Barren Luna 211

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & ELEVEN

Nolan's POV

I entered the clearing and Viki was already there. My wolf paced restlessly inside me. Every instinct said we were walking into a trap, but it didn't matter because Talia was safe.

Viki stood near the center of the clearing with a half mask covering the ruined side of her face. I resisted taunting her about the scar. When she saw me, she sneered.

"So, you came," Viki said. "I was starting to think you were a coward."

I ignored the insult and scanned the clearing. "Where is Talia?"

Viki laughed softly. "We're getting straight to the point then."

"Did you expect us to talk about the weather?" I asked.

Viki took a step closer. "Do you remember what you did to me?" she asked.

"I remember sparing your life when I didn't need to. Clearly, you forgot that," I replied.

Her eyes flashed with hatred. "You should have killed me," she said. "Then I would not have had the chance to return the favor."

"Where is Talia?" I demanded again.

"Safe," Viki replied. "Whether she stays that way depends on you. But, it's not her you should be worried about."

She gestured toward the far side of the clearing.

Only then did I see Maggie.

She was tied to a tree with her wrists bound above her head. Three rogues stood nearby, watching her closely. Her body shook as

she sobbed.

My wolf snarled at seeing the rogues. Again, I had to push him down. ‘We will spill their blood. I promise you,’ I told him.

“Oh? So, you do care about her. Interesting,” Viki said. “Maybe not after you hear the truth.”

“Stop playing games, Viki.”

“I’m not. She wanted to be your Luna, you know,” Viki said casually. “Poor thing. She’s so young, so foolish.”

I grit my teeth. I felt like a fool. The traitor had been right under my nose.

“Release her,” I ordered.

“Oh, no. Not yet. Not before you do something for me,” Viki said.

“What do you want?”

Viki pulled a dark colored bottle out of her bottle. “Simple,” she said. “Drink the wine, and I let her go.”

‘Don’t you dare drink that. I can smell the poison from here,’ my wolf warned.

“You think I am stupid?” I asked. The question was more so for my wolf than Viki.

Viki’s smile widened. “Of course not,” she said. “The wine will not kill you. It will weaken you. It will only dull your Alpha power.”

“To make it easier to kill me,” I spat.

CHA

“Believe what you want. Either way, Maggie lives if you drink. If you refuse, she dies.”

“And Talia?” I asked.

“That is different. You will have to do more than drink wine to get her back,” Viki replied. “But it starts with you drinking the wine.”

“I agree, but first you will tell me who is backing you. You couldn’t have done this alone even with Maggie’s help,” I said.

“You’re in no position to make demands, Alpha Nolan,” Viki stated and offered the bottle. “Drink the wine and then, I’ll tell you.”

I reached for the bottle.

As my fingers closed around the glass, I opened the mind link.

“Talia, now!’

The clearing exploded into chaos.

A scream tore through the trees as one of the rogues fell. Another barely had time to turn before Talia in her wolf form slammed into him. Her claws tore through his chest like butter. Blood sprayed across her muzzle and Maggie.

“No, no, don’t kill me!” Maggie cried out as Talia severed the ropes binding her and shoved her aside. The third rogue lunged, but Talia drove him into the dirt by his neck before snapping it.

“No! You’re not getting away this time!” Viki screamed in fury.

She lunged toward me with a dagger. I could smell the wolfsbane on it. I caught her wrist mid-strike. Viki was strong, but not strong enough to overpower me.

“Give it up, Viki. This is over,” I growled. I twisted her arm, forcing her to drop the dagger. Then, I kicked her hard in the stomach, sending her into a nearby tree.

“No, no, it wasn’t supposed to be like this,” Viki coughed as she pulled herself up. She saw Maggie backing away from her and lunged for her. “This is all your fault! I will kill you for your betrayal!”

Talia slammed into her before she could reach Maggie, sending her back into the dirt. I walked over and yanked her up by her hair. I pulled the cork out of the bottle with my teeth before shoving it into Viki’s mouth with my free hand.

“Drink,” I ordered.

Viki fought, but she had no choice but to swallow. I released her and Viki immediately put two fingers down her throat in an attempt to vomit, but the liquid didn’t come up.

“What have you done?!” she yelled at me before she began to cough violently and claw at her neck. Her pupils became dilated and blood began to roll down from her nose before she fell backwards and lay there motionless.

Was she dead?

‘Nolan, we need to go. More rogues are coming,’ Talia warned through our mind link. ‘I can’t fight them all.’

Before I could respond, I heard a chuckle and then laughter.

The sound was wrong, unhinged.

Viki slowly got to her feet, still laughing. The first thing I noticed were her eyes.

Her eyes were blood red.

She turned on the rogues who had rushed forward to help her, attacking them without warning. One fell screaming. Another

tried to flee.

2/3

I froze.

Viki looked exactly like my father had in his final moments.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED & TWELVE

Nolan’s POV

‘Focus Nolan! More are coming!’

Talia’s voice broke through my shock. I caught the rogue lunging for me by the throat and quickly snapped his neck.

More rogues kept coming. I quickly mind linked with Marco, letting him know where I was and what was going on. I didn’t give him time to answer as I closed the link and focused on the fight.

I recognized them immediately by the way they moved. Their coordination was poor, their expressions unfocused, and their scent was wrong. These were not ordinary rogues looking to survive. Every one of them carried the unmistakable taint of

madness.

Talia moved to my side without hesitation.

We fought back-to-back. It was the only way to keep the rogues from surrounding and separating us. Each time a rogue lunged, one of us intercepted. My claws tore through flesh while Talia’s fangs ripped off limbs.

Viki screamed, “Maggie, let’s plaaayyy!!”

I turned just in time to see her break away from the fight. She lunged toward Maggie with the dagger clutched in her hand. Maggie was frozen with fear. Talia lunged forward and shoved her aside, taking the attack head-on.

“No!” I shouted as I saw Talia stumble backward baring her teeth at Viki.

I reached them in seconds. My fist connected with Viki’s temple, sending her back into the ground. Viki laughed wildly, but she was no longer calculating. The poison had stripped away the last remnants of her sanity.

I quickly placed her into a headlock. She struggled against me, but I held her in place. Talia quickly disemboweled her.

