Barren Luna 221

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & TWENTY ONE

Nolan's POV

Talia did not react with anger when Walden spoke. I saw the surprise in her eyes, but she did not let it show beyond that first flicker. My wolf growled within me. He did not like how Walden was talking to Talia, but Talia had to hold her own in front of them.

"Luna," I said evenly, "this is Walden. He is my Chief Warrior."

Walden inclined his head a fraction in acknowledgment.

"Chief Warrior Walden," Talia said calmly, "There is no need for the jab. If you have an issue with my proposal, this is what you're here for. Explain your reasoning."

Walden raised an eyebrow at Talia's reaction as if he didn't expect Talia to respond in a professional manner.

"Winter is approaching," he said. "The harsh season always weakens supply lines and strains manpower. Construction of a wall across the plains will require significant warrior presence for at least a month. During that time, our fighting force will be divided between defense and labor."

Some of the pack members began to nod their heads in agreement. He did make a good point.

"If another pack chooses that window to challenge us," Walden continued, "or if rogues gather in greater numbers, we will not have our full strength available. Even with villagers assisting, issues will arise. That is part of construction. On top of that, conflicts between villagers and warriors are inevitable when food and resources become limited."

Walden turned his full attention back to Talia. "For those reasons, I oppose beginning construction now."

No one said anything. The room remained quiet as everyone digested his words. Della was fuming but she couldn't argue against Walden's point.

"There is truth in what Walden is saying," I said. Talia didn't look at me, but I could tell she was upset by how rigid she became.

'I thought you agreed with my plan,' Talia said through our mind link.

'I do, but Walden is not opposing you because he doesn't like you. I left him in charge of Bloodmoon while I was in Silverfang. He handled border pressure, internal disputes, and patrol rotations without incident. I have never doubted his loyalty or his judgment when it comes to our military strength,' I explained.

'Walden does not know everything,' Talia responded.

That was true. He did not know about the resurgence of mad rogue blood. I had kept that information contained to prevent panic from spreading through the pack.

"I acknowledge the concern. You make valid points," Talia said after a moment. Walden looked pleased until Talia continued." However, the wall is not being built out of fear. It is a preemptive measure."

Walden frowned and looked as if he was about to say something, but Talia didn't give him the opportunity.

"I will not force every warrior to participate," she said. "But at least half must."

A murmur rippled through the room at that number.

"We offer structured rotations," she went on. "Increased rations during shifts."

Walden's expression did not change.

“If we are attacked during that month,” Talia said, “I will call on Shadowclaw’s elite warriors. I will also request reinforcement from Silverfang.”

Walden exhaled through his nose. “Shadowclaw and Silverfang are too far. By the time either pack responds, we would have sustained major casualties. And the area you’re concerned with is over six miles. Six miles! Even with one thousand wolves working in rotation, that is an enormous undertaking. It is not possible for the wall to be completed in a month.”

“With that mindset, it won’t be possible,” Talia argued.

Walden then stood up, angrily sliding his chair back. “You may have governed Shadowclaw, but Bloodmoon’s terrain is different. Let the wolves who know what they’re doing handle the safety of the pack.”

My wolf snarled inside me. ‘How dare he talk to our mate like that!’

Anger rose up in me, not because he questioned logistics, but because he questioned her authority in front of the council. Walden had always been blunt, but never disrespectful, not until today.

“That is not an option,” Talia snapped. “If there are structural challenges, we address them. But do not dismiss the plan because you assume I cannot understand.”

Walden opened his mouth again, but I cut him off. “Enough.”

Talia returned to her seat next to me.

“You are allowed to question feasibility,” I said to Walden. “I expect that of you. But you will not mock my Luna in this room.”

“It was never my attention, Alpha. L…”

“The wall construction is urgent,” I said, interrupting him. “This is not optional. Our temporary fixes are not long term sustainable. If no one has an alternative, the wall will be built.”

“Alpha, please see the reason,” Walden pleaded. “All eyes have always been on us. If anyone notices reduced patrols, we will be sitting ducks.”

“Walden, you are my Chief Warrior,” I said. “I value your judgment. But you will apologize to Luna Talia for questioning her authority in this manner.”

Walden’s shoulders stiffened. For a moment, I thought he would resist, but then he said, “My words were blunt. I should have chosen them more carefully. I apologize, Luna.’

‘He is not sincere,’ my wolf growled. ‘We need to make an example out of him.’

‘If Talia doesn’t accept, we will. If she does, this will be his one and only warning,’ I told him and he huffed in agreement.

“Accepted,” Talia said and Walden visibly relaxed.

“Are there any alternatives to the rogue problem?” I asked.

No one said anything. I expected more, but I also understood how people can become complacent. I was back and I would make sure the pack knew better.

After a few minutes of silence, I said, “We will move forward with building the wall. Half the warriors will be assigned in rotation. Marco will coordinate gate security planning. Walden will oversee construction logistics and ensure combat readiness is not compromised.”

Walden did not argue again.

“This begins immediately,” I finished. “That is my final order.”

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & TWENTY TWO

Nolan's POV

Talia loosened the clasp at her collar as soon as we stepped inside our bedroom. I removed my jacket and set it over the chair. For a moment, neither of us spoke.

"We should be there when construction begins," Talia said at last.

I glanced at her. "Why?"

"He was opposed to the proposal, and he was not happy with you ordering it to still be completed," Talia replied. "I want to see how he's organizing the warriors. And how the villagers are reacting."

"You think he'll mishandle it?" I asked.

"I don't believe so but there are different ways to mishandle things while still seeming innocent," Talia answered.

"We'll go in the morning," I agreed.

We were preparing to go to bed when there was a loud knock at our door.

I exchanged a look with Talia before crossing the room and opening it. Marco and Della stood in the doorway. Both looked panicked.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"There's a disturbance at the border," Marco said.

“Warriors and villagers are arguing,” Della added. “We have broken up a few fights, but it is only escalating.”

“I’ll handle it,” I said.

I turned to Talia. “You’re staying here.”

Her expression changed immediately. “No, I’m going with you.”

“This could turn violent,” I said. “You were just injured.”

“And I am Luna,” she shot back. “If the conflict is over the wall, then it concerns me directly.”

