Barren Luna 441

Chapter 441

Talia's POV

Nolan's voice was sharper than normal when he turned to Leslie, his eyes searching for answers. A chill ran through me, and my muscles tightened. If Nolan figured us out, I didn't know how I would explain not telling him.

'Good. Better that he knows now than later,' my wolf said, and I ignored her.

Leslie looked up from her open book and glared at Nolan. "Nolan, I need you to relax. My memory has been all over the place lately. The pregnancy symptoms are hitting me pretty hard. Lots of headaches, and I'm tired all the time."

"I don't understand how you can't remember," Nolan responded.

"Sometimes I can't even remember what I had for breakfast. Do you think I'm hiding something?" Leslie snapped.

Nolan's frown deepened. Before he could say anything else, Solon stepped in. "Nolan, you need to be patient. Leslie's going through a lot right now, and this has been stressful on all of us."

Nolan finally seemed to calm down. "Both of you are right. I'm sorry, Leslie. I didn't mean to pressure you."

My wolf let out an irritated sigh, frustrated that Nolan stopped digging for answers so quickly. I gave Nolan a quick smile to let him know it was okay. "Don't worry about it," I said.

"Actually, I think I found something," Leslie finally said. "There's a treatment that was used once. It's a mix of herbs that you'll need to take every day."

"What does it do?" I asked.

"It should slow down how much energy the twins are taking from Talia. I will go to prepare it in the hospital," Leslie replied.

Nolan's eyes brightened a little. "That sounds promising. I can't wait to see what herbs were used."

"You're not coming," I said.

"Why not?" Nolan asked.

“If you come, you'll just make me nervous. Solon needs your help with the paperwork I left him. And as my mate, you can be more useful here." I nudged him and smiled.

Nolan hesitated, torn between wanting to help and not wanting to leave me alone, but eventually he nodded. "Alright, I'll stay. But if you need anything, call me right away."

“I will,” I promised. I gave his hand a quick squeeze before letting go.

Leslie stood and picked up the book and a notepad. "Come on," she said, nodding toward the door. I followed her out, glancing back at Nolan and Solon before the door closed.

I waited until we were a few steps down the hall before speaking in a low voice. "That was pretty convincing back there. I almost believed you. Maybe you should have gone into acting."

“This is not a laughing matter. I told you I didn't want to lie for you,” Leslie said. "But you did it anyway," I countered.

"Only because he needed to hear something positive," Leslie said. "I couldn't imagine how upset he was by all of this when he found out."

I nodded. "If he loses hope, he might decide it's safer to give up the

my

babies now. I couldn't handle that. I need them, Leslie." After losing r father, didn't want to lose another family member if I could help it.

.n

Leslie sighed, sounding as worn out as I felt get it. I really do. The herbs can be helpful like I said but theyre not a true solution. Tikkeer searching," she promised

"Thank you, Leslie. You're the best," I said, ignoring her eye roll.

When we got to the hospital lab, Leslie started working right away. She pulled jars of

dried herbs from the shelves and measured them out.

"Do you ever wish things were normal?" I asked. "Just for a day?"

She didn't look up. "Every day. But then I would have never met you or my mate.

So, I welcome the chaos no matter how bad it gets."

Leslie finished making the herbal mixture, poured it into a bottle, and sealed it. She shook it, and the liquid changed from green to a bright blue.

Leslie pressed a bottle ght blue.

hands. "You'll need to take this every morning. The herbs can't really cure you, but they can slow down how quickly twins are developing. So, you need to take this on time every day."

"I won't forget," I said. "Nolan won't let me."

"Just to be safe, I am going to have Della give the recipe to Clara, so she can prepare it when you head back to Bloodmoon," Leslie said. "You should drink this one now."

"Why?"

"To make sure it works."

"You don't even know if it works?!"

"None of these herbs by themselves or combined will harm the twins. Now drink."

I uncorked the bottle. I took a sip and grimaced. The tonic tasted like bitter cheese

and eggs.

"It isn't supposed to taste good," Leslie chided. "Finish all of it."

"Do I have to?" I pouted.

"All of it. Now," Leslie ordered.

I scrunched up my face and choked it down as fast as I could. Leslie passed me a glass of water, and I chugged it. "Why does medicine always taste so bad?" I groaned.

Leslie smirked. "If it tasted good, you'd want seconds. Can't have that."

"I need something sweet to recover. Think Nolan would bring me a whole carton of

ice cream if I begged?"

She rolled her eyes. "He'd probably bring two. You know how he is."

“Perfect. I'll tell him it's for science," I said, finally able to smile.

Leslie almost laughed. Her face softened for the first time all morning. "Now he's going to end up buying you an ice cream store."

I shrugged and gave her a real smile. “I know. That's why I can't let him lose hope. Who knows? Maybe your herbs and all the ice cream he buys me really will save me."

Chapter 442

Talia's POV

Two weeks passed without any trouble.

I took Leslie's herbs every morning and night, just like she told me to. Nolan kept buying ice cream, more than I could ever finish, but it never got rid of the bitter taste. He walked me to the hospital for checkups every day. Leslie checked me over and told Nolan everything was normal.

"Their growth has slowed," Leslie reported at the end of the first week.

"By how much?" Nolan asked.

"Enough that I'd have to measure twice to be sure I wasn't imagining it," Leslie replied.

By the second week, Nolan relaxed even more. He started going to Solon's office in the mornings instead of walking me to the hospital. He worked through the pack requests that had piled up while I was away, sending most of them back with answers before I even saw them.

Every time I saw him happy, I felt guilty for lying, but not enough to tell him the truth. I told myself I was keeping quiet to spare him worry, to give him these days of peace, and because I was scared. I was scared of what the truth might do to him, to us. Maybe I just wanted to believe that if I acted like everything was fine, it would be.

