Barren Luna 241

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & FORTY ONE

Talia's POV

Nolan leaned close to me. "That proposal is insane," he said, his voice low enough that only I could hear it.

"I know," I said.

"Then, why are you agreeing to this?"

"Trust me. I know what I am doing," I responded.

If we didn't go along with Landon's proposal, then the other packs would agree with Landon that we were overreacting. I was against infecting something on purpose, but if it meant the other packs would do what they needed to do to protect themselves, it was worth it.

"I am sure you have a prisoner or two in your dungeon you could test the blood on," Landon suggested with a sneer.

"No. We will not be using prisoners for your proposal," I said firmly.

"Have you changed your mind, Luna?" Landon asked.

"No," I said. "Testing on people who are already in our custody is not something we are willing to do, regardless of what they

have done."

“Then, what do you suggest, Luna Talia?” Landon asked.

“We propose testing the blood on hunted prey instead. The effect will be visible, and no person will be harmed in the process.”

Several of the Alphas nodded immediately. A few took a moment to consider it, but none of them objected. My alternative was practical and it removed the argument about cruelty entirely.

Landon’s smug expression did not change, but his eye did twitch as he noticed that he was not getting any support as he originally thought.

“You have gone soft,” he said, looking at Nolan. “A few months with a Luna and you cannot bring yourself to be too cruel to prisoners. I did not expect that from the Alpha of Bloodmoon.”

‘Don’t let him rile you up. He’s trying to provoke you to get what he wants,’ I told Nolan through our mind link.

Nolan smirked and said, “Soft or cautious? You do not fully understand how quickly the mad rogue infection takes hold once it enters the bloodstream. Testing on a smaller prey animal limits the risk to everyone present, including your own people.”

“We can send one of our warriors to…”

Landon scoffed, cutting me off. “Hunting is my specialty. I can manage this on my own.’

I looked at Della and Della stepped forward. “Alpha Landon, I can take you into the forest and help you identify suitable prey. We can have something ready within the hour.”

“Ten minutes,” Landon said. “I do not need more than that.” He turned and walked toward the tree line with two of his warriors

behind him.

“Henry, Walden. I want both of you at the edge of the forest before Landon comes back out. Stay out of sight but stay close,” Nolan ordered through our pack link. “If whatever he brings out gets loose, I want you in position to restrain it.”

“Understood,” Henry said through the mind link. Walden gave a short nod and moved without a word.

Nolan turned to Marco and said, “Bring the mad rogue blood from storage, but keep it sealed until we are ready to use it. We will also need restraints.”

Marco nodded. “I will bring the chains.” He left, moving quickly back to the pack house.

Colin walked up to me and said, “You know he is not going to come back with something small.”

“I know,” I sighed in frustration. “Landon has a point to prove. Whatever comes out of that forest, it will not be a rabbit.”

“He is being foolish. I don’t even know how he became an Alpha with how hot tempered and reckless he is,” Nolan added.

“The same could be said about you, Alpha Nolan,” Colin teased.

“And what is that supposed to mean?” Nolan asked, his eyes narrowing.

“Just like you, he wants to prove he is not afraid of whatever is in that blood.” Colin paused. “He also wants to prove he is better at this than everyone here.”

“That is where you are wrong,” Nolan snorted. “I have a healthy respect and fear of the infection.”

“Either way, whatever Landon has planned is going to produce something memorable,” Colin said.

“I am counting on it,” I said. “I’m hoping no one is harmed in the process.”

We gathered outside the forest entrance. Walden and Henry were at the edge of the tree line in their positions. Marco returned with a sealed container and chains. He stood back and out of the way.

Ten minutes passed. Then a few more and then we heard movement.

Branches snapped. Something heavy was being dragged through the undergrowth, and the sound of it reached the group before anything came into view. Several of the Alphas near the front took a step forward to make a line to protect the Lunas who hadn’t retreated just yet.

Landon came through the tree line with his hand wrapped around a rope. On the other end of the rope, restrained at the neck and dragging its feet against the ground, was a gray bear.

It was not a small one.

It was fully grown and it was not happy about being dragged. It roared as it pulled against the rope with enough force that anyone less than an Alpha would have lost his footing, but Landon hauled it forward without visible difficulty.

Landon stopped in front of the group and dropped the rope, placing his foot on it to keep the bear in place. He folded his arms, a smug smile curling across his face.

“I think this makes the perfect prey for the test. Don’t you agree, Luna Talia?”

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & FORTY TWO

Nolan’s POV

The bear was still pulling against the rope at Landon’s feet. Its breath came out in hard bursts. Landon had his arms crossed. He was satisfied and he was not hiding it. His two warriors stood a few feet behind him, looking equally composed.

One of the visiting Alphas broke the silence first. “How long did that take you?”

“Eight minutes,” Landon replied. “Give or take.”

The group reacted immediately. Several of the Alphas spoke at once. A few of them moved closer to get a better look at the bear. They were praising him for his hunting skills.

I glanced at Solon, who looked like I felt. He was watching Landon with disgust. To bring back a bear for this experiment was ridiculous and reckless.

‘Just like we thought,’ my wolf sneered. ‘He’s an idiot. That is more dangerous than someone who’s actually malicious.’

Landon had mocked Leslie less than an hour ago. If something went wrong today and that was a strong possibility, he would be the one who ended up hurt. The only healer that we had at the wall was Leslie. I did not know Leslie would help him if that happened and I was certain that I would not ask her to.

I clapped slowly and everyone’s attention turned to me. “Impressive, I mean that. Bringing down a bear of that size in under ten minutes. I do want to point out that it is a juvenile and is already naturally aggressive.”