My wolf roared in satisfaction. His Luna, our Luna, had finally taken justice from what this evil woman had done to her.

I released Viki. Her body hit the ground with a final gasp. The madness left her eyes even before life did. For a moment, everything was silent except for our heavy breathing.

Talia shifted back into her human form. I removed my shirt and gave it to her to wear. “Is it over?” she asked as she pulled on my shirt.

Then more rogues rushed in.

Before they could reach us, Marco and Della burst into the clearing with warriors. They cut down the remaining rogues without hesitation.

When the last rogue fell, I finally relaxed and my wolf calmed down.

“Secure the area,” I ordered. “Clean this scene thoroughly. Preserve Viki’s blood and the wine.”

Talia hugged me. “That wine,” she said quietly. “I think it contained the blood of mad rogues.”

“It did,” I replied.

“If you had drunk it…” Her voice faltered.

“Then, don’t think about it,” I said and kissed her forehead.

I turned to Maggie. She stood apart from the others, trembling. Della tried to speak to her, but Maggie stared straight ahead, unresponsive.

'Do not pity her,' my wolf growled as I approached them.

"Maggie, what the hell were you doing out here? Are you even listening to me?" Della demanded as she snapped her fingers in Maggie's face.

"Who is backing Viki?" I demanded.

Maggie jumped at my voice and then shook her head frantically. "No, no, I don't know."

"Don't lie to me again, Maggie," I growled.

"She didn't tell me. She lied to me," Maggie stammered.

I took a step closer. "About what?"

"She said…" Maggie hesitated and then started crying.

"Enough of your crying! Answer the damn question," Della snapped. "Or Goddess help me I'll make you talk."

"She said Talia stole her mate," Maggie blurted out. "That she seduced you."

"And you believed her?" I asked.

"I thought I was helping you," Maggie cried. "I thought she was manipulating you. I thought…"

“No,” I cut in. “You were selfish. You only cared about what you wanted. Did you ever think about how I felt or what I wanted?”

Maggie collapsed to her knees, sobbing. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean for this to happen.”

“Your tears won’t save you,” Della snapped. “How could you do this? You…”

“Della, that is enough,” Talia said.

Della scowled but fell silent.

Talia touched my arm. “Viki was skilled at manipulation,” she said quietly. “It makes sense that she believed her. Viki wouldn’t have told her everything.”

I didn’t respond. Maggie betrayed my trust. If she had concerns, she should have come to me instead of an outsider.

Maggie crawled forward and clutched at Talia’s ankle. “Please,” she begged. “Forgive me.”

“Maggie, I…”

Talia swayed. Her knees buckled. I caught her instantly.

The scent of her blood hit me, and I looked down to see it smeared across my hand. My heart sank when I saw the deep wound in

her right shoulder.

‘Get her to a doctor now,’ my wolf urged. ‘She has been poisoned.’

“I need to get her to a doctor right now,” I said as I picked up Talia.

Maggie scrambled to her feet. “I can help. I…”

“No,” Della said firmly. “You’ve done enough.”

Maggie stepped toward me, but Della blocked her.

“You stay away!!” I snarled. “If anything happens to Talia, you will die. Do you understand me?”

Maggie froze, terror written across her face.

I did not wait for an answer.

212

I broke into a run back to the pack house.

Nothing mattered except getting my mate to the infirmary alive.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & THIRTEEN

Talia’s POV

“Ugh,” I groaned as the sunlight from the window hit my eyes. The glare made me blink hard. My body felt heavy and sore as if I had fallen down a flight of stairs. When I tried to pull myself up, pain flared through my right shoulder. My shoulder was wrapped in clean bandages.

I turned my head and saw Nolan asleep in the chair beside my bed. He was sitting upright, but his posture had slumped. His head tilted forward at an awkward angle, and he snored softly.

‘He has been watching over us,’ my wolf told me. ‘He has not left once.’

My chest tightened at the thought. I couldn’t imagine how he felt, but the dark circles under his eyes explained it all. For three days, Nolan did not know if I was alive. He probably never stopped searching and attempting to link with me. This had to be the first time since I went missing that he got some sleep.

I reached out and brushed my fingers along his face. The moment my skin touched him, his eyes opened.

“Talia?” he asked, still half-asleep. Then, his eyes widened in surprise. He pulled me into a tight hug that caused me to wince as he brushed against my shoulder. Nolan quickly released me and stood. “Are you in pain? Do you need the doctor? I will get the doctor.”

“Nolan,” I said quickly, catching his wrist. “Stop. I am okay.” Nolan paused as if he didn’t believe me. “Sit down. I’m okay.”

“You’ve been asleep for so long,” Nolan said as he finally sat down. “I didn’t know if you were ever going to wake up.”

“Don’t be dramatic. I just passed out from blood loss. Nothing serious,” I said.

“No, you don’t understand.” His jaw tightened and his eyes became glossy. “I failed you,” Nolan said, his voice shaking.

I frowned. “What are you talking about?” I asked.

“When I brought you here, the doctors couldn’t do anything,” he said, his voice strained. “The poison was already spreading, though it wasn’t from the mad rogues’ blood directly. We almost lost you. If Leslie hadn’t given us those powerful healing herbs before we left Silverfang…” He paused, and a tear finally slipped down his cheek.

My heart felt like it twisted in my chest. I could feel his grief and guilt through the mate bond. “Nolan,” I said firmly. “None of this is your fault.”

Nolan shook his head. “I failed to protect my mate.”

I leaned forward and kissed Nolan. At first, he didn’t respond, then he kissed me back earnestly. I pulled back and said firmly, You did everything you were supposed to do as my mate and my Alpha.”

“But…”

“Viki planned all of this. There was no way for you to know she had gone this far,” I added, cutting him off.

Nolan sighed and caressed my cheek. He looked torn as if he was fighting with himself about who was at fault for all of this, but we were both victims. We underestimated how vindictive she truly was.

“A scratch,” Nolan said bitterly.

“What?”

“One clawed wound, and it nearly killed you. I thought it was wolfsbane at first, but it was her claw. I should have never allowed you to come with me,” Nolan continued.

