Barren Luna 181

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & EIGHTY ONE

Talia's POV

We made it to the Shadowclaw border checkpoint right before sunset. A metal gate stretched across the road with two SUVS parked at an angle behind it. This gate was new. Michael had worked fast once he found out Jason had failed again. It didn't matter what he did. He was going to lose Shadowclaw, and he was going to be banished.

As Nolan's car slowed, two armed guards approached us. I could hear Nolan growling low in his throat. I touched his forearm and said, "Stay calm. We have to play it smart."

"I know," Nolan responded without looking at me.

Behind us, Della and Marco pulled up in their own car. Farther back, the transport vehicle rolled to a stop.

"State your purpose," the first guard said as he walked up to the driver's side window.

"We are here under the Alpha King's authority," Nolan responded.

"We have orders from Elder Michael. No entry into Shadowclaw until further notice. Turn back," the guard stated.

"Do you know who you're speaking to?" Nolan asked. "I'm Alpha Nolan of BloodMoon and this is Princess Talia of Silverfang. Go and open the gate now."

The guard barely reacted to my title, which told me he was not going to cooperate. "And I have my orders. No one enters," the guard replied.

Nolan's eyes narrowed and his hand tightened on the steering wheel. "Elder Michael does not outrank the Alpha King."

The second guard stepped closer. His hand hovered near the weapon strapped to his belt.

"We follow Elder Michael," the second guard said firmly.

Behind us, I saw Marco step out of the car. Della followed, and even from a distance I could tell she was ready for a fight with the way she was rolling her shoulders. Marco's body tensed as if he was seconds away from incapacitating both guards.

"I don't think you two understand the situation you're in," I said.

"Talia, you no longer have authority here. Leave. We will not warn you again," the first guard responded, earning a growl from Nolan. I gripped his forearm and shook my head.

"Let me handle this," I said and Nolan nodded.

I opened the door and stepped out of the car. Nolan got out of the car and leaned against it, watching to see what I would do next.

I turned my head slightly toward the transport vehicle. "Beta Henry."

"Yes, Princess." Henry got my hint and yanked the cover from the cage, revealing Jason inside.

"Alpha Jason?!" The guards whispered, eyes wide.

I kept my hand on the cage frame and looked over my shoulder at them. "Tell Elder Michael if you do not allow us entry," I said,

"I will execute his son right here and the only thing he will have left of him is his bloodied head."

Jason jerked against the restraints, and the muffled sound that came from behind the gag was pure fury.

“You’re bluffing,” the first guard said, but his voice shook.

“Try me,” I told him. “Do you want your Alpha’s blood on your hands? What do you think Elder Michael will do to you if you are the reason for his only son’s death?”

“Open the gate,” the first guard finally commanded.

The second guard moved fast, rushing back to the gate. He punched in a code. The metal gate began to move to the left.

I stepped out of the transport vehicle and Henry closed the door. Then I walked back to Nolan’s car and got inside. Nolan got back in right after me and finally allowed himself to laugh.

“Well done. I don’t think I could’ve done it better myself,” he said.

“Thank you.”

After a moment, he asked, “Would you really want to kill him?”

“It was a bluff,” I admitted.

“Good. Death would be too merciful for him,” Nolan replied.

We crossed the border and drove toward Shadowclaw’s pack house. The road inside the border looked the same as I remembered. A few pack members stood near storefronts farther down, pausing to stare as we passed.

A moment later, Elder Michael appeared at the entrance of the pack house, flanked by two guards. His expression was hard, but I saw the panic beneath it. At least he cared a little about the wellbeing of his son.

Michael walked toward us in quick strides. “What have you done with my son?” His voice carried, meant to plant the idea that we were the aggressors.

I stepped forward before Nolan could speak. I had to own this. I would not allow Michael to bully me.

“Jason is alive,” I said. “He is restrained for transport and judgment for his crimes against Silverfang.”

“Lies. Jason has been a loyal Alpha,” Michael responded.

I almost laughed and said, “You and I both know that isn’t true.”

“How dare you laugh! You walk into my territory with my son in a cage and you expect cooperation?” Michael snapped.

“I expect obedience,” I growled, stepping toward him. I am here to enforce the Alpha King’s command.” Michael’s mouth tightened. “You have no authority here.”

“That’s where you are mistaken, Michael,” I said firmly. “I am Princess Talia of Silverfang, the daughter of the Alpha King. Seeing me is as if you’re seeing the Alpha King himself.”

“Whatever my son has done, it has nothing to do with me or Shadowclaw. You can leave,” Michael stated in an attempt to control the situation. I wasn’t going to let him, not this time.

“Shadowclaw is under Silverfang’s authority now, pending formal reform,” I told him.

Michael’s eyes flashed. “This is unheard of. You can’t do this.”

“I can and I will, Michael. You and your son have committed multiple crimes against the crown. You are lucky I am even discussing this with you,” I snapped.

“You have no evidence or proof. You…”

“You encouraged your son to drug me with Moonlust,” I interrupted him. “You helped him attempt to force a mark and restore a bond I rejected. You are as guilty as he is.”

His lip curled into a sneer, “Prove it.”

“Your son and former Beta did that for me,” I said.

Michael frowned. I could see him trying to work through a plan to escape except there was no way for him to escape this.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & EIGHTY TWO

Talia’s POV

Michael’s demeanor changed almost immediately after Nolan spoke.

His shoulders eased and his expression smoothing as if he had simply flipped a switch. It was unsettling how quickly he adapted. Michael had always been unpredictable, but this change was disturbing.

“War would serve no one,” Michael said after a brief pause. His voice was calmer now, almost appeasing. “Shadowclaw has already suffered enough instability.”

Nolan did not respond. He watched Michael carefully. I could tell through our bond that he too was suspicious of Michael’s mood change.

Michael turned his attention back to me. “Princess Talia, my earlier reaction was… impulsive. I apologize for it.”

I kept myself from rolling my eyes. He meant every word. Michael was only doing damage control because he had not expected

Nolan to be here.

“If Shadowclaw is to avoid unnecessary bloodshed,” Michael continued, “then a proper transition must be handled with order and transparency. I will arrange for a full assembly tomorrow.”

My surprise must have shown on my face because he quickly added, “At that assembly, I will explain the situation and formally transfer leadership of Shadowclaw to you, under the Alpha King’s authority.”.