“It concerns the pack’s security,” I corrected. “Which means I go.”

She stepped closer. “You cannot keep sidelining me every time something becomes dangerous.”

“This is about your safety.”

“No, this is about control,” she said angrily. “You think you are protecting me. You are not. You are isolating me. What will the pack think if I am not there? No one will respect me as Luna.”

I frowned. There was no time to discuss this. “Talia,” I said firmly. “You are staying.”

Her eyes flashed with anger. “You do not get to order me like I am a child.”

“Della,” I said, turning away from Talia, “you and two guards remain here. Do not let her leave.”

Della hesitated for half a second and then nodded. I stepped out with Marco before the argument could continue. Behind me, Talia yelled, “You cannot treat me this way, Nolan!”

‘You shouldn’t have done that. You are disrespecting our mate,’ my wolf growled. I ignored him and did not turn back.

The border was already lit with torches by the time we arrived. I could hear the shouting when we were about a mile away.

Warriors and villagers were clustered near the first marked stretch. Some were pushing each other. Others were shouting over one another. Tools lay abandoned in the dirt.

At the center of it stood Walden. He was not interfering. Walden was just watching.

“Enough!” I shouted.

Pack members flinched at my voice before turning to face me.

“What is going on?” I demanded.

Walden stepped forward. “I issued the construction order,” he said. “As commanded.”

“I can see that.”

“The warriors are unhappy,” he continued. “The villagers are more so.”

A villager shouted from behind him, “We shouldn’t be doing this work! This is not our job!”

Walden did not look back. “I explained the incentives,” he said to me. “It did not help.”

“What did you tell them?” I asked.

“The truth,” he replied. “That half the warriors would be assigned. That each household must send at least one able member to assist. When they learned it was Luna’s proposal, tempers worsened.”

I felt my wolf bristle. He did this on purpose. What point was he trying to prove?

“How is that relevant?” I asked quietly.

“I told them where the idea originated,” he said evenly. “I thought they needed to know.”

“It is your job to control them and make this work,” I pressed.

“I have controlled patrol disputes and border skirmishes,” Walden responded. “But this is not a rogue threat. This is internal resistance.”

‘We need to put him in his place. He is overstepping,’ my wolf growled and now I agreed. Walden was purposely causing issues, so this would fail.

“You have commanded this pack’s forces for years. You expect me to believe you cannot handle a riot?”

Walden did not flinch. “This is not a riot. This is distrust.”

I stepped closer to him. My Alpha aura began rolling off me, but Walden didn’t back down. “You will not incite hostility toward my Luna.”

“I am not hostile to her,” Walden replied. “I am concerned about you.”

“Choose your next words carefully,” I warned.

Walden held my gaze. “Since you brought her back,” he said, “your focus has not been the welfare of the pack. You have expanded patrols. You have adjusted guard rotations. You have now committed half

the warriors to construction to keep rogues away instead of addressing the major issues happening within the pack."

Marco stiffened beside me. "That is enough," he said sharply.

Walden ignored him. "There is no need for the wall. Rogue incursions have been manageable."

"And yet, my Luna was still captured," I said.

"And recovered," Walden countered. "Because you acted decisively."

"No, she recovered because she escaped on her own," I growled.

"The mate bond is clouding your judgment," Walden finally said.

Silence settled around us. Even the villagers had stopped shouting.

"You believe my judgment has weakened."

"I believe you are acting out of protectiveness rather than strategy."

"The rogues are changing," I said. "You do not know everything I know."

"Then inform your Chief Warrior," Walden replied. "What am I missing?"

"You insist the previous patrol method has no issues?" I asked.

"It functioned," he said. "It maintained balance. It did not provoke internal division."

“And what do you suggest?” I asked.

“Reconsider the scale of the wall,” he said. “Delay until after winter. Reassess manpower distribution. Do not push the pack

into resentment.”

The villagers behind him murmured approval.

I looked at the warriors. Some avoided my eyes. Others looked conflicted.

This was no longer a debate about logistics. Whether Walden meant to or not, he was challenging my authority. Even if I wanted to go along with his plan, I could not now.

“The wall construction stands,” I said firmly. “You are free to disagree in council. You are not free to undermine me or my Luna in front of the pack.”

“I have done no such thing,” Walden said defensively.

“You disagree with my decision, so gave the pack enough information to cause panic and tension,” I accused.

“I am trying to protect Bloodmoon,” Walden defended.

“And what do you think I am doing?” I asked.

“I believe,” Walden replied, “that since Luna was kidnapped, you have not managed the pack with the same clarity before. You put her above the safety of the pack. Please reconsider this, Alpha!”

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & TWENTY THREE

Talia's POV

How dare he just leave while I was still talking?

'Please calm down. He is doing this for our benefit,' my wolf said in an attempt to calm me down.

'You're supposed to be on my side,' I growled.

'I am, but he's right. We just recovered. Let him handle this,' my wolf urged, but I ignored her. I was not going to allow him to treat me like a child. I allowed my ex to take control when he returned, and the pack turned on me. I would not allow that to happen again.

'But Nolan is not like that. He…' I pushed my wolf down midsentence. I quickly moved to leave the room, but Della stepped in

front of the door.

"Della, what are you doing?" I asked.

"You can't leave," Della said.

"Move," I told her.

"No."

"There is a riot at the border. I need to be there," I told her.

"And Alpha Nolan ordered you to stay here," Della argued.

"Della! You are my Beta not his," I snapped.

“I made a promise to protect the pack just like you did. Nolan is now my Alpha too, and it is my responsibility to keep you safe,” Della countered. “You’ve been reckless lately trying to prove yourself. You just need to relax and let Alpha Nolan handle this.”

I scoffed. “I am not a child that needs to be protected.”

“No one is treating you like a child, but you were poisoned less than a week ago. You almost died. You don’t need to exert yourself,” Della shot back. “Alpha Nolan is trying to protect you.”

“I do not need protection from my own pack,” I argued.

“Listen to me, Talia. You weren’t here seeing how Nolan nearly lost his mind when you disappeared,” Della explained. “He didn’t sleep; he barely ate. He blamed himself for everything. At least try to understand where he’s coming from.”