“Stop. I wanted to come. I knew it would be dangerous,” I told him, squeezing his hand. “If I hadn’t come, you may be the one in the bed or worse.”

“I should have killed her the first time she kidnapped you,” Nolan muttered.

Nolan stared down at our hands like he could not look at my face while he spoke.

“I already warned Solon and your father,” he said. “I told them about the possibility of mad rogues reappearing and what the blood can do. Now that it happened inside Bloodmoon territory, they will have to take it seriously. They will have to tighten security.”

“They will listen,” I replied.

Nolan’s mouth pulled into a grim line, and then he surprised me. He lowered his voice and copied Solon’s voice so well that I almost thought Solon was in the room.

“If you let my sister get hurt again, Nolan, I will personally make sure you regret it.”

For a second my breath caught, and then I laughed.

Nolan smiled. “He said it twice,” he admitted. “Your father did not say it the same way, but the meaning was the same.”

“I believe it,” I said, still smiling. “I am surprised Father did not send Solon to stand guard outside the door.”

“He wanted to,” Nolan said. “I refused.”

“Knowing Solon that’s not going to stop him.”

“That’s why I have a guest room already prepared for him when he arrives,” Nolan said. “Also, I sent Della and Marco to investigate, and if mad rogues have reappeared, the other packs need to know to properly prepare.”

I nodded. “That was the right decision.” If madness could be contracted through bites or scratches, we were dealing with something that none of us had ever dealt with before.

“What are you thinking? I can see you’re trying to work something out,” Nolan said as he noticed my silence.

“I’m just thinking that I can help and reach out…”

“No,” Nolan said, cutting me off. “I want you to focus on resting. You don’t need to work on this. Della and Marco can handle it while you recover.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, trying to lighten the mood. Nolan leaned in and kissed my forehead.

My thoughts went back to Maggie and how she was crying in the clearing. Not once did she try to help Viki. It seemed like she regretted everything.

‘Do not make the same mistake you made with Viki,’ my wolf growled. ‘Maggie made the decision to harm us. Do not pity her because Viki used her.’

‘Easier said than done,’ I answered.

“Nolan,” I said, hesitating. “Where is Maggie? How is she?”

Nolan’s expression changed the instant I said her name. His eyes darkened and I could feel his anger through the mate bond.” She is alive,” he said flatly. “Other than bruises, she is unhurt. She has been waiting in the hallway since dawn.”

“I want to see her,” I said.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & FOURTEEN

Talia’s POV

Nolan frowned at my words but didn’t argue. He stood and opened the door. “Come in.”

Maggie stepped inside. Her eyes were swollen, and her hands were clasped so tightly in front of her that her knuckles looked pale.

“Stop. That’s as far as you go,” Nolan ordered and Maggie came to a stop a few feet from my bed. Nolan returned to his chair

and sat down.

“I’m sorry,” Maggie started, her voice shaking. “I will accept whatever punishment you decide.”

“You were going to be punished whether you accepted it or not,” Nolan snapped. Maggie flinched at his tone but didn’t respond. “You colluded with Viki and led Talia, your Luna, into a trap that almost got her killed. You are lucky that I didn’t have you hung.”

“I did not know she would do that,” Maggie said quickly. “I did not know she would bring rogues into Bloodmoon.”

“But you knew she’d hurt Talia,” Nolan replied. Maggie opened her mouth as if she wanted to say something and then closed it. Tears slid down Maggie’s face, and she wiped them away with the back of her sleeve like she was angry at herself for crying.

“You’re right,” Maggie said. “I was selfish. I thought I was helping you.”

“Not only were you selfish, but you are arrogant to think that you could dictate the decisions of your Alpha,” Nolan growled. ” Pack loyalty is not optional in Bloodmoon, Maggie. It is not something you do when it benefits you. I thought you understood this. That was my mistake for being too lenient on you.”

Maggie’s knees hit the floor. “Please, Alpha, I will leave,” she said, voice cracking. “If that is what you want, I will leave Bloodmoon.”

Nolan scoffed. “Again, you still think you have a choice in this. The only reason I allowed you to stay is because I wanted Talia to get justice.”

Seeing Nolan so stern with Maggie was surprising. I thought he would be a little lenient based on their relationship, but Maggie had done something unforgivable. Nolan hated rogues more than anything else. Maggie truly should have known better.

“Luna Talia,” Maggie pleaded. “Please. I know I almost got you killed. I’m so sorry. I cannot undo what I did, but I swear I will spend the rest of my life making it right. Please…”

“How am I supposed to believe that, Maggie? You apologized before and led me straight to Viki. What will be different this time?” I asked.

Maggie shook her head hard. “No. I am asking for a chance to prove I am not that person. I made a stupid decision. It won’t happen again.”

Before I felt as if Maggie was lying when she apologized, this time her apology felt genuine. My wolf huffed but did not argue with me. She wanted Maggie to be gone, but she could also tell Maggie was not lying and regretted her decision.

“I can forgive you,” I said.

Maggie’s eyes widened.

Nolan’s head snapped toward me. “Talia.”

“I said I can forgive you,” I repeated firmly. “That does not mean I trust you. It just means for now you will not be banished”

Maggie swallowed hard. “Thank you. Luna Talla, I…”

I raised a hand slightly to stop her from rushing into gratitude too quickly.

“You will be punished based on pack law. If you ever commit an unforgivable act again,” I said, “there will be no conversation. You will have only one option: flee or be executed.”

“I understand,” Maggie said quickly.

“Swear on it,” I said firmly.

Maggie placed a hand over her heart and then said, “I swear to the Moon Goddess.”

Nolan’s eyes stayed on me. I could tell he did not like my decision by his intense frown, but he wasn’t going to stop me. This was my decision and he wasn’t going to take that from me.

“You will also follow ranks properly. You will address me correctly. If you have concerns, you will speak to Nolan directly and respectfully, or you will keep your distance. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Maggie said. “Yes, Luna.”

“Now, get out,” Nolan ordered.

Maggie stood slowly, wiped her face, and shut the door behind her.

A moment later, the door opened again, and Della rushed in so quickly she nearly collided with Nolan. Marco followed behind her. Della went straight to me.

“Let me see,” she said with a worried look.

She carefully checked my shoulder and then seemed finally relieved.