'You have to tell him,' my wolf reminded me every time. 'You can't keep lying to him like this.'

'I will.'

'You keep saying that, but you still haven't told him.'

'I will tell him.'

My wolf never argued with me before. She was always on my side, but now she kept bringing it up.

'Are you afraid of dying?' I asked.

'No. I would gladly give up my life for our pups, but our mate should know,' my wolf replied.

'I promise I will tell him. When have I ever lied to you?'

My wolf hugged me and stayed quiet.

Today's checkup took longer than usual. Leslie read my results twice, frowning at the second page before setting it down.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Stable," she pronounced. “You're stable. Nothing has changed since last week."

"That's good, right?"

"It is good."

"You don't sound like it's good."

"It's good for today," Leslie said. "I don't know how long it lasts, Talia. I don't know when your body will start building a resistance. If that happens, your condition could start to worsen quickly, and we will have no way to stop it."

"Then we'll worry about it when that happens,” I said. “I have full faith in you figuring something out."

"I really wish you didn't," Leslie muttered as she rubbed her eyes. "It's stressing me out."

“Then, stop stressing. You're carrying a child yourself, and you've been on your feet since dawn. You need to sit and put your feet up."

"I'm the healer here."

"And I'm the Queen, so I win,” I said. "Now, let's go. We're getting out of the hospital and getting some fresh air."

Leslie let me lead her outside.

We sat in the garden, enjoying the warm afternoon shade while the servants brought tea and snacks.

Leslie always carried books noriet

She had three, and I brought

We set them on the table between our cups and read together just like We had for the past two weeks. We read slowly and quietly, with plenty of tea.

"What about Rudolf?" Leslie suggested, without looking up from her page. "For a boy. For your father."

"He'd have hated that. He thought naming children after the dead was morbid."

"He would have loved it and pretended to hate it."

"That's fair." I turned a page. "I like Elian, though."

"Elian." She tried it out. "Elian's good. And for a girl?"

"Nyla."

"Nyla." Leslie considered it, then nodded. "Nyla and Elian. So you've got one of each ready and no idea which you'll need."

"That's the difficulty. I might need both of one and neither of the other."

"You could pick four and let the Moon Goddess sort it out on the day."

"That's what Nolan said. Almost word for word."

"Then Nolan is occasionally sensible." She reached for another biscuit. "I'm having

no such trouble. Mine has been named since the day I found out."

"You haven't told me."

"I'm not going to, either. You'll hear it when she does."

I laughed. The sun was warm. For a moment, it felt possible to sit in the garden with

my brother's mate and believe everything would keep going.

Then Leslie swore.

Her outburst was so sudden and loud that one of the servants jumped in fright. Leslie was already halfway out of her chair, both hands pressed flat on the book. Her face had gone as pale as the page.

"Leslie?"

“Here.” She turned it around and stabbed her finger in the middle of the page.

I read it.

The passage was about the full moon. Every wolf knows their strength is highest on those nights never thought about it, but it's the same for wolves who haven't been born yet. In cases like mine, the unborn take more on those nights. They draw on their mother's

strength, pulling energy from her for their own changes. If th get

hungry enough, it could weaken me

maybe even put both of us in

danger.

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I read it a second time to be sure I had it right. Then I put the book down.

My mouth had gone dry. "Leslie, what day is it?"

She didn't answer me. She was

already counting on her fingers, lips moving, and I watched her get to the end of it and start again from the beginning because she didnt like the answer the first time.

Then she stopped counting and looked up.

"Tonight," she said. "It's tonight."

Chapter 443

Talia's POV

"We'll double your dose tonight," Leslie said. "Just for tonight, take twice as much as usual, both times, and get to bed early."

"Is that safe? For them, I mean."

"It's safer than the alternative. The herbs help slow down what the babies take from you. If they're going to take more tonight, the tonic has to be stronger too. It's the best we can do with the time we have."

That night, I drank the double dose, just like Leslie said. It tasted even worse than usual. Nolan sat on my bed and watched me finish the second cup, trying not to laugh.

"Don't even start," I warned him.

"What? I didn't say anything."

"You were about to. I can see it all over your face."

"I wish I could show you what you look like. Your face is priceless," Nolan said as he took the cup from me and offered me ice cream. "Like a kid forced to eat vegetables."

"It tastes like swamp water. Like Leslie boiled something dead in a swamp," I said. I ate the ice cream, glad for the sweetness that finally covered up the bitter taste.

"She more than likely did," Nolan said, shrugging.

I rolled my eyes and took another bite, grateful as my stomach finally calmed and the bitter taste of the tonic had begun to fade.

"I've got something for you," Nolan said as he set the cup aside. He opened the drawer in the nightstand and put a small cloth bundle in my hand.

I unwrapped the bundle and found a dark green stone. It glowed in my hand, warm and soothing.

“It's beautiful,” I said as I lifted it toward the lamp, watching the light shine right through. "Where did you get this?"

"Alpha Landon,” he said with a grin. “He sent a letter to Solon and me this morning. He heard about the pregnancy and wanted to check up on you. He sent this. They just found these stones in Lonefur. They are the first in three generations."

“It's like Leslie's, but it's green," I said.

"This kind of Ember is blessed with luck, especially when it comes to pregnancy. It can help calm your mind and keep the babies stable."

"You asked him for this, didn't you?"

"I did," Nolan said. "I saw how much Leslie's helped her. I didn't think Landon would find something just for you so quickly."

"Nolan, thank you," I said, kissing him on the cheek.

"Don't thank me. Thank Landon, and let him brag about it for a year." He smiled. "I'll find a cord for it tomorrow so you can wear it. For now, keep it under your pillow."

