Barren Luna 391

Chapter 391

Nolan's POV

The next night, Marco, Della, Talia, and I walked to the clearing together. Moss and leaves muffled our footsteps, making us nearly silent.

Della suddenly said, "I don't know why Arya insisted on this. Am I the only one bothered by this?" She glanced between us, her brow furrowed, clearly seeking agreement.

“No, Della, you're not the only one," Talia responded.

"She's going to be naked with your mate. It's mortifying. How can you be so calm?" Della asked. "I wish I had never come up with that stupid game."

"That's because Nolan and I talked everything through," Talia said. “I packed spare clothes for her, and I won't be too far away if something happens."

Della scoffed. "That doesn't mean he has to be the one to help her with her first shift." She pointed at me as she spoke.

"Arya's still young, Della. Having Nolan there will make it easier for her, even more than if Walden helped,” Talia said.

I knew I could use my Alpha aura to help Arya feel better, but I didn't want to. If it had been Maggie, I would have helped her without a second thought because she was like a sister. But Arya was a stranger, and I felt awkward, almost as if I was being pushed into it. The whole situation was uncomfortable.

'It's too late to regret it now. Be glad our mate is so understanding,' my wolf huffed.

'I kind of wish she wasn't so understanding,' I replied.

'She puts the pack before herself,' my wolf said. 'But that doesn't mean this isn't hard for her. We'll need to make it up to her later.'

We left the woods and saw a big bonfire lighting up the group of warriors. Walden stood with Arya, his arm around her shoulders. The warriors cheered for her, showing how much they cared. Arya had bonded with them quickly, and they definitely spoiled her.

Arya saw us and her face lit up. She hurried over, unable to hide her excitement. "I am so glad you came, Alpha, Luna. I am excited to see my wolf."

I nodded, but Arya looked past me to Talia, looking for approval. Talia smiled and nodded, encouraging her. Arya's face relaxed with relief.

"Will you run with me afterward?" she asked.

I hesitated, thinking about the pain she would go through. "You should rest after your shift," I said quietly.

"Running with you will help her," Talia said. "It will help her feel like she belongs."

I gave in and kissed Talia's forehead. "Fine. I'll see you soon," I promised.

Arya and I walked into the forest, leaving the celebration behind. Arya said nothing but I could tell she was nervous by the way she kept looking at me when she thought I didn't notice. Whatever she had on her mind, she didn't have the courage to say it and I didn't care to have a conversation with her. I wanted to get this over with and go back to Talia.

We came to a clearing where the grass looked silver in the moon and the dew soaked our shoes. The air was cool and smelled of moss and wildflowers and damp bark. Crickets sang in the distance and trees creaked and an owl called overhead.

"This is the perfect spot," I said.

"What do I do?" Arya asked.

"Get on all fours. It'll be easier that way," I instructed and Arya did so. I knelt beside her and noticed her breath was coming out in short fast bursts. "Slow your breathing. You're going to hyperventilate. Take deep breaths. Let your wolf come forward, Arya. Don't fight her. Let her move through you. She is not here to hurt you."

She nodded, but fear flashed in her eyes. The shift started, and Arya's body shook. She gasped, pain showing in every line of her face. She clawed at the ground, tears running down her cheeks. “Alpha, please,” she choked out. “Make it stop."

She gripped my hand, desperate as pain shook her small body. I let my Alpha aura flow out, trying to soothe her. "You're strong, Arya. You can do this," I told her. Slowly, her body shimmered, bones twisting and fur growing.

With one last, painful cry, Arya's wolf appeared. She was sleek, brown, and stronger than I expected. She lifted her head and howled at the moon, wild and triumphant. The pack answered her, their howls filling the night to celebrate Arya's first shift. Arya nuzzled by my side and said through the pack link, 'Thank you, Alpha.'

I stepped behind a tree and shifted. We ran into the night together. The forest blurred by, wind rushing in our ears. I felt Arya's laughter through the pack link, a pure joy at being alive and belonging. We ran for what seemed like hours, finally stopping by a stream. We were out of breath and happy. Arya shifted back first, and I turned away. I heard her bouncing with excitement before she said, "We should go swimming next."

'Get dressed,' I told her through the pack link before I took the clothes prepared for me and stepped behind a bush to shift back. When I came back, Arya was wearing a loose t-shirt and leggings. Her hair was damp with sweat. She smiled at me and repeated, “We should go swimming next."

'No,' my wolf growled, and I agreed. We needed to set clear boundaries. Doing anything more would be crossing a line. If these moments turned into something else, the pack would see it as disrespectful, and it could hurt my bond with Talia. "No. We should go back," I said firmly. "You need to rest."

"Okay," Ayra agreed, but then added, "Can we stay out here a little longer?"

Chapter 392

Talia's POV

Outside of the forest, I paced nonstop. Arya had howled an hour ago, but Nolan had still not returned. I reached out multiple times to Nolan and he never responded back. My mind raced. What if he's hurt? What if something happened between them?

Minutes turned into hours, and the wait became unbearable. Arya had shifted, as the howl told us, but they should have returned by now. A newly shifted wolf couldn't run for hours like this.

