Barren Luna 451

Chapter 451

Talia's POV

The next night Camilla led us to a clearing in the woods.

The walk was long, at least two miles. Nolan carried me for the last mile because I was too tired to continue.

There was barely any moonlight. The witches set candles around the clearing, lighting it up while the woods beyond stayed pitch black.

'Are you sure about this?' Nolan asked me through our mate bond.

'I would be lying if I said I wasn't scared, but I am more afraid of facing a future where I would have to choose my life over our pups,' I replied.

'I'll be with you every step of the way. You can squeeze my hand until it breaks. I don't care,' Nolan responded.

Crickets chirped in the distance until the witches' footsteps in the grass cut them off. Sometimes a breeze made the candles flicker and shadows move across the trees. Hattie and Dalila stood with the others in a circle.

Camilla stopped Nolan at the edge. "You'll stand here," she told him. "Don't take a step closer, and don't interrupt, no matter what you see or hear.”

"What will I hear?” Nolan asked as he put me down.

"That is not important."

Nolan's hands shook slightly as he let go of me, and for a second, I thought he might change his mind. He didn't. I wished I could reassure him, but I barely trusted my own voice. "It is. If you tell me what to expect, I will know not to overreact," Nolan argued.

"You'll hear her scream in pain," Camilla said. "But you have to stand here and let it happen. If you break the circle while her spirit is halfway out of her body, you'll lose her tonight. There'll be no ritual, no rebirth, and nothing we can do. Do you understand?"

Nolan clenched his jaw. "I understand."

For a second, I thought he might refuse and grab me, even if it meant risking everything. But he just clenched his fists and made himself stay, breathing hard.

The air buzzed with magic, making the hairs on my arms stand up. I was breathing fast and shallow. Everyone in the circle watched me, waiting to see if I would back out.

"I won't interrupt," Nolan repeated. He kissed my forehead. "I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere."

Hattie took my hand and led me to the center. My legs shook, and I only moved because she helped, one slow step at a time. Everything went quiet, like even the night was holding its breath.

"Lie down on your back," Hattie instructed. "Keep your arms at your sides."

I lowered myself to the ground and felt exposed and small under their gaze. "Will it help if I stay still?" I asked.

"It'll help, but it won't matter because you won't stay still," Hattie answered.

"You'll be the strongest woman we've ever met if you manage to do that," Dalila added.

"Dalila, you're not helping," I muttered as Hattie placed a small pillow under my head.

Hattie crouched next to me. She was frowning, and I said, "How bad is this going to be? Camilla told me I'll scream."

"I won't sugarcoat it. This will hurt more than anything you've ever felt," Hattie explained.

"I've been through painful things before," I said.

"You haven't been through this. You'll wish you were dead and death won't come. There'll be no way to stop it until it's over. Are you sure you want to go through with this?"

My eyes widened, but I quickly maintained my composure. "I understand. I'm not backing out of this."

"Good. Focus on why you're doing this if you can. Hopefully, it will ease some of your pain."

The ten witches closed the circle around me with Camilla at my head. Someone slipped a folded cloth under my neck so I wouldn't have to lie on the hard ground.

"Are you ready, Talia?" Camilla asked.

"Yes, please proceed," I replied.

The chanting started out soft, just a whisper. With each word, I could feel the power growing. I shut my eyes, bracing myself, and listened to the odd rhythm of their voices.

'I'm here with you. We'll get through this together,' my wolf reassured me.

At first, nothing happened. Then I felt a tug in my chest, like something inside me was being grabbed.

My heart pounded so hard I thought

it would break through my chest The pressure kept growing until breathing became shallow and quick. I wanted to call for help, but I couldn't get the words out.

'It's okay. Focus on breathing,' my wolf reassured me, but then the pain began.

It felt like little bits of me were being ripped away. When they touched her, the pain

got even worse. I bit my lip to keep from screaming. My wolf had been with me since I was fifteen.

'Talia,' my wolf gasped. 'It hurts!'

"Stop," I screamed. "Please stop! It's too much! Camilla, make them stop!"

Camilla didn't respond. Nobody

stopped. The chanting kept going. Camilla placed her cool hand on my forehead and left it there, silent. She didn ftell me it would be over soon or that I was all right, because it wasn't.

I tried to block out the pain, but there was no escape. I squeezed my eyes shut, digging my nails into my palms. I thought of Notan at the edge. Dremembered his promise and tried to hold on to that while the pain washed over me.

'I'm here,' my wolf whimpered, weaker and weaker. 'I'm still here. I'm still...'

And then she was gone.

The emptiness she left behind was worse than the pain. For two seconds, that silence was all there was before everything faded to black. The last thing I heard was my own voice.

The world slipped away and the clearing vanished into darkness. I tried to hold on to something. My wolf, Nolan, even the pain, but everything slipped through my fingers.

Then, there was nothing.

Chapter 452

Talia's POV

I woke up on the ground with Nolan holding me.

"She's awake." He held my face in his hands, openly crying. "Camilla, she's awake. Talia, say something."

"I'm here," I said hoarsely. "Stop yelling."

He laughed shakily and hugged me tight.

I couldn't even lift my head. This wasn't like the full moon, when the change left me

shaky and worn out. This was quieter, but it hurt more. There was a hole in my mind where someone used to be.

"How bad is it?" Nolan asked.

"I can't feel my wolf at all."

"Camilla?"

"That's normal," she said. "Let me check on her."

She knelt next to me and reached for the green stone on my chest.

"Where did she get this stone?"

"Landon from Lonefur sent it," Nolan said. "Before we left Silverfang. He said it calms the mind and helps unborn pups stay safe."

"He was right about what it does, but wrong about when she needs it," Camilla said as she took the chain from my neck and handed the stone to him. "Right now, her wolf has been separated from Talia to keep her and the babies safe during birth. After the babies are born, we'll return her wolf so she can heal."

"Then I will return the stone," Nolan said.

"No, keep the stone. It is far more powerful than that Alpha believes," Camilla said. "Put it back on her when she has been reunited with her wolf. It will help with the healing."

