Barren Luna 231

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & THIRTY ONE

Talia's POV

Della walked beside me along the unfinished stretch of wall. Her expression remained serious. "Are you sure?"

"I could just be overreacting," I replied.

"When you expelled Jason and Michael from Shadowclaw, did you send Henry to track them?" Della asked.

I shook my head. "No. I strengthened the defenses and banned their return."

"That's it?" Della stopped walking. "You didn't think you had to have someone watching them?"

"At the time, I believed removing them was enough," I explained. "I didn't think they would be stupid enough to come back."

Della looked at me like she wanted to say more but was choosing her words carefully. "What if Jason found another way in, like the way Viki did," Della suggested. "He's not the kind of a man to just give up, especially with Michael breathing down his neck.

"No, this is different," I explained. "Walden is very thorough. He knows every warrior's background. Jason couldn't have walked in without someone recognizing him."

"And yet, Viki was able to do it," Della countered. "She got past his defenses. Who's to say Jason couldn't do the same?"

"No, Walden would've noticed," I said stubbornly.

Della didn't argue, but she didn't look entirely convinced either. "I think you should listen to your instincts. You should be cautious and not dismiss it."

"I know. I am going to tell Nolan tonight," I agreed.

By the time we returned to the pack house, I had almost convinced myself I was overthinking it. The man at the border only resembled Jason. Things had just gotten resolved. It was natural that my mind would find his face in a stranger's.

'You haven't been doing that. Why would you see him now all of a sudden?' my wolf argued.

'It's called PTSD and it can show up at any time.'

'Contact Henry,' my wolf urged, unconvinced by my explanation.

"I don't want to make something out of nothing," I replied.

'And what if it is something? Then you would be putting yourself and others in danger. Contact Henry.'

I closed my eyes and reached out through the mind link. Henry responded quickly, 'Luna Talia, is everything okay?'

'Yes, everything is fine. I just wanted to check on Shadowclaw and see how things are going,' I replied. 'Has anything unusual come up in the last few days?'

'Nothing out of the ordinary,' Henry said. "The pack has adapted well to the changes. Why? Why are you asking all of a sudden?"

'I saw a warrior today who looked like Jason,' I answered. 'I wanted to know if you have anyone check on his whereabouts or if he attempted to return to Shadowclaw.'

‘No, Luna. Jason has not come near Shadowclaw. Neither has Michael. I have eyes on every entry point, Luna. I would have told you the moment I suspected anything.’

‘I know you would have. Just stay vigilant.’

‘Always.’

“Thank you, Henry.”

I ended the link. Talking to Henry had not been as comforting as I assumed. If Henry hadn’t seen Jason, there could be a chance that the warrior was Jason.

‘No, I am overthinking things. He wouldn’t be that stupid,’ I told myself.

At dinner, Nolan sat across from me. Clara and the maids moved quietly around the table. Nolan watched me pour my water absent-minded.

“Are you not feeling well?” Nolan asked. “You’ve barely touched your food.”

“No, I’m fine. I’m just thinking about the wall,” I said. “Walden expects it to be finished within the month.”

Nolan frowned and then turned to Clara, “Leave us, please.”

She and the others bowed and exited the room. When the door clicked shut, Nolan asked again, “What is wrong? Just tell me, Talia.”

“I thought I saw Jason today,” I said.

Nolan put down his fork. “What?”

“At the border, I saw one of the warriors in the group being sent back for training. He had the same build, the same way of standing,” I explained.

“Did you see his face?” Nolan asked.

“I did, but only for a second. I know how it sounds,” I said. “I already contacted Henry. He confirmed that Jason hasn’t come anywhere near Shadowclaw.”

“Then it wasn’t him.” But Nolan still looked bothered, and he wasn’t reaching for his fork. He was staring at the table like he was working through something.

“But I can’t shake it, Nolan. The way he looked at me wasn’t the way a warrior looks at his Luna,” I added.

“Are you sure it wasn’t him?” Nolan asked.

“That’s the point, Nolan, I don’t know. I don’t know if my mind is playing tricks on me, but something about that warrior wasn’t right,” I said.

Nolan exhaled slowly. “If there is any chance, any at all, that Jason found a way into Bloodmoon, we don’t need to delay. We need to investigate now. I won’t risk him harming our pack or you again.”

“I know. That’s why I’m telling you.”

“If it is him, I will kill him,” Nolan growled.

“I won’t stop you from doing what is best,” I said. There is only so many times you can give a person a chance. I was too lenient with Viki, and I was not about to make the same mistake twice.

Nolan nodded slowly, but the tension didn't leave his face. He opened his mouth to speak again when the dining room doors flew open.

Maggie rushed in, her face pale and her breathing uneven, as if she had been running for a long time. "Alpha. Luma. We have an emergency!"

Nolan was already on his feet. "What is it?"

"A supply depot is on fire at the border!"

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & THIRTY TWO

Nolan's POV

When Talia and I arrived at the border, two of the three supply depots had already burned down. The ground around the depots was blackened and wet from the effort to put the fires out. Smoke still clung to the air in thin streaks, and the smell of burned grain and scorched wood was strong.

"This is awful. Who would have done this?" Talia muttered as she surveyed the damage.

Warriors moved through the burnt remains. They stepped over broken beams and collapsed shelving while they checked for anything that could still be salvaged. The third depot remained standing, but guards had formed a tight perimeter around it.

"Alpha," Walden said as he approached us. There were ash smudges on his face and armor. "We put the fire out as fast as we could."

"Did you catch who started it?" I asked.

Waldon frowned and said, "No. Whoever did it used the chaos to put out the fire as a means to escape."

“Start an immediate investigation,” I ordered. “Right now.”

“Yes, Alpha.”

I turned to Maggie, who had followed us. She didn’t look guilty, so for now, I would assume she had nothing to do with this.