"Alright." I nodded, carefully placing the Ember away. "By the way, Leslie wants me to go to bed early tonight. She was very firm about it, but I'm really not tired."

"You will soon." He turned off the lamp, got into bed behind me, wrapped his arm around my waist, and rested his hand on my belly like he did every night. "I'm here."

"You say that every night."

"And every night it's been true."

I lay in the dark and felt his breath slow against my neck.

One of the twins kicked, then the other. I rubbed my belly and prayed quietly, “Let

the book be wrong. Let tonight be normal."

If things go wrong and I wake up in a

hospital, weak, with Leslie taking care of me, he will know the truth. He will realize I lied to him in that hallway and every night after Wanted to tell Nolan that was frightened, but the words wouldn't come. It was easier to pretend I was okay. For a moment I almost wished that Leslie would return and reprimand me for not sleeping, to relieve the pressure in my head.

'You took double the dose. That will be enough,' my wolf told me.

'And what if it isn't?'

'It will be,' my wolf said. 'Just sleep now.'

I closed my eyes and tried to think about something else. I do not know when I fell asleep, but suddenly I was awake, standing in an empty hospital hallway. Everything looked strange and far away. The hospital was empty.

Then, from somewhere down the hall, a baby cried.

I followed the sound. The crying grew louder, then split in two. It was not just one

baby. It was two, both crying out of sync.

A big window looked into the

nursery. Two cribs stood side by

side, each holding a baby Their faces were bright red as they orled as loudly as they could. One looked almost like me. The other looked like a mix of Nolan and Solon.

“Those.....those are my babies," I said as I put my hand on the glass.

Then I heard the noise behind me.

Suddenly, the hallway filled with people, all moving toward a door at the end of the corridor. I prepared to push through the crowd but

phased right through them. As got closer, I heard crying again. b

stopped at the room and pushed the door open.

Inside the room, Solon leaned against the wall, covering his mouth, his eyes red from crying. Della had collapsed on the floor, crying in Marco's arms. "You said you could help! You said..." she sobbed.

Leslie stood close to the foot of the bed, arms hanging by her sides, looking defeated and mortified.

Nolan took my hand in both of his and bowed his head, since he was crying so violently that the bed shook. Then I realized what I was seeing.

The twins were born, healthy and beautiful. And I was dead.

Chapter 444

Talia's POV

I jolted awake, screaming.

White light made it hard to see. I flailed around until hands gripped my shoulder, holding me in place.

"Talia, look at me. Focus on me. You're okay."

Nolan's voice brought me back. My hands and body kept shaking, filled with restless energy I couldn't control. Finally, Nolan's face came into focus above me.

"Nolan?"

"There you are. It's okay. You're safe," Nolan said as he cupped my face.

I tried to sit up, but my arms felt weak and heavy. Nolan helped me sit up.

Solon stood at the end of the bed, looking concerned. "Thank the Goddess you're awake," he said. "You scared us, Talia."

Leslie was to the right of me, checking my pulse. "The dosage was too much. It was a gamble I shouldn't have taken. I'm sorry, Talia."

"What happened?" I croaked as my throat burned.

"You started screaming a couple of hours after you fell asleep; you started yelling like something was hurting you," Nolan explained. "You were so hot to the touch, and I couldn't wake you up. I tried shaking you, calling your name, but nothing worked. I linked Solon and Leslie and carried you here."

"You were unconscious for a very long time. No one could touch you after a while because your Moonfire flared up," Leslie said quietly. "I finally stabilized you about an hour ago, but it took longer than it should have."

"Well, it's morning now, so everything's okay, right?"

Leslie just frowned and said, "I wish that were the case."

"What do you mean? Leslie, how long was I out?" I asked.

"Two days," she said. My stomach dropped.

I immediately tried to connect with my wolf, but she didn't respond.

'No, no, no, Goddess no,' I thought as I reached for her again. There was still no response. Panic started to rise. Did the twins take her from me?

'I'm still here,' my wolf whispered, sounding far away, like she was speaking from far away. She was just a flicker deep inside, but she was still there.'I just need to rest.'

'Don't scare me like that,' I told her. 'I thought I lost you.'

That brief moment of not feeling her brought back the painful memories of when I couldn't sense her at all. I remembered how alone and weak I was then, and I never wanted to go through that again.

"Leslie," Nolan said, turning to her. "She's been stable for two weeks. So what changed this time? You said you'd explain everything once she woke up."

"It was the full moon," Leslie replied, meeting his eyes. "The moon makes wolves stronger, but it helps them, too. The connection between us and them gets more intense. During the full moon, they were at their strongest."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Nolan demanded. "Was that what the double dose was for?"

Leslie nodded and said, “Yes, I thought that would counteract the effects of the full moon but it didn't."

"It's over now, so we don't have to worry about this anymore."

"It's over for this month," Leslie responded.

"What do you mean for this month?"

“This will happen every time there's a full month,” Leslie explained.

I saw the worry in Nolan's eyes as he took in Leslie's words.

"I'm alright," I said, doing my best to calm him down. "Nolan, look at me. I'm awake,

I'm talking to you, and I'll be sitting up soon. I'm really fine."

"You're not fine," Nolan said as he took my hand in both of his, and it felt just like it had in my nightmare, making my stomach twist How many more full moons until they come?"

Nobody answered him.

"Leslie, how many?"

"Three or two," she said. "It depends on when they decide to come."

"Three or two," Nolan said flatly. "One of them did this to her. She can barely hold

her head up. What's going to happen next time? Would it be worse?"

"Nolan," I tried.

“No, I want the answer. What is going to happen to her, Leslie?"

Leslie opened her mouth and closed it again.