This was too easy.

I had expected resistance, but Michael was barely putting up a fight. We needed to be careful moving forward.

“I agree,” I said carefully. “A full assembly is appropriate.”

Michael nodded and said, “Then it is settled. Until tomorrow, you and your party will be treated as honored guests.”

Michael turned and gestured to one of the omegas standing nearby. “Prepare quarters for Princess Talia and Alpha Nolan and their guests. Ensure their needs are met.”

As omegas moved into action, Michael took a step back. His gaze lingered on Nolan a moment longer before he turned away. Only once he was gone did I release the tension in my body.

The omegas guided us to our rooms. Everything looked the same as I remembered, and yet it felt entirely different now. This place was no longer Jason and I’s domain. Michael had quickly changed the decorations to suit his taste, but all of that would change. Soon, it would be mine.

Our quarters were spacious and well-appointed, just like I had designed them to be when I was Luna. Dinner arrived before we could even get a moment to decompress. Trays were set on the table and the omegas retreated immediately.

Marco immediately went into action as he searched for any hidden cameras or microphones. Henry assisted with the search,

Before anyone could sit, I spoke. “I want guards stationed outside Jason’s cell at all times. No one approaches him without my authorization.”

One of the guards bowed and left immediately to carry out the order.

I turned to Henry. “You’ll dine with us,”

Henry hesitated only a fraction of a second before nodding. “Yes, Princess.”

We took our seats. The food was untouched for a moment as I gathered my thoughts.

“Starting tomorrow,” I said, meeting Henry’s eyes, “you answer only to me.”

Henry did not look surprised. He straightened slightly in his chair. “Understood. I will follow your commands.”

Nolan leaned back, watching the exchange with quiet approval. Marco remained relaxed but alert, his attention flicking occasionally toward the door as if he expected trouble to walk in at any moment.

“Before we eat, we need to make sure it’s not poisoned,” Della said. “Since you know Michael is good for that kind of thing.” “He wouldn’t dare,” Henry said.

“Yes, he would,” I responded. “If he thought he could get away with it.”

Della took out a small bag filled with what looked like white powder and said, “Leslie gave me this. She said all I need to do is sprinkle the herb on the food. If it turned a different color, it would mean the food was poisoned.” She sprinkled it on the food and in our drinks. Thankfully, the powder did not change colors.

“I am glad he wasn’t foolish enough to try to poison us,” Marco added.

As we began to eat, Nolan spoke. “Michael’s compliance came too quickly.”

Henry paused mid-bite and said, “You’re not wrong. It was unnerving how fast he switched his tone.”

“Men like him rarely surrender power without attempting something,” Nolan continued.

I set my fork down. “What are you thinking?”

“During tomorrow’s assembly, he’s going to retaliate,” Nolan replied. “I don’t know what he plans on doing, but there will be a fight. Henry, do not come to the assembly unless we contact you first. Stay with the guards near Jason until you receive direct orders.”

Henry nodded. “Understood.”

I felt tense. I expected a battle when I got here, not this passive aggressive version of Michael. Creeping unease had curled into my stomach.

Della noticed it immediately.

She reached across the table and squeezed my hand. “Tomorrow will settle everything,” she said softly. “Once the transfer is done, Shadowclaw will be yours, and you’ll be able to move on and start the new chapter of your life in Bloodmoon.”

I forced a small smile. “I hope you’re right.”

Della glanced toward Nolan and Marco. Both appeared calm, almost unbothered. They looked confident as if no matter how things turned out tomorrow, they would be able to handle it.

Nolan smiled and said, “Look at them. They would never let anything happen to us.”

Marco chuckled quietly. “You’re not wrong.”

By the time we were done eating, I felt more relaxed. I listened to Marco and Della talk about what they planned on. It allowed me to ignore what we would have to deal with tomorrow if only for a little while,

Eventually, Della pushed back her chair and stood. “We should rest. Big day tomorrow.”

She grabbed Marco’s hand and tugged him toward the door. As she passed Nolan, she winked exaggeratedly. “You two should do the same.”

My face flushed instantly as the implication sank in-I and Nolan would be sharing a room tonight.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & EIGHTY THREE

Talia’s POV

The doors closed behind them, and I stole a glance at Nolan. He had unbuttoned his shirt a little and was pouring himself another glass of wine. Only then did it truly sink in that we would be sharing a room for the night.

I felt my heart rate increase. I tried to calm down to keep Nolan from feeling my nervousness through the mate bond. I wish I had taken the suppression herb, so he wouldn’t be aware of everything going on with me.

“This is nothing new. I just need to calm down,” I told myself.

I slept in his room before. Nolan had been drunk and could have easily taken advantage of me, but he didn't. Tonight was different. I have accepted him as my mate and vice versa.

There was no haze of alcohol to hide behind this time. My nerves were getting the better of me. There were too many life changing events happening for me to not be nervous.

My thoughts spiraled before I could stop them. Would he expect to solidify our mate bond tonight? Would he….

"Talia."

Hearing Nolan call my name startled me out of my thoughts.

"Y..yes," I stammered. "Did you say something?"

"You zoned out. Are you okay?" Nolan asked. "Are you worried about tomorrow?"

I hesitated. Should I tell him again I wanted him to mark me? I thought better of it and nodded. "Yes," I said. "I don't know what to expect tomorrow. Everything could go wrong."

"It will go smoothly. If things do get hectic, we will handle it," Nolan said. He reached over and gripped my hand. His touch made the mate bond flare. "I won't let anything bad happen to you."

"Nolan… can I ask you something?"

"You don't have to ask for permission," he replied.

I took a breath and asked, "Can I really trust you?"

Nolan did not answer immediately. I stayed silent to allow him time to respond. Nolan smiled. He let go of my hand and brushed his thumb lightly along my jaw,

“You are my mate,” Nolan finally said. “And you are my Luna. I will stand by you, not because of obligation, but because I chose you. I always will.”

The certainty in his voice and feeling his sincerity through the mate bond released the tension in my chest. Before I could second -guess myself, I leaned forward and kissed him.

Nolan, surprised by my boldness, froze for only a second. Then he kissed me back. His hand slid into my hair as he pulled me closer. The kiss was deep, hungry, it was as if Nolan had been waiting for this for a long time. It left me breathless.

