Barren Luna 171

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & SEVENTY ONE

Talia's POV

After leaving Leslie's cabin, I felt like a weight had been lifted from my chest. I felt energized. I knew that wouldn't last due to my lack of sleep, but I wanted to take full advantage of it while I could.

I headed toward the training grounds to release some of my pent-up energy.

I walked the usual path, but I did not see Nolan anywhere. Normally, he trained at this hour or sparred with Marco. Today, he wasn't there. Only a few younger warriors practicing their forms and a pair of instructors shouting corrections.

Colin's voice echoed in my mind: Distance yourself from him. If he truly cares about you, he'll make the effort.

That advice made sense when I heard it. Now, I wasn't so sure. It felt like I was switching from one thing to another to worry about. Two days remained before I was expected to make my decision and yet, Nolan was nowhere to be seen.

Had something happened to Nolan? Or had he taken my silence as a sign that I no longer wanted him as my mate? The longer I walked without seeing him, the heavier that pressure felt.

"I am overthinking this," I told myself. "He's probably handling something important with his pack."

Still, when the sun started to set and I realized I had wandered the palace grounds half the day without finding him, my anxiety returned with a vengeance.

Something was wrong.

By the time I arrived at dinner, I had no appetite. I pushed food around my plate and kept glancing at the door, half-expecting

Nolan to walk through it.

Della found me before dessert arrived. She slid into the seat across from me and lowered her voice. “You look like you have not slept. What happened?”

“Nothing. I am simply tired,” I lied.

“You’re a terrible liar, Talia,” Della said, rolling her eyes. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

I hesitated and then decided it was pointless to hide anything from her. “I have not seen Nolan all day,” I admitted.

“And that’s a bad thing because? I thought you were upset with him,” Della said.

“I’m not upset with him. I wanted him to put forth an effort to pursue me and not just make demands or try to control the situation,” I responded.

“Oh, you really don’t know what today is,” Della said as she ate a spoonful of pudding.

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“Today is his father’s Memorial Day,” Della replied.

“Oh.” I sat back in my chair, “How do you know that?”

“Because Marco is with him right now. He stays with him all day,” Della explained. “Nolan does not train, he does not leave his room, and he does not speak unless necessary. He basically drinks himself into unconsciousness.”

All day, I had been restless. It made sense now. I was responding to Nolan's sadness that I was feeling through the mate bond.

"There is nothing wrong with checking on him, you know," Della suggested. "You can take the initiative this time. It will show him that you care about him regardless of the mate bond."

"I am not sure about that. This is a very sensitive time for him," I said.

"And?" Della countered. "He has seen you at your lowest multiple times. I think it is about time you've seen him at a low point." "I barely know him," I said, though my voice lacked conviction.

"That is exactly why you should go," Della said. "This is actually the perfect chance to see him as a person, not as an Alpha or a potential mate."

She was right. If I wanted to judge Nolan fairly, I needed to understand him beyond all the walls he put up.

Della leaned forward. "Go to him. If he pushes you away, then at least you know where you stand and the decision will be easier."

I took a slow breath and nodded. "You are right."

"Of course I am," she said, softer this time.

By the time I left the dining hall, the sky had darkened into shades of deep blue. The closer I got to Nolan's room, the more anxious I became. I had no idea what I was walking into and the thought of him rejecting me was frightening.

I reached Nolan's room. Before I could knock, Marco stepped into the hallway. He looked surprised to see me as he closed the door.

“Princess? What are you doing here?” Marco asked.

“I… I wanted to check on Nolan,” I answered. “I hadn’t seen him all day.”

Marco glanced back at the door before looking back at me. “Tonight isn’t really a good time,” he said.

I frowned but I didn’t push. Marco knew Nolan better than me, so he would know if it was safe for me to engage. “I can come back tomorrow,” I said quietly. “If that is better.”

Marco hesitated. He looked torn, as if he wanted to say yes but knew Nolan would not approve. Before he could respond, Nolan called out, “Marco, bring more wine.”

Marco pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration. I could tell that he wanted to argue with Nolan, but being that Nolan was his Alpha, he had no choice but to obey.

“I will handle it from here,” I told him. “From your reaction, I’m sure he doesn’t need any more wine.”

Marco studied my face as if trying to determine if this was a terrible idea. “If you insist,” he said as he opened the door for me. But be prepared. He is not himself today.”

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & SEVENTY TWO

Nolan’s POV

Today was my father’s Memorial Day.

I sat alone in my room with a half empty bottle of wine on the table and a cup in my hand. Years had passed, and I was still no closer to the truth behind my father’s death.

Rogues had carried out the attack, yet I no longer believed the Alpha King was responsible. I was supposed to find answers, but by coming to Silverfang, I only had more questions and more stress.

My father's face flickered in my mind. The last time I saw him alive. One moment, he was smiling at me and then the next he was a raging beast.

I slammed the cup down on the table and drank straight from the bottle. The wine slid down my throat and left a dull warmth in my chest. It did nothing to ease the constant pain I felt at remembering that moment.

I needed at least two more bottles until I passed out. It would be a sweet relief from my racing thoughts.

'Coward,' I heard my wolf grumble. 'You need to fix your mistakes with our mate.'

"Not now," I responded.

'Are you going to wait until she chooses Colin before you act?' my wolf growled.

Each time I saw them together, something twisted hard in my chest. I did not like that she seemed comfortable with Colin while she kept her guard up with me. It made me restless and angry in ways that made me feel inferior.

Hadn't I shown her enough that I would always choose her? Yes, I made a mistake by ignoring the mate bond initially, but she should know that I wanted her. What more did I need to do to prove it to her?

Even though she rejected Leslie's request to give me the herb to secure my loyalty, I would have taken it without hesitation if she asked me to. I would never betray her like that fool, Jason. (1

'You will have to tell her,' my wolf said. 'After what you did, words alone won't work anymore. You've been giving her mixed signals. You need to tell her that you want her as a mate.'