"Understood," Nolan said as he placed the stone in his pocket.

"Now, lift her head."

Nolan did, and she put a second chain around my neck, letting the pendant fall where the first had been.

The new stone was purple, about the size of a walnut, and warm against my skin.

As soon as it touched me, the pain eased, like someone lifting their hand off a bruise.

"Oh," I whispered.

"Better?" she asked.

"Much better. What is it?"

"Your wolf," Camilla said, sitting back. "The part we took out of you is in that stone. She's not gone, not hurt, and not far away, no matter how it feels. She's just asleep."

For a moment, I couldn't breathe. The hollowness within me grew with every word, draining what little strength I had left. Cold fear pressed on my ribs and made my eyes burn. I have always felt her there, steady and wild, comforting me. Now there existed only silence, and it hurt. I wanted to beg Camilla to undo it and give her back, no matter the risk.

Nolan stared at the pendant. "And you can bring her back?"

"When the babies are born, we open the stone and give her back. That's the second ritual, and the whole point of the first," Camilla explained. "That's why the necklace never comes off, not to wash, not to sleep, not for a second. If it breaks, we lose her."

"It won't come off," I promised.

"Make sure it doesn't. I've had this conversation before, and it went badly."

"Can she hear me in there?" I asked.

"Try and see."

I reached for her like you test a sore tooth, careful and expecting it to hurt. Nothing.

I tried again.

Then, so faint I nearly missed it, from further away than ever before: 'I am here.'

I started crying again.

'Are you okay?'

'Yes, I'm just tired,' she murmured. 'Don't fuss. The pups are fine; I can feel them both. Go to sleep, Talia.'

"She answered," I told Nolan. "She sounds awful and really far away, but she answered me."

"Good." He pressed his forehead against mine and stayed there. "That's good."

I forced myself to look up at the

group around us. All ten looked just as exhausted as felt Two were

sitting, and one had a hand on

another's shoulder to keep upright.

"Thank you," I said. "All of you. I know that was hard. Ten of you were out here half

the night for a wolf you didn't even owe anything to."

Camilla smoothed my hair back, a grandmotherly gesture that almost made me cry again.

"You were brave, child," she praised me. "Braver than most who lie down in that circle."

"But I begged you to stop."

"You did, but you also did not try to flee which would have made everything worse for all of us," Camilla said as she stood up with Hattie's help.

"Take her home and put her to bed," Dalila ordered. "Now, Alpha. Before she falls asleep on the grass, you have to carry her uphill in the dark."

Nolan got his arms under me and stood up with me in his arms like I weighed nothing.

"You're both staying with us until you

give birth, Talia," Hattie said. "We

need to check on your vita

day. Sometimes the separation. causes complications, and if necklace moves someone needs to fix right away. This is the only way to keep you and the pups safe until the birth."

"This isn't up for negotiation," Dalila added firmly.

"We weren't going to," I said. "Thanks for taking us in with no warning."

Hattie rolled her eyes and laughed.

"Stop thanking us. We're friends, right? You don't thank a friend for a bed. If you get bored in the next two months work on names. You'll want them picked before the babies show up*

"Everyone keeps telling me that."

"Well," Hattie said. "It might help you to know that when I checked on you this

afternoon, I sensed both of them clearly. There's a boy and a girl."

Nolan's head shot up so fast I felt it.

"One of each?"

"One of each," she confirmed.

I looked at him, and he looked at me, and for the first time in days, we were truly

smiling in delight.

Chapter 453

Talia's POV

“Elian,” I said, watching as Nolan fluffed the pillows, keeping me propped up in bed. "For the boy. I told Leslie weeks ago, and I haven't changed my mind since."

“Elian's good,” Nolan said, turning the name over in his mouth. “And the girl?"

"Nyla," I replied.

He repeated the name softly to himself. "Nyla. Elian and Nyla.” He nodded slowly. "I like them both."

“Good, because I settled on them in a garden at Silverfang weeks ago, and I've been waiting for you to catch up."

I couldn't reach Solon or Leslie through the link with my wolf removed, so I wrote them two long letters instead, and Hattie promised to send them out first thing in the morning. I told them the coven had found a way to help. I didn't include the details. Some things shouldn't go on paper.

"You should go home," I told Nolan while sealing the letters. "Bloodmoon can't run by itself for two months."

"It doesn't have to. I've already arranged it," he said, looking entirely too pleased with himself. "Solon and Leslie are covering everything between them until we're back."

"Leslie is about to have a baby," I pointed out.

“Leslie said, and I'm quoting, that she doesn't need both hands to hold a baby nor hold a pen," Nolan replied.

I laughed until my chest hurt.

"She's going to complain about it every single day," I warned him.

"She's already started," he said with a sigh. "She sent a list of things she expects in

return when we get back."

"What's on it?" I asked.

"I'm not telling you because you'll agree to all of them," he replied, grinning.

The two months after that were slow.

I stayed at the coven with Nolan next to me, and one witch or another came into our room every day, checking me, asking questions, and writing things down. Nolan made the herb tonic himself, morning and night, and stood over me until I'd finished every drop, just as he'd promised Leslie he would. He never once let me talk him out of the second cup.

Each week, my wolf faded a little. As the pups grew, they took more and more of her. I tried not to let Nolan see it, but fear crept in at night. What would happen if she didn't return? I kept pushing that fear down, but it stayed in the back of my mind.

By the end of the second month, I had to work to find her at all. When I did, I could barely hear her.

'I need to rest now,' my wolf told me one evening.

'No. What's wrong? Do I need to take another dose of the tonic?'

'I am not leaving you. I am only going to sleep for a while,' she replied. Her voice

sounded very far away. 'I will come back when the pups are born.'

'Stay a bit longer.'

'I can't...'

I swallowed down my fear and said, 'Okay. Go rest.'

She didn't answer me again.

I stayed up most of the night, still hoping I could feel her, just like when you keep poking at a tooth that's gone. I knew this would happen for two months, but it hurt more than I thought it would.