I barely noticed when we stood. He pulled me against him, and the next moment he lifted me and carried me to the bedroom. When he sat me down on the bed, he was on top of me in an instant. His hands roamed my body causing me to moan.

My hands tightened in his shirt as the mate bond pulsed between us. When his lips left mine and traced along my jaw, a shiver ran through me. I inhaled sharply when his mouth moved to my neck and froze. All the nervousness returned as I awaited his bite, but it didn’t come.

Nolan pulled back just enough to look at me. His expression had shifted from lust to concern. “You’re nervous,” he said quietly.

I had not realized how obvious it was until he said it. “I am,” I admitted. “I want this, but everything feels… overwhelming.”

Nolan wrapped his arms around me and kissed my forehead. “We stop here,” he said.

“No, wait, I want this. I…” I started.

“It’s fine, Talia. We will have time,” Nolan said, cutting me off. “I don’t want you to feel pressured.”

“Thank you for understanding,” I told him as I rested my head on his chest and listened to his heartbeat.

“There’s something I want to tell you,” Nolan continued after a moment. “Something I should have said a long time ago.”

I lifted my head with curiosity. “What is it?”

“I fell for you the first time I saw you,” he admitted. “I was angry, bitter, and drowning in my own resentment back then. Every misunderstanding, every rumor, it all fed that anger. Instead of coming to you, I pushed myself away.”

“Honestly, I was afraid of you at first,” I admitted softly. “Not of you, really, but of what people said you were. Later… I realized you weren’t the monster they described.”

Nolan’s arms tightened around me. “Thank you for taking a chance with me, Talia.”

“I’m your mate. I’ll stand with you. And I’ll help you uncover the truth about your father’s death. Whatever it takes,” I promised

him.

We kissed again. It was slower this time and not influenced by lust from the mate bond. When we finally pulled apart, exhaustion settled over me all at once.

His fingers traced a slow pattern against my arm. “Get some sleep, my Luna.”

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & EIGHTY FOUR

Nolan’s POV

I woke to the sweet scent of roses.

Talia was still asleep in my arms. Her back pressed lightly against my chest. Her breathing was slow and even. The bond hummed low and steady beneath my skin.

‘She has fully accepted us,’ my wolf said. ‘We should mark her now.’

“No,” I snapped back. “Not yet.”

‘I am sick of waiting. She is OURS. Mark her,’ my wolf retorted.

“Yes, she is our mate,” I agreed. “That does not mean we get to rush her. We would be no better than that scum that betrayed

her.

My wolf grumbled, but he stayed quiet. I was not going to ruin what little trust I had earned because he was impatient.

I lowered my head and kissed her forehead. Then, her cheek and then the side of her neck. That got her attention and her eyes fluttered open in the middle of the kiss.

For a brief second, confusion crossed her face. Then awareness followed, and she blushed. Talia turned around to face me.

“Nolan,” she said quietly.

“Good morning,” I said.

“I fell asleep,” she murmured.

“You did,” I said. “You were comfortable.”

She tried to sit up but stopped as her hand brushed my upper body as she moved. Her fingers caught on the raised lines of my old scars. Talia traced one of the scars with her finger before looking back up at me.

“What happened to you?” she asked. I know she was confused as werewolves weren’t scared.

“They are from battles,” I replied. “They came from weapons tainted with wolfsbane.”

“Wolfsbane?” she repeated.

“Not enough to kill but it causes the wound to heal wrong and scar,” I continued.

Her expression softened. Talia leaned forward and pressed a gentle kiss to one of the scars. My breath caught as pleasure coursed through my body.

I expected her to pull back, but she didn’t. Talia kissed another, slower this time, like she was doing it on purpose. My wolf practically purred.

“Talia,” I said, “if you do not stop, neither of us will make it to the transfer ceremony.”

Her eyes widened. Heat rushed into her face. She pushed off the bed so fast she almost stumbled.

“I need to shower,” she said quickly, and then she went into the bathroom.

I sat there for a second, listening to the water start and forcing myself to stay where I was and not join her in the shower. My wolf laughed inside my head.

‘We are supposed to chase her,’ he said.

I ignored him as I got up and got dressed. Even though I would rather fulfill the mate bond and make sure Talia would never

think of another male, today was not about that. I was here to support Talia taking over Shadowclaw.

After breakfast, we met with Marco and Della and headed to the square.

The pack members were gathered in groups. I could feel the hostility in the air before I saw it on their faces. Most of them looked angry and ready to fight. Then, I noticed Jason was in a holding cell nearby, but Henry was nowhere to be found.

I reached out to Marco through our mind link. “Stay close to Talia. They are up to something.”

Before Marco could move, Della was already close to Talia, slightly behind her but close enough that she could step in without being told. I couldn’t help but smile in approval.

Michael finally made his appearance. He walked onto the stage and raised his voice so the crowd could hear.

“Shadowclaw,” he called and pointed at Jason. “Look at what has been done to your Alpha. This is the proof of what happens when outsiders are allowed to invade our pack and rewrite our rules.”

“Michael, stop. You are twisting the truth,” Talia responded.

Michael scoffed. “Twisting?” he repeated. “You are the one twisting the truth, playing tricks. It is your fault our pack has fallen.”

A wave of voices rose immediately in agreement with Michael.

“It is Alpha Jason and your actions that have led us here,” Talia countered.

“Princess Talia, the ex-Luna, hid her identity in our pack. She fooled everyone. She played the role she wanted and let my son suffer for it,” Michael said.

Voices rose again.

“She lied!”

“She pretended to be omega!”

“Viki wouldn’t have suffered if she told the truth!”

I grit my teeth. This pack was a bunch of idiots. Even now, they would rather place the blame on Talia instead of accepting that their Alpha was a cheating fool.

Michael lifted his hands as if he was calming them, but his eyes gleamed like he enjoyed every second of their anger.

“She hid her true identity to fool everyone,” Michael continued, “and now she returns as the Alpha King’s princess, standing beside Bloodmoon’s Alpha like this was always the plan.”

“That is not true,” Talia said, louder this time. She sounded strained as she was attempting to keep her anger in check. “I am here because Alpha Jason and you need to be punished for what you both have done.”

Michael's smile widened. "Punished?" he echoed. "My son is bound like an animal. He is silenced. He has done nothing wrong!"