“Maggie, compile a full list of every warrior who worked on the wall today,” I ordered. “I want names, assignments, shift times, and where they were stationed. Once completed, give the list to Walden.”

“Yes, Alpha,” Maggie said quickly. “I will have it within the hour.”

I shifted my focus to Marco and Della.

“Marco, Della, confirm the whereabouts of those assigned to the training grounds,” I ordered. “I want to know who was present, who was absent, and where they were during the time the fire started.”

Marco nodded once. “Yes, Alpha.”

Della’s eyes narrowed at Maggie. She looked back at the burned depots and then she looked at me. It looked as if she wanted to say something, but she finally said, “We will get it done.”

“You will all report to me within an hour,” I commanded. “This needs to get resolved immediately. If someone is trying to sabotage us, we need to know as soon as possible.”

Maggie moved toward the path back to the pack house. Marco and Della headed toward the training grounds route, already speaking quietly as they planned how to confirm the information.

“What would you have me do, Alpha?” Walden asked.

“You will continue to monitor progress over the wall. We can’t let this distraction derail us,” I answered. “Talia and I will inspect the damage ourselves.”

“Yes, Alpha,” Walden answered.

Talia and I walked through what had been the first depot. The roof had collapsed inward, and the interior was a mess of charred timber and melted metal brackets. The storage racks had fallen, and what had not burned had been soaked beyond use Even the stone foundation had darkened where the heat had pressed into it for too long.

“How could a fire get so bad so fast without anyone noticing?” Talia asked quietly.

“And there’s no smell of gasoline or anything,” I added.

The border was already difficult to resupply. Supplies had to travel far, and every trip required guards, planning, and timing. The wall construction had already stretched our distribution system. Two depots lost in one night meant we would need to reroute transport, push stock toward the third depot, and find temporary storage quickly.

An hour later, Maggie had returned with her report.

“Alpha, all wall construction warriors have been accounted for,” Maggie reported. “Walden had already verified every name. None of them were missing, and none of them left their posts without authorization.”

Marco and Della arrived next. Marco looked calm, but his eyes were more alert than usual, and Della still glared at Maggie.

“Training grounds are clear,” Marco said. “We confirmed the full roster. We didn’t find any discrepancies.”

Della added, “Nobody at the training grounds left their assigned areas during the time window.”

“So, we are nowhere close to finding out who caused this or what caused this,” I said angrily.

“Could rogues have done this?” Talia suggested.

Walden’s head turned toward her. “No,” he said sharply. “We would have smelled them from a mile away. On top of that, there were no rogue scenes in our vicinity. I already checked with our scouts.”

Talia brows furrowed and she nodded. She looked like she was doing the same thing I was doing. Talia was going through every possibility of what could have happened.

“This was not accidental,” I finally said. “I think we need to heavily consider that someone among the pack did this.”

Walden nodded. “I agree.”

‘Could that bastard Jason have done this?’ my wolf growled within me. ‘Our mate said she saw him.’

Through our mind link, I quickly asked Talia, “You said you saw Jason. Show me exactly what you saw.”

Talia quickly showed me the memory and said, “It was a warrior in armor. I noticed his profile and the build but only saw his face for a few seconds.”

I could see the memory as clearly as if I had been there with Talia. The warrior did look a lot like Jason, but only that brief glance at his face was not enough to confirm it was him.

“Talia noticed a warrior that looked like Jason. He was wearing armor,” I explained.

“All warriors have been cleared,” Walden confirmed again. “I would have noticed an exiled former Alpha trying to infiltrate our ranks.”

“I know. If they are all accounted for, then I must have been mistaken,” Talia admitted.

“With the warriors eliminated as suspects, the only remaining variable was the group of villagers who had assisted with construction,” Della interjected. “They moved between supply areas more freely than warriors did. They also knew the border terrain well enough to slip away fast.’

“Walden,” I said, “verify every villager who assisted today. Confirm who they are, where they were stationed, and where they went afterward.”

“Yes, Alpha.” Walden turned immediately and began issuing orders to his men, already moving toward the village line to start confirming names and households.

Talia’s posture changed as soon as Walden left. The stiffness in her shoulders became more obvious now that she was no longer focused on keeping up the appearance of a strong Luna. She looked pale and her eyes looked weary.

Della stepped closer to me, lowering her voice so only I could hear.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & THIRTY THREE

Nolan’s POV

Back in our room, Talia refused to rest.

The moment we entered, she removed her coat and sat on the edge of the bed without lying down. Her eyes stayed fixed on the door as if she expected someone to walk through it at any moment.

“You should try to get some sleep,” I said.

“I will after we hear from Walden,” she replied.

“You’ve been on your feet since this morning.”

“Two supply depots burned down, Nolan. I’m not going to sleep while we’re still waiting to find out what happened.”

There was no reasonable argument to make against that. I sat beside her and waited with her instead.

We sat in silence for a long time. The exhaustion showed in her posture. Her shoulders were tense, her jaw set, and her eyes had lost some of their usual sharpness. She was pushing through it rather than admitting to it.

‘Don’t try to get her to lie down again,’ my wolf warned. “That will only make her angry.’

‘I wasn’t going to. She had already made her position clear, and pressing the point would only create an argument neither of us needed,’ I responded.

Eventually a knock came at the door.

I stood and opened it. A guard handed over Walden’s report and stepped back without a word. I brought it back to the bed and read through it carefully.

According to the report, every villager who had been working construction that day was fully accounted for. Names, assignments, and movements had all been confirmed. No one had left the site unaccounted for during the window when the fires started, and nothing in the behavioral records flagged anyone as suspicious.

I read through it a second time before handing it to Talia to read.

“All the villagers are accounted for,” Talia said as she finished looking through the report. She exhaled and the tension in her shoulders finally gave way. “How could someone slip past us like this?”

“We will figure out what happened,” I reassured her as I helped her out of her clothes. “But you need to sleep.”