“I understand why he is worried,” I said. “But I am Luna of Bloodmoon. If there is unrest because of my proposal and I hide in a room, what message does that send?”

“That you are recovering.”

“No, the pack would see me as weak. They already see me as a distraction.”

“No one would dare say that.”

“Maggie did. Walden did.”

“Maggie doesn’t count and it’s Walden’s job to be an asshole,” Della countered. “Everyone loves you.”

“They don’t know me like you do, Della,” I answered. “Yes, they would never dare say it aloud, but they already think it. It they didn’t, there wouldn’t be fighting right now.”

“That is not true,” Della argued. “I am sure they are fighting for different reasons and if anyone ever disrespected you like that, I would handle it.”

“It is not your responsibility to defend me every time someone challenges me,” I said. “I am Luna and I have to take control”

Della didn’t move from blocking the door. She looked conflicted but she wasn’t backing down. “Please, Talia, just stay here Nolan can handle this on his own.”

I sighed and ran a hand over my face. “Don’t make me order you to stop blocking me, Della. I don’t want to do it, but I will if you don’t move.”

“Talia! Are you really going to use rank on me?”

“I will if I have to!”

Della’s eyes widened in surprise and hurt. I had never pulled rank on Della before, and I didn’t want to command her to obey if I didn’t have to. Finally, she stepped aside. “Goddess, Talia, you don’t have to be so stubborn all the time,” she pouted.

“Thank you for understanding,” I told her.

Della rolled her eyes and said, “It’s not like I had a choice. Let’s go.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“You’re not going by yourself. I would rather have Nolan not throw me in a dungeon,” Della replied.

We reached the border within minutes. Warriors and villagers were arguing in clusters. Marco was trying to break up a fight while Walden and Nolan were arguing. I could feel his anger through our bond.

“This is utter chaos,’ my wolf scoffed. ‘We need to handle this right now.’

“Enough!” I shouted. My voice carried farther than I expected, but not everyone stopped arguing. Then, I commanded, ” Silence!” The Luna command wasn’t as strong as an Alpha command, but it was enough to make them think twice.

All eyes turned toward me. Nolan looked at me in surprise. “Talia, what are you doing here? I said I would handle it,’ he said through our mind link.

‘You will not deal with this on your own,’ I told him.

“I understand that you are angry about the wall,” I began. “You believe it is unnecessary because you believe our warriors are strong enough to handle rogue incursions.”

“They are,” Walden said firmly as he cut in. Nolan had begun growling due to Walden’s constant challenges to his authority.

“I agree,” I said. Murmurs rippled through the crowd. “Normal rogue invasions have never broken this pack.”

“Then why change our system?” a villager demanded. “Why force this when it is not needed?”

“Because what attacked me was not normal,” I admitted.

There were more murmurs of confusion. Even Walden looked shocked by my admission. None of the warriors truly understood the horror of the mad rogues; only Nolan, Maggie, Della, Marco, and I had witnessed the nightmare firsthand.

A warrior near the front frowned. “Rogues have attacked before. They use wolfsbane sometimes. This is nothing unusual ”

“But they weren’t just using wolfsbane,” I responded.

Walden folded his arms. “But the doctor said…”

“The wound that nearly killed me was not from wolfsbane alone,” I answered, cutting Walden ott. “The rogues that kidnapped me were mad rogues. That is why I almost died.”

The reaction was immediate. The color drained from people’s faces. Fear replaced anger.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & TWENTY FOUR

Talia’s POV

Chaos erupted within the crowd. Pack members began to panic.

“Why are we out here if there are mad rogues around?” someone yelled.

“I have a family!”

“Everyone calm down,” Nolan commanded and the crowd silenced again, but fear was still wafting from them.

“Is the Mad rogues’ blood as poisonous as the legends?” Walden asked, looking directly at me. “It is said that even being near is dangerous.”

I could tell from his tone he was implying that it couldn’t be true. My wolf growled in annoyance as a few pack members were exchanging looks and muttering that it was just an urban legend.

“You are correct. Those who are afflicted lose reason,” I continued. “They do not distinguish between enemy and ally. They react like rabid animals, biting at anyone nearby.”

Walden frowned. “Then, how did you survive, Luna?”

“I was only scratched by one infected wolf and that one scratch nearly cost me my life,” I responded.

Walden frowned, visibly appalled by this new information. The crowd of pack members began to visibly panic. “Alpha, why didn’t you inform me of this?” Walden asked.

“We did not announce this immediately because we did not want panic spreading through the pack without proof,” Nolan explained. “We wanted to make sure that this was the Mad Rogue poisoning.”

“After extensive testing, we confirmed it was true,” I said.

“Luna, you recovered. Does that mean it can be cured?” a warrior near the front of the crowd asked.

“Only because we had a healing herb prepared in advance. I required two full days of treatment before my condition stabilized. And even then, if Alpha Nolan hadn’t gotten me to the doctor in time, I would not have made it,” I answered.

“Two days?” Someone repeated in alarm.

“I was not hiding away in my room because I was embarrassed by being kidnapped,” I said. “I was still recovering. You all know how quickly normal wounds heal. Three hours at most for most of us. Even with wolfsbane poisoning, it would not take a full day for a wound to heal.”

I pulled down my collar to reveal the scar on my shoulder. “This is what the Mad Rogue poisoning did to me.”

Walden’s expression changed. The challenge faded from his face. He finally looked remorseful.

“If a group of infected rogues crossed the border at once,” I continued, “and several of our warriors were wounded, we would be dealing with an outbreak. If enough warriors were weakened at the same time, our defenses would collapse.”

“This is why the wall is needed. The wall would give us time for Silverfang and Shadowclaw to come to our aid,” Nolan added

Walden bowed low to us. “I understand now, Alpha. Luna, Alpha, I apologize for doubting.”

The crowd remained quiet as they processed the information. The earlier anger had disappeared and was replaced with tear

“Are there any objections?” I asked.

No one spoke.

Walden stepped forward and bowed his head slightly. “There will be no more delays. We will have the wall completed within a

month.”

“Thank you,” I said. “All of you for understanding.”