"You are lying to them," Talia snapped. "You know what your son did. He drugged me. He tried to force a mark on me!"

The crowd did not care. They shouted over her and became more agitated. We had to get a handle on this before we had an angry mob and then I would have no choice but to spill blood to protect Talia.

I stepped forward and yelled, "Quiet!"

My alpha aura slammed into everyone. The pack flinched. Some stepped back without thinking. The noise dropped fast, not because they suddenly agreed, but because instinct demanded they stop talking when a stronger Alpha forced silence.

"Princess Talia is telling the truth!" a familiar voice rang out.

Henry pushed through the crowd to stand before everyone. He had a black eye and his face was bruised. The bastard Michael even harmed one of his own to continue the lie.

The pack recognized him immediately. There were murmurs amongst the pack.

"That is Beta Henry," someone muttered.

"What happened to him?" another asked.

"Elder Michael did this to me to keep me from telling the truth, I almost died!" Henry said firmly.

Michael's face contorted into a sneer as if he had not expected Henry to stand against him.

“That man is a traitor,” Michael snapped. “He abandoned Shadowclaw. He sided with outsiders, Seize him.”

A few guards hesitated and then moved like they were going to obey out of fear of Michael’s rank.

I moved quickly. I slammed the palm into the chest of one of the guards and sent him flying. Another I kicked hard in the stomach causing him to double over while the third backed away.

“I dare anyone to touch him,” I said. “He is under the protection of the Alpha King as a witness.”

“This is Shadowclaw territory. The Alpha King’s authority means nothing here,” Michael growled. “And no one will believe the words of a traitor!”

“Then, let your pack determine for themselves,” I said with a smirk.

“Henry,” Talia said, loud enough for the crowd to hear, “tell them the truth.”

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & EIGHTY FIVE

Nolan’s POV

I moved just enough to place myself fully in front of Talia when Henry began to talk. Every instinct I had was focused on keeping her protected. There was no telling how the pack would react to the truth and they were all hostile.

I was not taking any chance that Talia would be harmed. I would rather murder all of them than to tolerate any harm coming to Talia and I would have no regrets doing it.

It seemed Marco and Della also agreed as they were now standing in formation.

“I want to clarify something before I begin,” Henry said firmly. “Princess Talia did not hide her identity to try to take ownership of Shadowclaw.”

“Lies! What do you call this?” Michael snapped, pointing at Jason.

“Facing the consequences of his action,” Henry responded. “Princess Talia did not hide her identity. She renounced it when she became the Luna of Shadowclaw. She couldn’t reveal it because she no longer had the title to become Alpha Jason’s mate.”

The pack members murmured in surprise. I was even surprised. It made sense now how upset Talia was about her relationship with Jason. She had given up everything for that fool, and he spat in her face. It made me want to punch Jason’s face again.

“Elder Michael and Alpha Jason have coveted the Alpha King’s throne for years. When they discovered…”

“Lies!” Michael exclaimed. “He just wants to have control. He always…”

“Shut up!” a pack member yelled out even though their voices trembled.

“Let him speak!” another joined in.

I smirked as Michael stared at them. He never expected to lose his grip on the pack like this.

“When they discovered Princess Talia’s true identity, they realized she was their way to the throne,” Henry continued. ” Knowing how Princess Talia no longer wanted anything to do with Jason, poisoned her and Jason attempted to force a mark on her to secure control over her claim and Silverfang.”

There were gasps within the crowd. Wolves understood exactly what that meant. This was a crime that every pack law condemned. It was forbidden to force a mate bond.

“Alpha Nolan intervened before that act could be completed. Had he not, the consequences would have been irreversible,” Henry continued.

Michael reacted quickly. “That is a lie,” he shouted, pointing at the crowd. “He just wants power.”

“No! That is, you, it has always been you!” Henry snarled. “Look at my face! Princess Talia, Alpha Nolan, the Alpha King…they didn’t do this to me. He did!” Henry pointed at Michael. “This is what he does! Do not allow him to fool you into going against the Alpha King? If I hadn’t been smart, he would have beaten me to death to keep me from telling the truth today!”

“Are you going to believe him or your Elder?” Michael demanded.

Not one person rose to Michael’s defense. Henry’s injuries were just a reminder to them of how Michael abused those that didn’t go along with his plans. I smirked. Everything he put in place was now falling apart by his own hand.

Seeing that the pack no longer was in his control, Michael attempted to leave the stage, but he did not make it two steps.

Shadowclaw warriors closed in, their movements swift and coordinated. At the same time, Silverfang warriors stepped forward from among the onlookers. They surround Michael. One restrains him by pinning his arms behind his back.

“You cannot do this,” Michael snapped. “I am your Elder.”

“You are under arrest,” one of the warriors replied.

Michael’s gaze darted wildly before landing on Jason. “Say something,” he barked. “Tell them this is a lie.”

Talia stepped out from behind me before I could stop her.

“We did not come here to cause a war. We came to stop one from happening,” Talia said firmly. “Shadowclaw does not deserve to be twisted into a weapon for personal ambition.”

Michael looked at Jason before sneering. “We haven’t even spoken to my poor son. We need to hear his explanation.”

“Sure,” Talia stated. She walked over to Jason, who was still gagged, bound, with a warrior on both his sides. There was nothing to fear, but I couldn’t help but still walk with Talia.

Jason reached forward and removed the gag.

“Speak,” Talia said. “Your father wants you to tell everyone the truth.”

“Tell them how they are liars and we never did anything. They are…”

“We did it,” Jason said hoarsely.

Michael froze.

Jason lowered his head, his voice breaking. “It is all true.”

A stunned hush fell over the crowd.

“Everything Beta Henry said was true,” Jason continued. “I used Moonlust. I thought I could fix everything if I marked her. I thought we could go back to how everything was before.”

“You fucking fool! You have ruined everything. All your foolish actions are coming back to haunt you,” Michael shouted. My eyes widened as I realized that Michael was attempting to sacrifice his own son instead of taking accountability.

Jason shook his head slowly and said firmly, “You told me to do it. You said it was the only way and I believed you. You said the Alpha King would never see it coming. You said Shadowclaw would be stronger.”

Michael's mouth opened, but no sound came out. Fear and then anger flashed in his eyes. I couldn't help smirking that Michael was finally watching his son stand up to him.