Talia nodded slowly and finally lay back. She pulled the blanket up without another word. Within a few minutes her breathing had slowed and steadied.

I kissed her forehead, then moved to the chair by the window. The pack house was quiet now as no one was moving around I looked out the window and up at the night sky.

“Why is she so obsessed with this?” I asked my wolf. “She’s even more of a workaholic than I used to be.”

‘It is an opportunity to prove to the pack she can protect them. She needs to see it through to the end,’ my woll replied

“She doesn’t need to do that. The pack already knows,” I replied.

‘It is more about how she feels,’ my wolf responded.

Eventually I left the room and spent several hours in my office working through reports. When I returned to the room later that night, Talia hadn’t moved. I went to sleep without disturbing her.

She was still asleep when I woke up the next morning. I dressed quietly, checked that she hadn’t stirred, and left without making noise.

Breakfast was already set out when I reached the dining room. Maggie walked in shortly after I sat down.

“Alpha,” she said, setting a cup down in front of me. “Della and Marco are here. They’re waiting in the hall.”

I looked up in alarm. We didn’t need another disaster. “Did something happen overnight?” I asked quickly.

“I don’t believe so,” she said.

“Send them in,” I ordered.

Della and Marco entered a moment later. Their expressions were relaxed, which told me this wasn’t urgent. Della glanced around the dining room as if expecting to find Talia already at the table.

“We came for breakfast,” she said. “And to check on Talia. Where is she?”

“Still sleeping,” I replied.

That stopped both of them.

“Still?” Della said with a frown.

“She was up most of the night waiting for Walden’s report,” I said. “She refused to go to bed until she had read it herself. She’s exhausted.”

Della crossed her arm and rolled her eyes. “Of course, she wouldn’t and it’s partly your fault.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, confused.

“You see, Talia has not had a moment to relax since she got here. First it was Viki’s kidnapping, and now this. She has been on high alert since she left Silverfang. At some point, that catches up with a person.”

Marco said nothing, but he didn’t look like he disagreed.

“I know,” I said. “I’m not going to push her this morning. She can sleep as long as she needs to.”

Della nodded, but the concern didn’t fully leave her face. “What about after she wakes up? She’s going to want to go straight back to the wall. You know she will.”

“Then I’ll need something ready for her before she has the chance. At least today, I want her to rest well,” I said.

Marco thought for a moment. “We could take her into town to go shopping.”

Della shook her head. “She would spend the whole time thinking about what the pack needs and what still has to be done. She wouldn’t be able to separate it from work.”

Maggie, who had been refilling cups, looked up carefully. “If I may say something, Alpha.”

“Go ahead,” I said.

“The roses in the central garden came into bloom,” she said. “If you wanted to arrange a lunch date out there today, I could have it set up within the hour. It would give Luna somewhere comfortable to sit outside.”

Della glared at Maggie for a brief moment and then nodded. “Actually… that’s perfect.”

“Careful, Della. You’re actually agreeing with Maggie,” Marco teased with a chuckle.

Della cut her eyes at him and hissed, “And what is that supposed to mean?!”

Ignoring the love birds’ bickering, I turned back to Maggie and ordered with a smile, “Set it up.”

“Yes, Alpha.”

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & THIRTY FOUR

Talia’s POV

My wolf woke me close to noon.

I opened my eyes and stared at the ceiling before the time registered. The light coming through the curtains was too bright for morning. I sat up and looked at the other side of the bed.

‘Why did you wait so long to wake me?’ I asked.

‘Because you needed more rest,’ my wolf replied. ‘Now, let’s get up and find our mate.’

I could not remember the last time I had slept this long. My body clearly needed it more than I had thought. I still felt tired but

not as much as before.

I got up, washed, and dressed before heading down to the dining room.

Breakfast had been kept warm for me. I sat down and placed a roll on my plate. I had taken only a few bites when Maggie walked in, and she was grinning from ear to ear.

“You look like you’re having a good day,” I said as I took another bite of my roll.

“Luna,” she chirped. “Alpha Nolan is waiting for you in the central garden. He said to come whenever you’re ready.”

I set the bread down. “Did something happen?”

Maggie shook her head. “Nope, just a surprise I think,” Maggie replied. “He said to tell you to come when you are ready.”

Intrigued, I grabbed another roll and headed out. As I approached the central garden, the air carried the scent of roses. My wolf caught the scent and became curious.

‘The roses are in bloom,’ my wolf said in surprise.

‘Not possible. It is the wrong season,’ I replied.

The moment I stepped through the entrance, I saw the rose bushes. They were full and open despite the cold. How was that possible?

‘There is something on them,’ my wolf added. ‘A fertilizer, or a potion maybe. Something was used to bring them out early.”

I looked at them for a moment longer before continuing down the path.

At the far end of the garden stood the central greenhouse. The glass was fogged slightly from the warmth inside. I pushed the door open and stepped in

Nolan stood beside a table that had been set up in the center of the room. It was the kind of table you would expect in the main dining room, not a greenhouse. It was properly laid out with several covered dishes, two glasses, and an open bottle of wine

“Good morning,” Nolan said.

“It is noon, Nolan.”

He stepped closer, a small smile playing on his lips. “You just woke up, so it’s morning to me ”

“What is all of this?”

“A date,” he said simply, pulling out the chair nearest to me “Sit down”

“You planned all of this?” I asked as I walked over

“I did. Since you came to Bloodmoon, I have not given you the time I should have. We never had a proper honeymoon We have

barely had an afternoon to ourselves without something pulling one or both of us away. I wanted to change that.” Nolan gestured toward the chair again.

I sat down and Nolan took the seat across from me and poured the wine.

“It is perfect,” I told him.

Nolan chuckled and said, “You haven’t tried the food yet.”

“That is not what I meant,” I said. “Being here with you is enough.”