There were murmurs amongst the group. The novelty of Landon catching the bear had worn off. Now, the Alphas and Lunas were considering how dangerous this situation could become.

“I don’t understand what you mean, Alpha Nolan,” Landon responded.

“Of course, you don’t,” I responded, noting the slight frown on Landon’s face. “Exposure to the mad rogue blood would only make the bear more dangerous and fierce. A simple rope will not be able to restrain it. Before we proceed, we need to make sure it is properly secured. For everyone’s safety, including yours, Alpha Landon.”

Talia turned to Marco and said, “Chains.”

Landon did not respond, but I saw his jaw flex.

“It seems like you want to object, Alpha Landon. Are you not in agreement?” I asked. Arguing with me right now would only make Landon reveal himself as the bastard that he was. He was someone who would put his need to be right over his pack’s safety.

“Of course not, Alpha Nolan. Safety is of the utmost importance,” Landon replied through gritted teeth.

Marco and two guards moved in with the chains. The bear pulled hard as they worked, and it took both guards holding the existing ropes taut while Marco secured each restraint. When the last chain was locked, the animal sagged slightly and then began pulling again in a different direction. It was testing each point of resistance one at a time.

‘This bear is far too intelligent,’ Talia said through our mate link.

‘We don’t have a choice. We have to do this to make sure no one can suspect our suggestions on the wall anymore,’ I responded.

‘I know, but this is cruel,’ Talia sighed.

Marco handed Talia the container of mad rogue blood. She took it and held it carefully. Talia opened the container.

“How are we supposed to know that blood is infected? It could be anything else,” Landon interjected.

“We’re just going to have to find out, then,” Colin responded before I could. Landon opened his mouth to say something but closed it when I glared at him. I had enough of his interruptions.

“Everyone back,” Talia ordered. Most of them moved immediately and put ten feet or more between themselves and the bear. Landon took three steps back and stopped with a casual shrug.

I shook my head. This fool was going to get himself killed. ‘Let him. He doesn’t deserve to be an Alpha,’ my wolf huffed.

It seemed Talia felt the same way as she did not address Landon.

Della took the open container of blood from Talia. Marco handed her a bow and then a single arrow. Talia took the arrow and dipped the head into the open container of blood. She made sure the tip was fully coated before she withdrew it. Della quickly closed the container and handed it back to Marco.

“We need to be prepared for this to go left,” Talia told Della. “If the bear escapes, I need you and Marco to defend to get the group to safety.”

“Yes, Luna,” Della said as she stepped back.

Talia lifted the arrow. Her hands were steady. I could feel her anger through the mate bond. She was not happy about doing this, but she was not backing out. Talia raised the bow, held the draw for a moment, and adjusted her angle.

“Stay alert,” Talia said to the group. “All of you. Whatever happens next, do not move toward the animal for any reason.”

Then, she released.

The arrow hit the bear in its left flank. The animal lurched at the impact and then collapsed.

Its whole body began to violently convulse and snapped all four chains taut at once. The sound of the metal pulling to its limit was loud enough that several people flinched. Every person in the group took an involuntary step back, including Landon.

The convulsion passed. The bear sagged against the chains and went still.

“You just killed it,” Landon scoffed, starting forward. “Nothing happened. Now, I-”

He choked on the rest of his sentence. The bear's head snapped up, its eyes glowing a solid, terrifying red from edge to edge.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & FORTY THREE

Nolan's POV

The first chain snapped at the rear left leg and then the second.

"Everyone get back," I commanded, but my Alpha command came too late. The bear lurched forward and the remaining restraints tore loose all at once.

"Talia, get the Lunas back now," I said but she and Della were already moving to usher the Lunas back toward the packhouse.

Henry and Walden moved forward to distract the bear. Walden was slammed hard into a tree. The bear crossed the clearing and went straight for the nearest group of Alphas.

Most of the Alphas cleared out of its path. Landon stepped forward instead, dropped into a fighting stance with his arms out.

'What is that idiot doing? He's going to get himself killed!' my wolf growled.

"Landon, fall back!" I ordered, but Landon did not listen to me. He held his ground and waited for the bear to reach him. Landon avoided the first few swipes but then, the bear caught him on the left side and drove him hard into the ground. "Damn it! Hold on Landon!"

Landon got one arm up, but the bear was faster. It clamped down on his shoulder with its jaws and began thrashing him. Landon screamed in pain as he punched at the bear's head, but the bear was not letting go.

I reached the bear's right side. Solon came in on the left at the same moment. Colin jumped on its back and locked both arms around its neck. He pulled with everything he had.

The bear released Landon to try to throw Colin off its back and that gave Solon and me the angle we needed to bring it down. Solon and I drove our claws into his neck, ripping as hard as we could. It finally collapsed and Henry rushed over with a bucket of water to rinse the blood off our hands.

"Make sure to get all of it off," I told them. "You don't want to make a mistake and infect yourself."

Solon and Colin didn't have to be told twice as they began scrubbing their hands in the water. I turned to Marco after cleaning my hands and said, "Burn it. Every single part of it. Do not touch it with your bare hands under any circumstances."

"Yes, Alpha," Marco nodded before waving over two guards who already had gasoline and a torch ready.

Landon was on the ground writhing in pain with his hand pressed against his shoulder. The blood had soaked through his fingers and was running down his arm. He looked up at me and for the first time all morning there was nothing behind his eyes except fear.

"Please," he breathed. "Help me. I cannot feel my arm."

"I warned you, my Luna warned you and you refused to listen," I growled. "Your recklessness harmed one of my pack members. I should let you suffer."

"I know." His jaw was tight with pain. "I know. I'm sorry. Please help me."