Jason looked up at the crowd and said, "I was wrong. I am sorry."

Angry shouts erupted from all sides, calling for the exile of both Jason and Michael.

"Banish them!"

"They dishonored the pack!"

"Traitors!"

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & EIGHTY SIX

Talia's POV

Jason and Michael's banishment spread quickly.

By sunset, the elders had already sent word to the neighboring packs. Some packs agreed while some seemed cautious about how the Alpha King intervened.

Shadowclaw would finally have the opportunity to grow and thrive.

I did not allow myself to relax. I still needed to prove that I could rule Shadowclaw. If I wanted the pack to follow me, I had to move quickly, speak clearly, and make decisions that could not be questioned.

The first thing I needed to do was to decide on what to do about Henry.

I met him in the main hall of the palace in front of Elders and a few warriors. I wanted my decision to be public, so no one could twist the narrative behind closed doors. The Elders had stood against me when Jason first betrayed me, I couldn't trust them

fully yet.

"Princess Talia, this was an odd request. We could have met within one of our conference rooms," one of the Elders said.

I ignored the elder and turned toward Henry. He looked nervous. He bowed and greeted me, "Princess Talia."

"Beta Henry," I said. "I called you here to discuss the leadership of Shadowclaw moving forward."

"Splendid," the previous elder said.

"We have some candidates that…"

"Henry will remain Beta of Shadowclaw," I said, cutting the elders off. They paled at my declaration but none of them spoke against me.

"Understood, Luna," Henry responded.

"You answer to me," I continued. "You do not answer to anyone who claims authority, only to me."

Henry nodded once. "Yes, Luna."

"What of Alpha Nolan? I am sure he would need some input as he is your mate, isn't he?" the elder asked, trying to stir up conflict.

“Princess Talia does not need my input to be Luna of Shadowclaw,” Nolan simply said. I noticed how he stood a step behind me. He was clearly making it known that I was in control of this situation, not him.

“Elders, do you have any questions?” I asked.

None of them spoke and I left them where they were to find an office to work on the final paperwork. Once everything was completed, I leaned back in the chair and finally allowed myself to relax.

“You handled that well,” Nolan said, offering me a cup of tea.

“I handled it because I had to,” I replied.

“Do you always have an issue taking a compliment?” Nolan teased.

I blushed and before I could respond, Nolan had left me with my thoughts, so I did what I had been doing for days. I focused on the next task. I met with two elders who had supported Michael in the past and warned them that any attempt to stir unrest would be dealt with immediately. I made sure the kitchens had enough food for the pack, because instability made people hungry in more than one way.

That night, the pack insisted on a celebration.

Fires were lit in the courtyard. Tables were pushed together. Music played from a small speaker, and someone started a chant that made others laugh because it sounded ridiculous.

Della found me before I could slip away back to my room.

“Where do you think you’re going?” she asked.

“I am going back to my room to get some rest,” I replied.

“You can’t do that,” Della whined. “This is your celebration even if everyone looks like they’re walking on eggshells. You have to be seen.”

Della did have a point, but I wasn’t going to admit it. I took a sip of my drink and then I noticed she was staring at me.

“What?”

“So,” she said, drawing the word out as she looked me over, “still not marked.”

I stared at her. “So, that’s why you came to find me.”

“I came because I wanted to make sure you were okay and not going to burst a blood vessel by overthinking again,” she replied.

“I am not overthinking and what does that have to do with me being marked,” I said, then realized how unconvincing I sounded. Della laughed. “Because I know you. So, what, you talked yourself out of the situation, didn’t you?”

“It wasn’t the right time,” I snapped. My tone was sharper than I intended.

Della’s smile faded just enough to show she understood. “You weren’t thinking about that before, so why now?”

I looked down at my cup. “Now it is real. Shadowclaw is mine. Nolan is my mate. I agreed to all of it, and I still feel nervous.”

“Nervous that Nolan could end up like Jason,” she said plainly.

My throat tightened. “Yes.”

Della bumped my shoulder gently. “Nolan is not Jason.”

“I know,” I said weakly.

Della sat her cup down and placed her hands on my shoulders. “Then act like you know it. Release the past, even if you do it one step at a time. Tonight will be a good night.”

Before I could answer, someone brushed too close behind me. My hand jolted, and the wine in my cup spilled down the front of my dress,

“Sorry, Princess, I didn’t….” the omega stammered.

“It’s fine,” I quickly said. “Just go and enjoy,”

The omega bowed and scurried away as if afraid I would change my mind and punish him.

“Go change before it stains,” Della said, “And come right back. You’re dancing tonight.”

“Alright, alright,” I said, already turning.

When I reached the room, I paused with my hand on the door. Nolan’s scent was nearby, but he wasn’t in the room. This would give me a moment to go through my thoughts.

I stepped in and closed the door behind me.

I stripped out of the ruined dress, set it aside, and moved to the bathroom. The water was hot, and I let it run over me until my

skin.

Still, when I stood there alone, the questions returned.

When would I let him mark me?

Minutes later, I heard the door open and close in the outer room. My pulse jumped as I immediately knew it was Nolan.

I wrapped myself in a robe and walked out slowly.

Nolan stood near the table, his jacket already removed, his sleeves rolled just slightly as he poured a drink from the bar. He turned to look at me.

“You left early,” he said.

“I spilled wine on myself,” I replied.

“Do you think I made the right call today with Henry?” I asked quietly.

Nolan’s expression hardened slightly, not toward me, but toward the thought. “You did what you thought was best.”

“That is not an answer,” I said.

His eyes met mine. “Yes. You made the right call.”

I swallowed. “Do you mean it?”

“I do,” he said. “You are the Luna of Shadowclaw. You will not be undermined in front of your pack. Not by the Elders, not by anyone else, and especially not by me.”

I blinked rapidly as I attempted to fight back the tears. I didn't realize I needed to hear that from him. Nolan trusted me without a second thought.

"Talia," he said, and his voice softened, "what are you thinking?"

"I keep thinking about what happened with Jason," I responded and noticed Nolan's jaw tightened but he didn't say anything." And I keep thinking that I do not want fear to make me hesitate forever."

I stepped closer before I could overthink it.

"I am ready," I told him softly.

He blinked, caught off guard. "Ready for what?"

