Barren Luna 471

Chapter 471

Nolan's POV

Talia waited until we were past the school gate.

"What does 'Sleeping Beauty Queen' mean?"

"A name people made up," I said.

"Who made it up?"

I didn't have a good answer for her. The twins walked ahead, and Nyla's shoulders slumped. She obviously knew the name and didn't want to talk about it.

So I put on a face.

"Nyla." I crossed my arms and tried to sound serious. "Come back here and tell me what's going on."

She came back at half speed, and Elian stepped in front of his sister, as he always had.

"Am I in trouble?" Nyla asked.

"That depends on what you say. Where did that name come from?" It's not hard to keep a straight face with a five-year-old, but it only works half the time.

She looked at her shoes, then at her mother, and it came out in pieces.

"Some kids said we didn't have a mom." Her voice got quiet. "One boy said the Queen died when we were born, and the adults just say she's asleep so we don't get upset."

Talia made no sound at all beside me.

"And what did you say?" I asked her.

"I told them she's not dead, she's just sleeping." Nyla lifted her chin. "I said a doctor comes to see her, and you wouldn't do that for someone who's dead. But they said 'asleep' is just what grown-ups say."

"They didn't believe you," I said.

"No." She scrubbed her nose with her wrist. "So they started calling her the Sleeping Beauty Queen. In the story, she isn't dead either, but it wasn't nice that they called her that."

"She told them a bunch of times," Elian said, standing in front of his sister again. "They just laughed and kept saying it at lunch. It is not their fault that they kept saying it."

"Nobody's saying she didn't," I told him.

"I told him if he said it again, I'd make him stop. Nyla said that would make things worse, so I didn't." He stared at the ground.

I crouched in front of them, not sure what to say. I just hugged Nyla and Elian, hoping they understood how much I cared.

Five years of those two telling me every small thing that happened to them, who sat where and what was for lunch. Neither of them had ever brought this one to me. Somewhere they'd decided not to tell their father.

I got an arm around each of them and pulled them in.

"You both did nothing wrong. Nyla, you were right to tell them. Elian, you only wanted to protect your sister. And you two were never without a mom. Now she's here with us."

Nyla got a fist into the front of my shirt and left it there.

"You were already sad about her," Nyla said. "So we didn't want to make it worse."

"That was never your job to worry about." I pulled back to look at them. "From now on, if anything like this happens, even if it's an adult, you tell us. We'll handle it together."

Elian shrugged, which is as close as he gets to agreeing out loud.

Talia got down beside me and put her arms around them both.

"I'm awake now, and I'm not going anywhere." She hugged them tight. "No one gets to talk about you or me like that again. If anyone tries, say your mom's the Queen of the Werewolves, and say it to my face."
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Nyla laughed into her coat.

We walked home with a child on each of her arms.

The house was loud all evening. They got her on the floor and played everything they owned. Nyla brought down the stuffed animals and made a guessing game of their names, and Talia got half wrong on purpose and let Nyla correct her. Then Elian had her at cards for an hour,

cheating badly, and she let him.

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I sat by the window with a cup of cold coffee, just watching them play. Talia's

laughter filled the house, and the kids couldn't get enough of her. I felt grateful, even

if I don't say that word much.

I'd spent five years working out how to hand those two back to their mother. In my head, it took weeks. I had no idea it would be instant.

'Their bond has always been strong,' my wolf said. 'Pulling from her wolf made it stronger.'

At 8:30, it was time for the pups to go to bed.

"Mom has to come tuck us in," Nyla called from behind the couch.

"Mom's tired. She's been up all day and tomorrow's busy," I said. "I'll read to you tonight."

"Just one book, please." Elian had her sleeve and pulled her toward the stairs. "Then, we'll sleep properly."

"Elian, your mom needs to get some sleep," I said.

"I don't mind," Talia said.

She had that tired look in her eyes she got at the end of a long day. It made me want to tell the kids to let her rest, even though I knew she wouldn't agree.

"You don't have to," I said.

"I know," she answered. "I want to."

"One thing before you go. Tomorrow we're picking the new Deputy Chief Warrior. Walden narrowed it down to three, and the final round's at two o'clock."

"I remember," she said.

"So just read one story and go to bed early," I told her. "You'll be busy all day tomorrow with everyone watching."

"Yes, Alpha," Talia said, and went up with a child in each hand.

'You're sulking,' my wolf teased.

'I'm going through the watch rotation.'

'You're sulking because the pups got her and you didn't.'

'I'm not jealous of my own pups.'

'Sure, you're not,' my wolf chuckled.

'I'm glad she went up with them,' I said. 'They need time with her.'

I watched the stairs long after they'd

gone. I wished she would look back them, even in just

and ask me to fol

for a moment. I went down to the

guest room, turned off the lights,

undressed, and got into bed.