The next morning at my checkup, Hattie pressed her hands to my stomach for only

a few seconds before announcing, "The pups will be born any time now."

"Are you sure?" Nolan asked.

"Yes, any moment now," Hattie said.

"How can you tell?"

"Because I've done this more times

than you've been alive," she said, already writing it down in my chart "They've moved down in the right position. Talia, you should have noticed you're breathing easier than you were last week."

Now that she mentioned it, I had. "You were right. I just hadn't paid attention to it.

"I want you in the hospital room from now on. No more wandering around the house."

"That's fine."

"It is not fine," Nolan said, his face going pale. "Talia, everything for them is at Bloodmoon."

"That's fine. We can use them when we get back," I said, shrugging.

"I picked out everything so they could have the best chances for proper development at birth. We need to get our warriors to deliver them here," he insisted.

"Nolan," I said, taking his hand. "They'll be a week old. We'll go home as soon as I can travel, and they'll spend the rest of their lives in that nursery you spent a month building."

He didn't look convinced, but he stopped arguing.

That afternoon, I sat by the window with Solon and Leslie's letters, which I'd been rereading whenever I had an hour to myself. Leslie had written four pages about her daughter and one line about the pack.

Solon had done it the other way around, and then, at the bottom, in different ink, he wrote that he thought about me every day and that he was ready for me to come home safe.

I read them both twice. Between the two of them, there wasn't a single line that was actually about pack business. I sat there with the pages in my lap, feeling more looked after than I had in months.

I got about halfway through Solon's again when the pain went through my middle.

It wasn't like anything I'd had before. The pain doubled me over the arm of the chair,

and the letters hit the floor.

Nolan crossed the room in an instant before I could straighten up.

"What is it, Talia?” he asked, rubbing my back.

I caught my breath and looked up at him.

"Nolan... I'm going into labor."

Chapter 454

Nolan's POV

Everything blurred together as I rushed Talia down the hall. I held her close while she struggled to breathe. Her body was stiff with pain. We burst into the hospital room. Hattie looked up, eyes wide. "She's in labor!" she said.

Hattie pressed a button for help and pointed at the bed. "Lay her down here, quick!" My hands shook as I set Talia down. Hattie checked her pulse and started getting things ready. She called out, "Dalila, go get Camilla and the others! We need everyone!"

"Stay with me," Talia pleaded while she reached for my hand.

Hattie pushed me toward the door. "Stop. She needs me to stay," I said, trying to resist.

"No, you can't stay here," she said. "If you're here, it'll distract her from giving birth and it could mess up the rebirth ritual. You have to wait." She looked at me seriously. "Trust us, okay?"

I wanted to argue, to beg Dalila to let me stay, but the look in her eyes told me it was over. My heart hurt. I nodded, stepped back, and let the door close behind me. Dalila waited in the hallway with me, but I still felt alone.

We stood in the hallway and listened to Talia cry out in pain. Every time I heard her, I winced. I grabbed a chair and squeezed the armrest. I just wanted to be with her, to tell her it would be okay, to hold her hand. I felt useless.

Dalila tried to make small talk. "Did you eat today?" she asked. I shook my head, barely listening. My mind drifted to Talia's nightmares. She had told me so many times how scared she was that something would go wrong. I tried not to think about it, but I couldn't stop.

"Nolan, are you listening?"

"Dalila, this is not helping. Just be quiet."

"Alright grumpy pants," Dalila muttered.

Time dragged on. I counted Talia's cries, hoping they would slow down, but they didn't. Every time I thought things were calming, another cry cut through the air. I felt myself break a little more each time.

Then, all at once, it was quiet. I looked at Dalila, fear rising in my chest. She reached out and squeezed my shoulder. Suddenly, we heard something new. The sharp, tiny cries of babies filled the hall. Relief hit me so hard I almost collapsed. Then pain stabbed through my chest. My wolf howled inside me. 'She's gone! She's gone!' he cried.

I wanted to run into the room and shove the witches aside, but I fought the pain. This was part of the plan. Talia had to die for a moment, and then they would bring her back.

'Calm down. They are going to bring her back,' I told my wolf. He didn't reply and whimpered as he retreated to the back of my mind.

Hattie came into the hallway, looking tired but happy. She was carrying two little babies, both bundled up. "They're healthy," she said, handing the twins to Dalila. Dalila's face lit up as she cradled them. They were tiny, pink, and perfect.

I I reached out, needing to touch them and make sure they were real. Dalila smiled at me. "Let's take them to the nursery she said I followed her not wanting to look away from my babies, not even for a second. For a moment, I forgot about Talia. I was so happy I could barely breathe.

Dalila tucked the twins into their cribs and fussed over them for a second. Then she turned to me, serious. "The rebirth ritual is starting now she said You can't go back in

there until it's finished."

I nodded, my stomach in knots. I wanted to run to Talia and tell her how beautiful the babies were, but I had to wait.

I tried to focus on the twins, counting their fingers and toes. But my mind kept going back to Talia and that closed door. I paced the hallway, getting more anxious every minute.

"She's strong," Dalila said. "Talia will make it. She's the Alpha Queen after all." I wanted to believe her, but there was no sound from behind the door. I stared at the clock. The minutes crawled by, then an hour, then two.

Finally, the door opened. Camilla came out, tired and worried. My heart jumped and

I could barely speak.

"Is Talia okay?" I asked.

Camilla hesitated, then shook her head. "Her wolf has been returned to her body,"

she said softly. "But Talia isn't awake. She's in a dormant state."

"For how long?" I asked.

"I don't know," Camilla replied. "Some never wake up. We will have to give her time."

I felt like I'd been punched in the gut. "Why didn't you tell us this before?" I demanded.

"Because you would have stopped her from going through with it. That would have endangered her and the babies' lives," Camilla said.

"That wasn't your decision to make!"

"It was, once you accepted my help. I promised you I'd do everything in my power to save them both, and I did," Camilla said. "I have no regrets."

