?" Talia asked, frowning. "Is there something you need?"

"No, I just wanted to check on Leslie," I answered.

Talia's eyes narrowed as she stared at me suspiciously. Della and Leslie exchanged a glance before Leslie said, "Again, Nolan

and I have no romantic relationship."

"Well, you've seen her. She's fine. You can leave now," Talia said and turned her back on me.

I grit my teeth as she was giving me the cold shoulder again. It even looked like Colin felt bad for me. I wanted to know why Talia was doing this, why she treated me as if I was the one who had almost hurt her instead of the man sitting next to her.

Before I could ask, Leslie said, "Since you're already here, sit down and join the game. It will be more fun with you involved."

Talia shot a look at Leslie before shaking her head. "No. He does not need to join,"

"I think he should. It will make this less awkward," Della chimed.

Colin added casually, “I agree. It is only a game.”

It was three against one. Talia hesitated only for a few moments before sighing in defeat. “Fine. One round. Then everyone goes home.”

I took the empty seat next to Leslie. Talia begrudgingly spun the bottle. It turned slowly before stopping in front of Della.

“Truth or dare?” Talia asked.

“Dare,” Della answered without thinking.

“I dare you to make Nolan leave,” Talia said.

Della scoffed and rolled her eyes. She grabbed her glass and said, “No. I am drinking instead.” She downed her glass, and Leslie leaned forward to refill it. Della spun the bottle again.

It pointed at me.

Talia’s reaction was immediate. Her shoulders tensed as she awaited my response. “Maybe this isn’t such a good idea. I think I should go,” she said.

“No, you said one more round and we’re almost done,” Leslie said and Colin nodded.

Della smiled and asked, “Truth or dare?”

“Truth,” I said and I instantly saw Talia relax. That stung a little. Was she afraid that Della would dare me to do something to her? I should be able to do whatever I want to Talia as she was my mate.

“What do you most want to know right now?” Della asked, bringing me out of my thoughts.

I couldn't tell if Della was trying to help me or be mischievous. Either way, she was setting Talia up to be put on the spot and I welcomed the opportunity to get everything out in the open.

I turned toward Talia and met her eyes. "Will you choose me or Colin as your mate?"

Talia's POV

All eyes were on me. I swallowed hard before forcing out a small laugh even though my stomach twisted. How dare he put me on the spot like this, especially with how he had been acting. One moment he was angry, the next he was civil, and now he was demanding answers in front of everyone.

Once again, Nolan was trying to control the situation. I did not have to answer. I picked up my glass and drank instead. The alcohol burned my throat. It gave me a few seconds to avoid his stare and gather myself. I could feel the heat in my cheeks from embarrassment.

"Well, this was fun," I said as I stood up. "I should go."

"Come on, you don't have to be party pooper about it," Leslie teased.

Talia gave her tight smile before saying, "Don't forget about dinner tomorrow, Leslie." The color drained Leslie's face and she gave a quick nod. "You too, Colin, do not forget."

I walked toward the door. I wanted the night to end before anything else could happen. It seemed like I was going to get my way until Nolan stepped in front of me and blocked the exit.

"Nolan, I am really not in the mood. Please move," I said.

"You are avoiding me," he accused.

He was correct, I was avoiding him, I didn't like how he judged me for my decisions.

“I am not,” I lied as I kept my voice even. “I am tired and want to go to bed. That is all.”

“Since you say you’re not avoiding me,” Nolan said as he smiled, “Then I will attend the dinner tomorrow as well.”

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & SIXTY SEVEN

Talia’s POV

I arrived at the dining hall with Leslie on my right side and Colin on my left. Nolan walked behind us with a solemn expression as he was stewing with anger. Before we stepped inside, I stopped and looked at both Alphas.

“What’s wrong?” Colin asked.

“I am warning you both,” I said. “If either of you start another argument during dinner, I swear I will have you thrown out. Do you understand?”

Colin nodded and said, “I have no intention of arguing.”

Nolan gave a short answer. “Neither do I.”

Leslie let out a laugh under her breath. Nolan glared at her. “What’s so funny?” he asked.

“You two look like lost pups following her around,” Leslie said.

Colin’s ears reddened, and Nolan’s jaw tightened. I let out a sigh. “If you think trying to get them in trouble will get you out of this, it won’t. Leslie it won’t work. I won’t kick you out even if you pour wine on me.”