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I stared at the ceiling, listening to Talia's muffled voice as she read the twins a story.

Talia's only been awake for several days. It's way too soon for me to want her to ask me to stay, but I wanted to anyway.

Chapter 472

Talia's POV

I woke up on the kids' bedroom floor, a stuffed rabbit pillow under my head.

One bedtime story turned into three. After the last one, Nyla wanted the rabbit voice again. I don't even remember falling asleep. When I woke up, it was morning, and someone had put a blanket over me.

I propped myself up and watched them sleep. They looked so peaceful. I realized I'd never really looked at them this closely before.

Nyla slept with her mouth open, her arm hanging off the bed. She looked just like me, with the same chin, eyebrows, and mouth. But I noticed she had Nolan's eyes. Elian was lying on his back with his blanket on the floor. He looked just like Nolan, except he had my eyes, I thought.

'Those two are going to be trouble,' my wolf said. 'She looks like you, he looks like him, and they're both going to break hearts.'

"They're five," I said.

'So? Didn't you have a little boyfriend at that age?' my wolf asked.

'No, because Solon wouldn't let me. And it was just child's play, anyway,' I replied.

I got up quietly so I wouldn't wake them, opened the door, and ran right into Nolan in the hallway.

He was already dressed, boots and all. He looked at me, then at my pajamas and the rug mark on my cheek.

"I fell asleep," I admitted.

"I know. I checked in at eleven," Nolan said.

"The story was just too relaxing," I explained, pushing my hair off my face. "I was

doing the voices, and then I guess I just passed out."

"Did you sleep okay? I can't imagine it was comfortable."

"Honestly, I slept better on the floor than in my own bed, which is weird," I explained.

'Only because he wasn't in the bed with us,' my wolf muttered.

Nolan had his coat over one arm, so I caught him before he could leave. "What should I wear this afternoon? The whole pack is seeing me for the first time in five years, and I have no idea what I even own. I don't want to get it wrong."

Nolan smiled, and I realized I hadn't really seen him smile before. It reached his eyes, and his eyes sparkled. I felt like I could get lost in them. I quickly turned away to hide my blush.

"Come with me," Nolan said, leading me down the hall to my room and opening a door I thought was the bathroom.

It was a huge closet, running the full width of the room and packed. Rows of dresses went so deep you couldn't see the back, with coats, shelves of shoes, and drawers under the rails. Everything looked like something I'd actually buy.

I paused, honestly amazed. Had he chosen all of this?

"Did you pick all this out for me?" I asked.

Nolan shook his head. "You picked most of it. Once I learned your style, I kept adding to your collection," he explained Nolan ran his hand along the hangers, not really looking. He clearly knew exactly what he wanted. NovelPeak.org

Nolan stopped halfway down and pulled out a black dress.

I could tell it was perfect even before he took it off the rack. It had long sleeves, a high neck, and a simple, fitted cut. It was exactly what I would've picked, and he found it in seconds.

I put it on, and it fit like it was made for me. Standing in front of the mirror, I realized I couldn't zip up the back by myself.

"Let me help," Nolan said from the doorway. "You'll never get that zipped up alone."

He walked over, grabbed the zipper at the small of my back, and slowly zipped it up. Even though he was zipping up my dress, it felt much more intimate than it should. "You have great taste," I said to the mirror, hoping my voice sounded normal.

"Everything here is your style," Nolan said, still standing close behind me. "You picked the house, the garden this dress and the one next to it. He put a hand on my hip. "You picked me too, so I think your taste is pretty solid."

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I'd been looking at the dress, but then I looked at him in the mirror, and that was a mistake.

Nolan was very handsome. I'd

noticed before, but it hadn't really hit

me until now with his hand on my

hip and me wearing a dress he picked out. It would be so easy to fall for him if I wasn't careful.
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My heart pounded so hard I was sure he could feel it through the dress.

Someone knocked on the bedroom door.

"Luna? Clara says breakfast is ready, and she'll bring it up herself if you're not downstairs in ten minutes. She means it."

"Thanks, Annie." Relief hit me. I slipped out from under his hand and was halfway across the room before she finished. "We'll be late. I'm coming!"

I grabbed my shoes and left, not daring to look back.

Annie was gone by the time I got to the landing, which was too bad because I wanted to thank her for saving me. If she'd been even a little later, I probably would've done something stupid, like kiss him.

'What is stupid about wanting to kiss our mate?' my wolf asked.

'We don't know him,' I replied.

'But we did and you wanted to kiss him,' my wolf argued. 'And he did too.'

'I know.' I said, hurrying down the stairs. 'Three days ago, he barely touched me.

Now he stands too close, finds excuses to help, and keeps saying things that have double meanings.'

'He's our mate,' my wolf repeated.

'It's like he's trying to seduce me,' I said.

'You're hopeless,' my wolf huffed.