"I am not a healer," I said flatly. "You will need to ask Luna Leslie."

He turned to Leslie. She was checking Walden over who was concussed and then, Solon and Colin. Leslie did not move toward Landon at all. My wolf snorted in amusement.

“Luna Leslie, I…” Landon started but stopped in midsentence as another wave of pain hit him. “I was wrong. What I said earlier was wrong. You are the best healer I have ever seen, and I knew that when I said it. Please help me,” he begged.

Leslie finally looked at him. She looked at him as if he was an insignificant bug. Leslie turned her attention back to Solon.

“Please,” Landon begged.

Leslie still did not respond.

Then, Landon turned to Talia. “Luna Talia.” He gasped through the pain. “I was wrong. I will build the wall. I swear it. Please, get Luna Leslie to help me,” he pleaded.

Talia looked at him and said nothing. I could feel through the mate bond that she was conflicted. She was upset with him and believed he deserved this, but at the same time she didn’t want him to suffer.

“I can’t help you, Alpha Landon. I cannot force another Luna to do something that she does not want to do,” Talia finally said.

“Solon,” Landon choked out his name desperately. “Please, please, I’m begging you. Help me.”

“Leslie…” Solon started but stopped when Leslie glared at him.

“There is one thing that would change my mind,” Leslie finally offered. “Sign the Lonefur pack over to Solon right now.”

Landon looked at Leslie as if she had grown a third leg. “This is not a game. I need help,” Landon snapped.

“Clearly,” she replied. If you refuse, Solon will take the pack when you die from this anyway. You might as well agree now so you can at least have a fighting chance to start over.”

Landon looked at Solon, who shrugged. “Fine,” he rasped. “Please take my pack. Just help me. I don’t want to die.”

Leslie did not move toward him, and Landon had begun to cry. Then, Leslie smirked. “I was joking,” she told him. “I have no interest in managing another pack with Solon. We are already too busy. I am not doing that to myself.”

She walked over to Landon and kneeled down next to him. “What I want from you is a genuine apology and from this point forward you will address me correctly. You will address me as Luna Leslie, not woman, not healer, but Luna Leslie. Do you understand?”

Landon didn’t hesitate and blurted out, “I am sorry, Luna Leslie. I’m sorry.”

Leslie reached into her bag and produced a small pill. She placed it into his mouth and Landon swallowed quickly. Unexpectedly, he was unconscious a second later.

Leslie pressed two fingers to the side of his neck. She swore under her breath.

“Shit! This isn’t good.”

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & FORTY FOUR

Talia’s POV

“Leslie, what’s wrong with him?” I asked.

“The toxins are spreading too fast,” Leslie replied as she stood up. “The medicine I gave him is not working. His body is not responding to it the way it should and the infection has already moved further than I expected.”

“What is going to happen to him?” one of the Alphas asked.

“He’s going to turn,” a Luna said frantically.

“We should put him down first,” another Alpha chimed in.

“No,” Leslie snapped, ending the discussion. “He needs to go to the hospital now. There is an emergency method that may still help him, but it has to happen immediately.”

“Take him now,” Nolan ordered. “Leslie and Solon ride with him, keeping him stable. Do not stop for any reason.”

The guards lifted Landon carefully and carried him toward the vehicles. Leslie and Solon followed behind them. “After all this, I think I may demand his pack,” I heard Leslie mutter as she walked by.

The group now turned to me. The skepticism some of them had carried was completely gone. They had seen the infection take hold in seconds and what it did to a fully grown bear. All of them understood how serious the situation was now.

“I will return to my pack,” one of the Alphas said. “Construction will begin immediately.” The group murmured their

agreements.

“Yes, please. There is nothing left for you all to do here. Please head home and travel safely,” Nolan said.

“I want you to know that we will do everything possible to save Alpha Landon. We will not give up on him,” I added.

They nodded and began moving toward their convoys.

Henry came to stand beside me. “Luna Talia, I can stay,” he offered. “Whatever you need, I can support you.”

“Likewise,” Colin added as he walked up. “I have nowhere urgent to be.”

“You both need to go get looked over at the hospital. Walden probably has a concussion, so help him back to the hospital,” I said. “After you both are cleared, go home. You have packs to run.”

“But…”

“Are you doubting my ability to run my pack?” I asked, interrupting Henry.

“Of course not, but…”

“No buts. Go. I will reach out to you if I need you,” I ordered. “That goes for you, Colin. Nolan and I have this handled.”

Henry looked like he wanted to argue but did not. Colin held my gaze for a moment and then nodded. I watched them escort Walden toward the vehicles.

“Landon better not turn. I want to kick his ass while he is able to understand and remember,” Nolan grumbled.

“Look at the bright side. He made sure the rest of the packs will take the threat seriously now,” I said.

“At the risk of others. I should tell your father about this.”

“Trust me he already knows. I am sure Solon has already started the process of getting his rank removed.”

When we reached the hospital, a nurse directed us to a waiting area outside Landon’s room. Solon was already there, standing

with his arms crossed and his back against the wall. His brow was furrowed as he was communicating through the mate bond.

“Solon,” I said. He looked up when he heard my voice. “How is Alpha Landon?”

“Leslie is treating him now,” Solon answered. “If we had waited a second later, he wouldn’t have turned. He would have died.”

“Died? He was only bitten,” Nolan said in alarm.

“On top of the infection, the bear did serious damage. His shoulder was shattered and two of his ribs were broken. The injuries and the infection together are working against him. Leslie is giving him a blood transfusion now,” Solon answered.

“What? Why?” I asked. “How would a blood transfusion help him?”

“Leslie spent years building up a resistance to all toxins that we were aware of, to the point that her blood has healing properties now. As the strongest healer, her blood can work as an antiviral or antibiotic,” Solon explained.