'I can't reach him,' my wolf whined. My worry grew, especially thinking of him alone with another she-wolf.

My worry for Nolan mixed with frustration at not being able to help. Walden walked over. "Luna, please calm down. There's nothing to worry about."

"Don't tell me to calm down," I growled. "They've been gone for hours. That's not normal and you know it."

Walden stepped closer and put his hand on my shoulder. He tried to reassure me, but his touch only made my wolf growl louder.

"The woods are safe. Arya is safe," Walden said. "I checked her myself, especially after what happened with Maggie." The memory of Maggie betraying the pack still haunted us all, a reminder of how quickly things could go wrong. "I was thorough, Luna."

His words felt empty. I couldn't shake the dread growing inside me.

"It wasn't enough," I said.

Tension hung between us, every word heavy with worry.

"What do you mean?" Walden asked.

"Just because she was checked doesn't mean she's safe for him," I said. "I'm done waiting. I'm going to look for them myself." Regret filled me. Nolan had a bad feeling about this, and I went along with it. I put the pack first. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I should have listened to myself.

Reluctantly, Walden relented. "We shouldn't alert everyone. We don't know what we're walking into."

"We?"

"I'm going with you," Walden said.

"We're all going," Della said, walking up with Marco beside her.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

Della's presence was both comforting and challenging. Her loyalty never wavered. "I told you I didn't like this from the start. I wasn't going to give you space, but I also wasn't going to be far if you needed help, and clearly you do," Della said. She walked over and pulled me into the hug that I realized that I really needed.

"We're going to find them, Luna. We won't stop until we do," Marco reassured. I nodded, and then we moved together into the forest, calling out, "Nolan! Arya!" Branches scratched our arms as we moved forward, every sound louder because of our worry. Walden went ahead, tense and alert. Della followed, her hand near her weapon and her lips tight. I kept glancing over my shoulder, sure someone was watching us.

We searched for what felt like forever until my wolf suddenly yelled, 'Stop!'

"Stop, stop," I said. Della, Marco, and Walden turned to me.

"What's wrong?" Della asked. "Did you see something?"

"My wolf told me to stop. She's picking up something here," I replied.

Walden knelt by some disturbed earth at the base of a huge oak. "There's something here," he said quietly, and I hurried over. He pointed to Arya's torn clothes on the ground. The sharp scent of a fresh wolf shift hit me, making my stomach twist. When a wolf shifts, it leaves behind a metallic, charged scent that lingers in the air.

"Keep searching! We're close," I said.

We kept going, urgency sharpening our senses. The scent led us deeper into the forest, toward the stream that marked the edge of our safe area and the deep woods.

What I saw at the stream made my blood run cold. Arya was sitting on top of Nolan, her hair wild and her clothes twisted. Nolan lay beneath her.

My wolf took over, and I shoved Arya aside, dropping to my knees next to Nolan. His skin felt cold as I grabbed his hand and checked his pulse. “Baby, baby, wake up,” I said, but Nolan didn't open his eyes.

I turned to Arya. "What did you do to him?" I snarled. My heart pounded as I

checked his pulse. It was slow, but it was there.

"I didn't hurt him," Arya said calmly as she stood up. "I saved him."

Arya's calm only made Della angrier. "Saved him from what?" she shouted, stepping forward. Della grabbed her by the throat.

"Get your hands off me. You should respect your Luna," Arya stated.

Della snarled and raised her fist to hit Arya, but Walden stepped in. He caught Della's fist and said, "Stop! Let her speak."

Della pushed Arya back and shoved Walden away from her. "You may like this little bitch, but I don't. She hurt my Alpha. She has less than a minute to start making sense, or I'll beat the truth out of her."

"I saved him from her," Arya said, pointing at me. She straightened her clothes and said, "I'm Nolan's mate now."

“That's it,” Della said and lunged for Arya, but Marco caught her by her waist. She held her in place as she flailed to get at Arya.

"Please, calm down first!" Marco urged.

My mind refused to make sense of Arya's words. Mate bonds could not be forced or stolen. I stared at her in confusion.

"What are you talking about? You can't be his mate. I'm his mate."

The evidence was clear, and I couldn't stand Arya's nonsense anymore. But then

she lifted her chin and revealed a mark on her neck, the exact same mark as mine.

"See?" Arya said. "Nolan marked me."

Chapter 393

Talia's POV

I stared at the new mark on Arya's neck. Anger clouded my vision as I rushed at her.

I slapped her hard, knocking her to the ground.

My wolf growled inside me, fighting for control. "Get up," I said as I moved closer to Arya.

Walden grabbed my arm to stop me. "Wait, Luna," he begged. I took his wrist and pulled his hand off me. My Luna aura surged, making Walden flinch as he tried to hold on.

'No. She dared to touch what's ours,' my wolf snarled. 'We need to kill her right now!'

Arya raised an eyebrow, almost daring me to hit her again. She stood firm, like it was just another training session. Arya smirked at me, and I sneered. I was going to slap that smug look off her face.

Walden glanced between us and said, “Luna, please. I know how this looks, but please try to listen to me."