'I have tried,' I argued.

'Telling her that she belongs to you does not mean the same as telling her you want to be her mate,' my wolf growled.

‘I am trying, but she avoids me,’ I said.

‘Try harder,’ my wolf countered, ‘You saw how Marco treats Della. He does not threaten her. He supports her choices. You should try that instead of pushing every time you feel impatient,”

“I do not need advice from you,” I muttered.

“Yes, you do,” he argued. “You have a mate who is hurt and confused. If you want her, you need to care for her.”

Two days remained until the choosing ceremony. If Talia did not change her mind before then, I would have to think about more than my pride. Silverfang’s future was tied to her decision. If she chose Colin, I would not take another she-wolf as my mate. Silverfang and Bloodmoon would be at a disadvantage.

‘Her not choosing us is not an option,’ my wolf growled. ‘You need to show her that you want her. Remember she has begged you more than once to claim her.’

I stared at the cup and did not respond. I did not like the idea of pressuring her, but I also could not pretend politics did not exist.

I ran my hand over my face before looking at the door. I didn’t want to think about this right now.

Marco had gone to fetch more wine a while ago. Where was he? What was he doing?

“Marco,” I called out. “Where the fuck are you?”

There was no answer.

I clenched my jaw and opened my mind link with him. “Marco! I told you I needed more wine.”

Silence answered me again. My anger intensified. The last thing I wanted was to be left alone today with old memories and new doubts.

The door finally opened.

“Finally! What were you…”

I stopped mid-sentence as it was not Marco who entered the room.

It was Talia.

She closed the door behind her. Her eyes moved over the table, the bottle, and then my face. She crossed the room and offered

me a bottle of water.

Still in shock, I didn’t take it. Talia shoved it into my hand.

“Drink this,” she said. “You don’t need any more wine. If you keep going, you’re going to get drunk.”

There was no softness in her tone and that bothered me. Did she really just come to scold me?

“That’s the point of drinking, Princess. It is to get drunk,” I sneered.

Talia frowned and said, “Well, you shouldn’t.”

“You’re a little too late with that warning, Princess. I am already drunk,” I said before taking a sip of water. “I’m getting black

out drunk”

“Nolan…”

“What are you doing here anyway? Shouldn’t you be with Colin?” I asked sarcastically.

The words left my mouth before I could stop them. The second I heard them out loud, I regretted it. I sounded petty and jealous, which was exactly how I did not want to appear in front of her.

‘You idiot!’ my wolf roared in my mind. ‘She came here to see you, and you are pushing her away. You’re making this worse! Apologize!’

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & SEVENTY THREE

Nolan’s POV

Tala glared at me The look she gave me made it clear she didn’t appreciate my comment. If Talia wouldn’t scold me my wall decided to do so on her behalf

“You keep making things worse!‘ he snapped. ‘You need to apologize right now.‘

I did regret lashing out at her, but I couldn’t bring myself to apologize especially after how she avoided me when she was supposed to be getting to know me too. I kept my expression neutral as if none of this bothered me

Talia sat down beside me and asked, “Do you want me to choose Colin?”

The question caught me off guard. I didn’t expect her to just come out and ask that.

My wolf roared in my head before I even decided to answer. ‘What are you doing?! Tell her no!‘

I should have answered her. Instead, I noticed her scent: the sweet scent of roses. The moment I focused on it, I could feel the mate bond come to life within me. Without thinking, I leaned forward and gripped the back of her neck.

“What are you…”

I cut her off by pulling her forward into a kiss.

Her hands gripped my shirt, and I expected her to push me away, but she didn’t. She responded to my kiss, leaning into me. My wolf howled with joy that she had not rejected us this time.

I slid my hands to her waist, lifted her easily, and placed her on the bed so that I could kiss her more deeply. She gasped softly when her back met the mattress but did not try to escape. Her arms wrapped around my neck pulling me closer.

‘Mark her!‘ my wolf urged. ‘She’s right here. She accepts us. Mark her!‘

I lowered my head toward the curve of her neck and began sucking at her neck, earning moans from Talia. I could feel the place where my teeth would fit. My wolf pushed hard against my restraint as he wanted the bond to form so that no one else would

come near her. I didn’t blame him. I wanted it too.

Before I could give in, Talia said, “Nolan, stop.”

I froze and forced myself to pull back. Talia looked up at me. Her cheeks were flushed, and her lips were slightly swollen from the kiss. She did not look afraid but just overwhelmed.

I sat beside her so she would not feel cornered. My voice was firm when I said, “I will not allow you to choose Colin. You are my mate and you can only belong to me.”

Talia looked away as her face grew even redder. “You could have said that a long time ago.”

I did not respond. I didn't know what to say. I expected her to leave, but she stayed where she was. "I didn't stop because I don't want you," she said while blushing. "We just…we don't know each other well enough."

I shifted so I could see her better. "Then, let's get to know each other right now. Let's talk."

Talia leaned up and asked, "Like what?"

"Anything," I said. "First thing that comes to your mind."

She hesitated before answering. "I like quiet things. Places where I can think. Reading helps with that "

"I read too," I said.

Her brows lifted slightly. "What do you read?"

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"History I answered "Strategy Things my father pushed on me when I was younger I learned to enjoy it

"My father did the same," she said "That doesn't mean I like it. It's just a necessity"

"So, we have that in common," I said.

She nodded once. "We do, but I do like reading other things too."

"Then, you'll have to recommend a book to me," I said and Talia nodded. "What about full moon nights? How do you feel abour them?"

“I don’t like them,” Talia admitted. “I do not like losing control in front of everyone.”

“I feel the same,” I said. “Most people think the Alpha’s son wants to show off, but I never liked the attention.”

“That makes sense. You don’t seem like the type to boast. There’s no need for you to anyway,” Talia said.