Solon let go of the bed rail. "Enough," he snapped. "We can't keep going in circles like this."

I knew what was coming. I didn't have the strength to stop it.

"Solon, don't-"

"We can't keep hiding this from him,"

Solon muttered, jaw clenched. He

Wouldn't even

had

look at pag. You've

two weeks to tell him yourself but you didn't."

"Tell me what?" Nolan asked.

Nobody spoke.

“Solon.” Nolan's voice went very quiet. “Tell me what?"

"Are you going to tell him yourself, Talia?" Solon asked.

I opened my mouth to speak, but I didn't know how to tell him. What was I going to

say? How could I tell him that I've been lying to him for almost a month now?

"The truth is, Leslie never found a way to save her," Solon said when he saw how I was hesitating. "There isn't one. There never was."

I saw the truth hit Nolan. For a second, his face was frozen, then I watched

something inside him break.

"No," he whispered. "That's not true. Talia told me, back at Bloodmoon in the hallway, that Leslie had treated someone with this exact situation beføre Leshe knew what she was doing, and we affrushed out that night." He turned to me. "You told me that. I remember you saying it."

"Nolan, please-"

"Then tell me!" he snapped, his voice breaking. "Tell me what's really going on."

Chapter 445

Talia's POV

“Talia, tell me what is going on," Nolan demanded.

I opened my mouth, ready to say it was fine, but Leslie cut in before I could. "The herbs just slow things down in the beginning," she admitted, fidgeting nervously. "They don't actually fix anything. Eventually, they'll stop helping."

Nolan's face furrowed, and he looked between all of us, staring at us in disbelief. "So you've all been lying to me? Is that why you kept saying she'd be okay?"

'I told you we should have told him,' my wolf scolded. 'Explain it to him now!'

I reached for his arm, needing to close the space between us. "Nolan, I just wanted

to protect you. I didn't want you to lose hope."

He pulled away from me, his face hardening. "Were you protecting me, or just avoiding telling me the truth? Why didn't you just tell me? Why make me think there was hope?"

His anger faded. He just looked hurt. His shoulders slumped, and all the fight left him. "You should have told me, Talia."

"I'm sorry," I said quietly. "I was hoping Leslie would find something. I thought the herbs would buy us enough time to figure it out." My hands twisted nervously in my lap.

"We're supposed to be in this together, Talia. That's what we agreed on, and you lied to me for weeks," Nolan said. "I don't know if I can forgive this."

My heart dropped. It felt like I couldn't breathe. "You don't mean that. I am so sorry, Nolan. Please forgive me."

"If you really want me to forgive you, you have to give up the babies," Nolan said, and I balked at the request.

"You don't mean that," I said.

"You're my mate, the love of my life. I want you to live, Talia. And if that means giving up the twins, then so be it," Nolan responded.

His words shook me hard. I knew why he was desperate, but I couldn't do what he asked. "I can't," I said, my hands quivering. "They're a part of me. I can't just give them up."

Nolan's face crumpled; for an instant I thought he might beg, but Solon intervened. "Nolan, just calm down. There might still be something we can do."

Nolan turned on Solon and scoffed. "You've all been keeping this from me for weeks. Why would I believe you now?"

Solon met his eyes. "I know after everything we're asking a lot, but try to understand. We didn't want to give up hope. We were looking for a way to fix this."

"When were you going to tell me then? When Talia was too far along to save her?" "We wanted to tell you," Leslie said. She looked at me, her eyes apologetic. "But we didn't know if it was our place. Talia wanted to be the one to tell you."

"So you think that makes it okay?" Nolan shot back. "That you two aren't to blame?"

"No, it doesn't," Solon said, holding up his hands in a calming gesture. "But you're letting your emotions take over, Nolan. You're jumping to the worst-case scenario here."

Nolan looked straight at Solon. "If you were in my position, would you pick your baby or your mate?"

Solon frowned. He couldn't answer. Because just like Nolan, he would choose Leslie over their child.

"Exactly," Nolan sighed before turning back to me. "Get some rest. I'll arrange everything."

“Nolan, please,” I started, my voice cracking as I reached for him again.

“No, Talia,” Nolan snapped. “I can't..." His voice broke, and he turned away quickly, striding out of the room. The door closed behind him with a dull thud.

The tears came. I covered my face and sobbed. Solon sat on the edge of the bed and pulled me into his arms. He rocked me gently until I had nothing left.

When I had no more tears left, I pulled away and wiped my face. "How could he ask me to do this? The twins are his children too."

"It's just as hard for Nolan, you know," Leslie said. "You don't really think he wants to do this, do you?"

I shook my head. I knew he didn't want this, but it still hurt to hear him say it.

"He loves you. He's scared of losing you, Talia," Solon added. "We have no solution right now, and I don't blame him for not risking it. I hate to admit it, but I would be the same way."

"You don't understand," I said. "I'm not just crying because of what he said. I'm crying because he's right."

Solon and Leslie both looked at me, confusion clear on their faces. "What do you mean?" Leslie asked, reaching for my hand.

"The reason why I was screaming

earlier was that I dreamed I died after the twins were born,

explained. It seemed real. It didn't feel like a nightmare. It felt like I was looking into the future."

Solon tried to seem calm, but his eyes flitted toward Leslie as though searching for reassurance himself. "It was nothing but a nightmare, Talia it was just the effects of the Herbs and the full moon

"No," I said resolutely. "My dreams have always meant something. I dreamed about my dad dying before it happened. I saw the rogue attack

on Nolan before he came to the witon coven to plek me up. This was

a warning. I am going to die."

Leslie reached over and squeezed my hand tight. "No, you're not! I won't let that happen."

"Leslie, you don't even know how to cure it," I argued.