“Will it work?”

“I don’t know, but it is the only chance he has.”

Nolan cursed under his breath. “All of this because he refused to listen.”

Part of me believed that we should let him die while the other told me we had to try to help. I didn’t want to help if it was to the detriment of Leslie.

‘We don’t have a choice now. Leslie made the decision to help. Now we must wait,’ my wolf said.

After an hour, Leslie exited the room. She pulled the door closed softly before turning to us. “It worked,” she said. “He is stable and he is no longer in any danger.”

I sighed in relief. “Thank you,” I said. “Leslie, truly. Thank you for what you did for him today.”

“He didn’t deserve your compassion, but thank you,” Nolan added.

Solon stepped forward and pulled her into a hug. She leaned into Solon and that was not like her. Leslie didn’t like to be affectionate in public.

That’s when I noticed her face was deathly pale. She looked completely drained and was barely holding herself up.

“Leslie, you’re white as a sheet,” I said, stepping closer. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” she murmured, giving a weak smile.

Before I could tell her she needed to sit down, Leslie’s eyes closed and she dropped without any warning at all.

“Leslie!” Solon choked out, catching her just before she hit the floor.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & FORTY FIVE

Talia’s POV

“Someone get a doctor!” I ordered, already moving toward the nurses’ station.

“Stop,” Leslie said weakly. She tried to pull herself free of Solon’s hold, but he kept her upright and tight against him. “I’m fine, Solon. I do not need a doctor. Let go.”

“What are you saying? You just fainted,” Solon responded.

“You are far from okay,” I added.

Leslie rolled her eyes. “You two are overreacting,” she huffed. “I lost too much blood treating that idiot and my body responded accordingly. I do not need a doctor to tell me that. I need to rest.”

“Are you sure?” Solon asked.

“I am fine. I just need to lie down and I will be fine,” Leslie said firmly.

I was not entirely convinced, but arguing with Leslie when she had already made up her mind was not a productive use of anyone’s time. I looked at Solon, but he was focused on Leslie. It made sense. She was his mate. I remembered how Nolan was with me. It was a feat in itself that Solon hadn’t carried Leslie off to the doctor anyway.

‘Because he respects his mate’s wishes,’ my wolf said.

‘Or he knows he’ll never hear the end of it if he goes against her wishes,’ I countered and my wolf chuckled.

“Is there anything I can do?” I asked.

“You can be quiet and let me rest,” Leslie replied.

“Nevermind. Leslie is just fine,” I joked and Leslie almost smiled.

“There is a lounge at the end of the hall. She can rest there for now,” Nolan suggested. Solon lifted Leslie without asking her permission and carried her down the hall.

The lounge was small but there was a long sofa along the far wall. Solon set her down carefully. Nolan pulled a blanket from a shelf in the corner and handed it to Solon, who spread it over her. Leslie had already closed her eyes before the blanket touched

her.

Solon sat next to Leslie and stroked her head.

“You do not need to stay,” he said to me.

“If anything changes, let me know immediately. I don’t care what time it is,” I said.

He nodded.

Nolan and I stepped out into the hallway and pulled the door closed behind us. I stood there for a moment, not wanting to leave just yet. Nolan placed a hand on my back and guided me away from the door.

“Leslie will be fine,” Nolan reassured. “She knows her own limits. Leslie would not lie to Solon about her own condition.”

I knew he was right, but it did not make it any easier. I wanted to do something to help her.

“The best thing you can do is let her rest. Listen to our mate,’ my wolf urged.

“Fine,” I mumbled as Nolan led me away.

“Where are we going?” I asked, glancing down at where he held my hand.

“We should check on Landon,” Nolan said. “And send him home as soon as he is able.”

Landon had caused too much trouble for my pack and loved ones. He needed to go back to his pack and stay there. If I could find a reason, I'd send him to the dungeon for a few days to teach him a lesson.

Landon was awake when we entered his room. He was propped up against the pillows with his right arm immobilized at his side and his shoulder wrapped in thick bandaging. A doctor was carefully working on the outer dressing while Landon stared at the ceiling.

Landon noticed us when we came in. His eyes dropped in embarrassment as he should be. Landon started to say something but I did not give him a chance.

"Are you proud of yourself? Are you happy with your show of dominance, Alpha Landon?" I asked.

"I'm…sorry, Luna Talia," Landon replied.

"I don't care that you were sorry. You were warned multiple times before you went into that forest, and again when the bear charged. You were too busy trying to prove me wrong. Was it worth it? Are you satisfied with your performance?" I scolded.

"No…no, it wasn't worth it," Landon said softly.

"If Leslie had not been there," I continued, "you would not be in a hospital bed right now. You would be a mad rogue. You would have lost everything that makes you who you are, and we would have had no choice but to put you down the same way we put down that bear. Do you understand that?"

"Yes," Landon said quietly. "I understand it." I believed him. After going through the infection myself, I knew how terrible it felt, but it didn't make me any less angry with him.

"How is she?" Landon asked after a moment. "How is Luna Leslie? Is she alright?"

"She collapsed from exhaustion after saving you," Nolan answered and Landon's eyes widened in surprise. "She gave too much of her own blood to heal you and her body gave out. She is resting now and she is not to be disturbed."

“I want to thank her,” Landon said. “When she is well enough.”

“I would think carefully about the timing of that visit,” Nolan warned. “Alpha Solon might kill you for putting his mate in danger, you know.”

“Yes… I know.” Landon nodded, his expression dimming. He shifted carefully against the pillows, wincing as the doctor secured the bandage. “When I’m discharged, I’ll go straight back to Lonefur. I’ll begin arranging the construction immediately.”