“I am fine,” I said and smiled at her, brushing her hand away.

Della’s eyes narrowed. “You were poisoned. I do not want to hear ‘fine’ from you. Do you hear me?”

“The doctor already checked her twice this morning,” Marco said.

Della turned on him instantly. “Doctors make mistakes! And if you ever block me from seeing her again, I will make you regret it.”

“I followed Nolan’s instructions,” Marco said and hands up in surrender.

Della jabbed a finger toward him, then turned back to me and said, “I saw Maggie leaving your room. I wanted to wring her neck, but Marco wouldn’t let me.”

“I forgave her,” I said.

“You did what? Are you sure you’re not sick? She tried to get you killed, Talia.”

“She was deceived,” I said.

“So what?” Della shot back. “She didn’t care if you got hurt as long as you were out of the way, so she could get to Nolan. How could you forgive her? Nolan, you let her do this?”

“I don’t like it, but it was her decision to make,” Nolan responded.

“If Maggie steps out of line again, she will be banished,” I answered.

Della sighed in exasperation and shook her head. “You’re too merciful,” she muttered.

Nolan turned to Marco. “Any updates on the investigation?” he asked, changing the topic.

“The wine was tested. It contains the compound that caused the madness that occurred in your father,” Marco replied “We checked surrounding patrol routes and there was nothing that suggests the madness is spreading across pack borders now.”

I felt relieved hearing that, but not completely. “Then how did Viki get it?” I asked.

“We do not know yet,” Marco answered.

“Starting today, we need to ramp up warrior training and double border patrols. The moment anyone catches a scent that matches what we saw last night, I want it reported immediately.”

“Yes, Alpha,” Marco said.

Nolan looked at Della. “And you stay close to Talia at all times.”

Della crossed her arms. “I was going to do that anyway.”

Marco and Della left a few minutes later. Nolan sat on the edge of the bed and fell silent.

“What are you thinking?” I asked.

“It is a pity that you did not truly get to enjoy your Luna ceremony,” Nolan answered. “So, I’m thinking of holding a return party for you. What do you think?”

“That’s wonderful. Let Maggie organize it,” I suggested.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & FIFTEEN

Talia’s POV

Three days later, Della stood behind me, tugging the zipper of my dress up with more force than necessary.

“If you keep yanking at it like that, you’re going to tear it,” I told her and Della stepped back to sit down on my bed.

“I still can’t believe you allowed this,” she muttered. “This is a really bad decision to let Maggie organize again.”

“She will not try anything,” I said. “She cried and apologized to me at the hospital. She knows how close she came to losing everything.”

Della snorted. “Crocodile tears. She only cried because she got caught. If Viki never revealed it was Maggie helping her, do you really think she would’ve told the truth?”

“I think she would,” I replied as I looked at my reflection.

The dress I chose was a shade of soft blue. It was long, simple, and flowed easily when I moved. It wouldn’t slow me down if I needed to move quickly.

‘Are you concerned that something would happen tonight?’ my wolf asked.

‘No,’ I replied, but it was still better to be prepared.

Clara stood near the wardrobe, carefully putting away the dresses I didn’t choose. She hesitated before speaking, as if weighing whether she should say anything at all.

“Maggie really was distraught when she came back from the hospital,” Clara interjected.

“Only because Alpha Nolan is upset with her,” Della muttered.

“She locked herself in her room for almost a full day,” Clara continued. “When meals were brought to her, she was crying all the time and barely touched her food.”

“She should be miserable,” Della snorted.

I rolled my eyes. “What did she do after that?”

“She threw herself into preparing the party,” Clara continued. “She has worked all morning, and all night to make sure everything is perfect.”

“Are we supposed to be impressed?” Della asked. “That is her job. So, she should take it seriously.”

“She has been kinder with the other omegas too, Beta Della. I think Luna may be right about her,” Clara replied. I remembered how she was flaunting her authority over the other omegas,

‘She is learning her place so far,’ my wolf said. ‘But it’s changing nothing. She is still not to be trusted.’

“Don’t tell me she has you fooled too, Clara. She is only doing this to get back in Talia’s good graces. She is not sincere,” Della snapped.

“I think she understands what is at stake,” I countered. “This is her last chance.”

Della sighed and crossed her arms, “I hope you are right. Shouldn’t we be heading to the banquet hall? We don’t want Nolan thinking something is wrong.”

“Maggie moved the party to the central square, like you asked,” Clara said. “The guards have screened everyone in advance She

insisted on it.”

That caught my attention.

“She did?” I asked.

Clara nodded. “Yes. She said she did not want you to feel unsafe again.”

“Good”

“You are pleased too easily,” Della scolded.

“I am pleased that she followed instructions,” I corrected. “Nothing more.”

When we made it to the square, there were tables set up and people could sit anywhere. Pack members were dressed in casual clothing. Children were laughing and people were dancing.

The pack was very relaxed.

This was exactly what I wanted.

Nolan stood near the center. He was speaking with an Elder. Maggie stood a few feet away, overseeing the bar setup.

Nolan noticed me almost immediately and walked over to me quickly. He pulled me into a tight hug and I leaned into him. Nolan pulled back just enough to look at me.

“How are you feeling?” Nolan asked. “You look better.”

“I feel better,” I replied.

Nolan leaned forward to kiss my forehead, but I raised up on my toes and kissed him on his lips. He smirked and whispered into my ear, “Don’t do too much or you’ll pay for it tonight.” I blushed as I saw what he planned on doing to me through the mind

link.

Maggie approached carefully. “Luna Talia,” she said as she bowed to me again. “Everything is ready. If there is anything you would like changed, please tell me.”

I looked around once more before answering, “It looks good. Thank you.”

“I am glad,” Maggie said.

Della leaned in toward me. “It is fine,” she muttered, as if the word tasted unpleasant. “I am going to go find Marco.” Della glared at Maggie before she headed off toward the far side of the square.

“Go and enjoy the party, Maggie,” Nolan ordered. “You too, Clara.”

Maggie hesitated only for a second before her shoulders dropped in disappointment. Nolan was still treating her coldly “Yes, Alpha,” Maggie said and quickly left with Clara.