Several hours later, Nolan and I finally returned to our quarters. Nolan chatted about Walden and how he would reprimand him later, but I wasn’t paying attention. I was still upset that he didn’t trust me. I took a shower to clear my head.

“You handled the situation well today,” Nolan said quietly.

“I did what any respectable Luna would have done,” I said as I combed my hair at the edge of the bed.

He crossed the room and stood in front of me. “You did more than that. You squashed a potential riot before it even began. The pack will remember this.”

I did not respond.

Nolan studied my face before saying, “You’re exhausted.”

“I’m fine.”

“You don’t have to pretend with me. Did you overexert yourself?”

“I’m not pretending,” I said. “I’m frustrated.”

“About Walden?”

“About you.”

He blinked. “Me?”

“Yes.”

“You’re still upset about me ordering you to stay behind?” Nolan asked.

“Yes, and you forced my own Beta to go against me,” I replied.

“I was trying to protect you,” Nolan argued.

“No, you were trying to control me because you’re afraid of losing control again,” I countered. “When there is unrest, you cannot leave me behind again. I am your Luna and I am a warrior. I am not someone you place in a room for safety.”

“Talia, I know that, but sometimes there isn’t a need for you to get involved. I could’ve handled it on my own,” Nolan explained.

“You can not shield me from every conflict, the pack will see it and Walden picks up on it,” I said. “We cannot have the pack thinking I am weak.”

Nolan frowned. “You think I see you as weak?” he asked.

“I think you see me as someone you cannot lose,” I said. “But protecting me by excluding me is not the same as trusting me.”

Nolan sat down next to me and grabbed my hand. “Don’t ever think that I don’t trust you, Talia.”

“Then, act like you do.”

“What do you need me to do to show you that I trust you?”

“Promise me something.”

“What?”

“That we face issues together. That I will not be left behind while decisions are made or conflicts are handled. I don’t want the pack thinking that I am a coward.”

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & TWENTY FIVE

Talia’s POV

“Are you still upset with me?” Nolan teased.

“No, but you better be on your best behavior,” I said as I sat down for breakfast. Only a few minutes later, Della and Marco strolled in.

“So, you two seem okay. That means Talia probably didn’t have you sleep on the couch last night,” Della teased.

“No, but I have my eye on him,” I said. “What are you two doing here?”

“We thought we could eat breakfast together,” Della suggested.

Clara had just placed the last plate in front of us. Breakfast has just started, so it was fine with Della and Marco joining us.” Clara, please bring two more sets of utensils.”

“Yes, Luna,” she replied and hurried back toward the kitchen.

Della dropped into the chair across from me. “It’s much livelier to eat together,” she said as she glanced at the spread on the table. “And this looks good.”

“It does,” Marco added, taking his seat beside her.

I smiled. “You’re both welcome to join us more often.”

Nolan looked at me in exaggerated disappointment. “I preferred when breakfast was just the two of us.”

Della gave him a look. “You’re stingy.”

“I am not stingy,” Nolan replied calmly. “I simply enjoy quiet mornings with my mate.”

‘And other things,’ Nolan said through our mind link before showing lewd ideas of what he wanted to do with me at breakfast. I nearly choked on my water before I blocked him out of my mind.

Marco chuckled. “You’ll survive sharing her for one meal.”

Clara returned with utensils and set them down. We began eating.

After a few moments, Nolan turned to Marco and asked, “Is there anything to report?”

Marco wiped his hands and nodded. “Walden is making sure everything is going as planned.”

“How is the wall looking? Have they started construction?” I asked.

“They’ve begun laying out the foundation line along the outer plains,” Marco said. “Temporary grain storage is being set up near the construction site, so supplies do not have to be transported repeatedly. They’re also building rest areas for those on rotation. So far, everything is going smoothly.”

“That’s good,” Nolan said. “I was beginning to doubt Walden. I thought maybe leaving him in control had gone to his head ”

“I was surprised by his response,” Marco agreed. “But Walden always thinks about the pack first.”

Nolan glanced toward Maggie, who stood a short distance away near the wall. Maggie was still very attentive since my return I didn’t feel any animosity from her, but Della still didn’t trust her.

“Maggie.”

She stepped forward immediately. “Yes, Alpha?”

“Instruct the pack chefs to prepare protein heavy meals for the wall builders,” Nolan ordered. “Make sure they increase the

portion. The workers will need to keep up their strength If we’re going to get this wall complete within a month.”

“Yes, Alpha,” she replied, bowing slightly. “I’ll inform them at once.”

When she left the room, Della asked, “Why do you still keep her around? It is only a matter of time before she tries to stab you in the back again.”

“She is genuinely trying to make amends, Della. You have to let go of your grudge,” Marco replied.

“I’ll let it go when she faces real justice for what she did.”

“Enough of that. If you’re going to argue about this, you two can eat breakfast elsewhere,” Nolan said.

“Absolutely not. The breakfast isn’t as nearly as good for us,” Della said, causing Nolan to laugh.

We continued eating, and conversation returned to lighter matters. Della complimented the food again. Marco teased her about always judging meals. Nolan responded dryly that if she had complaints, she could cook for herself.

When breakfast was almost over, Maggie returned with an envelope. She approached the table and bowed slightly toward me.” Luna Talia, this was delivered at the gate. It is addressed to you personally.”

I frowned and took the envelope from her. On the front, written clearly, were the words: “To Luna Talia, personally.”

Nolan frowned and asked, “Who delivered it?”

“The guards do not know,” Maggie answered. “It was handed over and the person left immediately.”

“They didn’t recognize him?” Nolan asked.

“No, Alpha.”

‘What’s wrong?’ I asked Nolan through our mind link.

‘Last time we received an anonymous envelope like this, it was a letter demanding me to go alone to save you,’ Nolan replied. That sent a chill up my spine. What if one of Viki’s allies was looking for revenge?

‘Only way to find out is by opening the letter,’ my wolf urged. ‘Or we could burn it to be safe.’

I hesitated only for a moment and then opened the envelope and unfolded the letter inside.

Congratulations, Luna Talia, for gaining Bloodmoon’s approval. I was delighted to hear you are living up to expectations.

Looking forward to meeting you soon,

Your Dear Friend

“What does it say?” Della asked and I handed her the letter.