I smiled at Talia’s compliment. Talia was now fully relaxed in the conversation. I could hear it in her voice and see it in the way her shoulders loosened. I had not expected how much we had in common.

Talia yawned and said, “Keep going. Tell me something else.“.

“When I visited Silverfang as a child,” I said, “I always wanted to ask you something.”

She turned her head slightly. “Ask me what?”

“The roses,” I said. “Sometimes you carry one behind your ear. I wanted to know why.”

She was quiet for a long moment. I waited for her answer, but she didn’t answer.

I looked over and she was fast asleep.

Her hair fell across part of her face, and she looked peaceful.

For a moment, I simply watched her. A thought came to mind: what would we have been like if my father had not died?

If he were alive, she might already be my mate, and she would never have had to deal with Jason or any of the pain he caused. The thought filled me with frustration and regret, but it also pushed me closer to her. I leaned down and pressed a light kiss on

her forehead.

I pulled her gently into my arms and closed my eyes. She fit against me more comfortably than I expected.

‘Of course she would. She is meant for us,‘ my wolf said. ‘Don’t ruin the moment.‘

I ignored him and focused on the feeling of Talia in my arms. Right now, she was at her most vulnerable. Talia trusted me, so there was hope that she would not choose Colin over me.

For the first time in a long time, my mind didn’t race and I fell asleep with her in my arms.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & SEVENTY FOUR

Nolan’s POV

While drunk, I had forgotten to close the blinds, so the sunlight made it impossible for me to stay asleep. Annoyed, I shifted to grab my pillow to cover my face when I realized there was someone pressed against me.

Did Marco fall asleep in my bed?

When I opened my eyes fully, I saw Talia.

Her head rested on my shoulder and her arm was draped over my torso. She looked peaceful and content within my arms.

The memory of the night before came back to me. I didn’t expect her to stay with me for the entire night. Honestly, I didn’t know what to expect, but I was pleased with this outcome.

“This is how things are meant to be,’ my wolf said. ‘We should always wake up with her in our arms.’

I attempted to pull my numb arm out from under her but this caused her to stir. When Talia's eyes opened, her previously peaceful expression was replaced with confusion.

"Good morning, Princess," I said.

Talia's head snapped up to look at me. Her face turned red as I watched her realize that she had fallen asleep in my bed. I could hear her heartbeat racing faster.

"L… I shouldn't be here," Talia stammered.

Before I could respond, she climbed out of bed. She smoothed her clothes as best she could and avoided my eyes. Then she hurried toward the door.

"Talia, wait. You don't…" I started.

But she slipped out quickly, closing the door behind her.

I could hear her voice from the hallway. "No, Marco, I won't be staying for breakfast," she hurriedly said.

I chuckled as I knew she was running back to her room as quickly as possible.

My wolf snorted in amusement. 'At least she didn't run because you pushed her away this time. She knows she belongs here. She can't deny it anymore."

Before I could answer him, the door swung open without warning and Marco walked in. He did not bother knocking. Marco's eyes went straight to the bed, and then to me.

"Well?" he asked. "Did you mark her?"

“No.”

Marco raised an eyebrow. “You expect me to believe that? You two slept in the same bed!”

“I followed the rules,” I growled. “I did not touch her after she fell asleep.”

Marco scoffed. “Congratulations. You have mastered the bare minimum,”

I scowled. “She stayed with me all night.”

“She fell asleep,” Marco corrected.

“She felt safe enough to fall asleep in my arms, in my bed,” I countered.

Marco placed the tray of food on the table and picked up one of the empty bottles on the stand to throw away. “Then why did she

run away if you didn’t do anything?” he asked.

“I did not chase her away,” I argued. “She was embarrassed and panicked.”

Marco shook his head. “She panicked because the mate bond is pulling her toward you and she does not know what to do about it and you are no better.”

“She will not choose Colin anyways,” I said firmly.

Talia’s POV

My face burned from the moment I stepped out of Nolan’s room. I could still feel the warmth of his body and his scent on my skin. Worse, I remembered how safe I felt when I woke up.

How could I have let my guard down so easily? What if he had acted like Jason? But, deep down, I knew Nolan would never take advantage of me like that.

“Just calm down. It’s okay. Nothing happened. You just went to sleep,” I told myself.

I hope I didn’t look as flustered as I felt, but I knew I did. What time was it? I had to get back to my room before anyone noticed. I could shower and act like this never happened.

I ducked behind statues and vases to make sure no one saw me before taking the service hallways back to my room. I thought I made it back without anyone noticing, but only a few minutes later, as I was getting ready to shower, there was a loud knock at my door.

“Talia, open up.”

I let out a quiet groan. It was Solon. Had he seen me? No, he couldn’t have.

I stayed quiet, hoping he would go away quickly.

Then, Solon said, “I know you’re in there. Open up, Talia.”

I opened the door, hoping I looked normal. That hope died immediately when Solon frowned at my messy hair.

“Talia, are you okay? Your hair is a mess,” Solon said.

“Yes, I’m fine. I was about to shower,” I responded, trying to keep my voice even.

“Where were you this morning?” he demanded. “You missed breakfast. I was worried.”

“I, uh, I went running,” I lied.

Solon’s eyes narrowed as he stepped closer. “Running?”

“Yes,” I answered quickly. “I needed to clear my head.”

“Talia, I asked around,” Solon responded and I paled. “You weren’t running, so what were you doing this morning?”

I didn’t expect Solon to investigate and as I was trying to think of an explanation, Solon leaned in before I could stop him. He inhaled only once and frowned.

Solon’s body became tense as he slowly looked up at me. He previously looked concerned, but now he looked angry.

“Talia,” he said slowly, “why do you smell like Alpha Nolan? Explain.”

I stood frozen. My mind went blank and I was unable to find a single good lie. I could feel heat rising up my neck. This was the one thing I had not prepared for. I had not expected Solon to sniff me.