“That’s good for you,” I said, already turning to leave.

“Luna Talia, please wait.” His voice stopped me. “I want to thank Luna Leslie with a small gift. Could you give it to her for me?”

“Finally, a smart idea coming from you,” Nolan scoffed.

I paused, then reached out and took the small box from his hand.

It sat quietly in my palm-small, yet something about it felt… powerful.

Curiously, I couldn’t help but wonder what was inside.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & FORTY SIX

Talia’s POV

Once the last of the visiting convoys had cleared Bloodmoon territory, Nolan took Solon to see the tunnels. It made sense to do it then. Solon was one of the few people we trusted with that information and with the appearance of mad rogues again, it made sense to show him.

Della and I stayed behind and sat with Leslie in her room. She was still asleep even when Solon carried her back to their guest room. We kept our voices low and pulled two chairs close to the window, so we were not hovering directly over her while she

rested.

“He deserved it,” Della said.

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

“Landon, he deserved to be hurt by the mad bear,” Della repeated.

“Della, you can’t be serious,” I said.

“I am serious. The bear should have finished the job,” Della said firmly. She folded her arms and looked out the window. “Do you know that the Lonefur pack has not grown in six years? Members have been quietly leaving for other packs for years. Landon has spent a lot of time and energy to cover it up, but Silverfang has accepted so many of their own pack members for years.”

“I did not know that,” I said.

“Of course, you wouldn’t. It only became clear a few years after you left for Shadowclaw. He has coasted on his family name for as long as anyone can remember,” Della explained. “And today he almost turned into a mad rogue because he could not bring himself to take three steps back when someone told him to.”

“Normally, you wouldn’t be this worked up about it.” I mentioned.

“He almost got people killed. Nolan and Solon both had to intervene. What if they had gotten bit?” Della said.

I had not thought about that. I was confident in the fact that that would not happen.

“Solon or Nolan should take it over,” Della continued.

“It is not that simple,” I said. “That pack has belonged to Landon’s family for four generations. Stripping him of it over one incident would send the wrong message-every Alpha would start to wonder if they’re next, if we could take their pack at any moment. The only person who could do that would be my father, the Alpha King. Right now, I am the Luna of Bloodmoon, not the one who makes that call.”

Della’s eyes narrowed. She wanted to argue but with how red face was turning, I could tell she couldn’t come up with a counter

to my argument.

“He showed real remorse today,” I continued. “More than I expected from him, if I am completely honest. He is not beyond redemption. And he left Leslie an apology gift before he was discharged.”

Della’s frown vanished to a mischievous smirk. “What kind of gift?”

“He didn’t say. It was delivered to the room while you were out getting tea. It is on the side table.”

“What gift?” said a voice from the bed.

We both turned. Leslie was awake, propped up on one elbow. She wasn’t yawning. Her eyes were wide and clear of a person who had been awake for a while.

“You are supposed to be resting,” I said.

“I was resting,” she replied. “Until the two of you started talking.”

“We were whispering,” Della said.

Leslie rolled her eyes and pushed herself upright against the pillows. “I have been awake for at least the last ten minutes. You are not as quiet as you think.” She straightened the blanket across her lap. “Where is Solon?”

“He went with Nolan to see something,” I said. “He will be back soon. How are you feeling?”

“Better than I was,” Leslie responded. “Which is not saying much.” She looked at the side table. “What gift?”

I picked up the small box from the side table and brought it to her. It was wrapped simply with a plain ribbon, and there was a small card attached with Leslie’s name written on it. Leslie looked at the card for a moment without comment and then set it aside and opened the box.

Della had moved her chair several inches closer without appearing to notice that she had done it.

The door opened before Leslie could say anything. Nolan stepped in first, with Solon close behind. Nolan came straight to me, a warm smile on his face as he took my hand.

Across the room, Solon caught sight of Leslie sitting up in bed. His pace quickened. He reached her in a few strides, sat on the edge of the bed, leaned in and kissed her.

“Solon, you keep kissing her like that you’re going to make her faint again,” Della teased when the kiss lasted longer than a few

seconds.

Solon pulled back and cupped Leslie’s face. “How do you feel?”

“Better now,” Leslie said quietly with a blush. She held his gaze for a moment before looking back at the box in her hands.

“So, are you going to open it?” Della asked.

“Open what?” Solon asked.

“Landon sent her an apology gift,” Della replied.

“He should just give us the pack,” Solon sneered.

“See! Solon is on my side!” Della exclaimed.

Leslie laughed as she opened the box. She gasped and lifted out the necklace inside. It was a deep red stone set in a plain gold chain. The stone was a deep rich red that seemed to hold the light rather than simply reflect it. Leslie held it up and went very

still.

“It is the Lonefur Ember,” she said in excitement. “I did not think he would part with this. I did not think he was capable of it.”

“What is the Lonefur Ember?” I asked.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & FORTY SEVEN

Talia’s POV

“The Lonefur Ember is a gem,” Solon said.

“Clearly,” Della huffed. “But if it was just a simple gem, Leslie wouldn’t have responded like that. So, what’s so special about it?”

“There are only three in existence and all three have been protected in the Lonefur pack. The gem has properties that work on the bearer over time,” Solon explained.

“Can it heal her?” I asked.

“Better than that. It’s the reason why Landon’s family has held onto the pack for so long,” Leslie interjected. “It calms the mind during stressful situations, offers protection, and it slows aging if worn consistently.”

“Giving one away is not a small gesture. These gems do not leave the Lonefur pack. That has been the rule for as long as the pack has existed. Landon gave this to Leslie to show his sincere apology,” Solon added.