She and Marco read it and then sniffed it. “There’s no scent on it. And who is “your dear friend”?

Nolan extended his hand, and Della passed the letter to him. He read it silently.

“Do the guards know who delivered it?” he asked Maggie again.

“They do not,” she repeated. “He did not give a name.”

Della turned to me. “Do you have any friends I don’t know about?”

“No,” I said firmly. “Anyone I consider a friend would not hide their name.”

Marco shrugged. “It could be a prank.”

“Maybe,” I said.

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CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & TWENTY SIX

Maggie’s POV

Recently, I have been deliberately keeping myself busy.

Since the riot and the decision to build the wall, there has been no shortage of work. As head maid, I oversee supplies, coordinate with the kitchen, manage cleaning schedules, and ensure communication flows between the main house and the border teams. The other maids have been more cooperative than ever. There is no tension now.

They respect me and I have made sure to treat them fairly.

‘You’ve changed,’ my wolf observed one afternoon as I reviewed inventory logs.

“I’ve matured,” I replied silently.

‘You’ve let go,’ she corrected. ‘You’re not staring at Alpha Nolan every time he walks into a room anymore.’

I ignored that.

‘It’s good,’ she added. ‘You were hurting yourself back then.’

“I was foolish,” I said.

She hummed. ‘And now?’

“Now I focus on my duties,” I replied. It was better to act as if the past never happened.

My wolf was quiet for a moment before speaking again.

“That man from the bar was handsome,’ she said.

I nearly ripped through the paper I was holding. I carefully sat it down and said, “We are not talking about that.” That night had been an embarrassing mistake.

‘No, we should talk about it,’ my wolf insisted. ‘Not our destined mate, but still… handsome. Strong. Confident.’

I felt heat rise to my face despite being alone. I remembered when Mason took his shirt off and how he hovered over me. I cleared my throat, bringing myself out of thoughts.

“It was just a one-time situation,” I said firmly. “I was drunk and upset. I shouldn’t have done it.”

‘You didn’t regret it,’ my wolf pointed out. ‘You can’t lie to me.’

“I regret the recklessness,” I quickly said.

She gave a low, amused sound. ‘Says the person who muted me when I told you not to be reckless.’

“I was drunk,” I muttered.

‘If you wanted to see him again, I wouldn’t object,’ my wolf added.

“That is never going to happen. The bartender hadn’t even seen him before,” I pouted.

‘You don’t know that,’ she replied lightly. ‘If we are meant to see him again, the Moon Goddess has a way of changing fate to make sure we see him again.’

“It was a one-night stand, that’s it. There’s nothing more to it than that,” I stated.

My wolf went quiet, but I sensed faint disappointment coming from her. Yes, Mason was attractive and I couldn’t deny that t sometimes thought about him. But he wasn’t my mate.

“There are chosen mates,’ my wolf whispered. ‘But why rush into that? Let’s have fun. He made you happy.’

Mason said he was a warrior from Bloodmoon. With most of Walden’s warriors deployed to the border for wall construction, it was reasonable to assume he might be there. “No, that doesn’t matter. I have a job to do,” I told myself and went back to checking schedules.

Later that afternoon, I found myself walking toward the border. I couldn’t focus. My thoughts kept going back to Mason. I needed to get outside and clear my head.

“I am going to check on meal distribution at the border,” I told the other omegas. It was not a lie. The wall builders required steady supplies, and as head omega, it was within my responsibility.

Once at the border, I saw peaceful activity. Warriors were hauling timber. Villagers carried baskets of tools and rope. Guards stood posted at intervals. Near one section, several maids were distributing water and packed meals.

I walked over to them.

“Do you need help?” I asked.

One of the younger omegas nodded quickly. “Yes. We’re short on hands.”

I took a basket and began handing out portions to the warriors rotating off their shifts.

The work area was loud but orderly. No one paid special attention to me beyond polite nods. As more time went on, I became more and more disappointed at not seeing Mason. “Idiot,” I muttered to myself. I was foolish to come here, hoping to see him.

After delivering the last portion from my basket, I stepped away to retrieve another supply crate that had been left near a stack of timber.

As I turned into a narrow space between two storage structures, a hand suddenly closed around my wrist.

Before I could react, I was pulled quickly into a shaded gap behind a supply cart.

My back hit solid wood nullifying my first attempt to scream with a yelp.

I opened my mouth again to shout, but the sound died in my throat as lips pressed hard against mine. I struggled against the warrior, pressing hard against me. He finally pulled back and then I saw his eyes.

“Mason!?”

“You took your time,” he said quietly.

My breath caught. He was actually here in front of me. My heart pounded in my chest at how close we were to each other.

Mason moved closer, but not in a way that trapped me. His voice dropped lower. “You don’t know how painful it was waiting to see you again.”

‘He wants us,’ my wolf hummed.

I swallowed hard. “You’re supposed to be working,” I said weakly.

“I was working,” he replied calmly. “And now I’m on break. I was prepared to hunt you down and make sure every inch of you remembered me.”

My pulse refused to slow.

I had convinced myself we would never see each other again.

Yet here he was.

And I could barely form words beyond his name.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & TWENTY SEVEN

Maggie’s POV

Mason closed the distance between us and kissed me again. I kissed him back earnestly. His hands roamed my body before resting on my waist.

My hands moved to his shoulders. His grip tightened at my waist. I knew that anyone could turn the corner and see us behind the supply crates, but I did not pull away.

When he broke the kiss, we were both breathing heavily.

“Why did you leave without saying goodbye?” Mason asked.

I stepped back, putting space between us. I blushed at the question. ‘See…he did like us. We should never have left like that,’ my

wolf muttered within me.

“It was a one-night stand,” I said. “I didn’t think it was anything more than that.”

“It meant more to me,” Mason responded.

I shook my head. “We were both drinking. I was upset. We rushed into things. That is not the right way to start a relationship.”

“You decided that alone. You didn’t even take my feelings into consideration,” Mason said.

I didn’t know what to say. He was right. To be honest, I wanted to leave before him so I wouldn’t have to deal with waking up alone. I hadn’t even considered that he may want to continue our relationship.