My heart dropped straight to my stomach.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & SEVENTY FIVE

Talia’s POV

“Come inside,” I said and stepped aside.

Solon entered my room. He closed the door behind him but did not sit. His eyes stayed fixed on me, waiting for an explanation.

“Talia, why do you smell like him? Did he hurt you?” Solon asked again.

“Yesterday was Nolan’s father’s memorial day. Della told me he had shut himself in, so I went to check on him. I stayed to make sure he was alright and… I accidentally fell asleep,” I explained.

Solon stared at me as if he had not heard me correctly. “You fell asleep in Nolan’s room?”

“Yes,” I admitted.

“Did you sleep with him?”

“Yes, that’s what I said,” I muttered.

“You know what I am asking. Did you have sex with him, Talia?”

“No!” I exclaimed, my cheeks burning. “Nothing happened.”

“Talia, it’s okay. If he took advantage of you, Father and I will handle it,” Solon said.

“I am telling the truth,” I insisted. “We did not do anything. I fell asleep because I was exhausted from not sleeping well. That was it. He did not touch me.”

Solon still did not look convinced. He stepped closer and tilted my chin up. His gaze went to my neck as he checked for any sign of a mark. When he saw none, he let out a sigh of relief.

I pulled away from him. “Solon, I wouldn’t lie about that.”

“Talia, this was careless,” Solon said. “If Colin notices Nolan’s scent on you, he will be upset. You should know better than that.”

“You don’t need to treat me like a child, Solon. And I never said I was choosing Colin,” I retorted.

Solon looked at me in surprise. “Wait. You are not choosing Colin?”

I took a deep breath and admitted, “No.”

“Why? He’s a perfect fit. He cares about you.”

“Colin is a friend. That is all,” I said. “I know you don’t like Nolan, and he does have a bad temper, but he is honorable. He has saved me more than once. If I choose him, Shadowclaw will hesitate before making any moves. Choosing Nolan strengthens Silverfang and will keep Shadowclaw and Michael in check.”

Solon frowned slightly. “Talia, neither Father nor I want you to think about political pressure when choosing a mate. We want you to be happy.”

“I know,” I replied. “But I am the princess of Silverfang. Protecting our members is part of my duty. Who I choose will affect everyone.”

“But will you be happy with him, Talia?” Solon asked.

Nolan was my mate, and he is finally acknowledging the bond. He put forth the effort to start getting to know me. It was a start.

“Yes, I think I will,” I finally said.

Solon was quiet for a moment. I watched his expression shift as he thought it through. I knew he was wrestling with his dislike for Nolan, but he understood my reasoning.

Finally, he nodded. “If this is what you want, then I will respect your choice. You will always have my support.”

I expected Solon to argue with me a little more about choosing Nolan, but I felt relieved that he was respecting my decision. “Don’t look so relieved, Talia. Did you really think I would force you to be with Colin?” Solon asked.

“Of course not. I just… I appreciate it. Thank you,” I said. “But why were you looking for me this morning?”

“I wanted to tell you that I am going to agree to Leslie’s conditions,” Solon answered.

“Really? How? Dad was against you doing it.”

“I spoke with Father last night. We argued about it, but in the end, he agreed to let me make my own decision. If the condition makes her feel safe, then I will accept it,” Solon explained.

“I am glad. Leslie needs that reassurance,” I said. Solon accepting her condition meant she finally had someone willing to meet her where she stood instead of expecting her to compromise. Though I did hope Leslie was only bluffing as a way to test Solon’s sincerity.

“I am going to tell Leslie today. I think we spent too much time not acknowledging the bond. I am ready to claim her and let everyone know she’s my mate,” Solon said proudly.

“Wait for me,” I said. “Let me get ready. We can go together.”

Solon looked conflicted for a moment. His eyes glazed over for a split second, which meant someone had mindlinked him. “I cannot. There is something I need to take care of first.”

“What’s wrong? Is it something important?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said. “I will meet you later. Just… do not run off alone again.”

Before I could ask anything else, he stepped toward the door.

“Solon?” I asked softly.

He paused. “Yes?”

“I am glad you are choosing her.”

His eyes softened. “So am I.”

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & SEVENTY SIX

Talia’s POV

The afternoon dragged on. After a few hours, I didn’t want to wait for Solon anymore. I decided to find him to see if I could help him with the important matter. Keeping myself busy felt easier than sitting alone with my thoughts.

I went to his office first, expecting to find him reviewing documents like usual, but his office was empty. I checked the courtyard next and then the training grounds. There was no sign of him anywhere.

My worry grew. Without my wolf, I was not able to mind link him or anyone else to ask if they had seen him. Solon had said he had something important to handle this morning. It was unlike him not to tell me what was going on..

A guard passed by, and I stopped him. “Have you seen Solon?”

“Yes, Princess,” the guard answered. “He and Alpha Colin left together not long ago.

I stared at him, unsure if I had heard correctly. “Solon and Colin? Together?”

“Yes, Princess.”

That made no sense. Solon had told me he had urgent matters to attend to. He did not mention meeting Colin. My stomach tightened with unease. Why was he going to meet with Colin?

Was this about my decision? Was Solon discussing something with Colin regarding me choosing Nolan? Was he figuring out a way to still have me choose Colin?

I hated the idea of Solon going against my wishes, but that was the only thing that made sense. I did not want either of them to make decisions for me.

I turned and headed straight for Nolan's room. If anyone knew what was going on, it would be him. When I arrived, I knocked once and then again harder when no one answered.

"Nolan, open up! I need to speak with you," I said and knocked harder on the door.

"Princess?" Marco said, coming up behind me, causing me to jump.

"Where is Nolan?" I asked.

"He was summoned to the dungeon by the Alpha King," Marco said.

My stomach dropped. Did my father imprison Nolan because I was going to choose him? I could feel my heartbeat racing. No, Father would not do that.