Nolan didn’t give her a second glance and took my hand. His thumb brushed lightly against my knuckles. “You have Maggie’s loyalty now.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Just because she did this correctly doesn’t mean she’s loyal.”

Nolan smiled faintly. “It’s a start, but that caution is exactly why you are Luna.”

Before I could respond, he guided me toward the center of the square. The conversations around us gradually softened and the music lowered to a soft hum. Attention shifted to us.

“My pack,” Nolan said, his voice carrying, “Thank you for being here tonight.”

The square quieted fully.

“Three days ago, Luna Talia was taken from us,” he continued. “Today, she stands here alive and strong as the Lama of Bloodmoon should be.”

“I know the past days have shaken this pack,” I said. “They tried to break us. To break me. But I am still here and I am not going anywhere. I will stand with you. I will fight for you. And I will protect this pack beside Alpha Nolan.”

I raised my glass.

“To the Bloodmoon Pack,” I said.

The response was immediate.

“To the Bloodmoon Pack!”

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & SIXTEEN

Talia’s POV

The bedroom door shut behind us, and the sound cut off the noise from the party like a switch. I turned to Nolan immediately. I grabbed his shirt and pulled him down into a kiss.

He froze for half a second, and then he kissed me back. His hands came up to my shoulders like he was trying to slow me down without pushing me away. I kept my mouth on his and my body pressed to him.

When I finally broke away, gasping, Nolan’s voice was a strained rasp. “We should go to bed. You need sleep.”

“What happened to making me ‘pay for it’ tonight?” I teased, my voice dropping an octave.

“You’re still recovering,” he insisted, though his eyes were dark with hunger.

I stepped back, spinning in a slow, defiant circle. “I’m fine. See? Not a scratch left.”

“Talia.” His warning tone was there, but it was wavering.

“I’ve rested for days, Nolan. I’m not spending another night lying there like a porcelain doll while you sit across the room watching me like you’re waiting for me to stop breathing.”

“That’s not what I was doing,” he muttered, turning away to kick off his shoes. He pulled his shirt over his head in one fluid motion. I forced myself not to gawk at the play of muscles across his back, focusing instead on the wall he’d built between us.

“It is,” I challenged, walking up behind him. “You haven’t touched me the same since you brought me back. It’s like you think I’ll break if you hold me too tight.”

“You were poisoned, Talia,” Nolan snapped, spinning around. The raw fear in his eyes stopped me cold. “I watched the color leave your face. I watched you almost die.”

“But I’m here. I’m recovered.” I stepped into his space, my hands sliding up the hard planes of his chest, tracing the familiar maps of his scars. “I want you. Don’t you want me?”

I could see the internal war raging behind his eyes. My wolf stirred, pacing with predatory intent. ‘Show him,’ she urged.’

Remind him who we are.’

“Stop treating me like I’m fragile,” I whispered, my fingers curling into his skin. “I am not some weak female.”

“You need rest,” he grumbled, but his hands had already found my waist, his grip tightening instinctively.

I silenced his protests with another kiss-this one deeper, slower, demanding a response. Nolan’s control snapped. He cupped my face with both hands and kissed me hard. His hands moved from my face to my waist, pulling me closer until there was no space left between us.

“You’re going to regret starting this tonight,” he growled.

“Never,” I breathed, a triumphant laugh escaping me.

Nolan’s mouth dropped to my neck. The mate bond flared to life as he kissed the mark on my neck. I moaned and then Nolan stopped.

I pulled back enough to look at him. “What? What’s wrong now?”

“Every time I close my eyes, I see your blood on my hands. I keep thinking about how you were struggling to breathe and how the doctors were going to tell me I was too late.”

I reached up, cradling his face just as I had the moment I first woke up in the hospital. “Nolan, look at me. I’m right here I’m not going anywhere.” I leaned in, nipping at his jawline. “Nolan…”

“If I lose you,” he rasped, his eyes dark with a lingering shadow, “I lose everything.”

“Then don’t let me go,” I breathed against his skin, my voice a soft command. “I’m right here. But you’ve been acting like I’m already gone. Don’t you miss me? Don’t you miss this?”

“Yes,” he choked out.

I leaned forward and kissed his neck before biting down. It caught him off guard. “Then show me, my mate,” I coaxed. My hand slipped beneath the waistband of his pants, my fingers finding him, stroking him with a slow, wicked deliberation.

That was the breaking point.

In a blur, Nolan picked me up and carried me to the bed. He set me down and then he was on top of me, removing my clothes faster than he ever had before. His kisses were hungry as if all his restraint had left him. I wasn’t complaining.

When he finally entered me, my breath hitched and I clutched his shoulders, my back arching. “Nolan!” I gasped. Even now, I still wasn’t used to how large he was and how he stretched me.

Nolan cursed under his breath, and his forehead dropped to mine for a second. “Goddess… I could stay like this forever,” he groaned.

After a few agonizing seconds, he began to thrust slowly to allow me to adjust to him before he pushed deeper and harder. I wrapped my legs around him and pulled him closer, allowing him to go deeper.

I rocked my hips up to meet his thrusts. Pleasure kept building after each thrust until I was screaming his name and finally came in a shivering mess. Nolan followed quickly after, gripping my waist so hard I knew there would be bruises.

Eventually, he rolled onto his side and hauled me back against his chest, his skin slick and hot. I rested my head against his chest and listened to his heartbeat. I moved backwards to get closer to him and Nolan let out a warning, gravelly growl.

“You keep doing that and neither one of us will sleep tonight.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” I teased.

The room was quiet for a long moment before Nolan’s arm tightened around me, his voice turning somber. “You cannot do that again.”

“Do what?”

“You can’t put yourself in danger again like that, Talia. I can’t survive another scare like the last one.”

“I promise,” I murmured, sealing the vow with another kiss.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & SEVENTEEN

Maggie’s POV

I gripped my glass so hard it cracked.

Nolan was walking Talia back towards their room. He leaned down and kissed her, not caring who watched. Talia's smile widened as he whispered something in her ear.

The pack was still celebrating her return, but the sound only made my loneliness worse.

I had tried so hard to become his Luna.