Leslie looked at the necklace again. She set it carefully around her neck with a smile.

“I forgive him,” she said.

Della stared at her. “You are forgiving him just like that?”

“Yes, just like that,” Leslie said.

Della sat back in her chair and looked at the ceiling briefly. “I did not think Landon had that in him,” she said.

“Neither did I,” Leslie said.

Della snorted and crossed her arms. “He should be giving one to Talia for causing all that trouble too,” she muttered.

“Now that Leslie is awake, we should get back,” Solon said.

“You don’t have to leave so fast. Stay overnight. I know Leslie will appreciate the additional rest,” I offered.

“I told Father we’d be back today,” Solon said.

“At least have dinner with us and see how you feel afterwards,” I suggested.

“Then we’ll stay for dinner. I’ll let Father know,” Solon responded.

Solon looked at Leslie and she nodded. “Why not?”

Nolan released my hand and stepped out to arrange it. He came back a few minutes later and led us down the hall to one of the smaller dining rooms off the main hall.

We sat down without much discussion about who sat where. Solon pulled Leslie’s chair out before she reached it and sat beside her. He filled her water glass before his own and when the food came, he moved the dish closest to her slightly so she could reach it without stretching her arm.

Della leaned over to me at one point and said quietly, “He is almost unbearable to watch.”

“Don’t be like that. You should see how you and Marco are together,” I giggled.

“We are not like that,” Della responded.

“Yes, you are. At least Solon isn’t groping her underneath the table,” I added and Della blushed. Nolan almost laughed and covered it with a cough.

“Where is Marco anyway?” I asked.

“Walden was more injured than we thought. Marco is filling in for Walden and will be late to dinner,” Nolan explained.

Della nodded. She picked up her fork and began to eat without saying anything else. I watched her for a moment. She was looking at the empty chair next to her where Marco would have been sitting.

“You should stop being jealous,” I teased and Della cut her eyes at me. “Solon loves her. You should be happy for him.”

“For the record, I am not jealous,” Della said. “Just grossed out seeing him like that. Who wants to see their brother practically all over their mate?” She made a face, and Solon rolled his eyes at her before smirking.

“What did you think of the tunnels?” I asked Solon, changing the topic.

“The tunnels are well designed,” Solon answered. “I will replicate them in Silverfang, and I will tell Father what you have done here. Not just the tunnels, but the wall, the gathering today, and the way you handled everything that followed. He should know the kind of Luna you have become.”

“I could not have done any of it without Nolan,” I said.

“You need to learn to take a compliment,” Nolan stated. “You came up with all of this on your own.”

It felt good having a mate that supported me and not take credit for things that I had done. I hadn’t realized how much Jason had taken advantage of me. There were so many things that I had overlooked.

‘It is a good thing that the Moon Goddess blessed us with a second chance,’ my wolf said and I agreed.

The meal wound down slowly. We were nearly at the end of it when Leslie set down her cup and said, “Right. I will leave my herbs with you before we go. They will help with mild cases of the infection if you encounter them.”

Nolan leaned back in his chair and drank some of his bourbon. “Only for mild cases? What about full-blown infections?”

“They are not strong enough for a direct infection from a rogue-infected wound. What happened to Talia and what happened to Landon today, the herbs alone cannot handle that level of exposure. They would slow the progression in a minor case, but they would not be sufficient for anything more serious,” Leslie explained.

I looked at my hands and thought about what that meant in practical terms. We were being reactive, not proactive. Every countermeasure we had was just that, a countermeasure. It wasn’t a solution to the problem.

“It’s better than nothing, right?” Della asked, breaking the silence.

Before I could respond, Leslie scoffed, “Do you really think I am just going to stop with just the herbs?”

“What do you mean?” I asked with anticipation.

“I will develop an antidote,” Leslie said firmly. “It will be a proper one, something that works regardless of the level of exposure. I will start when we return to Silverfang.”

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & FORTY EIGHT

Talia’s POV

“Do you genuinely believe it is possible?” I asked.

Leslie was quiet for a moment before she answered. “No,” she said flatly.

“Wait, what?” Della exclaimed. “What do you mean no?”

“The mad rogue toxin is not like wolfsbane. It is not even close. I have spent years studying wolfsbane and its variants and I thought I had a reasonable understanding of how strong a toxin could get. What I dealt with today was dozens of times stronger than anything I had encountered before. Without the blood purification, Landon would have died,” Leslie explained, her voice tight with fear. “I went in knowing what I was dealing with and I still nearly lost him.”

“So, you are still going to try?” I asked.

“Of course. This threat cannot be ignored,” Leslie replied. “Every pack out there is now aware that the mad rogues are active again. If anyone is wounded and there is no antidote available, people will die. So yes, I am going to try.”

“Then we will support you however we can,” Nolan stated.

Leslie turned to Nolan and said, “I will need a sample of the infected blood.”

Nolan nodded. “I will have it prepared and ready before you leave.”

The next morning, we gathered at the front of the pack house to see Leslie and Solon off. Leslie looked better than she had the day before. The color had come back into her face.

“You can stop staring, Talia. I told you I was fine,” Leslie said.

“I know, I know. I am glad you stayed overnight,” I responded.

“Come back to Silverfang when you can,” Solon said. “Everyone misses you.”

“I planned to. Just so many things have come up that kept me from coming.”

“Dad misses you a lot. He talks about you all the time. He is still recovering from when you left Shadowclaw,” Solon added.

My chest ached. My father had seen through Jason long before I had and yet I had still walked away from everything to follow a bond that turned out to be exactly what my father warned me it was.

“It’s not like that this time. I am not going to disappear and never come back,” I said. At the time, I never thought about what my leaving would do to Solon or even my father.