“I woke up and you were gone,” he continued. “No explanation, nothing. You could have at least left a note.”

“And say what? Thanks for the sex? There was nothing to explain,” I said.

“There was to me,” Mason said angrily.

Silence settled between us. “I’m sorry,” I finally said.

“I haven’t felt this way in a long time,” Mason said. “And I don’t want to ignore how I feel.”

I didn’t answer.

“I asked to be assigned to the wall construction,” he added. “I thought I might see you again.”

“You volunteered for this?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Just for that? Just for an opportunity to see me?”

“Yes.”

Mason’s answer came without hesitation.

“None of this makes any sense,” I said. “You don’t even know me.”

“I know what I felt when I was with you.”

“That’s not enough.”

“It is for me.”

I took a breath. “We aren’t fated mates.”

“I know.”

“You should care about that. You should want to find your fated mate,” I argued.

“My fated mate left me,” Mason said. “She chose someone else.”

I stared at him in shock. “That doesn’t happen. How could anyone do that?” I knew from experience that it was hard for someone to turn away from their fated mate. Nolan was the perfect example of that.

“It does happen. And it happened to me,” Mason confirmed.

“She just walked away? Did she choose someone else?” I asked.

“Yes, she did,” Mason said flatly. There was no self-pity in his tone. He said it as if he was discussing the weather.

“But the mate bond…wasn’t it painful for her?” I asked.

“The mate bond meant nothing to her. She didn’t feel any pain at all,” Mason replied.

I didn’t know what to say to that.

“I’m asking for a chance,” Mason said.

“You don’t deserve someone who’s unsure,” I said.

“Then let me be certain enough for both of us.”

“If I agree,” I said slowly, “it won’t be because I’m treating you like a rebound. You don’t deserve that.”

Mason nodded. “You’re not treating me like a rebound. I am pursuing you.”

The words stayed with me.

After a long pause, I nodded once.

“I’ll give you a chance,” I finally said and Mason’s shoulders relaxed as if he had been preparing for me to reject him.

“I live near the forest,” Mason said quickly. “A small cabin. My shift ends at nine tonight. Come see me then.”

I hesitated but my wolf urged, “Trust him. This could be good for us.’

Before I could respond, Mason stepped away. “I need to get back.” Then he turned and left.

When I returned to the meal station, I handed out food without really seeing anyone. His words repeated in my mind. Why would he be so infatuated with me? He was allowing me to choose him, but it still made me worry. If I went to him, I would be choosing him.

‘We crossed paths with him again,’ my wolf said. ‘This has to be a blessing from the Moon Goddess.’

“It could be,” I answered. I was worried though. Even if his mate left him, his mate could come back. What if he changed his

mind and abandoned me?

‘You are worrying too much,’ my wolf stated. ‘You don’t have to agree to be his mate. He is pursuing us. You are allowed to live your life and enjoy yourself.’

“I know,” I told her and pushed her down. I checked my watch and realized it was almost 9.

I didn’t return to the main house as I didn’t want anyone to ask me where I was going. Clara had been keeping a watchful eye on me and the last thing I needed was her informing Talia. Even though she was giving me a chance to prove myself, I couldn’t help but feel she could be vengeful.

The path toward the forest was quiet. A few guards passed, but no one stopped me. The cabin stood a short distance from the tree line. Light showed through the window.

I stopped at the door. If I turned back now, I could forget all this happened. If I knock, I could start a new chapter in my life.

‘It couldn’t hurt to start something new,’ my wolf said.

I knocked once.

The door opened immediately.

Before I could speak, Mason caught my wrist and pulled me inside.

The door shut behind me.

His mouth found mine again, harder this time.

I forgot every reason I had given myself to stay away.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & TWENTY EIGHT

Talia’s POV

Today was one of the most boring days of my life. I should have been happy for the downtime, but I was restless. There was nothing for me to do, and I didn't have the patience to read.

Della suggested that we take a walk. Even though it was a beautiful day, I was still bored out of my mind.

"Why is today so boring?" Della groaned.

"I have no idea, but it is driving me crazy," I replied. "Shouldn't you be working on the wall?"

"No, my Luna. My job is to keep you company," Della replied and winked.

Nolan was still protective of me, so he was not allowing me to go into the city just yet. All we had left to do was to walk around or perhaps go swimming, but that didn't sound fun either.

"Maybe we have been dealing with chaos so long that normal days just feel weird now," Della replied with a shrug.

"Well, Nolan told me something interesting this morning that we can go investigate," I said.

"That he wanted you to stay in your room today where you're safe?" Della teased.

"No," I laughed. "Nolan told me he had a surprise waiting for me at the central garden."

"Alpha Nolan doesn't seem like the 'surprise' kind of a guy, but let's investigate anyway," Della said as she looped arms with

We passed through the stone archway and stepped inside.

Both of us stopped.

The original flowers and greenery that once filled the Alpha's private garden were gone. In their place stretched rows of roses in different shades: deep red, pale pink, ivory, and soft peach. The beds were evenly spaced, trimmed neatly, and arranged with clear walking paths between them. It looked almost identical to my garden back at Silverfang.

Della let out a low whistle. "He is much more attentive than I thought."

"Yes," I said quietly. I felt a mixture of surprise and happiness. My wolf huffed, 'Why are you surprised? He wants you to be happy. That is his responsibility. He should know everything about us just like you should know him.'

"I'm really glad he's your mate, Talia," Della said. "He really cares about you."

I nodded. "I am too." I had been lucky enough to be blessed with a second chance mate, and I was so happy that it was him.

"I have to admit; he's becoming more and more romantic. He might even surpass Marco at this rate," Della added.

I laughed softly. "Don't let Marco hear you say that."

"He can handle it. Maybe it will incentivize him to do more."

We walked deeper into the garden. The soil looked freshly turned. The stems had been trimmed properly. Whoever arranged this had put in time and care.

"I want this garden to be in the same shape as the one in Silverfang," I said. "Roses require a lot of attention. I don't want them to be neglected. They need…"

"I know, I know," Della said, interrupting me. "Trust me, I have spent enough time with you to know what roses need. I'll make sure the omegas take great care of them when you're not able to."

I bent slightly to inspect one of the lower branches and adjusted a stray stem.