I had convinced myself that if I proved I was useful, he would eventually look at me the way he looked at her. Tonight was the last nail in the coffin. Nolan would never love me. 1

'You should have listened to me,' my wolf said. 'It will be okay.'

'How will it?' I snapped. 'I am all alone now.'

At twenty, I was still without a mate. It just made me want to lie down and cry. Instead, I maintained my composure as best as I could but seeing Nolan and Talia so romantically with each other was my breaking point.

I turned toward Clara and the other omegas. "We will clean up tomorrow. Stack the plates and cups and clean the bar."

"Maggie, where are you going?" Clara asked.

"I just need some space," I said.

"It is late," she whispered. "You shouldn't be wandering off on your own."

“I am just taking a walk. It’s not a big deal,” I said, and I hated how defensive I sounded.

Clara took a step closer. “After everything that happened, you should not walk alone.”

“I will be fine,” I insisted. “I just need a moment to myself.”

One of the younger omegas glanced toward the guards at the edge of the square. “Maggie, we can just ask one of the guards. They…”

“No,” I snapped. “Please. Just do what I asked. I will not be gone long.”

Clara hesitated and then said, “Then, don’t go too far. Stay near the pack house.”

“I will,” I lied.

I walked away before anyone could say anything else. The square’s music faded behind me as I moved down the path and away from the lights.

‘Don’t give up hope. We will find our mate,’ she said, trying to sound gentle.

“That is not what I want,” I whispered.

‘It should be what you want,’ she snapped. ‘You are not his mate. You need to let this go. You betrayed the pack and Nolan. Nolan sparing you was a mercy. He should have killed you for what you did.’

The memory of Nolan’s face when he ordered me to apologize still made me grimace. He had humiliated me, but it was better than being exiled or worse being executed.

I walked until the path opened onto a quieter corner of the district, where a small bar sat tucked between two closed shops. I pushed the door open and stepped inside. It was dimly lit and there were not a lot of people inside.

A few men glanced up at me and then looked away.

I sat at the bar and the bartender asked, “What are you having?”

“Something strong, please.”

He filled and then slid a glass toward me without questions. I drank it down quickly. I ordered another and enjoyed the burn.

I had just lifted the third glass to my lips when two men approached me. One leaned his elbow on the bar to the right of me and the other sat down to the left of me, blocking me in.

“Alone tonight?” he asked.

“Yes,” I replied, staring into my drink.

The second man chuckled. “Well, so are we. What’s your name?”

“I’ve had a rough day. I don’t feel like talking,” I said before finishing my drink.

“Don’t be like that. Let us cheer you up,” the second man said.

I placed a twenty down on the bar and slid off my stool.

The first man stood up and blocked my path. “No need to rush. We are just talking,” he said.

“Well, I’m done talking,” I said.

He grinned like my words were a joke. “What is your name?”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. I attempted to sidestep out of his way, but he caught my wrist. His grip tightened.

“It matters to me,” he said.

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

The second man moved behind me. “You’ve got a lot of attitude for someone alone.”

“It would be better for you if you left me alone,” I said.

“Oh yeah? And why is that?”

“I am Maggie. I am Alpha Nolan’s maid!”

For a second, they looked worried and I thought they would leave me alone. Then the first man laughed.

“You expect us to believe that?” he asked.

“It is true,” I said.

The second man scoffed. “If you are Alpha Nolan’s maid, then I am the Alpha King.”

The first man grabbed my wrist again. “Come on. You can stop lying.” His grip tightened and I couldn’t remove his hand from

my wrist.

“Let go,” I said, and my voice rose. “Let go of me.”

He leaned closer. “Or what?”

I tried to jerk free, but he yanked me toward him. “Come on. I know the perfect way to cheer you up back at my place.”

“Let her go,” a voice said from behind them.

Both men turned.

A stranger stood a few steps away. He was tall and built like a linebacker. He glared at the two men as he walked over

The first man snorted. “Mind your business.”

“She already refused your offer,” the stranger said. “Let her go.”

The second man stepped toward him. “And who the hell are you?”

The stranger did not answer. He hit the first man so hard it sounded like thunder. The man staggered, shocked, and the stranger followed with a second punch that sent him stumbling into a table. The second man lunged, but the stranger grabbed him by the collar and slammed him into the bar. The bartender backed away fast.

“Leave,” the stranger snarled. “Now!”

The two men bolted for the door, cursing under their breath as they fled into the night.

I turned toward the stranger. “Thank you,” I said, finally catching my breath.

As the light hit his face, I realized he was strikingly handsome. My heart raced and I hated it.

“Maggie,” he said, his voice softening. “Are you alright?”

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & EIGHTEEN

Maggie’s POV

“You know me?” I asked. “How do you know me?”

“I’ve seen you with Alpha Nolan. It’s hard not to notice the people around him,” he explained.

That made sense, but his answer seemed to be too convenient. He could have overheard me say I was Alpha Nolan’s maid. I’d already been too careless tonight. “So, you’re a guard?”

“Mostly a warrior,” he said. “I rotate to the border patrol from time to time.”

“Alright. What are you doing here tonight? Did Alpha Nolan tell you to bring me back?” I asked.

“No. Tonight was a long shift, so I came here to relax,” he explained as he sat down on the stool beside mine, and I settled back into my seat to finish my drink.

“Bartender, old fashioned,” he ordered.

I watched him as he drank his drink. He let my gaze travel from his face down to where his shirt stretched across his broad chest. “I have to say… I’ve never seen such a handsome warrior before,” I blurted, my cheeks burning.

I wasn’t usually so forward, but alcohol wasn’t called liquid courage for nothing.

A slow smile spread across his face. “Are you flirting with me?” he asked.

“What if I am?” I shot back.

His smile widened. “You’re playing with fire, Maggie.”

“I am not afraid of being burned,” I purred before finishing my drink. No man had ever looked at me with such obvious desire.

My wolf growled within me, bringing me out of my lustful thoughts. ‘Stop this right now. We need to go home,’ she urged. ‘We don’t know him and you’re not thinking correctly.’

Normally, I would have listened as my wolf has always kept me safe, but tonight, safety was the last thing I wanted. ‘I’m just having fun. I deserve to have fun,’ I told her.