I rushed past Camilla into the room. Talia lay on the bed, pale and still. The purple

gem at her neck was black now. I grabbed her hand. It was cold and lifeless.

I dropped to my knees and started crying. "Please, Talia. Wake up. Please. I need you."

That's when it hit me. Talia's nightmare had come true. She wasn't afraid of dying. She was afraid she might never wake up.

Chapter 455

Nolan's POV

After hours by Talia's side, numb from crying, I sat on the edge of her bed with my head in my hands. The room was quiet except for the occasional cry from one of the twins in the nursery. I took a shaky breath and forced myself to calm down. I couldn't fall apart now.

Camilla came in. She sat down across from me, her face gentle but serious. “The coma is a side effect of the ritual. It happens, sometimes, when the body and spirit have been through so much," she said.

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?” I asked.

Camilla paused before saying, "I thought it would help if you understood why it was happening."

'Snapping at her will not help us,' my wolf scolded.

I looked up, pain twisting in my chest. "Is there anything we can do?"

Camilla shook her head slowly. "Right now, all you can do is wait. Talia's wolf needs time to recover. Maybe, when the twins are older, their blood could help awaken her.

I know that sounds harsh, but it has worked before."

I nodded, swallowing the lump in my throat. "So we just wait?"

"Yes. Stay strong. Take care of your children. That's the best thing you can do for Talia right now," Camilla said. "We'll watch over her while you rest. Now, go. You need to sleep in a proper bed."

I hesitated at first but I could feel exhaustion getting the best of me. I exited the room only to be met by the witches who had conducted the ritual. They looked like I felt.

"Thank you. For everything: for saving the twins, for trying to save Talia,” I said.

Dalila smiled softly. "We did save Talia. She's a fighter. Don't give up now."

I nodded again, forcing myself to not argue with her optimism that was beginning to become annoying. I needed to focus my energy on the twins. They needed me. Talia needed me to be strong. I promised myself I would not give up hope.

The next three days went by quickly. I stayed with Talia almost nonstop, talking to her even though she never answered. Sometimes I brought the twins and put them next to her, hoping she knew they were there. The witches checked on her a lot, gave me quiet support, and reminded me to eat and rest, even if I didn't feel like it.

On the fourth morning, Dalila came in carrying a bag. "It's time to go," she said quietly. "You can't stay here any longer."

"You're kicking us out?" I asked.

"You can not hide away from the world forever. You must face this head on and accept your new reality," Dalila explained. "And Alpha Solon said he would invade if we did not return his sister."

I chuckled and said, "That sounds like him. He doesn't mean it."

"Either way the people Solon arranged are waiting outside the forest. They'll help you get home safely."

I packed our things slowly. I bundled up the twins and wrapped Talia in a warm blanket, laying her carefully on a stretcher the witches provided. Outside the house, a car and two helpers waited, sent by Solon. I turned to Dalila and Hattie. "Thank you again," I said.

Hattie hugged me. “Come back if you need us. And keep believing. Talia's not gone, she's just sleeping."

I nodded and turned away, following the men to the car with the twins in my arms. The drive out of the forest was quiet. I sat in the backseat, watching the trees blur past, Talia's hand in mine.

We reached Silverfang in the

afternoon. Solon and Leslie werez waiting outside, worry etched on their faces. As soon as they saw us Leslie hurried over is she awake?" she asked, her voice trembling.

I shook my head. "She hasn't woken up since the ritual. Camilla said her wolf needs time to recover. She mentioned that the

twins are older, their

fright

help wake her."

Leslie's brow furrowed, but she nodded. "If there's even a small chance, we have to try. Talia would do anything for her kids. We can't give up."

Solon put a hand on my shoulder. "We're here for you. Whatever you need."

We settled inside, and I explained everything that had happened. Leslie burst into tears, and Solon looked like he wanted to rip things apart.

"We have to tell the other Alphas," Solon said after a moment. "We can't hide this from them. They need to know what happened and who's in charge now. Are you ready for that?"

To be honest, no, I wasn't ready. I never intended to become the Alpha King. It seemed like fate was forcing my hand again.

"Nolan, we can wait a few more days."

"No, let's do it now and get it over with," I said.

That evening, we gathered all the pack Alphas for a meeting. I looked around the room and spoke clearly. "Talia is in a coma after giving birth. I'll be acting as Alpha King until she recovers."

There was a stunned silence. Then a wave of questions.

"What caused it?" someone asked.

"Is there any hope?" another demanded.

“Talia had a high-risk pregnancy. Her wolf was drained due to the pregnancy and childbirth. She needs time to heal. Until then, we wait and stay strong," I explained.

The room was quiet for a long moment. Finally, one of the older Alphas spoke up. "You have our support. But are you sure you want to leave Silverfang now?"

"Thank you, but my family needs to be home. Bloodmoon is where we belong. I need to take Talia and the twins back."

Several Alphas tried to change my mind, urging me to stay in Silverfang. "It's safer here," Colin said.

"You shouldn't travel with Talia in her condition," Henry added.

"Thank you for your concern, but I have to take my family home. That's what Talia would want,” I said firmly, and the Alphas relented.

After the meeting, Leslie hugged me tightly. “If you need anything, you call, okay? We love you all."

Solon shook my hand, his grip strong. "You know you can always come back here. You're family. You don't have to do this alone."

"I know, but Bloodmoon is our home. Going home may cause her to wake up," I said.

With their help, I packed our things and left for Bloodmoon.

Chapter 456

Nolan's POV

When we got back to Bloodmoon, I took Talia straight to the best hospital room. The nurses got her settled while I pulled the doctor aside.

"She needs to be watched all the time-IV fluids, check on her often, everything," I said.

"We'll take good care of her," the doctor promised.

I sat next to Talia's bed and brushed her hair away from her face. She was pale, her breathing slow but steady. I bent forward and whispered, "Hey, Talia. We're home. The twins are safe, and I will take care of them until you wake. Can you hear me?"