I let the robe fall to reveal my naked body.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & EIGHTY SEVEN

Talia's POV

"Lock the door." I whispered.

"It's already locked," Nolan answered. His voice was low and controlled, but his body told a different story. I could see the tension in his hands by the way he twitched. Seeing him struggling with his resolve gave me confidence.

I stepped closer, reaching for his hand. His palm was warm and rough. I guide it upward, letting his fingers brush my stomach.

“You’re playing a dangerous game, Talia,” Nolan said through gritted teeth.

I placed his hand on my breast.

Nolan’s palm covered me fully. His thumb moved over my nipple, slow and deliberate. I let out a quiet moan and he exhaled slowly.

“Make me yours,” I whispered.

“Are you sure?” Nolan asked.

I reached for his shirt and undo the first button. Then the next. When I leaned in and kissed his chest, I could hear him growling low in his throat. His skin tasted clean and warm. I opened more buttons, kissing as I went. His muscles tensed beneath my mouth when I bit lightly.

I opened his shirt completely. My hands slide over his chest and down his stomach. I felt him tense.

“Talia,” he growled, a warning that I intended to ignore.

My hand moved lower, covered his hip, to the front of his pants. I wrapped my hand around him through the fabric and squeezed.

Nolan moved fast. One moment I’m standing, the next I’m on the bed beneath him. He braced himself above me. His mouth crashed onto mine. Nolan’s restraint was starting to break. His kiss deepened, hungry and demanding. I arched into him when his chest brushed against my breasts. He cupped one firmly, thumb circling my nipple.

“Don’t stop,” I moaned.

He kissed my throat, my jaw, and the hollow of my neck. This time I didn’t freeze. I tilted my neck, allowing him more access, but he didn’t stop at my neck. His kiss trailed down my neck. When he took my nipple into his mouth, I gasped. Heat pooled low in my body.

“Tell me what you want,” Nolan said in between licks.

“You, I want you,” I answered and he chuckled. He began moving down my body slowly.

“What…what are you doing?” I asked as he spread my knees apart and settled between my thighs.

Nolan smirked as he stuck his tongue out,

“Nolan, what….”

I gasped and arched as his tongue inside me. Jason had never done this before. I read about it in books but never thought to ask for it to be done.

Nolan holded me down with my waist. My fingers were tangled in his hair. When he sucked my clit into his mouth, my body jolted. He hummed softly, the vibration pushing me closer to the edge.

“Oh, my goddess, Nolan!”

He slid a finger inside me and then another. The stretch was intense but controlled. Nolan found the place inside me that made

my vision blur and pressed there deliberately.

“Tell me you like this,” Nolan said.

“Yes,” I said without hesitation, “I love it!”

He stood up, kicked his shoes off. Then his belt. His cock sprung free, hard and flushed, bobbing between us. I froze for a second. He's longer and thicker than Jason, and I feltl a flicker of nervousness mingled with anticipation.

Goddess, how was it going to fit?

I swallowed, actually swallowed hard, and he smirked. "Too late to back out now, Princess."

I raised an eyebrow. I wasn't going to back out of this. I reached up and grabbed him, earning a groan. "Does it look like I am backing out?" I growled as I stroked him slowly.

Nolan grabbed my hands and pushed me back onto my back. He looked into my eyes as he lined up. Nolan pushed in slowly, the head slipping through my wetness with ease, but the stretch was startling. It burned at first, a hot ache, but then I adjusted, and the pain became something electric and thrilling.

When Nolan's all the way in, he collapsed on his elbows and buried his face in my neck, shuddering.

"Holy shit," he murmured, voice muffled by my hair.

"Nolan, please," I whined. He began to move slowly as if worried I'll break. All I could do was clutch at him and rocked my hips in time. The sensation was raw; nothing like with Jason. No frantic grunting, no desperate rutting, no half-hearted climax for him and then rolling away, leaving me unsatisfied and alone. Nolan was attuned to every sound I made, every twitch and sigh.

"You feel so good," he moaned.

He kept the rhythm faster and fucked me harder. Each time he bottomed out, I felt the jolt all the way up my spine, and it made me desperate. I wrapped my legs around his waist, locking him to me, wanting more, wanting everything.

"Nolan!" I screamed as I tightened around him.

All his restraint broke.

He lifted both my legs onto his shoulders. I gasped at the new angle. He was able to thrust deeper into me. I can't think. I can only feel: his hips slamming into mine. His thrusts were frenzied as I could feel him pulsing inside of me,

"Mine," he groaned as he bit the crook of my neck.

"Yes, yes, yes, please Nolan," I moaned.

For a split second the pain of the mark was white-hot. Then, the mate bond slammed into place. I felt him inside of me,

physically and mentally,

Nolan slid carefully out of me before collapsing next to me. I reached up and touched the mate mark. It is real. It is proof, evidence that this really happened, that I am not dreaming.

"You're mine," he repeated, smiling softly.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & EIGHTY EIGHT

Talia's POV

'How long do you plan on sleeping?' a familiar voice teased.

'As long as I want,' I muttered.

'So, you are not happy to see me?' the voice asked.

'What?' I asked as I rubbed my eyes.

‘Talia, wake up!’

I woke with a startled gasp and then I heard a chuckle within my mind. I turned to see Nolan, still sleeping next to me.

‘Did you really think it was him?’ the voice asked, amused at my confusion.

Then, it clicked.

My wolf was awake! She came back to me!

I didn’t know if I wanted to scream in glee or cry.

‘Oh, my goddess, I missed you so much,’ I told her.

‘I told you I wasn’t going to leave you,’ she responded, ‘But you sure took your time bringing me back.’

‘I am sorry. Things got so complicated,’ I said.

“Talia?” Nolan murmured as he yawned into my hair. He pulled me closer to him. “What’s wrong?”

“She’s back,” I said, my voice breathless with excitement.

“Whose back?” Nolan murmured as he began drifting back to me.

“My wolf! She’s really back,” I squealed.

Nolan blinked awake, confusion flickering across his face before he realized what I was saying. Then, he smiled as if he was as relieved as I was.

“That’s good,” he said quietly. “I was wondering when she’d decide to stop hiding.”

‘I did not hide. It is his fault I disappeared in the first place,’ my wolf huffed. ‘But I forgive him anyway.’

I laughed and buried my face against his shoulder. “She says she forgives you.”