"Maybe I don't," Leslie said, her eyes filled with determination. "But you just

mentioned the witches. They might know something we don't. Contact them. Now."

Chapter 446

Nolan's POV

I left the hospital before I said something I'd regret.

I didn't tell anyone I was leaving. I slipped out the side door, past the gardens, and

as soon as I was clear of the buildings, I started running.

'She lied to us,' my wolf snarled. 'For two weeks, she looked right at us every morning and lied.'

'I know,' I said. I thought about how many times she looked conflicted in the past two weeks. I knew something was wrong, but I never questioned it. She played me like a fool.

'We slept next to her every night for two weeks, thinking Leslie could save her because she let us believe it.'

'Yeah. I know. You don't have to keep telling me. I was right there with you.'

At the edge of the trees, I shifted and let my wolf take control. I couldn't handle being human another minute. Being human meant thinking, and thinking meant remembering that hospital room.

He ran full speed, not caring about branches scratching us or the thick brush in our path. Even the stream's steep bank didn't slow him down. He just kept running until my chest burned, my legs trembled, and finally, when we were both spent, he stopped.

I shifted back to myself, kneeling by the water, breathing hard. Then all my thoughts rushed back, and I groaned in frustration.

'You can't have me in control forever. You will have to face this,' my wolf said, and I ignored him.

Blood was running down my right arm. There was a long scratch from my elbow to my wrist, and a few smaller ones above it. I didn't even remember when it happened.

I rinsed my arm in the freezing stream. The shock of the cold distracted me for about a minute.

I sat on the bank, arm dripping, waiting to calm down. But I didn't.

'You're allowed to be mad,' my wolf said, quieter now. 'I'm angry too. She should've told us the first night!'

'Then stop what you're doing,' I muttered.

'What am I doing?'

'You're going to start pushing me to go back,' I said. 'I don't want to. Not yet.'

'I haven't pushed you anywhere yet,' my wolf said. Then he paused. 'But think about this: if it were the other way around. If they told you you'd die, but the pups would live, what would you have done?'

I didn't answer.

'You'd have kept it from her as long as you could, and you'd lie to yourself that it was to protect her.'

'That's different,' I shot back.

'It's not different at all,' He sighed. 'She's their mother, Nolan. You're asking her to give up her pups so she can live without them."

'She won't live with them either.'

'She knows the costs, and she knew you'd take away her choice once you found out,' my wolf explained. She'd already made up her mind. She couldn't stand fighting with you about it every day for three months. That's not how she wanted her last moments with us.'

I sat there a long time and just watched the water flow by. I felt numb and exhausted. I never thought about how this was affecting Talia. All I could think about was how I wanted to save her. I was being selfish and giving her too much pressure. 'You're quiet,' my wolf said after a while.

'I'm thinking about how she looked when she woke up,' I answered. 'She couldn't even lift her arms after the effects of one night. What am I supposed to do? Just sit with her for three more months and watch her get worse?'

'I don't know,' my wolf said softly.

'That's not an answer,' I muttered.

'It's the only one I've got. But you're not going to figure it out sitting in a stream, bleeding all over yourself.'

I pulled my shirt back over my bloody arm and started heading back the way I came.

Talia was sitting up when I walked in. Seeing her made something ache in my chest. She looked better than she had that morning.

Talia held her arms out, and I went to her. She grabbed onto me and wouldn't let go as we hugged.

"You were gone," she mumbled into my shoulder. "Way too long. I almost thought you'd gone back to Bloodmoon without me."

"I'd never do that," I said softly.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"I'm sorry too," I said. "I couldn't hold it together here. I left before I said something I couldn't take back."

"Don't apologize for that." She pulled back and looked at me. "I should've told you the truth. You had every right to be angry."

"Let's just leave it at that for now," I said. "Can we really?" she asked.

"For now,"

bet

"I'm still angry. I probably will be for I

14 still said, taking her hand.

But I'd rather be angry with

than alone in the wood sŵnovels

"That's fair. I'll do everything I can to regain your trust, Nolan. I promise."

She held my hand for another moment. Then her eyes dropped to my arm and her whole expression changed.

"Nolan, your arm," she said, alarmed.

Blood had soaked through my sleeve.

"It's nothing. Just some branches," I said.

"Take the shirt off," she insisted.

"It's fine," I protested, but she wasn't having it.

"Take it off and sit down," she ordered. She was already calling for a first aid kit. Talia began to fuss over my arm.

"My wolf will heal this by tonight," I told her. "It'll be gone by morning. You know

that."

"I know exactly what your wolf can do," Talia said as she cleaned the scratch. But it heat slower if you're bouncing around in a car all day." Long trips slow everything down."

"Says who?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Every healer I've ever met says so. One of them's even married to my brother She turned my wrist over carefully. "So we're cleaning it now and wrapping it up right. Then you wolf can do his thing."

"Wait. Long trip?" I asked, suddenly wary.

"We're going to the witches' coven," Talia answered. "As soon as we're ready."

I just stared at her, stunned.

"Do they have a way to help you?" I asked, hope flickering in my chest.

Chapter 447

Nolan's POV

"I'm not sure yet," Talia said. "Leslie called Camilla last night when you were away. Camilla didn't make any promises. She was careful. She didn't say she could help, but she didn't say she couldn't either."

"So what did she say?"

"She told us to come as soon as we could, and said she'd do everything she could. Leslie said it twice."

"That's a good sign," I said.

"You think so?"

"Talia, that's actually really good." I turned to face her. "Camilla is old. She's older than anyone can remember. If she didn't know about this, she would've said so. She's never sugarcoated anything for anyone. She would've just told you there was nothing she could do."

"But she didn't."

"She said to come now. That means she knows what's going on." I realized I was talking faster than I meant to. "No one tells you to hurry over if they have no idea what's happening."