"Princess, are you okay? You look a little flushed," Marco said.

"Do you know why Nolan was summoned to the dungeon?" I asked.

"I do not know," Marco replied. "He left in a hurry."

That was enough for me. “Thank you,” I said quickly and headed straight for the dungeon. My footsteps echoed against the stone halls as worry pushed me forward. Whatever was happening, it was not normal.

When I reached the dungeon corridor, I saw exactly who I did not expect to see outside the cells.

Solon was standing beside my father behind a pillar. Colin stood next to him. They were all pressed close to the wall, positioned near Jason’s cell door as if they were listening.

All three turned when they noticed me. Solon’s eyes widened. Colin lifted a finger to his lips, signaling me to stay quiet.

I nodded and joined them. I could see Nolan standing in front of Jason’s cell. From where we were standing, neither Jason nor Nolan would know we were there.

“You took her from me,” Jason shouted. “You only want her because she is the princess!”

Nolan scoffed. “You are the one who only cared about her status. Do not try to blame me for the consequences of your choices.”

“She is my mate, and you need to stay away from her!” Jason yelled.

“Not anymore,” Nolan replied. “You broke that bond the day you betrayed her and accepted her rejection. Your mate now is that shameful whore Viki.”

Inside the cell, metal scraped as if Jason had stepped forward. “Viki is not my mate. She was a mistake.”

“Do you have any idea how much worse that is? You gave up on Talia over a mistake,” Nolan said in disgust.

“You do not deserve her, you monster,” Jason snarled. “You deserve to die just like your father!”

I almost gasped. How could Jason say something like that? I expected Nolan to lash out, but he kept his composure and only laughed at Jason.

“What is so damn funny?” Jason snapped.

“You do not have a claim on her anymore. The Moon Goddess has turned her back on you,” Nolan explained.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Jason asked.

“I am her second chance mate,” Nolan replied.

Solon’s head whipped toward me. I winced and gave him a small apologetic pat on the arm. This was not how I wanted him to find out, but it was out in the open now. Solon looked at Colin, who only shrugged, and Solon looked like he had even more questions than before. Father signaled him to stay quiet and kept listening..

Jason laughed. It was a laugh filled with resentment and anger. “There is no such thing as second chance mates. You think she cares about you? I am the one she loves, and there is nothing you can do about that.”

Nolan did not respond immediately.

Jason continued, his tone turning cruel. “You do not want her because of the bond. You want her because choosing her gives you power and the advantage to kill the Alpha King. That is all this is.”

“I want her because she is my mate,” Nolan said simply.

“Joke’s on you. She is barren by the way,” Jason responded.

“What… what did you say?”

“Why do you think I chose Viki?” Jason spat with a crazy laugh. “Talia is barren. She is useless.”

I went still, too stunned to breathe.

J Judith GW Author

Dear readers,

Talia’s mate selection is just around the corner-will more trouble find its way to her? I’d love to hear your thoughts in the comments! I’ll be taking a short break for about a week, so don’t miss me too much.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & SEVENTY SEVEN

Talia’s POV

“So, tell me, Alpha Nolan,” Jason said, his voice carrying sarcasm clearly through the bars. “Can you really accept that the Bloodmoon pack will never have an heir?”

He leaned forward, gripping the iron bars as if he wanted Nolan to see the satisfaction on his face. “Or does that not bother you,” he continued, “knowing your line ends with her?”

Jason’s laugh scraped at my nerves. I had truly thought it was Viki that had swayed how he felt about me, but I was wrong. As soon as Jason thought I was barren, he didn’t care about me at all.

Nolan did not answer right away which made my stomach twist. Why wasn’t he saying anything? Did he agree with Jason?

Noticing my discomfort, Solon gripped my wrist. His touch brought comfort and I began to slow my breathing. Then, it felt like my heart jumped out of my throat when Nolan roared.

The echo of it seemed to be even louder. It vibrated through my chest and Jason’s laughter cut off instantly. Nolan’s hand went through the bars and gripped Jason’s neck.

“You shameless bastard,” Nolan snapped. “You are not only a disgrace as an Alpha. You are a disgrace as a male.” He slung him backward and Jason barely managed to keep himself from falling back on his butt.

Jason’s face twisted with fury. “You think you are better than me?” he snarled. “You don’t get to judge my decisions. I did what was the best for my pack.”

“And look where that has gotten you. You have done more damage to your pack by abandoning her,” Nolan said, his voice hard.

Jason had no rebuttal. It was true. By trusting Viki, his pack was on the brink of ruin.

“I do not believe Talia is barren and even if she were barren, that was never her fault,” Nolan continued. “You were her mate. You should have stayed by her side. You should have protected her. Instead, you abandoned her like she was nothing.”

I felt relaxed when hearing his words. I didn’t realize how stressed I was about Nolan’s opinion on the matter. At least I knew if I was barren, Nolan would not have betrayed me.

I glanced toward my father. He was watching Nolan closely. My father nodded in approval. Solon also looked pleased with Nolan’s response.

Jason slammed his palm against the bars. “Do not pretend you would have done any different,” he snapped. “An Alpha needs an heir.”

“An heir does not have to be by blood,” Nolan snapped, “you simple minded fool.”

“The Elders would never…”

“Fuck that! An Alpha needs to make his own decisions and stand by them,” Nolan snarled, cutting him off. “An Alpha needs honor, something you never had.”

Jason scoffed. “I made the right choice.”,

“You were never worthy of her,” Nolan said firmly. “And the Moon Goddess will never grant you another mate I believe.”

“You do not know that,” Jason responded.

“I do,” Nolan said evenly. “Because the Moon Goddess already chose again. Yet, you have no one and will never have anyone again.”

Colin’s hand closed gently around my shoulder. “We should go,” he whispered. “Before he realizes we were listening.”