“Can’t hurt a girl for trying,” Leslie muttered.

I rolled my eyes and pushed the door open.

Father sat at the head of the table. Solon sat to his right, probably talking about something dealing with the borders. They both looked up when we entered.

I expected Father to be angry or at least surprised to see Nolan; however, he didn't even flinch. Solon, on the other hand, was caught off guard. His eyes widened slightly and then he forced a polite smile.

"Come in," Father said as he waved us over. "We have been waiting for you."

The servants moved quickly to show us our seating arrangements. Father pointed to the seats he had chosen. To my disappointment, he placed me between Colin and Nolan.

It was apparent now. Father either knew Nolan was my mate or he assumed he was. Putting me in between Colin and Nolan allowed him to observe every small reaction.

Colin and Nolan both stared at the seat. It seemed they both realized what my father was trying to do. They seemed to be a little more on edge. They both reached for my chair at the same time, but Nolan got his hand on it first.

Nolan smirked at Colin, Colin's jaw flexed as he glared at Nolan. I rolled my eyes. I couldn't believe they were going to argue over something as little as this.

"I can seat myself," I said quickly.

Nolan stepped back. Colin lowered his hand. Leslie covered her mouth as she was trying not to laugh again. I really wanted to tell her to shut up but I wanted to keep the peace, so I glared at her as I sat down.

Once everyone sat, Father said, "Before we eat, I want to properly greet all my guests. Healer Leslie, I am glad you came."

Leslie smiled politely and said, “Thank you for inviting me.”

“Do you plan to stay at Silverfang?” Father asked. His blunt questions surprised me. I expected my father to at least have small talk before he started asking questions.

Leslie cleared her throat nervously and replied, “I do not enjoy busy places. I plan to return to Windpaw after Princess Talia chooses her mate.”

Father nodded slowly. “That is understandable,” he said. “However, since you have a mate, you have every right to remain in Silverfang if you wish.”

Leslie’s eyes widened before her mouth dropped. Her head snapped towards Solon, who suddenly wanted to count the threads in the tablecloth.

“Did you tell him?” Leslie asked sharply. “Are you trying to force me to stay?”

Solon held up his hands and quickly said, “No. I did not say anything.”

“Then how did he know?” Leslie demanded.

I cleared my throat which made Leslie focus her attention on me. “No one told father anything. Father assumed and your panic attack just proved his assumption was correct,” I explained awkwardly.

Leslie went quiet. She looked down for a moment to compose herself and then sighed as she leaned back in her seat.

“I do not want to stay here, my Majesty,” Leslie said, her voice sharp. “I will go home. Even if you locked me up to stop me, I’d still find a way to escape.”

I groaned inwardly at her bluntness. Why did Leslie always jump to the most extreme conclusions? My father would never act

like that.

Before I could intervene, Colin spoke up. “Healer Leslie meant no disrespect, my Majesty. She only means that Windpaw is her home, not Silverfang.”

Thankfully, my father didn’t look offended. Relief flickered in his eyes, replaced quickly by concern. “There is no disrespect. Healer Leslie has a very real concern,” he said firmly. “No one here seeks to force you to stay, I assure you.”

I noticed Nolan leaning back, a faint smirk playing at his lips. He seemed to be enjoying the tension a little too much, but I couldn’t call him out-there was already enough drama tonight.

Solon leaned closer to Leslie, his voice low but earnest. “Is there any way I can convince you to stay? Any demands I could meet to keep you from leaving?”

Leslie froze, caught completely off guard. From his tone, it was clear he meant it. He really wanted to know. He wanted to make their relationship work.

After a moment of consideration, Leslie finally said, “I have just one.”

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & SIXTY EIGHT

Talia’s POV

“Then, tell us what it is,” my father said.

I watched Leslie’s expression. She looked calm, but I could tell from the tension in her shoulders that whatever she planned on saying wasn’t a small matter.

“I want to prepare a special herb for Solon,” Leslie finally said.

My father's eyes narrowed. Solon stiffened. Nolan stopped eating. Colin set his fork down and focused on her.

"What do you mean?" my father asked.

Leslie continued, "He would take it only after we mark each other as mates. If he betrays me afterward, the herb will activate and cause a pain worse than what he would feel if I rejected him. The pain would spread through his body. It would be intense enough that he might not survive it."

The words were spoken so calmly that it made them even more unsettling.