“Good because my wolf would give me hell if she didn’t,” Nolan replied, his voice warm with humor.

My wolf hummed contentedly as Nolan’s hand slid up my back. The bond between us felt complete and balanced now.

“You feel stronger,” Nolan said, brushing his thumb along my spine.

“I feel like myself again,” I admitted.

Nolan kissed me. I felt him hard against my hip. My wolf purred in delight, excited to experience what I had last night.

Right when Nolan began to line up, there was a knock on our door,

“Awful timing,” he muttered.

“Tell him to keep going,’ my wolf urged and I opened my mouth to tell them until I heard Marco’s voice from the other side of

the door.

“Alpha, you told me to make sure to wake you, so we can leave on time. If you don’t get up now, we will be late,” Marco said. Nolan groaned and pressed his forehead against mine. “I swear he does this on purpose.”

I laughed as Nolan rolled off me. “You did tell him to keep us on schedule.”

“That does not mean I like it,” he replied.

Nolan kissed my cheek and added lightly, “The Bloodmoon Pack is going to be very pleased to meet their Luna. It is a long time coming.”

“Now, you’re making me nervous,” I said with a smile.

We dressed quickly. If we lingered, we wouldn’t leave this room for another hour. I quickly had breakfast and met with Henry. I needed to prepare him to run Shadowclaw while I was gone.

“The Silverfang warriors I appointed yesterday will answer to you,” I said. “Until I return, Shadowclaw’s stability comes first.”

Henry nodded without hesitation. “Yes, Luna.”

“Any signs of unrest, you contact me immediately,” I continued.

“I understand,” Henry said.

“I can leave Beta Della to assist you, if necessary,” I said. I trusted Henry but it only took one moment of doubt for everything to go wrong. I needed to know he would be able to hold everything together until I returned.

“You need her with you, Luna,” Henry stated firmly. “You can trust me.”

I nodded and said, “Thank you, Henry.”.

“Safe travels, Luna.”

As we stepped outside, I began to hear voices even though no one was talking. The barrier that left me feeling alone within my own pack was gone.

‘You can hear them again,’ my wolf said. ‘Reach out to them.’

I closed my eyes briefly and reached outward.

The mindlink opened. Senior members of Shadowclaw responded instantly, showing respect and acknowledgement. Then, I felt members from Silverfang, all rejoicing in feeling me again.

“I can link again,” I said softly.

“Thank Goddess!” Della exclaimed. “It was terrible not being able to talk to you when I wanted to.”

I rolled my eyes and said, “We both have cell phones.”

“That’s not the same and you know it,” Della pouted.

“As my Luna, you’ll be able to link with Bloodmoon’s leadership as well,” Nolan explained. “However, I’d recommend waiting until we have the formal introduction.”

I reached for Nolan through the bond.

‘Hello, my mate,’ Nolan said and chuckled.

‘Last night was impressive,’ I teased. ‘I wasn’t sure if I was going to be able to walk this morning.’

Nolan smirked as he answered, ‘I was restrained. I won’t be tonight.’ Then, Nolan whispered to me multiple obscene positions

that he wanted to put me into.

I flushed and laughed out loud, drawing Marco and Della’s attention.

“Do I need to know?” Marco asked, eyeing us with open amusement.

“No,” Nolan replied immediately.

“Yes,” Della said at the same time, stepping closer and scanning me from head to toe.

Her eyes widened when she saw the mark. “Well, that explains the limp in your walk this morning.”

My face burned in embarrassment. “It is not that obvious,” I said.

“It is to anyone who knows what they’re looking for,” Della said cheerfully. “I cannot wait to see you complete the Luna ritual.”

“I have to win over the Bloodmoon first,” I said.

Nolan nodded approvingly. “Trust me, Bloodmoon will respect and love you.

I reached for Nolan’s hand without thinking, and he took it. Nolan leaned down and kissed me on the forehead.

Della clapped her hands once. “Alright. Let’s get going.”

I grinned. “To Bloodmoon, then!”

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & EIGHTY NINE

Talia’s POV

We arrived at the Bloodmoon Pack just before dusk, and the welcome started before I even stepped out of the car. Warriors lined the path to the pack house in neat rows. They bowed as we drove by. The people behind them leaned forward to see who Alpha Nolan had brought home.

“Are you ready?” Nolan asked as he parked the car.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” I replied.

“Don’t worry, they’re going to love you,” Nolan said.

Nolan stepped out of the car and I could hear the cheers from the pack. Bloodmoon clearly loved Nolan and were happy to see him. Nolan opened the door for me and I stepped out.

The crowd erupted again.

“Welcome to Bloodmoon!”

The greetings were loud and respectful, and I returned them with a calm smile and a wave. Everyone was excited to see us except for one person, a young woman in the middle.

She stood near the front. She wore a simple brown dress. Her black hair was pulled back into a tight bun. When she first saw Nolan, her face lit up with excitement, and she began pushing through the crowd to get closer.

As she approached, she saw Nolan open the passenger door and take my hand as I stepped out. Her smile faltered as her eyes darted from me to him and then to the matching rings on our hands. She frowned before she forced a smile back onto her face.

Who was this woman?

My wolf paced within me and said, ‘Someone who expected our mate to return alone.’

“Bloodmoon, I want to introduce you to Talia,” Nolan announced. The crowd immediately went silent to listen. “She is the Alpha King’s daughter, my mate, and the Bloodmoon Pack’s Luna.”

Cheers broke out around us. People clapped, wolves howled, and several older women smiled in a way that looked almost relieved. I held Nolan’s hand and nodded once, accepting the welcome while trying not to be irritated by this woman’s stiff

expression.

‘She does not matter. Nolan chose us. He accepted us,’ my wolf advised and I agreed.

I was here because the Moon Goddess had bound Nolan and me together, and I was taking on the role of Luna, I had nothing to prove. Even so, I could not ignore the way the woman watched Nolan, and then had the nerve to look at me like I was a nuisance.

The woman approached us and I braced myself,

“Welcome to Bloodmoon, Luna Talia,” the woman said. Her tone was formal, almost like a hostess greeting an honored guest. We are honored to have you,”

I should have appreciated the courtesy. Instead, it made my skin crawl. It felt like she was putting on a show and that the show

was all for Nolan.