Chapter 473

Talia's POV

The training ground sat behind the packhouse, down a hill and through some trees. Somehow, I knew the way before we even arrived.

My body just turned at the hill like it had done it a hundred times, and I knew where the fence would be before I saw it. I felt like I belonged here, even if I couldn't remember ever seeing it.

"What's wrong?" Nolan asked.

"I know this place."

"You should. You were down here most mornings." He held out his open hand and waited for me to decide to take it.

I took his hand, and we continued. I wasn't sure I was ready, but it was now or never. The pack needed to see me up and well. I needed to prove to them I was still their Luna.

Everyone was already there when we walked out of the trees, lined up along the fence and packed in tight. When they saw us, the crowd exploded. This wasn't polite clapping for someone who'd been sick; they were really cheering. I spotted a guy near the front with a kid on his shoulders. Both of them were waving at me.

'There was nothing to worry about. You need to learn to stop worrying,' my wolf said.

'They are cheering for the old me. The me that has her memories,' I said.

'They're cheering for you. You made them love and respect you, and losing your memories doesn't change that,' my wolf said.

Two chairs waited at the front. We sat, and Nolan leaned in so only I could hear him.

"Before we begin, remember that they don't know you lost your memory," he murmured, glancing at the crowd as if worried someone might overhear. His fingers tightened around mine to comfort me..

I kept my voice low. "So what do they think happened?"

"They think you got really sick after the twins were born and stayed that way for years. If people find out you are missing five years of your memories, they'll start questioning if you should still be Queen and Luna. We've had enough experience with those challenging our titles."

"So what do you need me to do?"

"Just sit with me for a couple of hours and look happy to be with your mate," Nolan said. "I know that's a lot to ask after only knowing me for three days."

"I can do two hours."

"You'll have to let me hold your hand in front of them."

"Nolan, you're already holding my hand."

Before Nolan could answer, Walden stepped onto the field with the three candidates.

The two men, Markus and Odin, were huge. Both were taller and broader than Walden, with one of them folding his arms to look even bigger The third, Lissa was much smaller, barely reaching the first man's chest. She looked everyone in the eye with calm confidence as if she had nothing to prove. NovelPeak.org

Nolan stood, and the whole place fell silent.

"Bloodmoon! Your Luna is here with you again," Nolan announced. "The healers say there's no medical reason for her recovery, so I'll tell you the truth: the Moon Goddess brought her back to us. We spent for

five

e years hoping and praying f this, and today, our prayers were answered!"

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The crowd erupted, and he let their cheers go on for a moment before raising his hand to quiet them.

"Walden's been doing both his job and his deputy's ever since Luna Arya left, and I should have filled the

spot sooner. These three an

final candidates. One of them will,

leave today as the new Deputy Chief Warrior," Nolan continued. "I want a fair fight. If you pull anything dirty, you're disqualified. Do you understand?" NovelPeak.org

"Yes, Alpha," the three candidates said in unison.

Nolan sat back down. I noticed the candidates getting ready in their own ways. Markus rolled his shoulders, Odin bounced from foot to foot, and Lissa took deep, calming breaths. Behind us, the crowd was already placing bets and calling out predictions.

"I'm betting on Odin. Lissa won't last for a minute."

"She shouldn't have been allowed to compete. It won't be a match. It'll be a

bloodbath. It's going to be unpleasant to watch."

"Right. She's nothing like Arya."

I leaned toward Nolan and said, “Lissa is going to win."

"Why do you say that?" Nolan asked.

"Those two are built to finish fast and probably think they will. Guys that big don't know how to last. She's half their size. Lissa needs to dodge and make them chase her until they're tired. The second guy might be a problem. He seems more nimble, but he'll tire out too."

Nolan smiled. “That's a great plan if that's what she's planning to do."

"I think she has," I said as I watched Lissa stretching.

“You should start the match,” Nolan suggested.

“Really?” I asked in surprise.

"They're your warriors as much as mine. Play the part. You wouldn't even need me

to tell you. You would have done it yourself.," Nolan replied.

I stood up and wiped my hands on my legs to calm my nerves.

The crowd went silent, waiting for me to speak. For a heartbeat, my mouth went dry

and my mind blanked. I felt Nolan's reassurance through the mate bond and

relaxed.

"Three of you made it this far, but only one will get the title," I said. "You've all earned your place. Now show us what you've got. Let the match begin!"

Chapter 474

Talia's POV

The competition was wild. People were shouting from the sidelines, and the energy in the air was electric.

Odin charged at Lissa right away and knocked her down in less than a minute. The guy behind us said, "That's it, she's done." But Lissa popped right back up. After that, she refused to stand still, making Odin look slow. He kept swinging and missing, getting more frustrated every second.

Halfway through, even the people who doubted her started cheering. By the end, everyone at the fence was rooting for Lissa.