Nolan reached over and lifted the cover from one of the dishes. The smell reached me before I saw it clearly. It was pepper chicken stew, prepared the way it was made in Silverfang. I recognized the color of the broth and the way the herbs had been laid across the top before I even lifted the spoon.

“Della made it,” Nolan said, watching my face. “She said it was your favorite.”

I pulled the dish closer and served myself a generous portion without waiting. I had not eaten it since leaving home. It tasted exactly the way I remembered.

“She has been keeping this from me the entire time I have been here in Bloodmoon,” I said. “I am going to get her back for this.”

Nolan smiled at my reaction and uncovered another dish on his side of the table. “This one I made myself. Maggie told me what to do, but I did the cooking.”

I served myself a portion of what turned out to be herb-crusted lamb. It was well-seasoned and cooked through properly. “This is delicious.”

Nolan raised an eyebrow. He picked up his own fork, cut a piece for himself, and chewed it slowly. His brows furrowed as he put his fork down.

“It is too salty,” he said.

“It is not.”

Nolan reached over and moved the dish firmly to his side of the table, away from me.

“Nolan.”

“You are being kind,” he said. He refilled my glass and set the bottle back down. “There is enough food here. Eat the rest.”

I laughed, and he looked quietly pleased with himself. I stood up from my chair and moved around the table.

“What’s wrong?” Nolan asked, his eyes following my every move.

I didn’t answer. I simply sat on his lap and wrapped my arms around his neck. Nolan pulled me closer, feeding me another piece of chicken with a low chuckle.

“Why did you move the dish?” I pouted, my lips brushing his jaw.

“Because you would have suffered through it just to spare my feelings,” he murmured, his thumb tracing a slow circle on my hip.

“Maybe I actually liked it.”

“You didn’t.”

I leaned closer, my breath hitching as our foreheads touched. “Since I cannot have the lamb,” I whispered, “I suppose I’ll have to taste something else.”

Then I kissed him.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & THIRTY FIVE

Maggie’s POV

Mason was waiting for me when I returned that evening.

He crossed the room before I had even closed the door and pulled me into a hug. I had not realized how much I needed that hug. When Mason let go, he kissed me, and I felt the tension from the day leaving my body.

“How was your day?” he asked. “Did they find out who started the fire?”

I shook my head. “No, not yet.” I set down the small basket I had been carrying. “It’s strange, though. The way it started so suddenly, and the location doesn’t feel like an accident to me.”

Mason smiled. “You are overthinking it. Who would be foolish enough to burn construction supplies when the wall is the most important project the pack has right now? It was probably an accident. Things like this happen all the time at construction sites. The culprit probably doesn’t want to reveal themselves because of how important the wall is.”

I considered that for a moment. He had a point. I would be afraid of what Nolan would do if it was me. “You are right,” I said. “I am just worried, that’s all.”

Mason sat down on the edge of the bed. “They’ll figure it out. Nothing to worry about.”

“Anyway, why did you come tonight? You told me you would come tomorrow,” I asked.

“It is my birthday and I wanted to spend it with you,” Mason replied.

I stared at him in shock. “Today? Your birthday is today?”

“Yes, today.”

“Mason.” I rubbed my hand over my face in frustration. “Why didn’t you tell me? I’ve been in the kitchen since early this morning. I could have made you a cake. I could have set aside time to find you a proper gift.” I looked at him, genuinely frustrated. “You should have told me days ago.”

Mason laughed and said, “And that’s why I didn’t want to tell you. I did not want to make a fuss.”

“It’s your birthday. A fuss is appropriate.” I sat down beside him. “I am an orphan too. I know better than anyone what it is like to have no one remember my birthday. You should have said something. I would have wanted to do something for you.”

Mason wrapped his arm around me and pulled me close to him. “You were busy. I did not want to add to it.”

“You are never an addition to my work,” I pouted. “For you, I don’t mind at all.”

Mason kissed my lips before continuing. “You said you were in the kitchen since this morning. Why? You are the head maid. You have staff for the kitchen chores.”

“I was helping with something specific,” I explained. “Alpha Nolan arranged a private date for himself and Luna Talia. I was the one coordinating everything and making sure everything was ready in time. It was not something I could hand off to my staff. It needed to be done properly.”

Mason’s expression changed. It was brief, but I noticed it. His jaw tightened slightly and he looked away from me toward the window. He did not say anything for a moment.

“Mason, what’s wrong?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he replied, turning back to me with a smile. “I just do not like the idea of you being overworked. You give too much of yourself to this pack.”

His answer seemed genuine; however, his tone was off. Mason still sounds like he was angry.

“Can I ask you something?” Mason asked.

“Of course.”

“The Alpha and Luna,” he started. “What is your relationship with them like? You speak about them often.”

“They have been very kind to me. When I first came to Bloodmoon, I was not sure if this was going to be right. There were days when I questioned it. Alpha Nolan especially made me feel like I belonged here and Luna Talia saved my life. I owe them both a great deal.” I looked down at my hands. “I want her to meet you.”

“Luna Talia?”

“Yes,” I said. “I told her I had found my mate, and she was genuinely happy for me. She hugged me.” I was surprised by Talia’s reaction. After everything I had done to her, she really was willing to forgive me.

Mason reached over and took my hand in his. “I understand,” he said. “And I am not opposed to it. But the timing is not right yet. We agreed on this, Maggie. On the full moon, after I mark you, we will go to her together as mates. That is the right way to introduce ourselves to her.”

Mates.

It still felt unreal every time he said it out loud, like something out of a fairy tale. Even my wolf was excited about this.

“You are right,” I agreed. “I just did not want her to feel like I was hiding something from her. She has been good to me, and I do not want to offend her anymore.”

“There you go worrying again,” he said. “We are just waiting for the right moment. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

Mason leaned in and kissed me again, but slower this time. When he pulled back, the smirk on his face told me the conversation was finished and his mind had moved on to other things entirely.