I hesitated. I wanted to continue to listen. I wanted to see Nolan continue to berate Jason, but I knew it was only a matter of time before we were noticed.

I allowed Colin to guide me away. We left the dungeon and went straight to my rose garden to debrief. I sat down on the nearest stone bench as I needed a moment to process what I heard.

No one spoke at first.

Finally, I looked up at Colin. “Was this your idea?”

“Partly,” Colin answered.

“And when were you going to tell me about this?” I asked.

“You weren’t supposed to know,” Solon chimed in.

“Solon….you said you respected my choice!”

“I was worried,” Solon admitted. “I did not know if Nolan would truly put you first. I spoke with Colin about it and we came up with the plan to test him.”

“Do you know how bad this could’ve turned out if he caught us?” I asked.

“Yes,” Colin said quietly. “But we both needed to know how he would react when it mattered.”

“You should have trusted me,” I said.

“You can’t blame us for being worried though. After what happened with….” Solon didn’t finish his sentence after receiving a glare from our father.

“After what happened with Jason…that’s what you were going to say, right?” I sneered.

“I understand why you are upset,” Father interjected. “And you should also understand our concern. We did not want you to go through the same thing.”

“Nolan is NOTHING like Jason,” I said firmly. Nolan had gone out of my way to save me twice and never took advantage of me. I knew even though I was nervous about him, I did feel like he wouldn’t betray me. I just wanted him to claim me properly.

“I know,” Father said. “Seeing how Nolan defended you tonight made me more confident entrusting you to him.”

I looked at him in surprise. “You already knew I would choose Nolan?”

I looked between Solon and Colin. Colin quickly said, “I didn’t tell him.”

Solon nodded. “Alright. I told Father.”

“Solon!” I exclaimed.

“Hey, you did not tell me Nolan was your second chance mate,” Solon added, turning toward me. “Why would you keep that from me?”

“I was worried you would fight with him,” I said honestly. “You are both stubborn.”

Solon exhaled through his nose. “That is fair.”

I reached out and squeezed his hand, “I know you were trying to protect me. I appreciate it and I promise I will help you keep Leslie.”

“Deal,” Solon said, flashing his usual smile.

“Solon, go confirm the arrangements for tomorrow’s ceremony,” Father said, turning to me with a gentle gaze. “We’ll make everything perfect for our princess.”

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & SEVENTY EIGHT

Talia’s POV

It was official the morning of the ceremony and I felt strangely calm.

I sat still while Della adjusted the sleeves of my dress for the third time. Her fingers tugged and smoothed as if she could iron out my nerves along with the fabric. Leslie leaned against the dresser with her arms crossed, watching us.

“If you keep messing with her dress like that, you’re going to rip it,” Leslie warned.

“Then, I will get her a new one. This is an important day for Talia. She has to look perfect,” Della responded.

“I think you’re more nervous than she is,” Leslie said.

“I am anxious. I want to know who she’s going to choose. She hasn’t even told me and I’m her best friend,” Della said and rolled her eyes.

I said nothing as I stared at my reflection. Once again, I looked like a proper Princess thanks to Della’s help. When I returned to Silverfang, I had felt awkward about dressing up like this and now it just felt right.

“Are you even listening?” Della asked, bringing me out of my thoughts.

“Sorry. What did you say?” I apologized.

“You’ve been out of it all day. That means you haven’t made a decision on who you plan on choosing.”

Leslie nodded. “Or she’s thinking of an escape plan.”

“I am not going to run,” I said. “And I have made a decision already.”

Both of them looked at me. “Well, who is it then?” Della asked. “Don’t keep us in suspense.”

“Nolan. I’m choosing Nolan,” I finally said.

Della froze. Her hands dropped slowly to her sides. “Nolan,” she repeated.

“Yes.”

“I thought you didn’t want to be with him because he wouldn’t claim you,” Della said.

“Well, he did claim me. He even defended me against Jason,” I explained.

“Oh, I wish I was there to hear that,” Della said and then she frowned. “Colin is going to be so sad. He really cares about you.”

Leslie snorted. “Just because he cares doesn’t mean he’s right for her.”

“True, but Nolan has been an ass lately,” Della argued.

“That is kind of Talia’s fault,” Leslie said and I glared at her. “Sorry, Talia, but it is true. Nolan told you not to trust Jason and you decided to find out for yourself.”

I turned toward the mirror, ignoring Leslie’s comment. “Colin is kind and he is loyal, but there is no spark there and I can’t force something that isn’t there.”

“You could learn to love him,” Della suggested,

“Not when I have a mate,” I said. “Nolan’s my second chance mate. That matters more than anything else. The Moon Goddess blessed me with another chance at happiness, and I won’t be ungrateful and take another mate because he looks like the perfect fit. I won’t be like Jason.”

Della studied my face. “If he ever betrays you,” she said quietly, “I will not forgive him. I will find a way to make him pay.”

“I know,” I replied.

“There’s always the herb,” Leslie suggested with a smile. “That way it is guaranteed he won’t betray you.”

I laughed softly. “That will not be necessary, but it will be for someone else.”

Leslie’s brow lifted. “Oh? Has Marco done something he shouldn’t?”

Della's face became flushed with panic as she said, "No. Marco wouldn't. He…"

"Calm down. It's not Marco," I cut her off, gripping her hand reassuringly. Della sighed in relief. I turned my attention back to Leslie.

"Solon agreed to take the herb," I continued.

"No way! Didn't your father Alpha command him not to agree?" Della exclaimed.

"Solan spoke with him and they both agreed," I explained.

Leslie straightened. "They did?"

"Yes."

For the first time since I've met her, Leslie looked genuinely surprised.

Della clasped her hands together. "That's incredible," she said. "I am glad Solon stood his ground on this. Great way to start a relationship."

"L…I didn't expect that," Leslie finally said.

"I told you to give Solon more credit," I said. "He won't betray you. I bet my life on that."