‘You are his pup. Of course it would hurt him,’ my wolf said.

‘I know that now. And it will never happen again,’ I told her.

I took a breath. “I will make a trip back soon. I promise.”

Solon pulled me into a hug and whispered, “You better, or I’ll drag you back home myself.” He released me, then immediately turned to Della and pulled her in too.

“Ewww, let go, let go,” Della squealed as Solon tightened his grip. He finally released her, laughing at the face she made.

But as Solon turned back toward the car, the smile disappeared from Della’s face. She watched Solon walk to the car, and for just a moment she looked like she was going to cry.

Leslie stepped forward and looked between the two of us with a serious expression. “What now, Leslie?” Della asked. “I haven’t done anything.”

“And you better keep it that way. Do not cause trouble, you two,” she said. “And do not get into any, either.”

Della opened her mouth to argue.

“I am serious,” Leslie said sharply before Della could get a word out. “I do not have time to travel back and forth, keeping the two of you alive.”

I nodded. Della closed her mouth and frowned. “Fine,” Della whined. Beside her, Marco turned away to hide his smile.

“I will contact you the moment there is any progress on the antidote,” Leslie continued. “Whatever I find, promising or not, I will update you.”

Leslie waved as she walked to Solon’s car. Solon was already there waiting. He stuck his arm out of the window and gave a single wave as they pulled away down the road.

We stood at the front of the pack house until the car disappeared. There was something about watching people you love leave that never quite got easier, no matter how many times you did it or how certain you were that they would be back.

Nolan placed his hand on my back. I let myself lean into him for a moment. “They’ll be back,” he said. “And we’ll go see them soon. I promise.”

“I know,” I told him as he pulled me closer to him.

Della and Marco went back inside first. Nolan and I followed a few steps behind her, and by the time we reached the office, I had pushed the sadness down.

Walden arrived an hour later with his usual composed expression and a report ready.

“I am glad to see you’re doing better,” Nolan commented as he entered the office.

“It would take more than getting slung into a tree to put me down,” Walden said confidently.

“Good to know,” I chuckled. “What brings you here?”

“All ten tunnels are complete,” he said, placing the updated map on the desk in front of me.

“Every tunnel has been marked with its access points, depth, and load capacity. The map has been updated from the original blueprints to reflect the final construction. Any deviations from the original plan have been noted in the margins with explanations.”

“Wow… that’s impressive,” I said, leaning in as I reached for the map.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & FORTY NINE

Talia’s POV

“Resume normal duties for now,” I said. “Nolan will confirm the patrol schedule and tunnel assignments.”

Walden nodded and looked at Nolan.

“Before you go,” Nolan said. “The men who worked on the tunnels did good work. Make sure they are rewarded well for it.”

“How would you like it handled?” Walden asked.

“Generously,” Nolan replied. “It was a huge task and they delivered without complaint and without anyone outside finding out. I want them to know that we appreciate their efforts.”

“Understood,” Walden said.

“Starting tomorrow, reduce patrols,” Nolan continued. “We need two guards stationed near each tunnel entrance, but nothing obvious. They need to rotate every six hours. With the wall built, no one will think twice about the reduced patrols. Put the remaining guards into training.”

“I will have the full schedule to Marco before the end of the day,” Walden said.

“Good,” Nolan said. “That is all for now.”

Walden bowed to me lightly and left.

Nolan was quiet for a moment after the door closed. He looked at the pile of documents on his desk and then at me. With everything that had happened, there was a lot that had been neglected.

“I can…” I started but Nolan shook his head.

“No. You have done enough, Talia. You need to rest,” Nolan said.

“We are a team, Nolan,” I argued.

“Yes, and I am tagging in. I can handle this paperwork,” Nolan responded as he picked up his pen. “Take the map and lock it in the study.”

“What about Landon?”

“I will let him know that Leslie is fine and that she received his gift,” Nolan answered.

“I will not be long,” I said. “With the both of us, we can knock out this paperwork in a few hours.”

“I mean it, Talia. Go take a bath or go with Della and relax. You deserve it.” Nolan looked up at me. “You have not stopped since before the gathering. The wall, the visit, Landon, Leslie. Let me finish this.”

I could tell from the glint in his eye that he was close to Alpha commanding me into relaxing, so I nodded and left the office.

The walk to our wing was uneventful. It felt odd that it was so quiet after the past two days.

‘Do not jinx it,’ my wolf said. ‘We need to rest. We do not need anything else today.’

‘Just the map,’ I told her. “Then we are done.’

‘Good,’ she said. “Then go take the bath Nolan suggested.’

The living room in our wing was empty. I went straight to Nolan’s study. I was about to open the door when I heard footsteps stopping behind me. I turned around.

Maggie was standing in the hallway. She should not have been anywhere near this part of the pack house. “What are you doing

here, Maggie?” I asked. I had been very clear about Maggie never cleaning our wing again, so what was she doing here?

Maggie’s eyes went to the map in my hands before she spoke. “I was passing by and saw you. I wanted to see if you needed help with something.”

“No, that’s okay,” I replied. “Thank you, Maggie.”

“Are you sure? I can take that for you and store it away,” Maggie suggested. “I know where everything goes in this wing.”

“I have it covered, Maggie,” I said firmly. Maggie nodded and stepped back. I pulled the study door closed and locked it from the

inside.

The shelving along the back wall was floor to ceiling and the lower shelves were deep enough to accommodate storage boxes. There was one on the second shelf from the bottom, pushed back behind a row of reference texts that had not been moved in months. I pulled the box out, placed the folded map inside, and slid it back behind the books. I checked the spines were even and stepped back to look at it from a distance.