I fought back the tears. Seeing her like that hurt. Once she was settled, I picked up the twins, one in each arm. They cooed and reached for my face. I tried to smile at them.

"You two are tougher than you look, huh?" I whispered.

At the door, I told them, "Your mom's going to be okay. She's just sleeping for a while."

I wasn't sure if I was saying it for them or for myself. Back at the packhouse,

everything looked even emptier. I put the twins in the nursery and soon heard voices in the hallway.

Clara burst in first. "Are those the twins? Oh my god, they're beautiful!"

Annie followed, covering her mouth as she started to cry. "They're perfect, Alpha Nolan!"

Della smiled, her eyes bright. "Let me see them!" Marco stood in the doorway, grinning. "What are their names?"

"Nyla and Elian," I said.

Clara reached for one of the twins. "Can I hold baby Nyla?"

"Of course," I said, gently giving her the baby. Annie wiped her tears, laughing and crying at the same time.

For a moment, everyone was happy. Then Della's smile faded when she noticed I was alone.

"Nolan, where's Talia?" she asked. "She hasn't responded to any of my mind links. Did she hide here to prepare a surprise or something?"

No one answered. Clara's expression turned worried, Annie's smile faded, and Marco stepped closer to Della.

I swallowed nervously, feeling everyone's eyes on me. "Talia's in the hospital."

"You said you'd keep her safe, Nolan. What happened?" Della demanded.

"Calm down, Della. Don't upset the babies," Marco stated.

"What happened to Talia?" Della repeated in a lower voice.

"The coven's ritual saved Talia from dying, but her wolf was so weak that Talia fell into a coma," I said.

Clara almost dropped Nyla in shock. Della took the baby from her and told Clara to sit down. "A coma?" Clara repeated. "When...when will she wake up?"

I nodded. "The doctors aren't sure. They say until her wolf has fully recovered, but we don't know when that will happen. For now, we just let her rest."

Clara covered her face and sobbed. Annie just stared blankly at the floor as tears rolled down her face. Marco looked at me with pity and said through the mind link, 'I'm so sorry, Nolan.'

Della put a hand on Clara's shoulder. She looked like she was on the brink of tears, but she composed herself and said. Hey, don't cry Talia's not gone. This is better than losing her. Remember, we thought she might not make it."

"How is this better?" Clara asked.

"She's just sleeping. She'll wake up when she's ready," Della said. "For now, we must focus on the Bloodmoon heirs."

"Can you help me with the twins?" I asked. "I can't do this alone."

Clara wiped away her tears and managed a small smile. "Of course, Alpha. It will be

my honor, and it would have been what Talia wanted."

Annie sniffed and nodded too. "I don't know why you're even asking, Alpha. I will help too."

After everyone left, the packhouse felt huge and empty. I carried the twins through the halls, listening to their soft breaths and little noises Every room reminded me of Talia, her fangh her footsteps, the way she teased me. Now all of that was góne.

As I walked, my wolf asked, 'Why does it feel so empty without her?'

'Because she was our heart,' I answered. 'She made this place feel like home.'

My wolf sighed. 'We need her, Nolan.'

'I know,' I said. 'But we have to be strong for the twins.'

I took the twins to Talia's favorite chair and held them close. I looked out the window while the sun set behind the trees. The sky was red and purple, but it didn't look pretty tonight. It just felt lonely.

"Do you think she can hear us?" I asked, looking at the twins.

'I hope so. Keep talking to her anyway,' my wolf said.

The twins started fussing, so I walked around the room, humming Talia's Jullaby. It felt strange doing it alone, but it calmed them and me l told them stories about their mom, how brave and kind she was how much she loved them even before they were born.

The truth was, I was scared. I had no idea how to be a dad, especially on my own. I kept thinking I'd turn around and see Talia in the doorway, rolling her eyes and telling me I was doing it wrong. But she wasn't there.

'You're not alone,' my wolf said. 'We have our pack. They will help us.' I knew that, but it wasn't the same as having your mate.

When the twins finally fell asleep, I dropped onto the couch and broke down. All the fear and stress I'd been holding in just came out, and I cried harder than I had in years. Harder than when my father died.

I missed Talia so much it hurt. After everything she'd been through, it just didn't seem fair.

Chapter 457

Nolan's POV

Five years went by in a blur. Talia was still in the hospital. Every morning, after getting the twins ready for school, I visited her before going to my office. I held her hand and talked about the kids or the weather, hoping she could hear me. After that, I dove into work. Everyone in the pack knew I was a workaholic again.

One afternoon, while working through a pile of paperwork in my office, there was a knock at my door. Before I could say anything, the door flew open. Elian and Nyla stood in the doorway with their backpacks. Elian was already grinning, like he knew he was about to get in trouble. Nyla looked sweet and a little nervous, just like always.

"You two know you're supposed to wait for permission before coming in," I said, raising my eyebrows. My wolf's voice was amused in my mind: 'Elian's just like you were, always breaking the rules. Nyla's the little angel.'

"Sorry, Dad," Nyla said quickly. “I told Elian we should knock and wait, but he just barged in."

Elian just shrugged, not the least bit sorry. "We knocked! And besides, you never care about that stuff with us."

I gave him a look. "That's not the point."

Elian flopped down on the couch like he owned the place, while Nyla stood quietly by the door.

"So, why aren't you two at school at this hour?"

Elian rolled his eyes. "School is so boring. We already know most of the stuff. I'd rather learn something useful, like how to fight. Marco says I have good reflexes."

Nyla nodded. "And our birthday is next week. Uncle Colin said our gifts would help us train. Elian thinks they're weapons."

Elian grinned. "Yeah! So we want to start practicing now. Please, Dad?”

I shook my head. "You're not getting weapons. You're five."

Elian pouted. "But Uncle Colin promised!"

My wolf snorted in my head. 'I was joking before, but he really is just like you were. headstrong, and always pushing the limits.'

I sighed. “Look, here's the deal. No weapons for now." The twins groaned in unison.

"If you want, you can train with Uncle Marco after school. Just don't keep him too

long. He has to look after Della, and she's pregnant, remember?”