Father's hand slammed down on the table so hard the dishes rattled. "Are you planning to kill my son? Is that your condition?"

"When did I say I wanted to kill him?" Leslie responded.

"Do not act coy with me," my father growled.

"I do not want to kill him," Leslie explained. "I want to ensure my mate's loyalty. That is all."

"That is all? That's ALL?!" Father repeated. "You speak as if this is a simple conversation over an afternoon brunch. You are talking about poisoning my son! The future Alpha King!"

"It is not poison," Leslie defended. "It is a safeguard. If he is faithful, nothing happens. If he betrays me, he feels the consequence of that choice."

I understood why she felt this way. Her parents' story had been haunting her for years. Of course she would want a way to protect herself. But hearing her describe a pain that could kill Solon made me worry.

"Leslie, you cannot be serious," I interjected. "You have not thought this plan through."

“I have thought it through, Talia,” Leslie shot back. “I know exactly what I am asking for. I will not bind my life to a man who can walk away without consequence. I will not repeat my mother’s fate.”

I looked at Solon. His face had gone pale. He did not look offended, just overwhelmed. His hand rested near his glass but did not

move.

“Solon,” Leslie said. She turned fully toward him now. “This is my condition. If I stay, if I accept this bond, will you accept it

too?”

Conflict showed plainly on Solon’s face. He cared about her, That much was obvious from the way he looked at her, but he also understood what she was asking. This was not a simple request for reassurance. She was asking him to swallow something that could kill him if a mistake was made whether it was his fault or not,

Solon opened his mouth to answer, but father interrupted him. “You will not answer that damn condition,” he said to Solon. The Alpha command hit Solon and he closed his mouth quickly. “I will. The answer is no,” father said.

Leslie frowned and asked, “So you will not allow him to decide for himself?”

“I will not allow my son, the future Alpha King, to bind himself to this fate,” Father said. “You are asking for a tool that could end his life. Do you understand what that means?”

“I understand exactly what it means,” she replied.

“Then you know why I refuse.”

Leslie crossed her arms and said, “What I know is that you do not trust him.”

Solon flinched at her words and turned to father. “That is not what this is,” Father said. “I am protecting my son.”

“Yes, it is,” Leslie insisted. “If you believed he would never betray me, you would have no reason to fear a herb that only activates if he does.”

“This is not about trust. This is about control,” Father retorted. “You fear not having any control, so you would rather control my son and inevitably kill him because you refuse to deal with your trauma.”

“It sounds like you do not trust him,” Leslie argued. “You expect him to rule a kingdom, but you do not trust him enough to let him prove his loyalty to me.”

I looked from Father to Leslie and then to Solon again. I trusted him. I did not believe he would betray her. I also knew herbs like that were not a game. I had experienced first hand what certain herbs could do to a wolf.

“Leslie,” I said carefully. “You do not need something like this. If you are afraid, you can take time. You can wait before completing the bond. You do not need to risk his life.”

Leslie shook her head. “You are not listening. Time does not change what he is capable of. I want a mate who chooses me and knows that betrayal has a cost. That is the only way I will ever feel secure.”

I thought of Jason and everything that had happened between us. I understood the desire to make betrayal hurt. I understood it too well. Even so, the idea of Solon collapsing in pain because of one mistake, or a misunderstanding, or something beyond his control, made me feel sick.

Father spoke again. “I will not approve this.”

“I know you understand where I’m coming from, Talia,” Leslie continued. “You could use the herb too. You have two Alphas right here. Do you plan on trusting either of them without consequences?”

I felt Nolan and Colin’s eyes on me, but I could not bring myself to look at either of them.

“I do not want anything like that,” I responded. “I might be afraid, but I do not want a bond built on fear of death.”

“Then, you are a fool just like my mother,” Leslie said sadly.

Father slammed his hand on the table again causing us all to flinch. “Enough! This dinner is over.”

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & SIXTY NINE

Talia’s POV

I barely slept after that terrible dinner. I was surprised my father hadn’t expelled Leslie from Silverfang immediately afterwards. Knowing him, he was going to take time to figure out how he could salvage the situation because I knew he would never want Solon to reject his mate.

I felt for Solon. I couldn’t get the image of the way he looked so defeated out of my mind. I tried to comfort him, but Solon told me he needed space.

“Goddess, what am I supposed to do?” I groaned as I tossed my pillow off the bed. I was angry about the entire situation.