"Enough of this. Let's get you to your ceremony. You have a hot mate to claim," Leslie said. I allowed her to change the topic. She had a lot to think about, and I had a mate to claim. I followed Leslie and Della out of my room.

The closer we got to the hall, the more nervous I felt. It was silly really. I had been begging Nolan to claim me, so I shouldn't be nervous about it now.

"You got this," Leslie said as she pulled me into a hug. She entered the hall to take her seat.

The hall was already full when Della escorted me inside. The murmur of voices stopped as we entered. The entire Silverfang pack was present and representatives from Colin and Nolan's packs were also in attendance.

Colin and Nolan stood on the stage in suits in their pack colors. Solon waited near the steps. When I reached him, he offered his arm, and I took it.

"You're ready," he said quietly,

"I am," I replied.

My father moved to the center of the stage, "Today marks a sacred moment for Silverfang," he said. "We gather to witness Princess Talia's choice of mate and the alliance that will shape our future,"

The crowd erupted in cheers. Solon escorted me up onto the stage. I took my place in between Colin and Nolan.

My father turned to me and said, "Talia, my daughter, please make your choice."

I faced Colin first and I could see Nolan tense in my peripheral.

I stepped closer and hugged Colin. "Thank you for always standing by me and being a wonderful friend."

Colin hugged me back and said, "No need to thank me, Talia."

I stepped back and turned to Nolan. I took his hand. “We have been through sa many things in a short period of time that we’ve known each other. You have protected me, defended me, even when I was unappreciative of it. You embody the true characteristics of an Alpha and a mate. Because of that, I choose you, Alpha Nolan, to be my mate if you will have me.”

Nolan’s grip tightened slightly. “I accept you as my mate, Princess Talia. I promise that I will protect you and honor you as my mate and Luna.”

My father looked directly at him. “Do not say those words unless you mean them, Alpha Nolan.’

“I meant every word,” Nolan said.

Jason had said the very same thing to me, and I didn’t know if Nolan was telling the truth, but I had to hope he was.

“Then, so be it,” father said and the crowd erupted again in cheers.

Colin chuckled. “If you ever mess this up,” he said lightly, “I will take her from you.” I could tell Colin was joking, but there was a glint in his eyes that made me feel there was some truth in his statement.

Nolan’s expression hardened before turning back to look at me with a smile. “You will never have the chance in this lifetime.”

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & SEVENTY NINE

Nolan’s POV

Colin placed a hand on my shoulder and said, “Congratulations, you two.” True to his word, he did not challenge Talia’s decision and stepped down from the stage.

My wolf rose inside me with a satisfied growl. ‘He chose us. Now mark her.’

‘Not here, not yet. Be patient,’ I told him. He snarled at my restraint, but he did not push. I wanted to relish this victory, and I wanted to claim Talia in the privacy of my home.

The Alpha King lifted his hand, and an attendant approached with a small tray. Two rings rested on a black pillow. The Silverfang’s crest was worked into a simple band of the ring while the other was adorned in diamonds.

“These rings represent Silverfang’s recognition of your bond. They will strengthen it and serve as a reminder that from this moment forward, both of you carry obligations that extend beyond yourselves,” the Alpha King explained.

Talia stood still at my side. She did not look frightened, but I could feel her nervousness through our bond. I squeezed her hand which caused her to smile at me.

“Talia,” the Alpha King said, “Hold out your hand.”

She did and the Alpha King slid the ring onto her finger. I immediately felt our mate bond intensify.

Then the Alpha King turned to me. I held out my hand. The metal was cool as it slipped onto my finger, and I can’t resist the

bond attraction now.

My wolf pushed forward again. ‘Now. Mark her. You have the right. Bring back her wolf so I can meet her,’ he insisted.

‘I will,’ I promised him. ‘You must be patient. We come this far. We need to do this right.’

“May the Moon Goddess witness this union,” the Alpha King said. “May your bond bring strength to Silverfang and Bloodmoon. May you honor what has been given.” He then turned to the crowd and told them, “Please go to the banquet hall

for the feast."

The crowd slowly dispersed only leaving Solon, the Alpha King, Talia and me.

"Nolan," he said, "when do you intend to return to Bloodmoon?"

"Soon," I answered.

I didn't want to give a definite answer. I had been away too long, but I had no intention of rushing back with unfinished business. Jason and Michael still needed to be punished for what they tried to do to my mate.

Talia's head turned toward me immediately. "Return to Bloodmoon?" she asked. "I need to go with you right?"

Her question bothered me. Would she not want to go back with me?

The Alpha King responded before I could. "Be that as it may, you have different responsibilities now. You must go to the Bloodmoon pack."

"Now? Like right now?" Talia asked.

"You chose Nolan as your mate. That means you will become Luna of Bloodmoon," the Alpha King added. "You cannot do that from a distance. You will need to bond with your new pack."

Talia turned to me and asked, "When do you need to go back?"

"Two days," I responded. "Does that give you enough time to prepare?"

Talia nodded once. "Two days is fine."

Solon finally spoke, cutting through the brief quiet. “We still have Jason to deal with.”

The Alpha King’s expression hardened. “We do.” He turned to Talia. “After you leave Silverfang, you will go to Shadowclaw first, complete the takeover, and rule it.”

Talia’s eyes widened slightly. The decision caught me off guard as well-I had expected Solon to take Shadowclaw, not her.

“Talia and Nolan will escort Jason back to Shadowclaw,” the Alpha King continued. “Michael will be captured. Their crimes will be announced. Both will be expelled.”

“Father, Solon could take charge of Shadowclaw. Or one of the seniors,” Talia said quietly. “It doesn’t have to be me.”

“It does,” the Alpha King replied, a gentle smile easing his features.

“Why?”

“Because you were the former Luna of Shadowclaw. They know and trust you as you never harmed them during your reign,” the Alpha King replied. “Your presence makes the transition cleaner. It reduces the chance of unrest.”