“This isn’t about fun, Maggie! We don’t know him,’ my wolf argued.

I pushed her down until she was nothing more than a distant whisper.

“I’m Mason, by the way,” he said.!

“Nice to meet you, Mason,” I replied. “And thank you for saving me.”

“What are you doing out here alone so late, Maggie?” His gaze was intense, tracking the movement of my lips.

“The man I love chose someone else,” I said simply. “I thought if I drank enough, it might stop hurting for a while. Maybe I could forget how stupid I was to believe I actually mattered to him.”

Mason placed his hand over mine. “Goddess, I’m sorry.”

“No need. With you around, I feel safe. So my plans weren’t fully ruined by those jerks,” I said.

Mason touched my cheek, causing me to look at him in surprise. “You’re gorgeous, Maggie. Anyone who didn’t choose you was a fool.” He leaned closer and kissed me. The kiss was gentle at first, but when I slid my hand into his hair, he deepened it.

When we pulled apart, I could see my own desire reflected in his eyes.

“We should find somewhere more private,” he suggested.

I nodded before my mind could catch up with my body. My pulse raced with anticipation and fear. I’d never done anything this impulsive, but I didn’t want to stop.

‘Maggie!’ my wolf snarled. ‘You need to stop this right now!’

‘Stop talking and let me enjoy myself,’ I growled back as I forced her down again.

Mason took my hand and led me to the back of the bar where there were a few rooms for private meetings. Mason found one that was unlocked and empty and pulled me inside. His hands tangled in my hair as he kissed me again.

Mason pressed me up against the door. One hand gripped my waist while the other grabbed my breast. I gasped. It was intoxicating, being wanted like this. It was better than any of my fantasies.

When Mason pulled back, he asked, “Are you sure about this? We can stop.”

Instead of answering, I reached for the hem of his shirt and tugged it upward. Mason understood immediately, pulling it over his head and letting it fall to the floor.

I'd thought he was handsome before. Seeing him like this stole my breath. His chest was broad and defined, muscle shifting beneath golden skin.

"Goddess, you're so sexy," I breathed, tracing the lines of his body with my fingertips. He shivered under my touch, a sound somewhere between a groan and a sigh leaving his throat.

Mason's hands moved to unbutton my shirt. When he pushed it off my shoulders, his gaze darkened as it settled on the black bra beneath. He guided me toward the small couch in the corner. We both sat down. When his hand slid between my legs, I had to clamp my mouth shut to keep from crying out. I was already so wet.

"Touch me too," he murmured against my neck as he guided my hand to his hard length with his free hand.

I wrapped my hand around him, startled by how hard he already was. I slowly began to stroke him and Mason began to pump his finger in and out of me in time with my hand. As the pleasure began to build, I couldn't focus on anything and held onto Mason.

Mason pulled away abruptly to pull his pants fully off as well as mine. He climbed on top of me. I felt him pushing into me and I gripped his shoulders as panic began to rise within me.

"Mason," I gasped. "Stop."

"What's wrong?" he asked, looking down at me

"I should tell you… I've never… I mean, I'm still…"

"A virgin?" he finished in a low whisper.

I nodded, heat rushing to my cheeks.

I nodded, my face burning with heat. Mason didn't pull back. Instead, he leaned in and captured my lips in a deep kiss.

"I'll be gentle with you, Maggie," Mason whispered into my ear before he thrusted into me.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & NINETEEN

Talia's POV

I joined Nolan for breakfast earlier than usual. He had already finished working through a stack of documents, though several more were arranged neatly beside his plate. I could tell he was trying not to work too much while I was there.

"You don't have to stop working because I'm here," I said, reaching for my cup.

"I'm not stopping," Nolan replied calmly. "I'm pacing myself."

"I don't want you rearranging your entire routine because of me," I said firmly.

"I'm just adjusting to the new norm, that's all," Nolan replied.

The new norm should be me sharing the responsibility with him, not me sitting around in our residence but waiting for him to

come back. I was Luna and I needed to start acting like it.

"I don't want to sit idle anymore," I told him.

"You have only just recovered. There is no reason to rush into anything," Nolan replied and gave me a soft kiss.

“No, I want to take on my Luna duties officially. I want to help manage pack affairs,” I said. “If I hadn’t been kidnapped, I would’ve been doing it already.”

Nolan smiled and said, “Honestly, I was waiting for you to say that.”

“And I have experience,” I continued and winked at him. “I assisted Solon in Silverfang, remember? And I managed Shadowclaw on my own for a while. I am well prepared to do this.”

A faint smile curved his mouth. “I know. You don’t have to convince me, Talia.”

He turned slightly toward Maggie, who stood at a respectable distance near the doorway. “Is everything ready?” he asked.

“Yes, Alpha,” Maggie answered with a smile.

I frowned. “Ready for what?”

“You’ll see,” Nolan said as he stood and extended his hand to me.

I took it. He guided me down the corridor toward the Alpha’s office. The guards nodded as we passed. When Nolan opened the office door, I stepped inside and stopped.

There were now two desks.

His remained where it always had, facing the window that overlooked the central square. But beside it, positioned close enough that we could speak without raising our voices, stood a second desk. Several books I often read were stacked neatly along one

corner.

“This office isn’t mine anymore. It’s our office,” Nolan explained.

I turned to him. “You did this?”

“I had help,” he replied. “Maggie oversaw the setup.”

I nodded. Maggie was really trying to make amends. I still wasn’t at the point of trusting her, but I appreciated the gesture, even if she had been ordered to do it.

I walked to the desk and ran my hand over the smooth surface. “You trust me this much?”

“You’re my mate. My Luna. Of course I trust you,” he said.

+25 Bonus

I didn’t want Nolan to trust me only because we were mates. I wanted him to trust me because he knew I was capable.

‘Then we will prove to him that we are worthy of our position,’ my wolf stated.

“Thank you. I won’t disappoint you,” I told him.

“I don’t expect you to,” he answered.

Nolan walked over to his desk and gathered a stack of reports. “Start with these. These are patrol summaries, border activity, and pack member concerns. The more complex matters, we will review together.”

I took the stack from him and sat down with a confident smile.