After a moment, Della looked around and asked, “Where is Maggie?”

straightened, “What do you mean?”

“The last time we entered this garden, she tried to stop us,” Della said with a small smirk. “I almost expected her to appear again and remind us it was restricted.”

“Well, I’m Luna now, so she wouldn’t do that again,” I said.

“And if she dared, I’d be right there to slap the audacity out of her,” Della declared.

“You’re never going to forgive her, are you?”

“Not until I am able to spend five minutes slapping her. So, no, never,” Della replied and I couldn’t help but laugh.

I turned toward the group of maids near the entrance. Maggie was indeed not among them. This was unusual because Maggie had been my shadow after the Viki incident.

“Clara,” I called.

Clara approached immediately. “Yes, Luna?”

“Where is Maggie?”

Clara hesitated briefly before answering. “She went out last night and hasn’t returned yet.”

I frowned. “She has been out all night?”

“Yes, Luna. I checked.”

I frowned. “That’s unusual. She has not missed her duties before.”

“This is the first time she has been absent without notice,” Clara added. “I am a little concerned, but I didn’t want to say anything just yet in case I was overreacting.”

Della crossed her arms. “Ugh, I hope she isn’t foolish enough to put herself in danger again. Or she could be plotting against you.”

“She was terrified after what happened with Viki,” I argued. “She won’t repeat that mistake.”

“Then, it could be something positive,” Della suggested.

“Like what?”

“Maybe she found her mate.”

I blinked. “A mate?”

“Is it so hard to believe?” Della replied. “She’s 20 and it is not impossible. Perhaps she has caught up with her mate right now.

The idea of Maggie finding her mate was comforting. That would solidify that she would never come for my position or Nolan again.

“I don’t think that’s it. She would have told me,” I said.

“Would she?” Della countered. “After everything that happened, I don’t think she would share that information. It’s not like you two are friends.”

Before I could respond, I noticed movement along the path leading from the main house.

Maggie was speed walking toward us. Her posture was composed. However, her hair was in a messy bun and her clothing looked hastily put on as if she had woken up late.

When she reached us, Maggie lowered her head in a respectful bow. “Luna, sorry I’m late.”

Della’s eyes flicked over her, whispering to me with a smirk. “Told you.”

“What?” Maggie asked, looking up in confusion and worry.

I smiled, stepping closer. “Maggie… Did you find your mate?”

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & TWENTY NINE

Talia’s POV

Maggie’s eyes widened before she began blushing. She looked away and said, “I wouldn’t call him my mate just yet.”

“I knew it!” Della exclaimed. “So, that’s why you were late.”

Maggie nodded as she nervously twisted her fingers in front of her. “Yes, but I promise it won’t happen again.”

“We don’t care about all that. Who is he?” Della said.

“What is his name? What is his rank?” I asked.

Della leaned forward slightly. “Bring him over. We want to see the man that has captured your heart.” I nudged Della in the side for being sarcastic.

Maggie’s cheeks flushed deeper. “He’s just an ordinary warrior. He is busy working on the wall right now.”

“That’s fine,” Della replied. “We just want to see him.”

“I’m not…I’m not ready to introduce him,” Maggie said quickly. “Maybe once the wall has been built.”

I studied her expression. She looked nervous but happy. This was not my reaction when I met my fated mate.

“Is he your fated mate?” I asked.

Maggie shook her head and said, “No.”

“What do you mean?” Della asked in confusion.

“We aren’t fated mates,” Maggie explained. “But we’ve decided to take things slow. We plan to mark each other at the next full moon.”

“If that is your definition of taking it slow, I would hate to see what you thought rushing was,” Della said.

For a moment, I did not speak.

Among werewolves, even those who were not fated mates could establish a bond. It was not unheard of. Still, I felt bad for Maggie. This was her second time attempting to tie herself to a man that wasn’t her mate. Was she that starved of love?

“It’s your choice,” I said carefully. “But why not wait until you can find your fated mate?”

Maggie lifted her head slightly with a bitter smile. “I’m twenty, Luna,” she said. “I grew up here, but I haven’t found my fated mate. I don’t believe he’s in Bloodmoon.”

Della crossed her arms. “That doesn’t mean he doesn’t exist nor does it mean you just give up.”

“I know,” Maggie replied. “But I don’t want to wait for someone who may never come.” She hesitated before continuing. “He was rejected by his fated mate… and he loves me now.” 1

I felt my stomach tighten slightly. So, they were both starved of love.

“And you think you’re a good match?” I asked.

“Yes,” Maggie said without hesitation. “We understand each other.”

There was no doubt in her voice, but I doubted it. This was infatuation at best, but who was I to tell her what to do?

“You seem certain,” I said.

“I am,” she replied, a faint blush coloring her cheeks.

Della glanced at me but did not interrupt.

Maggie’s expression softened. “If I can, I want to bring him to see you after the next full moon. I’d like your blessing, Luna.”

“This is good. She will no longer be a threat to us,’ my wolf said.

If Maggie had come to this decision on her own, there would be no reason for me to interfere in her life.

“I will meet him,” I said. “And if he treats you well, you’ll have my blessing.”

Relief spread across Maggie’s face. “Thank you, Luna.”

Della gave her a look. “You’d better have chosen well. We don’t need any additional drama because of you.”

“I promise I did,” Maggie replied quietly.

We did not press her further. Maggie excused herself to return to her duties.

After she left, Della looked at me and shook her head, “You care too much about someone you really shouldn’t care about.”

“I just want to make sure she’s okay.”

“No, you’re pitying her,” Della corrected. “She’s an adult. She will have to live with the consequences of her decisions. Your interfering only delays the inevitable.”

I did not answer.

Later that evening, when Nolan returned from his duties, I told him while he was undressing to shower.

“Maggie found a mate,” I said.

He paused. “She did?”

“Yes.”

Nolan smiled and said, “That’s good. I am happy for her.”

“They aren’t fated mates though,” I added. “But she has pretty much decided to be his mate.”

Nolan’s brow furrowed. “What? Who is he?”

“A warrior in Bloodmoon.”

Nolan frowned slightly. “Which one?”

I shrugged. “I didn’t ask for a name.”