Nolan turned slightly toward her. “Talia, this is Maggie,” he said. “I rescued her from the Mad rogues years ago. She is like a sister to me. She manages the maids and keeps the household running well.”

So that was why she moved to the front. Maggie was not a random pack member. She was someone who had become close to

him.

'We need to get rid of her,' my wolf growled. I ignored her. I would not exile this woman just because she had a crush on Nolan

I stepped closer and held out my hand. "It is nice to meet you, Maggie."

Her eyes flicked to my hand, and she lifted hers in response, but she did not take mine. Instead, she angled her hand, so the bandage wrapped around her hand was hard to miss.

"I am sorry, Luna," Maggie said quickly. "I injured my fingers while preparing a treat for Alpha Nolan. I did not want to be rude."

The bandage was wrapped neatly, and it looked fresh. Even so, a handshake would not have hurt her. Maggie simply did not want to shake my hand. I lowered my hand and forced a smile.

"That is a pity," I said. "I hope it heals quickly."

"Maggie, you need to be more careful," Nolan told her.

Maggie's smile faltered a little as if she expected Nolan to react more caring to her injury. "I just wanted to surprise you, Alpha," Maggie said as she pouted. Her sugary sweet voice made my skin crawl.

Nolan's arm slipped around my waist, pulling me closer, and he gave her a nod, "Thanks for thinking of me, but go get it treated before it gets infected."

“I will, Alpha,” Maggie promised.

Nolan’s hand tightened on my waist, and he leaned down to murmur, “Come on. I will show you our room. I bet you will love it.”

I nodded and followed him. As we walked to the pack house, I felt as if there were eyes on my back. I looked back and Maggie was still standing where we left her.

Maggie’s eyes met mine. The fake smile was now gone. Her expression was flat and cold as she glared back at me.

‘Be careful with her,’ my wolf warned. ‘She hates us.’

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & NINETY

Maggie’s POV

The moment Nolan and that woman were out of sight I finally allowed myself to show how I really felt: absolute rage and disgust.

I went to my room with my hands clenched so tightly that my nails dug into my palms. I shut the door and leaned against it. How did this happen?

Nolan left to make the Alpha King pay for killing his father, not come back with his daughter as his mate. On top of that, he moved that woman into his room.

What about me? He felt nothing about me? Impossible!

I had spent years imagining the day I would stand beside him as his Luna, and I had done it with patience. I had waited while other women whispered and tried to get close to him. While Nolan grew colder and more guarded each year, I told myself he would soften for me in the end. I just had to be patient.

Then she arrived with his mark on her neck.

“That bitch,” I growled and I kicked my chair across the room.

‘He was never ours from the beginning,’ my wolf whispered.

“No, that’s not true,” I argued aloud, my voice shaking. “He saved me. He wouldn’t have done all of that if I wasn’t the one for him.”

“That is not the same as choosing you,’ my wolf replied firmly. ‘He does not owe you, his heart.’

I huffed as I remembered the day Nolan saved me clearly.

I had been running from the Mad rogues, barefoot and bleeding, and my throat was raw from crying out for help that never came. When I crossed into Bloodmoon territory, I collapsed only a mile away from the pack house. I was certain the Mad rogues would drag me back before anyone noticed and finished what they started.

Instead, Nolan appeared.

He did not ask who I was. He did not question whether I deserved saving. Nolan killed the rogues with little effort, then lifted me into his arms like I weighed nothing. I’ll never forget that moment, how he smelled like smoke and pine and how I never felt so safe before that moment.

Nolan brought me to the pack and told the maids to care for me. I expected to be put in the dungeon as a rogue, but no. Over time, he gave me responsibility. Nolan asked my opinion about household matters. He left the maids under my care, and he did it because he trusted me,

The maids hinted. The older woman smiled knowingly. Even the warriors joked that I would be the one to calm him down someday, that I would be his Luna.

‘You allowed their foolish thoughts to delude you to the truth,’ my wolf said.

‘No, I know him. He allowed me to take care of him when he was at his weakest. That has to mean something,’ I countered.

‘It only means that he trusts you. You need to let go of this infatuation,’ my wolf growled. ‘We need to find our own mate,’

“No! He is our mate!” I exclaimed. “This has to be a trick from the Alpha King.”

Nolan only returned with her because he had been forced. That had to be the reason. Talia didn’t deserve him. She didn’t know him and loved him like I did.

‘If you’re going to continue like this, if you truly want to be his Luna,’ my wolf.said with a sigh, ‘then you need to act quickly’. “How?” I asked. “Tell me how because right now I feel helpless. He’s already marked her.”

“You are not helpless,’ my wolf replied. ‘You need to calm yourself and think clearly. Marks can be removed. Mate bonds can be rejected.’

‘I don’t know how to do that,’ I told her.

‘Someone must be able to. Someone who owes you a favor,’ my wolf suggested.

Her statement made me think of her.

A month ago, I had found a masked female rogue half-dead near the border. She had been thin, wounded, and silent until I offered water. When she learned I worked in Nolan’s household, that piqued her interest.

“That’s precious,” she had said after staring at me for a while. “You’re in love with him.”

I blushed and said, “That is none of your business.”

“It will be,” she said. “I will be able to repay my debt to you sooner than I thought.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You’re going to need my help very soon. Mark my words,” she replied.

I thought she was speaking nonsense, probably delirious from dehydration. However, I could not shake the odd feeling that she was telling the truth. Against my better judgment, I decided to hide her in a small cabin on the western corner of the territory that is barely patrolled, so the likelihood of someone finding her was low.

I never thought to ask her where she came from, but now I wondered did she come from Silverfang? Or did she have the ability to see into the future? I needed to know and it couldn’t wait until tomorrow.

Once night fell, the pack celebration was in full swing. I lied and said I wasn’t feeling well, so no one would come looking for me. I waited for hours until everyone went back into their homes. I slipped out of the pack house with my hood pulled up.

‘Be careful. If you’re caught…’ my wolf started.

‘I know. You don’t have to keep reminding me,’ I snapped.

I moved through the trees quickly. My anger kept me focused, and my wolf stayed tense within me.

When I reached the cabin, I quickly knocked.

The door opened a moment later, and the masked woman’s eyes met.

“Come in,” she said, ushering me into the cabin and closing the door behind me. “What is going on?”

“You were right, I need your help, Viki.”