The reports were organized by region. Most of them detailed rogue sightings along the outer borders. Some villages reported livestock stolen. A few mentioned attempted intrusions at night. Nothing too aggressive, but there was a persistent consistency of rogue activity.

“This has been happening for a while,” I said as I scanned the fifth patrol summary.

“It has,” Nolan admitted. “The terrain near the outer borders is overgrown. It makes it easier for rogues to approach unnoticed. I have increased patrol rotations since your kidnapping.”

“We cannot keep expanding patrols forever,” I said. “It drains manpower and leaves other areas exposed.”

Nolan leaned back in his chair. “What would you suggest?”

I set the reports down and thought through the terrain in my mind. “We build a wall,” I suggested. “A defensive wall along the most vulnerable stretch of the outer plains border. We establish limited entry points that are heavily guarded. Anyone entering must pass through those checkpoints.”

He listened without interruption.

“With defined entry points,” I continued, “we reduce the number of guards needed to maintain security. It would be a stronger defense.”

Nolan considered the idea for a moment. “It would change how we operate,” he said.

“Yes,” I replied. “But it would also force rogues to confront us directly and seek sanctuary properly. It would keep rogues from sneaking in anything that could harm us.

“It’s a solid plan,” Nolan said. “We’ll need to review cost, materials, and labor distribution, but I agree with the direction.”

Relief settled in my chest. For a moment, I had been concerned that I might have been overstepping.

“This is our pack now. You have as much a say in how to protect it as Nolan. Start thinking like this is our pack,’ my wolf scolded

‘You’re right,’ I agreed.

“I’ll call a meeting with the high-ranking wolves. Marco will want to hear this. The elders as well,” Nolan continued.

“I can explain the proposal to them,” I offered.

“Are you ready for that now?” Nolan asked. He looked genuinely concerned.

“I stood before Shadowclaw as Luna,” I reminded him. “I can stand before Bloodmoon.”

A proud smile returned to his face. “Good. Let’s go!”

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & TWENTY

Talia’s POV

+25 Bonus

High-ranking pack members were assembled in the central meeting room. The room sat near the heart of the pack house. It was large enough to hold a full council and still left space for warriors to stand along the walls.

As Nolan and I stepped inside, all conversations ended. The pack members walked toward the table. I had seen several of them at the return party, but this was the first time I would speak to them as their Luna.

“Alpha,” several greeted.

“Luna,” others added.

All eyes were on me. I kept my hands relaxed at my sides. I refused to look uncertain, even for a second.

‘You belong here,’ my wolf said firmly. ‘Don’t forget that.’

Nolan walked with me toward the head of the table. He sat at the head, and I sat to the right of him. Della took the seat to the right of me and Marco took the seat to the left of Nolan.

“Sit,” Nolan commanded.

Everyone sat down and one pack member said, “It is good seeing the Alpha and Luna. I hope you have called us here for good news.”

“This meeting is convened to discuss the safety of Bloodmoon,” Nolan explained. “Luna Talia reviewed the recent patrol reports. She noticed a pattern.” He turned to me and asked, “Would you like to elaborate on what you found?”

I stood up, and walked to the other end of the table, so everyone could see me. “I went through patrol summaries, border reports, and pack member concerns,” I began. “There is a consistent pattern in the documents. Rogue incursions are becoming more frequent.”

A few of them exchanged looks, but no one spoke.

“Right now, we are responding to the issue,” I continued, “but we are chasing the problem when we need to be proactive. Increasing rotations helps in the short term, but it burns out our warriors and makes us weaker in the long term.”

An old pack member leaned back in his chair and asked, “We are aware, Luna. This is a known concern; however, we don’t have any other choice.”

“No, it isn’t,” I said. “The outer plains are too open, and it gives rogues too many ways to approach without being spotted. We can change the structure of the border. My proposal is to build a defensive wall along the most vulnerable section of the plains border.”

“That would be cutting us off,” one of them blurted out. “How would we get supplies or help if we need it?”

“No, it would only block that area. It would connect using the forest edge and the mountains as anchors,” I explained. “We would create only a few controlled entry points with permanent gates. With limited entry points, we do not need dozens of scattered patrols. That frees the rest of our warriors to train, reinforce villages, and respond quickly if rogues appear elsewhere.”

“Isn’t this an overreaction? They are only stealing a few livestock,” another pack member asked. “They haven’t done anything that would warrant this.”

My wolf bristled within me. ‘Is our abduction not enough for them?’ she growled. ‘Would it be an overreaction it their loved one was taken from them?’

“This is not just about stopping rogues from stealing livestock,” I said firmly. “This is a situation where it will escalate. What happens when a rogue is caught? Will they become violent to get what they want? That is a reality that our pack should not have to face. By building the wall, it will prevent them from bringing in anything that can be harmful, prevent dangerous rogues or rogues with bounties being able to enter and cause damage before we find out about it.”

1/2

+25 Bonus

I did not need to bring up my kidnapping. It was still fresh on everyone’s mind. It shouldn’t happen and with stricter entryways this shouldn’t happen again.

“I want your assessment,” I said. “If you see flaws, say them. If you see improvements, speak.”

No one said anything for a few minutes.

Marco was the first to speak. He leaned forward, forearms on the table, and looked down at the table. “It’s practical and I think it could work,” Marco said. “When are you proposing to get this done?”

“In a month,” I said.

A pack member on the left side of the table spoke. “A month is fast.”

“It is fast if you expect only the warriors to build it,” Marco replied. “It’s not fast if we rotate construction shifts and use villagers for hauling, digging, and basic labor. Warriors handle security and the heavy lifting.”

Another pack member asked, “What about emergencies? If the wall forces movement through gates, it slows travel.”

“It only slows travel in that area. Of course, Bloodmoon pack members will be able to move freely,” Marco said. “It forces any rogues moving through that border to be seen, recorded, and challenged. They will be forced to do that if they enter any other area. That is the point.”

A few wolves nodded, while others remained stone-faced, watching Nolan. Then, a cold scoff cut through the silence.

To my right, a stern man sat rigid, his gaze hard with disgust as if I had said the worst thing imaginable.

“A wall,” he huffed, voice dripping with disdain. “So, is this what Bloodmoon has become? A pack that hides because its new Luna is afraid of rogues?”