His hands moved to the buttons at the top of my dress.

“Now,” Mason said, “I believe there is still the matter of my birthday gift.”

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & THIRTY SIX

Talia’s POV

The wall was finished within the month.

Despite everything that had worked against it, the fire, the supply delays, the rotation disruptions, Walden had delivered exactly what he promised. Nolan and I stood at the base of it the morning it was declared complete.

‘You should be proud of yourself,’ my wolf hummed. ‘This is a huge step as Luna that no one will forget.’

‘I think I am in shock that it actually worked well,’ I replied.

Even though I knew how much had gone into building it, seeing it fully standing was something different entirely. It was taller than I had imagined. It was exactly as the blueprints had specified and even better. The builders had even taken the time to weave in Bloodmoon’s crest into the wall.

Nolan and I met with Walden afterward in Nolan's office.

"Alpha, Luna," Walden greeted with a widened smile.

"Walden, you did good work," Nolan praised.

"The wall would not have been completed on time without you," I added. "Both of us are grateful for everything you have done to see this through."

Walden accepted the praise with a nod and immediately asked, "What would you have me do next, Luna?"

Nolan chuckled and teased, "What's got you so pumped Walden?"

"I am eager to continue working toward protecting our pack," Walden explained and focused his attention back on me.

"Go ahead, Talia," Nolan added with a wink, signaling that I could give orders just as he would.

I had been thinking about this for several days and had already prepared what I needed. I placed the blueprints on the desk in front of him. Walden picked up the blueprints and studied them.

"I need you to select approximately one hundred of your most trusted veterans. They need to be Bloodmoon born only and no new recruits," I started. "They are to construct ten hidden tunnels beneath the pack house."

"Hidden from everyone?" Walden asked as he looked up.

"From everyone," I confirmed. "If the rogues ever breach the wall, those tunnels will be our last refuge. The construction must be carried out in complete secrecy. Can you do this for our pack?"

After a long pause, Walden looked up from the blueprints. “A week,” he said finally. “I can have this done within a week.”

“That fast?”

“Yes, Luna. We can use the maintenance staff routes under the guise that we are reinforcing them. That will keep anyone from questioning what we are doing and why they need to be closed off,” Walden explained.

“Good. Let us know how we can support in pivoting attention away,” I said.

Nolan had been watching the exchange without interrupting. He gave a single nod when Walden looked to him for confirmation. Nolan already knew what I was planning and was on board.

“There is something else,” I continued. “I want to propose that we invite the other packs here to see the wall.”

Nolan looked at me in surprise. “Invite them here?”

“Yes,” I said. “You have already sent word to the other Alphas about the need to fortify their borders. I’ve heard that only

Silverfang, Shadowclaw, and Colin’s pack have begun building. The others have not moved at all,” I explained.

“So, you think seeing it will change their mind?” Nolan asked.

“Of course. Standing in front of what we have built here and speaking with us directly about the threat we are preparing will make it real for them. It may be enough to push the ones who are still hesitating into action,” I explained.

“Luna makes a good point. Neighboring packs that fall to the rogues would be a liability as there would be more mad rogue wolves to deal with,” Walden agreed.

“It is worth trying,” Nolan said. “But only after the tunnels have been constructed. We need to make sure we are not stretched too thin.”

“Of course, but we must make sure we make it a priority right after,” I added.

“We read your report on the arson investigation. Did you find anything else out?” Nolan asked, changing the topic.

“No, Alpha. We were not able to identify a cause with certainty and we were thorough,” Walden replied. “Based on the evidence we have, the most likely conclusion is that it was an accident caused by a storage lamp left unattended.”

I said nothing. I had read Walden’s report twice and I still was not convinced. It wasn’t that I didn’t believe Walden, but something about the situation felt wrong. The location of the fire, the timing, and the speed at which it had spread just did not sit right with me. However, I had no proof, and pressing the point would only make Walden think I did not trust his ability.

“Let’s be extra vigilant with the construction of the tunnels,” I finally said. “Remember no one but who you have selected to work on the tunnels knows about them.”

“Understood, Luna,” Walden said without hesitation. “You have my word.”

“I will help you choose the men,” Nolan added.

Walden’s eyebrows rose in surprise and then he smiled mischievously.

“What’s with that look on your face?” Nolan asked.

“You know, Alpha,” Walden said, “there was a time not so long ago when getting you to agree to anything that wasn’t your own idea required an act of the Moon Goddess herself. Luna Talia has done something I genuinely did not think was possible in all my years serving this pack. You have become remarkably easy to work with.”

I covered my mouth to keep from snickering.

Nolan looked at him with a flat, unimpressed expression. “Get moving, Walden,” he growled.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & THIRTY SEVEN

Talia’s POV

Nolan and Walden left together to begin selecting the warriors for the tunnel construction. I stayed in the office for a moment after the door closed behind them, thinking about what came next. The tunnel work was in motion. The invitations were not.

‘Aren’t you rushing this? Our mate said after the tunnels were complete,’ my wolf said.

‘No, we only have a week to prepare. I want to send the invitations out as soon as the tunnels are complete,’ I explained.

Sending formal invitations to every Alpha and Luna in the region was not something I could manage alone. Della knew the other packs and their leadership well enough to know how each invitation needed to be worded to be taken seriously. I left the office and went to find her.

I found her in the east corridor near the dining hall, speaking with one of the junior warriors. When she saw me coming, she quickly dismissed him.

“What was that about?” I asked.

“I was giving him a pep talk. The young guy is way too anxious,” Della replied. She paused and looked at me. “You’re walking differently.”

I looked down at myself and then back at her. “What do you mean?”

“Like you own the place. It suits you. You are finally starting to act like a true Luna of the Bloodmoon Pack,” she explained.