"She still wouldn't promise anything."

"Of course she wouldn't. That's how I know she means it." I took her hand. "If Camilla had said she could fix it, I'd worry she was just trying to spare our feelings. Camilla isn't nice. She's honest. And right now, honesty matters more."

Talia's eyes lit up. "That's what I thought too."

"So why are we still sitting here?"

We finished packing in less than two hours.

Solon had a dozen warriors in the yard before we finished, and he came out himself

to see us off. He was still thinner than he should be and moved slowly, but he was moving without assistance. That was something I wouldn't have expected two months ago.

"They'll take you to the edge of the woods," he told me. "I'm not sending my men in there. I've heard the stories. You will have to do it for Talia's only protection."

"That's all I would've asked, anyway."

"Good," Solon said. He squeezed my shoulder. "Take care of her, and bring my sister back."

"Solon, we're not walking into enemy territory," Talia argued. "Camilla fought with us. Hattie and Dalila kept me sane during training. They're my friends."

"They're still witches," Solon shot back. "And you're my sister, so I'll worry no matter what. Promise me you will be safe."

"I promise, big brother."

Leslie came out last, looking like she should be resting, and handed me a wooden box.

"Her herbs," she said. "Morning and night, hot, no skipping. They won't cure her, but they'll slow things down at least. Every extra day helps Camilla."

"I'll make sure she takes every dose."

"Make sure she does. She'll say she's fine and try to talk you out of it. Don't listen to her."

"I won't."

"Thank you, Leslie," I said. "I know I was..."

"No need to apologize, Nolan," Leslie said, waving me off.

"No, I need to..."

"Just take care of Talia," Leslie cut me off. She turned away quickly so we wouldn't see her crying. Solon followed and put his arm around her.

By then, Talia had gone quiet, so I picked her up and carried her the last few steps

to the car. She didn't argue, which scared me more than anything else that morning.

The drive took the rest of the day and most of the night. She slept against my shoulder for most of it gave her the herbs at dusk in the back of the car and she drank them was

without complaining. Thank them,

another warning sign.

We reached the Lost Woods at dawn, and I'd forgotten how creepy they were.

The fog was so thick, the trees were just dark shapes in it. There wasn't a sound coming from the forest. No birds were chirping, no insects, nothing but silence.

I got out and walked to the lead car.

"This is where you turn back," I said. "All of you, head back to Silverfang." The lead warrior hesitated. "Alpha, the Alpha Queen can't go in there alone."

"She won't be alone. I'll be with her." I looked at the fog. "Going into that forest without the witches' permission is how wolves disappear or worse. You know the stories."

"That's why I'd rather not leave you both without additional protection."

"They're expecting just us. Not a dozen armed wolves at their border," I countered. "I'm not giving them a reason to change then mind .minds: Wett

Well

be fine. Go home. Don't make me Alpha command you."

They hesitated, but left finally. I watched until the last one was gone, just to be sure.

Then I retrieved our bags. Talia got out of the car. I went up to her and put my free arm around her.

"Ready?"

"I've been ready since Leslie told me what Camilla said," she said.

"You can lean on me the whole way."

"I plan to."

We walked into the woods slowly.

The fog was cold and wet on my face, and I couldn't see more than a few feet

ahead. I was about to say something, but then the fog started to shift.

It didn't slowly fade away. Instead, the fog pulled back from us all at once, like a curtain opening. The trees appeared, clear and green in the morning fight. In the middle of the path stood a familiar small, older woman.

"Talia," Camilla greeted warmly. "Nolan. It's been a long time since I saw either of

you."

Chapter 448

Talia's POV

"Good to see you too," I said, walking over and hugging Camilla.

"You traveled all night," Camilla said, eyeing us. "You haven't eaten or slept. I know why you're here, but it can wait until after breakfast."

"We came because there's no time," Nolan said.

"There's always time for breakfast," Camilla said as she turned and headed up the path. "Come on."

Nolan frowned, about to protest, but I squeezed his hand. He looked at me.

"Just relax, Nolan," I said quietly. "Camilla invited us because she had a way to help us. You know she isn't the type to mince words. Having breakfast won't hurt."

"I don't want to sit and eat," Nolan argued.

"Do you want to insult her? If you insult her, then she may not help us," I countered.

"She would forgive you and we have an alliance. It would be in her best interest to help us," Nolan said.

"Don't be like that, Nolan. You can force your way with her or the coven," I said. I knew Nolan was trying to look firm, but he was trying not to let fear show.

"I think this is a waste of time. She needs to understand how serious this is," Nolan huffed.

"Trust me. She knows," I said.

"It doesn't seem like it," Nolan muttered.

"It won't be that bad. You'll enjoy the food this time," I whispered, nudging him gently. Nolan snorted, the sound a small relief, and the tension in his shoulders eased a bit.

'He's wary that she may be lying to him too,' my wolf said

"Too bad. You're doing it anyway." I linked my arm with his. 'But the old witch looks worried.'

'Don't jump to conclusions. She hasn't even evaluated me.'

'You will learn to listen to me,' my wolf huffed.

The coven's dining hall buzzed with noise before we even got to the door: conversations, clinking dishes, laughter from the far end.

The women here ranged from teenagers to elders, each with her own unique style: some in flowing robes, some in jeans and t-shirts, one or two with streaks of color in their hair that never faded, no matter how old they got. It was noisy, lively, and for a moment I almost forgot why we'd come.

Every head turned when they noticed us. For a second, no one spoke. About thirty witches just stared at the Alpha Queen of the wolves, which was me, standing in their doorway at breakfast.

Then someone shrieked from the middle of the room.

"Talia!"