Nyla's face lit up. "Thank you, Daddy!"

Elian was already on his feet, fist-pumping the air. “Yes!”

They both ran out, leaving the door wide open. I couldn't help but smile.

Before I could get back to work, Marco poked his head in. "You know they're going

to pester me about training and hunting rogues now, right?"

I laughed. "Just keep them away from anything sharp. And if Elian starts getting wild, tell him I said he can run laps instead."

Marco grinned. "You know I will." His grin dropped as he looked at me. "Are you doing okay?"

I just shrugged, not sure what to say. "You know how it is," I mumbled.

"You need to get out and stretch your legs," Marco said. "Have you even been on a run?"

I gave him a look because he already knew the answer. It just didn't feel right running without her.

"We could spend the night drinking like we used to. Just give it some thought," Marco suggested.

"Thanks, Marco. I mean it," I said, rubbing my forehead.

Marco paused for a second, then said, "And don't worry about the twins. They're good kids. You're doing right by them and by Talia."

"Some days I just wish there was more I could do," I admitted.

"We all do. The whole pack's behind you, you know that, right?" Marco replied.

"Yeah," I murmured, "I know."

Marco clapped me on the shoulder. "Alright. I'll go see what kind of trouble Elian's getting into now."

I managed a small laugh. "Good luck with that."

After Marco left, I turned back to my desk. The calendar caught my eye, and I frowned. The twins' birthday was circled in bright red.

Every year, on their birthday, we did the same thing. First thing in the morning, we went to the hospital. The doctor drew blood from Nyla and Elian and injected it into Talia. Camila thought it might help We all

hoped it would bring her back. Their birthdays should be spent on celebrating, not wondering whether they could revive their mother.

My mind drifted back to the first time we tried it. I could still hear Nyla's small shaky voice Daddy Wilhit hurt?" I crouched down ather level and squeezed her hand. “Just a little pinch, sweetheart. I'll hold your hand the whole time."

Elian had tried to act tough, even puffing out his chest and saying, "I'm But when the doctor

not scho

came in with the needles, he'd

grabbed my arm and held onnet?

tight..

remembered whispering, it's okay. I'm right here."

Nyla hid her face in my side while the doctor worked quickly. Elian watched, looking stoic, but I could feel his whole body shaking. When it was over, I hugged them and told them both how brave they'd been.

Now, after five years, they barely even flinched when the doctor brought out the needles. Not only had they gotten used to it, but they were ready to try again. It made my heart ache for them.

"Please, Moon Goddess. Please let this be the year she wakes up," I prayed.

Chapter 458

Nolan's POV

The night before the twins' birthday, I could not fall asleep. I kept thinking about Talia and how she had never had the opportunity to celebrate with them. Five birthdays, and she missed every one. My wolf tried to comfort me. 'She'll wake up,' he said. 'She has to.'

I must have dozed off, because the next thing I knew, Nyla and Elian were climbing onto my bed, both grinning and bouncing.

“Dad, wake up!” Nyla said, tugging on my arm. “It's our birthday!"

Elian flopped down next to me. "Come on, Dad! We want to open presents!"

I groaned, rubbing my eyes. It was still dark outside but the chirping of the birds signaled the sun would be rising any minute. "It's too early. Go back to sleep."

Nyla giggled. "Miss Clara and Aunt Annie are making your favorite breakfast. They also got fresh roses for Mom."

"I can eat later," I grumbled.

"Get up! Get up!" they chanted as they jumped up and down on the bed.

"Fine. Fine. I'm getting up," I groaned.

Once I got up and dressed, we went to the kitchen. Clara and Annie had made pancakes, bacon, sausage, fruit, and even a small cake. The twins ate, giggling and sneaking extra syrup. Fresh bright red roses sat on the table.

“Nyla, did you decide which games you're playing first tonight?" Annie asked as she refilled Nyla's glass with orange juice.

Nyla nodded excitedly. "Pin the tail on the donkey! And the cupcake tower. I want to win this year."

Elian rolled his eyes and said, "You always say that, but you make it fall over because you laugh too hard."

"Everyone's a winner with cupcakes. Just don't get frosting everywhere this time," Clara said.

Elian grinned. "No promises."

“Maybe after the party we can all go for a run," Annie suggested. "If the weather holds up, we could stop by the lake."

Nyla looked hopeful. "We never go on runs! Dad can we?"

I nodded. "Of course. Just for your birthday."

Clara squeezed my shoulder as she passed with the plates. "This might be the year, Alpha. I can feel it."

I nodded, not trusting myself to say anything. Annie quietly wiped away a tear, then went back to helping Nyla with the flowers.

As we ate, Nyla talked about all the games she wanted to play at the party. Elian kept interrupting, begging to open just one present before we went to the hospital. "Just one, Dad! I won't ask for more."

I shook my head, smiling. "We have a rule, remember? Hospital first, then party, then presents."

Elian groaned but didn't argue; he just piled more strawberries onto his plate while Nyla quietly arranged flowers for Talia.

"Do you think Mom will like the flowers?" Nyla asked.

I smiled at her. "She'd love them. Roses are her favorite."

Elian, with his mouth full of pancakes, asked, "Are we going to the hospital now?" "Yes, right after breakfast," I said.

After breakfast, I took the twins to the hospital. We walked into Talia's room. The twins ran to her. The doctor came in, greeted us, and set everything up.

Nyla squeezed Talia's hand. "Hi, Mom. Happy birthday to us! We brought you flowers and we have to give you an update about school. And yes, Elian got in trouble again."

Elian grumbled, "She always tells the teacher when I mess up."

Nyla stuck out her tongue. "That's because you're always getting into trouble."

Nyla talked to her mom about her favorite book and the girl who sat next to her in class as the doctor took her blood. She didn't even flinch Elian sat at the edge of the bed poking falia's hand ande pretending not to worry as the doctor took his. The doctor took blood from both twins and injected it into Talia's arm.

Ten minutes passed. Nothing happened. Talia still did not wake up.