I gave her a flat expression. “I have always acted like one,” I said. “Are you saying I wasn’t acting like a proper Luna before?”

Della raised both hands in mock surrender. “Of course you have. Forgive me, Luna, I wouldn’t dare,” she said dramatically.

I held her gaze for a moment longer before we both laughed.

After a few seconds, I cleared my throat and then said in a serious tone, “Beta Della, we have work to do.”

Her expression changed immediately and she gave me her full attention. “What are your instructions, Luna?”

“We are going to Alpha’s office,” I said. “I need your help to prepare invitations for the other packs.”

“Sure. That’s my pleasure.” She replied.

When we reached the office, I pushed the door open and stepped back slightly so she could take in the room properly. Nolan’s desk was on one side and mine was on the other, both occupied and clearly in regular use.

I gestured toward my desk. Della stepped in and looked around the room, taking in both desks before turning to me.

“He put a desk in here for you?” Della asked and I nodded. She smiled and walked over to the desk. “I knew he was a capable Alpha, but I am glad to see he is a devoted mate. Not a lot of Alphas are like that.”

“I know.” I answered as I remembered that Nolan made it a point that we didn’t need to separate offices. It was nice feeling included and treated as we were on the same level.

We got to work on the invitations, drafting one for every Alpha and Luna in the region. Della knew the right tone for each pack. She took extra care of the ones that needed a more formal approach.

Della picked up the sheet marked for Silverfang, a small pout forming on her lips. “I don’t think Leslie is going to show up for this.”

“Why do you say that?”

“She has always disliked large gatherings. I can see her finding a reason to not come,” Della replied. She let out a small sigh. “I miss her, though. No one else speaks their mind the way she does. You always know exactly where you stand with Leslie.”

“I miss her too,” I admitted. “More than I expected after leaving Silverfang.”.

“You should ask Solon. He could convince Leslie,” Della suggested.

I nodded as I reached out to Solon through the mind link. Solon’s presence came through slowly, which told me he had been

asleep.

“Talia?” he murmured. “What is it? Is something wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” I said quickly. “I just have news. The wall is finished.”

There was a brief silence. “Finished? Already? It’s only been a month.”

“I know,” I said. “Walden kept his word and then some.”

There was another pause. “That is remarkable.” He sounded more awake now. “What do you need from me?”

“We are sending formal invitations to every pack to come see it,” I said. “I want you and Leslie to come to Bloodmoon. Walk the wall with us, meet with the other Alphas and Lunas, and talk about what needs to happen next across all our borders. We have proved it can be done in under a month. The packs that have not yet started building need to see that for themselves.”

“I think it is an excellent idea,” he said with a chuckle. “I’ll be there.”

“Bring Leslie too. I need you both here, please,” I said.

Solon was quiet for a moment. “I cannot make that decision for her. You know how she is about these things.”

“Which is why I am telling you now that if she refuses, I will contact her myself every single day until she changes her mind. I have no intention of taking no for an answer.” I insisted.

Solon laughed. “I will ask her,” he said. “That is honestly the best I can offer you.”

“That is enough,” I said. “For now.”

He chuckled again before ending the link.

When I opened my eyes, Della had stopped writing. Her pen hovered above the page as she watched me expectantly.

“Well?” she asked. “What did he say?”

I leaned back slightly, a small smile tugging at my lips.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “Leslie will come.”

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & THIRTY EIGHT

Talia’s POV

A week later, Nolan and I were up before dawn.

The pack house had been in preparation mode for days. Extra food stores had been brought in, and guest houses had been cleaned. Warriors had been briefed on their roles during the visit; the wall tour route had been confirmed with Walden. All that

was left was to wait.

We did not wait long.

Della came to find us while we were still finishing breakfast. She was dressed in a very professional suit. Della bowed to us and Nolan said, “Why so professional? Sit down and have breakfast with us.”

“The first convoys have reached our border,” Della said and sat down. “Walden is already at the scene. He has taken the early arrivals directly to the wall.”

“Solon and Leslie?” I asked.

“Still on the way,” she said with a smile. “Their convoy is close. Moonbrook is with them.”

Nolan set down his cup and I was already standing. “Guess it is time to get started.”

We made our way to the wall and found the visiting leaders gathered at the entrance, moving slowly along the base of it with their heads tilted back. I watched their faces as they took it in. Some of them had sent polite but noncommittal responses to the invitation, responses that told me very little about whether they actually believed the threat was real or the wall was necessary. It was clear now that they underestimated the threat as well as the wall.

“This is larger than I imagined,” one of the Alphas said.

Another Alpha gestured toward the eastern section. “The reinforcements alone are extensive,” he said. “How long did this take?

“Just under a month,” I responded.

“A month?” Another Alpha exclaimed. He looked at Nolan and he nodded.

No one spoke after that and I let the quiet satisfaction of being right settle over me.

Henry’s voice came through the mind link while the visiting leaders were still touring. ‘Luna Talia, I have arrived.’

‘I am glad that you could make it. How is Shadowclaw doing?’

‘All is well in Shadowclaw. There are no incidents to report,’ Henry responded.

‘Thank you, Henry,’ I replied.

Nolan, Della, and I moved to the outer entrance to wait for the remaining convoys. The morning was cold and clear, and the sounds of the visiting leaders talking among themselves carried from further along the wall. Della stood with her arms folded against the cold and said nothing, which meant she was in Beta mode.

Two convoys appeared on the road at nearly the same time. I recognized the Silverfang banners first and was surprised that I telt giddy at knowing my brother had arrived fast.

Nolan and I walked out to meet them.

Solon stepped out of the car before it had fully stopped and crossed the distance between us in a few strides. I met him halfway and threw myself into his arms for a hug, feeling my wolf wag her tail in excitement too.

“I have missed you, brother,” I said.

“And I’ve missed you too,” he said. He pulled back and looked at me. “You look well, Talia. You look like yourself.”