“I should talk with her,” Nolan suggested, his voice dropping an octave.

“For what?” I asked.

“To find out more about this mystery wolf,” Nolan replied.

“She already made her decision.”

“That doesn’t mean I shouldn’t know more.”

I stepped closer. “Nolan, she’s not a child.”

“She’s the head maid and works in the Alpha’s residence,” Nolan argued. “If someone intends to mark her, I need to know who She shouldn’t make a rushed decision-”

“She looked happy,” I said, interrupting him gently. “We should respect her choice.”

Nolan hesitated, the worry still etched deep in his expression.

“She asked for my blessing after the next full moon,” I continued. “She is not hiding it from you if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Fine. But when we do meet him, I’ll make it clear that if he hurts her, he’ll have to deal with me.”

I raised a brow, a playful smirk tugging at my lips. “You sound overprotective.”

“It’s not what you think. I see her as a sister and you know how gullible she is.”

“I know,” I said lightly. “I only meant that you’ll make a strict father one day.” I said and laughed.

Nolan’s worried expression shifted to a smirk. “A father?” he repeated.

“Yes,” I nodded.

Nolan stepped into my space, wrapping his arms around me and guiding me toward the bed with effortless strength. “I look forward to it.”

“What are you doing? Aren’t you supposed to be showering?” I asked as he laid me back onto the bed.

Nolan leaned down, his kiss searing against my skin. “The shower can wait,” he murmured against my lips. “I can’t wait to be a father.”

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & THIRTY

Talia’s POV

Days went by and I adjusted to my new normal. After breakfast with Nolan that morning, he would go to the training grounds to train the warriors, and Della, Marco, and I went to the border to check the progress of the wall.

It had been a week since construction started, and we were making good progress. The wall was not finished, but it was already impossible to miss. The wall was much higher than it was only a few days ago.

Walden was observing the construction. Warriors moved in organized lines as they hauled supplies from trucks and stacked materials where they were needed. Villagers carried lighter loads and worked in smaller groups. When Walden noticed us, he began walking towards us.

“Good morning, Luna,” Walden greeted respectfully. “Beta Marco. Beta Della.”

“Good morning, Walden,” I replied.

“Checking progress, again?” Walden asked.

Marco nodded to him. “Yes, we want to make sure you’re fully supported out here.”

“How are the warrior shifts going?” I asked. Half of the warriors being assigned to wall construction meant fewer warriors training under Nolan each day. I wanted to know if that gap was causing resentment or weakness.

Walden nodded once. “I had to work out a few kinks in your plan to rotate warriors with Alpha Nolan, but so far it has been

working.”

“That is good,” I said.

“Honestly, the warriors are fighting with each other to work on the wall,” Walden added.

Della gave a short laugh. “Fighting?”

“They want to be here instead of training with Alpha Nolan,” Walden explained with a chuckle.

I looked at the warriors working on the wall. This was simpler work compared to dealing with Alpha Nolan. I’ve heard Nolan had created a more rigorous training schedule in response to my kidnapping.

Marco chuckled and said, “That sounds accurate. Alpha is a stickler when it comes to training. He’ll make you do something over and over until he approves.”

Della scoffed. “They act like he is going to bite their heads off for missing a step.”

“He might,” I said, and that made Marco laugh.

“They are only prolonging the inevitable. The warriors will have to train. There is no escaping it,” Walden added. “But for the time being, we are getting too many volunteers everyday.”

That surprised me. “Too many?”

“Yes. We have a surplus list every morning. People keep registering for construction shifts and it’s not just warriors,” Walden said.

“Why?” Della asked. “Weren’t they against it before?”

“Because they want to help and feel the urgency now. Now that everyone knows that Mad Rogues are a real threat, everyone is pitching in to get this wall up as soon as possible,” Walden replied. “Today there are even more people registered finished organizing them before you arrived.”

He pointed toward a group of warriors standing off to the side. Some were already in armor. A few shifted their weight like they

were impatient to leave.

“That group is being sent back to the training grounds,” Walden said.

I scanned the group and that’s when I saw him.

One of the warriors stood among them like he belonged there. His armor fit him the same way it always had, like it was part of him and not something he wore. He was speaking to a warrior beside him, and then he looked directly at me.

For a second, everything in my body locked up. The memories came flooding back. I remember how he discarded me, how he attempted to force his mark on me, and how I had him gagged to bring him to justice in Shadowclaw.

‘Is that Jason?’ I thought. 1

“What’s wrong?” Della asked, causing me to jump. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.

I forced myself to turn away and look at Della. I cleared my throat and gave Della a weak smile. “It’s nothing,” I said too quickly.

I did not give Della an opportunity to question me and asked, “Walden, how are we looking on our timeline?”

“At this pace, I am confident the wall will be finished within a month, perhaps sooner if we continue to get a surplus of volunteers,” Walden answered confidently.

Della looked toward the wall again and then back at him. “That is great!”

“It helps that the villagers are cooperating,” Walden replied. “They want the wall too. It is definitely unifying the pack more.”

“You’ve handled this well, Walden,” I complimented.

Walden dipped his head to me. “I am just doing my job.”

“Don’t downplay your achievements, Walden,” Marco lightly teased. “This would not have gone as smoothly without your leadership.

“Thank you, Beta.”

Marco glanced toward a cluster of workers struggling to reposition a heavy section of material. “Come on. Let’s go help with that.” Walden nodded and followed Marco.

Della stayed with me. We began walking along the length of the wall while staying out of the way of the work crews. I watched my footing as the ground was uneven. Della was talking about something, but I wasn’t focused. I kept thinking about that

warrior.

Della waited until we were far enough away so that no one could overhear us easily. “What is wrong?”

“It was nothing really,” I repeated.

Della stopped walking. “Don’t lie. I saw that look. You looked scared.”

I kept moving for another few steps before I finally stopped. Della walked back up to me and said, “Tell me what it is. I am your Beta and your friend. I’ll protect you whatever it is.”

There was no point in lying to her. Della wasn’t about to let this go or worse she’d get Nolan involved immediately

“The profile of that warrior,” I whispered, “it looked too much like Jason.”

“What?” Della’s face darkened.