I was angry at father for Alpha commanding Solon to keep him from responding. He shouldn’t have done that because now things would be tense between him and Solon. But I understood his concern.

I couldn’t even fault Leslie even if I wanted to. Leslie had every reason to be wary and suspicious, but she didn’t need to take it out on Solon. Though I understood her reasoning even if I wished I didn’t. She was a deeply scarred woman but knowing that did not make the sight of Solon’s sorrow hurt any less.

Unfortunately, their situation only made me think about Jason and his warning: No Alpha would want a barren Luna like you.

I knew Jason said that to hurt me. Jason wanted me to believe that he was my only option and to ignore all the terrible things he had done and take him back. I knew that he was trying to manipulate me, but part of me still feared that Jason was right.

I had every test and examination done while still Luna of Shadowclaw. The doctors never found anything wrong with me.

Now, without my wolf, my doubts continued to increase at this very moment. By morning, my eyes burned from exhaustion, but I had made my decision. I needed to be examined again. And it couldn't just be anyone doing it. There was only one person I trusted to do this for me and that was Leslie.

I waited until the sun had fully risen before making my way to Leslie's cabin. The entire walk I kept pausing and turning back before pushing myself to go talk to her. I finally reached her cabin and knocked on the door.

There was a long moment of silence before the door opened a crack. Leslie looked back at me with dark circles under her eyes. It seemed I wasn't the only person that didn't get any sleep last night.

"Rough night?" I asked.

Leslie pushed the door open fully but kept one hand on the door in preparation to slam it in my face. "Look Talia, if you're here to try to convince me, you're wasting your time, and I am running out of patience with you intervening in my life."

Her tone stung, but I understood it. She was tired. She needed space. And she didn't expect everyone to pressure her again after what she said last night.

"I'm not here for that," I whisper.

"You said that last time and then you tricked me into agreeing to go to that dinner," Leslie said.

"I'm not here about Solon, I promise," I said firmly, "I know Solon would accept you. He just needs time to process everything."

She snorted quietly, clearly unconvinced. “Processing and accepting are two different things.”

“I know,” I said softly. “But he cares about you. He truly does.”

Leslie crossed her arms over her chest, “Cut the crap. Why are you here?” she asked.

I hesitated for a moment, trying to find the right words,

Leslie sighed and leaned her shoulder against the door frame. “You are wasting yours and my time. I thought you weren’t coming here to convince me.”

“I’m not,” I said quickly. “I am just letting you know that I understand where you’re coming for. I get it.”

That made her pause. She studied my face carefully, searching for any sign that I was lying. When she found none, Leslie relaxed a little, but she still eyed me suspiciously.

“Then what do you need, Princess?” Leslie asked.

I swallowed hard. My palms felt sweaty. I was trying to find the right words, but it was all so embarrassing.

Leslie frowned when I didn’t respond right away. She reached for my hand and pulled me into her cabin. Leslie closed the door. ” Look, you don’t have to be nervous. After everything we’ve been through, you can talk to me,” Leslie said, “What trouble have you caused this time?”

“I haven’t done anything. I’m not in trouble or at least I’m not in trouble yet,” I said. “It’s something personal.”

Leslie raised an eyebrow. “Well, what is it?”

I drew in a slow breath and forced myself not to look away. “I want you to help me check something.”

“Talia…you’re starting to scare me,” Leslie said. “Check what? What do you need me to check?”

“I want you to check if I’m barren.”

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & SEVENTY

Talia’s POV

I stood there, feeling exposed. Leslie stared at me as if I had just spoken in another language.

“What?”

My throat felt tight, but I forced the words out again. “I want you to help me check if I am barren.”

Her expression shifted from shock to anger in an instant. “This is about Jason, isn’t it?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“That fucking bastard…I should’ve known from the beginning he was up to no good,” Leslie growled. She then calmed herself and asked, “What did he say to you exactly?”

“He said no Alpha would want a barren Luna,” I explained.

Leslie’s jaw clenched. “You realize that says more about him than it ever said about you, right?”

“I know that,” I said quietly.

“Then, tell me what you’re afraid of,” Leslie said.

I looked at my hands for a moment and then laced my fingers together to keep them from shaking. “I am afraid Jason was right that I am barren.”

“He was not,” Leslie said at once. “There are plenty of couples who can’t conceive, and their mates never abandoned their she- wolves.”