Nolan took my hand.

Earlier, Nolan had quietly asked me to let him hold my hand in public, so the pack would see. I kept my hand in his and tried to act normal.

Then, the bond flared. I could feel Nolan's emotions and could almost hear his thoughts.

For two days, the bond had felt like a faint connection, barely there. Now it was so strong I could feel it in my chest. Every minute Nolan's hand stayed on mine, I couldn't think about anything else.

'Let him hold us,' my wolf whispered, needy and impatient. 'We need more than that honestly.'

'No, we don't. What is wrong with you?' I responded, ignoring the urge to lean into Nolan.

I thought about pulling my hand away, but I couldn't make myself do it. After a while, my thoughts just stopped making sense. I sat there in my black dress, feeling my face get hotter and hotter. I knew everyone could see.

Out on the ground, Lissa was winning.

Lissa was smaller than both guys, but she used it. She kept dodging, making them chase her until they were exhausted. Odin went down in the sixth minute and stayed down. Markus saw it all but still couldn't catch her. He lasted a bit longer, delivering a swift kick to Lissa's abdomen that almost knocked her out, but she recovered quickly. After tiring him out, Lissa grappled Markus until he tapped out.

Walden walked out into the arena and raised her hand over her head.

Nolan jumped to his feet, and so did I. We clapped with everyone else until my hands stung.

He waited for the noise to drop.

Nolan raised his voice, "Your new Deputy Chief Warrior is Lissa!"

We walked over to Lissa as the crowd got even louder. She was filthy, with blood on her face, but she stood up straight, beaming with pride. She'd spent all week telling herself she could do it, and now everyone else knew it too.

"I can't believe Luna was here to see this!" Lissa grinned. "I'm glad you were here."

"That was the coolest thing I've seen in years," I told her. "Not that I get out much, but still."

Lissa tried to laugh, but winced. "Okay, remind me not to take a punch from Odin again."

"Or a kick from Markus," I teased. “He almost sent you a mile out of the ring."

Nolan turned to Walden. "Let Lissa recover for a few days. After that, I want her doing real work in the position. I don't want her doing busywork. It is time for you to take a break and focus on just your role."

"Of course, Alpha."

"Let her help plan the patrols this week with you. If you have disagreements, bring them to me," Nolan instructed.

"You read my mind, Alpha. I was hoping you would say that. Lissa has already provided some much needed suggestions on how to improve the patrols," Walden explained.

"Thank you," Lissa said, voice shaky but proud. "I won't let you down."

Then we heard some noise near the trees. Marco was helping Della, who was super pregnant, down the hill.

"Did I miss it?" Della called out. "Lissa, please tell me you kicked their butts!"

"You missed it," I called back.

"Dammit!" Della yelled, and my lips trembled as I fought a laugh. “Did she at least win?"

"Of course she did," I said.

"I knew it!" Della let go of Marco and grabbed Lissa's hands. "I told everyone you'd win."

"She really did," Marco added, rolling his eyes fondly. "No one believed her."

"Everyone said you were too small. I said that's exactly why you'd win Della looked her up and down..

"Walden picked the right person, and

called it."

want everyone to 1.n

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I grabbed her elbow gently. "Della, you shouldn't be walking around in this heat. Not

when you're this pregnant."

"Don't start with me," she said, waving me off.

"Seriously, half the pack would have carried a chair out here for you," I said.

"I'm fine, and there's no way I'm

missing the first real excitement we've had in ages. And then I

somehow miss it anyway," Dellanet

pouted Then she stared at me and frowned "You're bright red. Are you okay?" NovelPeak.org

"It's just the weather," I mumbled.

"It's not that hot," Della said, putting her hand on my forehead. "You're burning up.

Are you feeling okay?"

Everybody within ten feet turned around, Nolan included.

Everyone nearby stared at me. For someone who was supposed to be Queen of the Werewolves, I really wanted to disappear.

"I'm fine," I blurted out, probably too fast. "Nolan, why don't you and Marco go celebrate with Lissa?"

'Don't send him away,' my wolf whined. 'He is our mate. He needs to stay with us.' "What about you?" Nolan asked.

"Someone has to make sure Della sits down. We'll join you in a bit."

Nolan gave me a long look, one that lasted longer than I wanted, then finally nodded

and walked off.

I sat down, finally. Della dropped into

the chair next to me. I pressed my hands to my knees, trying to stop them from shaking My heart was pounding, and it was becoming harder to breathe. An omega brought me water, and I drank it quickly, but it barely cooled me. NovelPeak.org

'Go to him,' my wolf urged. 'He'll make it better.'

Della leaned closer, sniffed me, and grinned like she knew a secret.

"That's not a fever," she teased, smirking.

"Don't even say it," I groaned.

"You're in heat. Aren't you?" Della said, still grinning.