“Colin can absorb Shadowclaw too. I’m just not sure I can-”

“Father is right,” Solon said, cutting in. “We trust you.”

Talia exhaled once. “Then I’ll do it properly.”

“It’s the right call,” Solon said, patting her back. “You’re the most qualified.”

“My decision is final,” the Alpha King said, though there was pride in his tone now, not authority. “And I trust my daughter to see it through.”

Talía dipped her head. “Understood, Father.”

I could feel her unease in the way her shoulders tensed.

‘It will be fine,’ I told her through our bond. She looked at me quickly as if she didn’t know I could do that. I smirked and she

blushed.

The Alpha King then turned to me, his gaze thoughtful but kind. “Nolan,” he said, “promise me you’ll stand by Talia as she takes over Shadowclaw.”

This was not only about Shadowclaw. It was another test to prove my loyalty to Talia. It was about whether I would treat Talia as a mate or as a pawn. It was about whether I would stand with her in public and in action, even when it benefited Silverfang more than it benefited me,

“I will support her, no matter what,” I said, “You have my word.”

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & EIGHTY

Talia’s POV

I was grateful for what Nolan said, but whether he would truly stand with me until I took Shadowclaw still unsettled me.

He was my second-chance mate. The bond mattered. Still, I had learned the hard way that a bond did not guarantee loyalty.

“Get yourself together,” I told myself.

I did not allow myself time to obsess. I needed to keep busy. There were things that needed to be settled before my departure.

Leslie and Solon were first.

I found them the next day in one of the conference rooms in the infirmary. Solon stood near the window. Leslie paced while twirling a vial in her hand.

They both looked at me when I entered.

“Took you long enough,” Leslie said flatly. “What was so urgent that we needed to be here this early?”

I raised an eyebrow. I had told Leslie why I needed her to come, but she was clearly pretending she did not know that Solon had already agreed to her conditions.

“I just wanted to get the situation between you settled before I left,” I explained.

“There is nothing to settle. His father won’t let him do it, and that’s that. We should reject each other and be done with it,” Leslie said.

Solon looked at Leslie in surprise. “No. I will not accept your rejection.” He turned to me. “I thought you told her.”

“What are you two talking about?” Leslie asked with fake annoyance.

“Father has already been informed of my decision, I agree to your condition,” Solon replied. “He will not interfere.”

Leslie snorted. “He Alpha commanded you. There’s nothing you can do. Let’s stop dragging this out.”

I bit my lip to keep from telling Leslie to stop acting. I did not know why she was testing Solon like this, but I did not want to

interfere.

Solon frowned. “He doesn’t get to control me,” he said as he stepped closer, taking the vial from her hand suddenly.

Leslie studied him for a long moment. “You understand exactly what this means.”

“Yes,” Solon answered.

“Then drink it and swear to me,” Leslie said, crossing her arms over her chest.

Solon uncorked the vial and drank it in one motion. He grimaced at the taste for only a second. He looped his arm around Leslie’s waist and pulled her close, causing her to blush.

“I swear I will never betray our bond,” he said. “If I do, I accept the pain, the punishment, and the consequences of my actions without protest.”

After a moment, Leslie finally said, “Good. Then I will stay.”

Solon smiled and kissed her forehead, making Leslie’s face turn even redder. “I will not make you regret it,” he said.

I cleared my throat pointedly, drawing their attention. I did not want to watch them make out here.

“Congratulations,” I said. “I’m glad the matter is settled.”

Leslie glanced at me. “Shouldn’t you be getting ready to leave? I am sure you need to prepare.”

I arched my brow. “Are you dismissing me?”

“I want some time with my mate,” Leslie said, giggling. Solon nodded in agreement.

I laughed. I was genuinely happy that they would accept each other. “Once everything is settled with Shadowclaw and Bloodmoon, I will come back to visit,” I said.

“Don’t bring any trouble back with you. Trouble always finds you, Princess,” Leslie said.

“You know I have ruled over a pack before.”

“And?”

I looked at Solon to defend me, but he said nothing.

“It hasn’t been a whole five minutes yet and you are already choosing her over me, brother,” I pouted.

“You know what they say,” Leslie teased. “Happy mates, happy lives.”

With that settled, I left them alone and went to find Della.

She was halfway through packing when I found her. Clothes were scattered across the bed. Marco sat nearby looking amused.

“What’s going on?” I asked. “Are you going on a trip?”

“Yes, I am,” Della replied.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

Della grinned. “I am coming with you.”

“Wait, when was that decided?” I asked.

Della fake pouted and replied, “You don’t want me to come with you?”

“No, that’s not it,” I answered.

“I asked my father for permission,” Della explained. “He spoke with your father, who agreed since I am Marco’s mate. It didn’t matter if he agreed or not. I was not about to let you do this alone. I am your Beta, after all.”

Relief settled in my chest knowing Della would be with me. She hugged me tightly. “You should go get ready too. We leave in the morning.”

When the time came to leave for Shadowclaw, I felt more prepared and confident.

Father stood with Solon and Leslie in the parking lot. Della and Março waited in the car behind mine. Nolan stepped out of his vehicle the moment he saw me.

Jason was already secured in the transport cage, restrained and gagged. His eyes burned into me as I approached. I did not look away as he was loaded into the back of the transport vehicle.

Father drew me into a firm embrace, then Solon followed.

“Safe travels,” Father said quietly.

“Contact us as soon as you get there,” Solon added.

I nodded.

I turned to Henry. “Beta Henry, you are responsible for Jason during transit.”

“Of course, Princess,” he replied. “He will not escape.”

Nolan opened the door for me.

“Are you ready, Talia?” he asked, a smile curving at the corner of his mouth.

I took one last breath, then stepped forward.

“Yes,” I said. “Let’s go to Shadowclaw.”