Before I could reply, a familiar hiss reached my ears. I smiled and turned toward the sound.

“Goddess, Solon, you couldn’t wait until the car stopped or are you trying to hurt yourself so I can take care of you,” Leslie scolded as she got out of the car. She looked me over and her expression softened.

“You look like a pack Luna, Talia,” Leslie finally said. “A real one.” She glanced past me to where Della was standing. “I see Della hasn’t driven you crazy yet.”

Della stepped forward with a wide smile. “Oh, it is nice seeing you too, Leslie.”

Leslie laughed and then pulled Della into a hug.

“How’s Father doing?” I asked.

“He is well,” Solon replied. “Busy, as always, and showing no signs of slowing down. But he misses you.”

“You know he could reach out sometimes,” I said.

“Yes, but he wanted to give you space to grow into your role. You know how he is.”

I smiled at that. It was exactly the kind of thing our father would do.

‘We should reach out to him later today,’ my wolf suggested.

‘I will. There is so much to tell him,’ I agreed.

“Welcome! Solon and Leslie. Thank you for coming,” Nolan formally greeted them. Nolan then extended his hand to shake

Solon.

Solon stared at Nolan’s hand for a moment. I started to get ready to mediate an argument when Solon brushed Nolan’s hand away. He placed his hand on Nolan’s shoulder instead.

“You can’t be serious, Nolan,” Solon said. “We’re a family. Act like it.”

Before Nolan could respond, Solon pulled him into a tight hug. Nolan’s shocked expression caused Della and Leslie to burst out laughing and I couldn’t help but giggle.

“Are you guys having fun without me?” Colin asked as he exited his car. I moved toward him on instinct with my arms already

open.

Nolan coughed.

I stopped and extended my hand instead. Colin took it and shook it with a firm grip, but his eyes had already moved to Nolan. He had a mischievous smirk on his face.

“Stingy,” Colin teased.

“Welcome to Bloodmoon,” Nolan said evenly, ignoring the comment.

“What? I don’t get a hug?” Colin asked.

“No,” Nolan said firmly, but from the twitch at the side of his mouth I knew he was trying to hold back a smile. I thought I would never see the day where Nolan would not want to maul Colin.

“Aw, don’t be a wet sandwich, Nolan,” Colin fake pouted.

Nolan cleared his throat and said, “Let’s go and start the tour.”

Colin grinned and fell into step beside us as Nolan turned and led the group toward the wall.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & THIRTY NINE

Talia’s POV

The Alphas and Lunas gathered at the base of the wall as a group after the tour. Some of them were still looking back at it as they settled into position. Others were speaking quietly among themselves.

Nolan and I moved to the front to stand in front of the group. Upon seeing us, the talking stopped and the group focused on us.

“Thank you all for making the journey,” I started. “I know it was not a short one for many of you, and I am grateful that you came and that you took the time to see this for yourselves.”

“Building this wall was Luna Talia’s idea,” Nolan added. “From the initial planning to the execution, she led this project. What you have seen today is the result of her work and the work of everyone in this pack who carried it out.”

My wolf hummed with pride as Nolan supported me. He didn’t say he was going to speak. I composed myself, but inside I was grinning from ear to ear.

“I am sure you all are wondering why I built the wall. Bloodmoon already had natural defenses on several sides,” I explained.” The Abyssal Forest covers a significant portion of our territory and is not something rogues can move through easily or quickly.

Because of that, we only needed to build along the plains, which kept the scope of the project manageable.

“It still doesn’t explain how this was possible in just a month,” one of the Alphas spoke up.

“You’re right. Completing it in under a month during winter was not easy. It required our warriors and villagers working together consistently and without interruption,” I explained.

“I don’t understand why this is necessary,” a Luna interjected. “This feels like too much since we have patrols.”

“The wall changes how we handle border security,” I continued. “Right now, packs rely on constant patrols to monitor their borders. That requires significant manpower and still leaves gaps because no patrol can be everywhere at once. With the wall in place, we have ten controlled entrances. A small rotation of warriors can manage all ten effectively, which frees up the rest of our forces for other responsibilities. The pack is safer and we are using fewer resources to maintain that safety.”

I looked across the group.

“We are prepared to share the blueprints with any pack that wants them,” I added.

Maggie moved quietly through the gathered leaders, placing an instruction manual into each pair of hands. A few of them opened the covers immediately and began reading. Others held them at their sides and kept their attention on me.

“This is something that worked for us and we believe can work for other packs as well. The basic structure can be adapted to suit different terrains, and additional defenses can be layered on top depending on what each pack needs,” Nolan added.

A short, dismissive snort came from Alpha Landon of Lonefur on the far side of the group. It didn’t surprise me that it was him who was opposed to it. Alpha Landon was notorious for being disagreeable for no reason at all.

“Do you have something to say, Alpha Landon?” I asked.

“With respect,” he said, though his tone carried very little of it, “Lonefur is a small pack, and we are located far from the main rogue territories. We have not had a significant rogue incident in years.” He looked around at the Alphas beside him. “I am not sure this is a problem that applies to all of us equally. Building a wall of this scale requires enormous resources. It seems to me like Bloodmoon may be overreacting to a threat that is not as widespread as they believe.”

Several of the smaller pack Alphas murmured in agreement with what Landon had said.

I bristled at his tone. She did not appreciate the dismissiveness any more than I did. ‘He is challenging you. Make him regret it,’ she growled.

Solon spoke before I could. “Every pack here makes its own decisions about how to protect its people. But safety measures like this are designed for the long term, not for conditions that already exist. The question is not whether you have faced significant

rogue activity recently, but whether you are prepared if that changes.”

“I want to be direct with you about why we built this when we did,” I said.

Alpha Landon looked at me with impatience and said, “Then by all means, explain.”