My heart sank. I tried to keep my face calm for the twins, but it hurt. 'Maybe we give

it more time,' my wolf said.

I started gathering our things. 'No. We focus on the twins,' I said, not wanting to think about this anymore.

“Come on, you two. Let's go. The party will start soon," I said to the twins.

Nyla suddenly gasped. "Wait! Dad, I think her fingers just moved!"

Elian shook his head. "No way. You're just imagining it."

"I'm not! I really saw it!" Nyla said. She looked at me, hoping I'd believe her.

I wanted to believe her so much, but I couldn't let myself hope. Not yet. "Maybe, sweetheart. We can look again after the party, okay?"

Nyla nodded, but I could see her disappointment. Elian shrugged, already looking for a way out.

We left the hospital and walked to the party.

The twins had been the princess and

prince of Bloodmoon since they were born. The whole pack adored them Their birthday was never merely an afternoon. Every year it started in the morning and lasted welf after dark. Every year it got bigger, because nobody in this pack could resist spoiling them.

The twins cheered up as soon as we got there. They saw Kaya, Solon and Leslie's daughter, and ran over to hug her.

Clara and Annie had come ahead with the balloons and were still tying them to the

chairs. Solon ducked over, wearing a goofy hat, and waved.

"Hey, birthday twins! Who's ready for the treasure hunt?"

Elian perked up. “Me, Uncle Solon! Are there real prizes this time?”

Solon gave him a mock frown. "Only if you can solve the riddles. Think you're up for

it?"

Nyla elbowed her brother. “I am! Last year, you got stuck on the first clue."

Elian stuck out his tongue. "Not this year. I've been practicing."

Leslie laughed from behind him. “I'll be the judge. You two better play nice."

Annie raised her hand. "Can grown-ups join the hunt?"

Solon grinned. “So long as you promise not to steal all the chocolate."

When the party kicked off, Kaya and the twins brought all the kids together for games, running races and seeing who could make the tallest cupcake stack without if falling. Nyla

fight there helping

the little ones and cheering for everyone. Elian saw every game as a

challenge, always pushing Kaya to

compete. I stood back and watched

them run and laugh, full of energy

and joy.

I walked over to Solon and Leslie by the snack table.

Leslie smiled at me and asked, "How's Talia doing today?"

Chapter 459

Nolan's POV

I shook my head. "No, nothing new," I said quietly.

There was never much to say. Leslie always asked about Talia, if anything was different. Every time, the truth was the same: nothing had changed.

"You've done a great job with them," Leslie said. "Whatever else is on your mind, remember that."

"Honestly, they practically raised themselves," I replied, trying to smile.

But the truth was, raising them hadn't been easy, no matter how I tried to downplay it. There were nights when the twins cried for their mother, and all I could do was sit there feeling guilty and helpless. I tried to hide that from everyone, but Leslie saw through it.

"They didn't, and you know it," Leslie said, touching my arm. "When Talia wakes up and sees those kids, she'll be so glad it was you here."

Leslie squeezed my hand, just for a second. "You're too hard on yourself, Nolan."

I managed a crooked grin. "Aren't we all?"

She snorted. "Not like you."

"I hope you're right," I murmured.

Marco walked up the hill toward us, his hand hovering behind Della, ready to catch her if she stumbled.

"There you are!" Della called out. "Did you see the cake yet?"

"Yeah, I saw it. That thing's as big as a door," I said, grinning.

Della grinned, her cheeks flushed with pride. I could tell organizing the party meant everything to her. Even Marco, who pretended to complain, secretly didn't mind. Talia was Della's best friend. Making the cake and making sure the event went well was the least she could do while Talia recovered.

"It's five tiers, and it took me two days," Della said as Marco helped her sit down. "And I sorted the gifts. There are almost a hundred. They're stacked by the tables in the order people got here."

"Della, you're seven months pregnant," I reminded her.

"Trust me, I know," Della replied, rolling her eyes.

I turned to Marco. "Why is your wife making a five-tier cake and counting a hundred

presents at seven months along?" I asked.

"Because I told her not to," Marco said with a shrug.

"Don't blame him. He tried," Della said, waving it off. "I wanted to do it, Nolan. They're my niece and nephew, and I've made their cake every year since they were born. I'm not stopping now just because I'm pregnant."

Leslie laughed at them both. "Give up, you two. Della's never stayed still in her life, and she's not about to start now."

After that, guests really started showing up. The field filled up just like it did every year. Right in the middle of everything, Elian shouted so loud I heard him from fifty feet away.

Elian's voice rang out, pure excitement UNCLE COLIN!" He'd been waiting for this moment all morning, barely able to stand stilf during the preparations. The twins looked forward to Colin's arrival more than any other part of the celebration. For them, his visits were a sign that the day would be special. Colin had arrived.

My son ran straight at him. Colin scooped him up and spun him around like he weighed nothing.

"Elian does this every year," I said. "Never greets me like that, though."

"That's because you're the one who makes him do homework," Leslie said, grinning.

Colin set Elian down and pulled out

gifts. Both twins came running. He

wasn't family. He was just an old friend who had always been there. Still, the twins called him Uncle CoSomehow he always brought exactly what they'd been wishing for, even the things they'd never told anyone about. I live with them and I still sometimes get it wrong.

This year, it was a pair of leather training bracers for each of them. The Moonbrook emblem was stamped on the outside, and underneath, their names in small, careful letters.

Nyla went completely quiet. "That's my name," she finally said.

"It is," Colin said, crouching to her level. "I had them made in Moonbrook: That's the Moonbrook emblem above it. Here, let me shows you. They go on like this. Snug, but not too tight." He gently turned her wrist over.

He helped them put the bracers on, one at a time, checking every strap and making sure they could move their fingers. Elian started punching the air even before Colin was finished. Nyla kept staring at hers.

"Well," Leslie said, "he does look more like their dad than you right now."

"Excuse me?" I said, raising an eyebrow.

"I'm just calling it like I see it," Leslie replied with a smirk.