“But they weren’t Alphas,” I argued. “When I could not get pregnant with him, I thought something was wrong with me. The doctors at Shadowclaw examined me and there was nothing wrong with me, but Jason didn’t even hear me out. After I left Shadowclaw, I was checked again. They said I was fine, but I still cannot shake the thought that maybe something was overlooked.”

Leslie pulled out the chair across from me and sat down. “Ok, look, healers can sense things regular doctors cannot,” she said. ” We work with the body, but we also work with the soul. That is our difference,”

“You can really tell if someone can have children?” I asked.

“Yes,” Leslie confirmed. “Werewolf fertility is tied to our soul. When I examine someone, I do not just look at their body. I feel the flow of that energy. If something is blocked, I can sense it.”

A flicker of hope rose inside me, but I pushed it down, afraid to trust it too soon. “But… My wolf has not awakened yet. Will that make a difference?”

“No,” Leslie said. “Your wolf is part of you even if she is not fully awake, Your soul is still complete. I can still read it.”

I exhaled slowly. “So, you can tell?”

“Yes,” Leslie said. “If you want me to.”

“I do,” I answered. “I need to know. I cannot keep wondering about this.”

Leslie stood and moved toward the shelves. I watched as she chose a small glass bottle and a clay cup. She poured water into the cup and then added a few drops of liquid from the bottle. The water turned deep blue.

“What is that?” I asked.

“A mild focus potion,” Leslie explained. “It is safe. It helps calm your mind and make your energy easier to read.”

She brought the cup over and held it out to me. I took it from her. The ceramic felt warm from her touch.

“Drink all of it,” Leslie instructed.

I drank it in a few swallows. A few seconds later, I felt the tension in my chest loosen. My heartbeat slowed to a steadier rhythm.

Leslie moved behind me and rested her hand lightly on the top of my head. “Close your eyes.”

I did as she said. At first, I felt nothing. Then a gentle warmth spread from the top of my head down through my body. It was soothing, like stepping into sunlight after being cold for too long.

For the first time in days, my thoughts stopped racing. There was no repeating of Jason’s harsh words. No flash of Solon’s sad eyes at the dinner table. Just a peaceful quiet..

It was hard to tell how long we stayed like that. I didn’t realize I had fallen asleep until the warmth faded and I felt Leslie’s hand lift from my head. I opened my eyes as she moved around to stand in front of me again.

“So, what’s the verdict?” I asked.

Leslie smiled. It was a real smile, not a forced one to make someone feel better. “You are fine,” she said. “You can bear pups.”

“You are sure?”

“There is nothing wrong with your ability to conceive. Your energy is clear. There are no signs of damage or blockage,” Leslie

answered.

“Then why…?” I swallowed. “Why did I never get pregnant with Jason?”

Leslie shrugged slightly. “Clearly because your relationship with him was not meant to last.”

I blinked. “That is it?”

“Yes,” Leslie confirmed. “Sometimes the bond does not allow conception when the pairing is wrong. The body can sense it even when the mind cannot. You were not the problem.”

It felt strange to think the bond knew that Jason wasn’t loyal before he even betrayed the bond. I was forever grateful. Now knowing how Jason truly was, there was no telling what kind of atrocities he would’ve committed when he realized I was the Princess.

“Why were you still worried about this? Nolan and Colin care about you. You’re not losing no matter who you choose,” Leslie

pressed.

“Jason treated me well at first too,” I said. “He was kind and patient. I believed our bond was unbreakable and it was worth losing my status as Princess. Then, he changed when I couldn’t have his pup and with Viki’s lies, he threw our bond away without a second thought.”

“That was him. That doesn’t mean Nolan or Colin would do that,” Leslie stated.

“I didn’t want to take the chance,” I said “It would not only hurt me. It would hurt Silverfang too. The pack’s future is tied to my choice. If I choose someone who later discards me, it affects everyone.”

Images flashed through my mind: Nolan rejecting me, Colin looking at me with disgust, and the Elders judging me for failing for a second time.

Leslie leaned down to wrap her arms around me in a firm hug.

“You do not need to worry about that right now,” she said. “Just know you are whole.”

“Thank you, Leslie,” I said.

“You trusted me with this. Thank you for that. It means more than you realize,” Leslie continued.

Leslie let go of me, but I don’t know…

I should’ve felt better, but something in my chest still wouldn’t settle.