“Watch your tone, Alpha Landon,” Nolan said firmly. I gripped his wrist, hoping my touch would calm him. There was no reason to be fighting about this.

“Earlier this year, I was kidnapped,” I said. “During the investigation that followed, we encountered rogues who were not behaving like ordinary rogues. Their behavior was erratic and violent in a way that went beyond what we normally see. Testing confirmed that their blood showed signs of infection consistent with the mad rogue infection.”

There were gasps and murmurs amongst the group. Alpha Landon scoffed again. “How are you alive then?”

I ignored his question and continued talking, “One of them attacked me directly. I came very close to not surviving it. I am standing here today because I just got a small scratch and Healer Leslie of Silverfang once gave me her useful healing herbs,” I

looked toward Leslie briefly and then back at the group. “Without her, I would not be here.”

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & FORTY

Talia’s POV

The group went silent. Solon’s voice came through the mind link.

‘Talia,’ he said. His tone was controlled but I could tell he was angry.’

‘Solon, what’s up?’ I responded.

‘This is not funny Talia. Nolan told me your injuries were not serious. He said you recovered quickly and that there was nothing to be concerned about,’ Solon said firmly.

‘I am fully recovered,’ I responded.

‘You know what I am asking you,’ Solon said.

I did not answer immediately. There was no point in lying to him. I already told the truth.

‘I asked him to keep the details from you,’ I admitted. ‘I did not want you to worry about something that was already resolved.’

There was a pause. I know it wasn’t for long, but it still made me anxious. ‘We will discuss that later,’ Solon finally said and closed the mind link.

‘I told you that you should’ve told him,’ my wolf huffed.

‘Telling me I told you so isn’t going to help the situation,’ I said before I returned my attention to the group in front of me.

“Is this the same mad rogue blood that drove Alpha Lake insane?” Colin asked.

I heard the name and glanced at Nolan without meaning to. He was standing still beside me with his expression unchanged, giving nothing away.

“Yes,” Nolan confirmed. “It is the same strain.”

Then, Alpha Landon laughed. Colin cut his eyes at him and demanded, “What is so funny?”

“This charade is hilarious to me,” Landon answered. “Alpha Lake’s madness has been exaggerated over the years. It was one isolated case. I am not going to commit my pack’s resources to building a wall over an urban legend.”

I felt Nolan’s anger through the mate bond. Before I could respond, Solon spoke up. “It seems that you still have not learned manners, Alpha Landon.”

“What did you say to me?” Landon asked, stepping toward Solon.

“You are standing here listening to the Luna of Bloodmoon tell you she was infected and nearly died, and your response is to call it an urban legend? That is shortsighted, Landon, and you know it,” Solon replied.

“That is enough,” I said, before Landon could respond. “I think you have misunderstood the purpose of today. No one is forcing this on anyone. We are only providing an option. Every pack here makes its own decisions.”

Landon still looked at me with disdain. “You are not providing options. If you truly meant the wall to be optional, you could have given everyone a list of the healing herbs that cured you. That is a simpler solution.

“Don’t you think Luna Talia would have provided them if it was that easy?” Leslie countered.

“No. She wants to force our hand because of her trauma,” Landon argued.

Leslie rolled her eyes. “They are difficult to source, time consuming to prepare, and we do not have an unlimited supply,” she explained. “I spent years building the supply that I have, and it is not something that can be replicated quickly or distributed at scale. More importantly, Luna Talia was only scratched and she nearly died. We have no confirmation that the herbs could have cured a direct infection from a bite.”

Landon looked at her with open contempt. “You are supposed to be the best healer in the region,” he said, “and you are telling us you are not sure your own herbs work. That is a remarkable thing to admit.”

Solon tensed beside Leslie. “Are you deaf?” Leslie growled. “That is not what I said.”

“Enough,” I said.

The word came out with the full weight of a Luna command behind it. It slammed into everyone, causing them to dip their heads in respect to me. Landon looked at me in surprise but quickly composed himself. It seemed that he had forgotten I was the daughter of the Alpha King and had the rank to make even with him, an Alpha, submit to me if I wanted.

'Calm down, love,' Nolan said through our mind link.

"Alpha Landon, I understand your concern. Lonefur is remote, but it is not as much of an advantage as you think," Nolan stated. "If mad rogues come to your borders, the nearest pack capable of sending support is at least two days out. A wall would buy your pack time."

Landon looked at him with a thin smile. "With respect, Alpha Nolan, I am not convinced you are offering an objective assessment here. It seems to me like you are here to support whatever your Luna decides, and that is not the same thing as giving sound advice."

My wolf snarled, 'Put him in his place or our mate may end up killing him!'

I interjected before Nolan did. "If mad rogues reached Lonefur's borders tomorrow, what would you do? What is your plan right now, today, if that happens?"

Landon opened his mouth and then closed it. His confidence had faltered only slightly. He had not expected the question to be

turned back on him.

"This isn't about me. This is about you two causing panic about this mad rogue legend," Landon argued.

"It is the truth," I snapped.

"Then, prove it. Inject someone with the infected blood," Landon suggested. "Let every pack here witness what it does. If it is as dangerous as you say, we will all see it for ourselves. If what you say is true, I will return to my pack and begin construction of the wall immediately."

I hesitated. I hated how Landon was going this far to try to prove we were overreacting. All he had to do was just say he wasn't going to build the wall. There was no need to try to turn the rest of the packs against me which would lead to the other packs not respecting Bloodmoon.

"Why are you hesitating? This is a fair request. Or are you finally willing to admit you overreacted and lied about your kidnapping to save face?" Landon questioned.

"How dare you!" Nolan growled as he stepped forward.

I moved in front of Nolan to block him from doing something we would regret. He did not push past me. Nolan leaned into me, using my body to calm him. Landon was watching us as if he had already won.

I looked at his smug expression and smiled. "Fine. We'll show you the proof."