Dalila vaulted over the bench, Hattie right behind her, and suddenly I was being hugged by both of them. Nolan reached out, just in case I fell over because their hug was so hard.

"Camilla told us yesterday you were coming," Dalila said into my shoulder. "I thought she was kidding. I told Hattie, 'She's joking. The Queen has better things to do.' Hattie said the old woman's never told a joke in her life, and I figured there's a first time for everything."

"There's not," Camilla said from behind us.

Hattie stepped back to look at me, eyes dropping, going wide.

"You're pregnant."

"Yep."

"Super pregnant. You're as big as a house."

"Hattie!" Camilla scolded.

"Sorry. I just was not expecting this. How far along are you?" Hattie said.

"Look at you! Sit down, don't just stand there," Dalila added.

"She's having twins," Nolan said.

They both started talking over each other. Dalila grabbed my hands and shook them. Hattie skipped congratulations and went straight to asking if I'd been sleeping, if my

back hurt, if anyone had told me

about the tea she makes for swollen

feet.

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Neither of them knew why we were here. Camilla hadn't told them. Seeing them so

happy for me was harder than anything in the last three days.

"So why did you come?" Dalila asked. "Not that you need a reason, but nobody

travels halfway across the territory pregnant just to say hi."

"Dalila," Camilla cut in. "Your soup's about to burn."

"My soup's fine."

"It's on high heat, and you've been out here for four minutes."

Dalila cursed and left, while Hattie laughed and led us to the end of a bench.

"Sit. Both of you. You look like you two need to relax."

A few minutes later, soup appeared in front of us. I watched the steam curl up, catching hints of garlic, leek, and tomato. My stomach growled, and I realized how hungry I really was. Dalila hovered above us with her bands on her

ins warling until

we each took a bite.

"Well?"

"It's really good," I said.

"It's my homemade recipe. Eat up," Dalila said. "Eat the whole bowl. You're eating

for three."

Camilla sat across from us and folded her hands.

"They're here for help," she told the table. "That's all for now. They've been traveling since yesterday, so they'leat and rest, and we'll talk this afternoon when everyone's clear-headed."

"We don't need to rest," Nolan said. "I'd rather explain now so you can start

helping."

"Nolan."

"Camilla, with respect, every hour matters. If I'm sitting here eating soup while you

could be finding something to help her, I'd rather....."

I put my hand over his under the table and pressed.

He stopped.

Camilla looked at him for a long moment, her expression softening for a second.

"The twins need rest too," she said. "Even if their dad doesn't."

Chapter 449

Talia's POV

I slept until it was dark outside.

Nolan woke me softly, speaking in a low voice. "We should go," he said, gently moving a strand of hair from my face. I rubbed my eyes and followed him down a dim hallway to a room at the back of the house.

A big table sat in the middle. Camilla, Dalila, and Hattie were sitting together, looking serious. Old books were piled up everywhere, some so worn out I thought they might fall apart if I touched them.

Dalila looked up as we came in. "Finally awake?" she joked, but I could tell she was worried about me.

“Let her have a minute,” Hattie said, sounding firm but kind. She slid a cup toward me. "Chamomile tea. You're going to need this for your nerves."

"That sounds ominous," I yawned.

Camilla didn't look up from her book. "Sit down," she said. "We need to talk, and we don't have much time."

Nolan pulled out a chair for me, and I sat next to him. "They're hoping the books will tell us something new," he murmured.

"Leslie told me a great deal about your condition, and I have spent two days with these books because of it," Camilla said, looking up from the current book she was reading. She tapped the nearest one. "But I want you to tell me everything, especially things that Leslie wouldn't know."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"What it feels like," Camilla replied. "Leslie cannot tell me what it is like to be the one they are taking it from."

So I told her.

I told her what the full moon felt like. It wasn't like being tired or hurt. There was just nothing there when I reached for it. The herbs barely worked during the full moon. My wolf had been distant ever since.

"Leslie is a serious woman," Camilla said when I'd finished and closed the book she had been previously reading. "If she says there is no cure in medicine, then there is no cure in medicine, and I will not waste your time pretending otherwise."

"Then, what do you plan on doing if medicine doesn't help?" Nolan asked.

“Be patient, Nolan," Camilla said firmly. "Hattie will examine Talia first."

Hattie came round the table. She put both hands flat on my belly and closed her eyes. Hattie stayed like that for a long time. Nolan started to get impatient. I could feel it through our mate bond; before I could say anything to him, Hattie began talking.

"They're strong," she said. "Camilla, they're very strong. I've never felt anything like this in an unborn child, let alone two of them." One hand moved up to my chest, right over my heart. "And they're drawing off her much faster than her body can replace it. That is why her wolf is so distant. She is doing everything she can to maintain them."

"We know this already," Nolan said.

"Leslie said the herb tonic won't work as well, and each full moon night is a risk that it will stop altogether," I added.

"How far along is she?" Camilla asked.

"Then they'll be born within three months," Hattie replied, and Camilla became pale. "but the strain of the birth will be too much for Talia and her wolf."

Hattie's hands shook as she pulled her hands back. She looked regretful that she had said that, and Dalila offered her tea.

Camilla frowned and asked, "Is there anything else, Talia? I need to know everything. This will help me determine what to do."

"I had a dream," I said.

"Tell me about the dream."

"I was in a hospital, in a corridor with nobody in it. Theard crying, and I found the nursery, and the twins were there Both of them, healthy screaming their heads off. Then there was a crowd at the end of the half, and I pushed through it, and I saw myself on a bed, dead."

Nobody spoke.

"It's not the first one," I added. "I dreamed about my father before he died. I dreamed about the rogues that attacked Nolan on the road here, before he left."

Camilla sat back in her chair.

"That is not a nightmare," she said.