From the doorway the shelf looked undisturbed. I left the study, pulled the door closed, and locked it.

I turned around and almost bumped into Maggie. She was close enough to the door that she probably could hear where we walked and moved around in the room.

“Maggie, is there something else?” I asked.

“I was just wondering,” she said. Her hands were folded in front of her, and she was not quite meeting my eyes. “About lunch. Whether you would be eating here today or in the main hall?”

“The main hall,” I answered. There was an awkward pause between us because it seemed like Maggie wanted to say more, but she thought better of it.

“Of course,” she said. She nodded once and walked away.

The kitchen did not need advance notice for one person eating in the main hall. Maggie knew our wing was private and that the study was not a room anyone came to without being invited. Yet here she was, twice in the space of ten minutes. The first time could have been explained away. The second could not.

My wolf growled within me. ‘She wanted to know what the map was. She is going to try to look for it.’

I went back into the study and moved the map to a different location entirely. If Maggie had seen which shelf I used, she would find an empty box. I locked the study again and stood in the hallway. My wolf was still growling quietly.

I was not going to confront her about it.

I would test her first and see.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED & FIFTY

Maggie’s POV

Mason was already in the room when I got back that evening. He came to me before I had even set down my bag, pulled me into a hug, and kissed me.

We had been living together for a few days, and I was still getting used to it. The closeness was something I had wanted for a long time. Waking up beside him, having him there at the end of the day, all of it was exactly what I had hoped for. However, it still felt odd having someone around when I was sorting through my thoughts.

“You are quiet, tonight,” Mason said as he kissed my forehead. “What happened?”

“You almost got me caught today,” I replied. “That is what’s wrong.”

“What do you mean?” Mason asked.

“I went to study and I was standing outside the door working up the nerve to go in when Luna came down the hall. I had to tell her I was asking about lunch.” I explained as I sat down on the edge of the bed.

“But she did not accuse you of anything,” he said.

“She didn’t have to. I could tell from the way she looked at me. She knows I was up to something and she is just waiting for me to make a mistake,” I continued.

“You are overthinking it,” Mason reasoned.

“If she had accused me I could have defended myself, but the silence is even worse.” I turned to fully face him. “I want to know why you need that map. You have been asking me about the pack house layout since you moved in. You asked me about the study specifically and now this. What is really going on?”

“I just need you to get the map,” Mason repeated.

“I know that, but why? Tell me why you need them,” I asked again.

“Why do you think she built those tunnels?” Mason asked, interrupting me. “She built them for emergencies.”

I frowned and asked, “What’s your point?”

“Do you think ordinary pack members will be able to use those tunnels? When something happens, the Alpha and Luna go first. The Beta and the senior warriors go next,” Mason explained. “We will not be the first ones through those passages, Maggie. We will be the last, if we are let through at all. And by the time anyone comes back for us, it may already be over.”

I shook my head. “Luna Talia is not like that. She would not abandon us.”

“She is still the Alpha’s mate. She may not have a choice if the Alpha puts her life above everyone else,” Mason argued. “People make decisions under pressure that they would never make otherwise. I am not willing to leave our safety to someone else’s good intentions.”

“You do not know that,” I stammered.

“You saw what the mad rogue blood did to the bear,” Mason continued. “It happened in seconds. We won’t have time if we are waiting for the Alpha and Luna to go in order. If we know where those passages are before that happens, we have a chance.”

I did not answer.

“I am not asking you to take it anywhere or hand it to anyone,” Mason reasoned.

“She already suspects me,” I repeated. “She is going to catch me.”

“She suspects you of being too curious,” Mason countered. “That is all. Luna does not have proof of anything. She has a feeling,

and a feeling is not enough to act on.”

My wolf whined within me. ‘I don’t know about this. We shouldn’t do it.’

I wanted to believe Mason. Part of me did. Mason thought things through before he acted and he had never pushed me into something that put me at real risk. He was not a man who acted carelessly or without thinking about the consequences.

‘But this is reckless, Maggie,’ my wolf said. ‘We can’t do this. You need to think this through, Maggie. We don’t need to make the same mistakes,’ my wolf warned.

“You could have told me that before asked me to do this,” I pouted

“Would you have gone if I had?”

“How could you ask me that?”

“So, that’s a no,” Mason sighed.

“I am not saying you were wrong about the reason,” I argued. “I am saying I do not like being sent in blind. If you want my help with something you need to tell me the full picture first.”

Mason nodded. “You are right. I should have been upfront with you from the beginning. I will be going forward.”

“I am just asking you to bring it out, let me see the layout, and put it back exactly where it was. Luna will never know it moved. I promise,” Mason continued.

I still pouted and didn’t look at him. All of this felt really odd. He was pressing so much that I still felt like he wasn’t telling me everything.

“If you don’t care about our safety, I don’t know if we should move forward with marking each other,” Mason sighed.

I whipped around. “You promised to mark me tomorrow night,” I said.

“I want to,” he said. “You know I want to.” Another pause. “But I need to know we are safe first. I need to know I can protect you if something happens. Getting that map is part of that. Once I have seen it, once I know where the passages are and what our options are, then I can mark you knowing I have done everything I can to keep you safe.” He looked at me. “That is what the mark means to me,” he said. “That I am taking responsibility for you. I cannot do that halfway.”

He had promised to mark me on the full moon. That promise had been made without conditions. Now there was a condition. I wanted to call him out on it, but I was hesitant.

Mason began kissing my neck. “Please Maggie. I want us to be mates. You have to trust me.”

The thought of another man I cared about rejecting me was too much for me to bear. I could do this one thing, this one time.

“Alright,” I finally said. “I will do it.”