"I've raised those two by myself for five years," I said. "Every night feed, every fever, every nightmare."

"I'm just teasing," Leslie said gently. "You know you need to lighten up. Staying high strung like this is not good for your health."

“Maybe one day,” I sighed and then muttered, "He just shows up twice a year with presents."

Solon laughed so hard he had to put his cup down. "Let it go, Nolan. Nobody's taking your kids away." He clapped me on the shoulder. "Come on. Let's cut that huge cake."

"Nyla! Elian! Cake time!" I called.

They ran over with Kaya right behind them and half the other kids following. Della started clearing space at the long table. Clara went to grab the knife.

Henry and Arya showed up late, as usual. I waved and started toward them. The two lovebirds were still making each other late.

'They will have a pup of their own soon,' my wolf said.

Then something at the hall entrance caught my eye, and I stopped in my tracks.

A woman stood in the doorway, wearing hospital clothes.

She slowly looked around at the tables and faces. Confusion was written all over her. It was like she'd walked into the wrong room and didn't know where she was.

Talia was awake.

Chapter 460

Talia's POV

I stood at the entrance of the grand hall, searching for a familiar face.

But I didn't recognize anyone. The hall was full of people chatting loudly, and kids running around. I felt out of place.

"Excuse me, can I help you?"

A young maid walked up, holding a tray. I quickly turned and let my hair cover my face so she wouldn't recognize me.

"I think I took a wrong turn," I said. "Sorry. What's going on here?"

"It's the prince and princess's fifth birthday," she said, like I should know already. "Everyone from the pack is here."

"The prince and princess?" I repeated, confused. "I didn't know there was a birthday today."

She gave me a puzzled look. "You really didn't hear? It's all anyone's been talking about for weeks."

I tried to play it off, forcing a small smile. "Guess I must have missed it. I'm new around here."

"That.....makes sense," she said. "From your clothes, it looks like you just recovered. Yes, this is a huge event for Bloodmoon every year. You should go back and get dressed. We have many guests arriving shortly."

"Thank you," I said and walked away quickly. My mind raced with questions. This was a party for two kids I didn't know, in a pack that wasn't mine and a dangerous pack at that.

I slipped outside of the hospital and found a garden. I hid behind a hedge, hoping no one would see me.

The garden had rows of roses and gravel paths. It was bigger than the one at Silverfang. Some roses were deep purple, and white climbing roses went up the wall. They looked like my roses, or at least a variation of them.

'We've forgotten something,' my wolf said, her voice faint and distant.

'Are you okay? You sound awful,' I asked.

'I'm fine,' my wolf replied. 'Just tired like you.'

'What do you mean we've forgotten something?' I asked.

My wolf hesitated. 'I wish I could explain. It feels like a memory is missing, but I can't grab onto it. Can you remember anything else?'

I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to focus. 'No, I can't. Everything after last night at home is just blank.'

I sat on the edge of a flower bed, trying to remember what had happened since I woke up. Nothing made sense.

Ten minutes ago, I woke up in a hospital bed with an IV in my hand. The room was quiet except for the beep of machines. White walls made it feel even more unfamiliar. The rooms at Silverfang were a light yellow not white. I blinked, trying to remember how I got there, but all I felt was confusion and the sting of the needle.

'You're okay. We're okay,' my wolf reassured me.

'Where are we?' I asked.

'I don't know,' my wolf replied.

I lay there, staring at the ceiling, hoping something would make sense. I checked for injuries, but nothing was wrong. I wasn't hurt or in pain just tired in a way I couldn't explam. I was so wear it took five tries to stand up. Maybe I'd been asleep for days.

The thought made me uneasy. I tried to reach out to my father and Solon through a mind link, but got no answer. I couldn't stay and wait for someone to notice I was awake. I needed answers now.

I pulled out the IV and left.

Outside the hospital, I realized I wasn't in Silverfang before the maid confirmed it. I

was deep in their territory, far past the border. None of it made sense.

Just last night, I had dinner at home with my father and Solon in Silverfang. Had I been kidnapped?

Bloodmoon and Silverfang have never gotten along. We aren't at war, but Bloodmoon's Alpha didn't like my father and never came to any meetings or even addressed him as Alpha King properly as I heard. My father wouldn't have sent me, and Solon wouldn't let me come alone. No one would bring me here on purpose.

'Maybe we were kidnapped, but I doubt it,' my wolf said.

'That has to be the only reason, right? We're in a hospital. Maybe we were drugged.'

I said.

'Maybe we came for diplomatic reasons. Father did want you to start fulfilling your princess duties with Solon,' my wolf replied.

That made sense, but where was Solon? Father would not have let me do this on my own, not after just returning from Shadowclaw.

Sitting in a rose garden, waiting to see if I was right, just made me feel stupid.

'Then, let us go home,' my wolf suggested. 'We can figure out how we got here once we're safe.'

"

I avoided the main paths and took the long way around the buildings, moving quickly. Guards stood at the front gate, and others patrolled the wall. When the guards passed,4 slipped through an opening and ran for the trees.

"TALIA!"

A man ran toward me, fast. He was tall, dark-haired, and dressed in a suit. He ran

like reaching me was the only thing that mattered. I'd never seen him before. I felt scared but also strangely excited.

'He's not a threat to us,' my wolf said.

'Who is he?' I asked.

'I don't know,' my wolf answered.

For a moment I thought about running, but my body froze. I couldn't move. Some

part of me wanted him closer so I could figure out who he was.

He reached me before I could move. He didn't slow down or ask. He hugged me tight, pulling me into his chest.

“Talia,” he whispered into my hair, his voice trembling with a mix of disbelief and overwhelming emotion. “I can't believe you're awake."

I pushed him away and placed my hands between us.

He released me immediately, but he didn't step back. He just stood there, staring at

me with a look that was almost heartbreaking-like he was relieved to see me, yet terrified that I would disappear again.

His reaction left me completely confused. I had never seen someone look at me with so much happiness and sadness at the same time.

"Who are you?" I asked.