"Your Moonfire has woken

something else in you. It happens

sometimes with the old powers.

They do not arrive alone. Your re seeing forward, Talia, and you have

been for some time."

"Then it's going to happen," Nolan said. "That's what you're telling us. That her fate

is already determined?"

"I did not say that."

"Then do something," Nolan

demanded, slamming his hands down on the table. He stood up and approached Camilla. Dalila and Hattie immediately became defensive. "Whatever it costs whatever you need from me, I'll get it. I don't care what it is. Just tell me

you can change it."

“Alpha Nolan, you will calm yourself,” Camilla ordered. “We need calm right now. If

you can not control your emotions, I will expel you."

Nolan relented and sat back down.

Dalila glanced between us. "May I ask the obvious thing? Giving up the pups. Is that

on the table?"

"Yes," Nolan said.

"No," I said.

"Talia, we talked about this."

"It isn't on the table," I repeated sternly. "It never has been."

"You should not be upset with him, Talia," Camilla said. "He cares. It is a hard decision for you both."

It wasn't that I was upset with him. I just didn't want to talk about it, or even think about it, unless it was truly our only choice. I didn't know how to make Nolan understand that.

"There's another option," Camilla said finally. "It could save both you and the twins, but it's risky. I want to make sure you understand that before I explain further."

"Tell me," I begged her. "Please, tell me what it is."

Chapter 450

Talia's POV

Camilla didn't answer right away. She picked up one of the older books and turned it

so we could see the page.

"The Rebirth Ritual," Camilla said quietly.

"I've never heard of it," I said, frowning at the page.

"You wouldn't have. It belongs to us, and we don't talk about it outside these woods," Camilla said, smoothing the page. "Listen. I'll explain it once, then you can ask questions until you understand."

"Go on," Nolan prompted.

"Ten of my witches will take part of your wolf spirit and seal her away." Camilla traced the page with her finger. The writing was cramped and old, the ink faded where hands had touched it for years. "You'll carry the twins like you are now. When it's time, you'll give birth."

"And then she dies," Nolan said flatly, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Yes. That part does not change. It will be exactly as Leslie told you and exactly what Talia saw in her dream."

"Then what's the point of the ritual?" I asked. My hands shook, but I tried to keep my voice steady.

"Your wolf will be kept safe," Camilla said. "After you deliver your children, we'll return what we took. Your wolf will go back into your body and bring you with her. You'll come back, Talia. It'll take time, and you'll have to heal, but you'll be alive. Both your children will be too."

"There's no version of this where I don't die," I said.

"No," Camilla said.

"I have to die," I said. The words tasted bitter.

"You do. There's no way to keep the twins safe and stop it. If we try to stop them from taking from you, we hurt them. You already said that's not an option," Camilla explained. "So we let it happen, then we undo it. That's the ritual."

'That is not fair,' my wolf whimpered, somewhere deep down and getting fainter every day. 'What did we do? The Goddess gave us two. She gave us two and then made it like this. Why would she do that to us?'

I didn't have an answer. My thoughts spun. Every story I knew about fate or sacrifice felt hollow now. Was this a test, or just bad luck? My chest ached with all the things I still wanted to say and every future slipping away.

I didn't have an answer.

"Camilla," Nolan said, his voice raw. "If you give her wolf back and she doesn't wake up, what then?"

"Then she does not wake up," Camilla replied simply.

"That's it? That's your answer?" Nolan demanded.

"Yes it is. That is all I can do for you," Camilla said, not looking away from him. "You are welcome to not choose this path."

"We've done it before," Hattie put in quickly.

"Many times," Dalila added. "The coven has performed this ritual and the women have come back."

"Then why didn't you say that in the first place?" Nolan asked.

"Because nothing comes free," Dalila answered.

"Whatever you want, I'll pay for it."

"That's not what we mean," Hattie said, hesitating. "Everyone who came back had to give up something to come back to life. That's what Camilla means about risk."

She looked at me, her eyes softer than I'd ever seen them. "We don't want to frighten you, Talia. But it's better to know the truth than to be caugh unprepared some women came back changed, but they also found new strength. You may discover you're capable of more than you ever imagined."

"Pays what?" I asked.

"It's different every time. Some come back, and their wolf never gets to full strength again," Hattie said. "Some lose pieces of their memory. Years of it, sometimes. Some of them don't live as long afterward as they would have. There's no way to know in advance which it will be, or how much."

Nolan put both hands over his face.

"We need time," Nolan said. “We need to think about this properly."

"I don't," I said softly. "We don't have other options and this is the only one."

He dropped his hands and stared at me.

“Talia,” Nolan said, his voice shaking. “This is a serious decision. We have to...”

"I'm doing it," I said. I took his hand in both of mine. "Nolan, look at what we have now. Two hours ago, all we knew was either we lost the twins, or you lost me. Now there's a way that no one has to die."

"But you won't be the same."

"Maybe, maybe not, but I'll be alive," I said. Tears ran down my face and I didn't care. "I'll pay whatever itcosts. Memory, strength years, don't care. The ritual can have whatever it wants. It is worth it if it means I get to grow old with you and our pups."

We were both uncertain, but our bond remained. It felt steady and strong, even with everything we didn't know. Love, fear, and loss had shaped us, pulling us closer every time. Nolan's hand in mine was a promise. No matter what happened to me, he wouldn't let go.

"All right," Nolan said finally. "All right. I'm not leaving your side. Not once. Whatever happens, I'm going to be there."

"I know you will," I whispered.

Camilla stood up and closed the book.

"We begin the extraction tomorrow at nightfall," Camilla announced. "Rest today, and prepare yourself. Tomorrow will be the hardest thing you have ever done."

"I'll be ready," I promised.