I clenched my fists so hard my nails dug into my palms. The urge to attack grew, but Walden stepped between us before I could do anything.

"Just give me one day, Luna. Let me figure out what happened," Walden said.

Every instinct in me told me to ignore him and tear Arya's throat out, but then I saw Nolan's body. I grit my teeth and closed my eyes. I took a calming breath before nodding.

"Arrest Arya. Send her to the dungeon. No one talks about this," I ordered.

Walden nodded. "As you wish, Luna."

"I'm not going to the dungeon. I'm..." Della punched Arya hard, causing her to cover her mouth in pain. She quickly restrained Arya, pinning her arm behind her back. "What are you doing?"

"You shut your mouth, you traitor," Della snarled. "You're lucky she doesn't have you executed immediately."

With a last glare at Arya, I helped Marco lift Nolan and made our way out of the forest.

At the hospital, I sat in a chair outside of Nolan's room. The doctor had been running tests after being sworn to secrecy. The doctor returned and said, "All of his vitals are normal."

"Then, why won't he wake up?" I asked.

"I have never seen sedation like this," the doctor explained. “It really depends on the Alpha. I'm sorry I don't have ways to wake him now, Luna."

The relief I originally had vanished, and anger followed right after. "Thank you,” I said weakly before walking into Nolan's room. I looked at him, unconscious in the bed.

'You should have listened to me,' my wolf scolded.

I clenched my fists. 'I won't doubt you again. She'll pay for this. I don't care why she did it,' I replied.

"Why would Nolan mark her? None of it makes sense,” I murmured, sitting beside Nolan's bed.

"I don't think Arya's telling the truth," Della said, coming into the room and quietly shutting the door. "A mate mark only happens if both people are awake and agree to it. Both wolves have to want it. The bond only works if you mean it. Nolan couldn't have done it while he was sedated either. If he tried, it would have hurt him. That could be why he isn't waking up."

The truth hit me hard and made me even angrier. Nolan wouldn't have marked her by choice, so he wasn't just sedated; whatever Arya did made Nolan mark her. 'She's no better than Jason,' my wolf growled, and I remembered the time Jason tried to mark me by force, pinning me until Nolan showed up and stopped him.

“If she forced the mark, she needs to be arrested and punished. It is against our laws," I said.

"I don't think she'd be stupid enough to do that." Della frowned and crossed her arms. "I think the mark is fake. She must have used magic or something. Some spells can mimic a mate mark. Just because we got rid of Morgana doesn't mean there aren't other dark witches out there."

"I wish you were right," I muttered.

"It has to be," Della said.

"The mark, it looks just like mine," I said, hugging myself, feeling hurt and confused. Nolan wouldn't betray me. He loves me, I told myself, but Arya's words kept echoing in my mind.

Della put her hand on my shoulder. “Don't jump to conclusions. Nolan wouldn't betray you. He can be a jerk, but he's not a cheater."

Della touched my arm. “Breathe. You and Nolan have been through worse. That brat won't ruin what you have."

I nodded without saying anything. My mind raced with ways they could have done

this without waking Nolan. The door opened, and Walden walked in, looking unsure.

I frowned at him, still upset he stopped me from punishing Arya.

"What did you find out?" I asked.

"Arya won't talk to anyone but you," Walden replied.

Della scoffed. "Of course she does. Did you try torture? I bet she'd talk if you tortured her."

"Della!"

"What?" Della said. "She is a traitor. She acted against YOUR Alpha. Why are you putting her over your Alpha?"

"Enough," I snapped, causing them both to stop talking. "I'm going to see Arya." "No, this is what she wants," Della objected, but I stood up and walked to the door.

Arya refusing to talk unless I was there felt like a challenge I couldn't ignore. If Nolan was in danger again, or if there was more to the mark, meeting her face-to-face was the only way to find out.

"I need answers, and I need my mate back, so I'm going to talk to her," I said.

Chapter 394

Talia's POV

Our footsteps echoed down the stairs into the sub-basement. The air smelled like old sweat and mildew, like a locker room no one had cleaned in years.

"Ugh, why does it always smell like this?" Della complained under her breath.

"The dungeon isn't meant to be pleasant for anyone. That's the whole idea," I said. Della just grumbled quietly.

Walden stayed quiet, his face tense. He was probably still trying to figure out why Arya betrayed us.

Marco's voice carried down the hall before we even reached the holding cell. "You are not in a position to make demands," he told her. "We're trying to help you but..."

"Then bring her here," Arya snapped, interrupting Marco. "If you want answers, bring the Alpha Queen. Otherwise, I'm not talking."

She saw me before I could say anything. Her hands were cuffed behind her back. Arya stepped away from the bars and sat in the only chair in her cell, her eyes never leaving me.

I crossed my arms and met her eyes. "You got what you wanted," I said. "I'm here now. So start talking."

Arya looked at Walden. "I told you, I want a doctor." She turned her head so I could see the bite mark on her neck. "Check it yourself. You'll see it's real."

"You just want to spread the lie that Alpha marked you," Walden said. "I won't allow it."

I didn't need a doctor to tell what I was looking at. The bite was fresh, the skin around it red and swollen. But I didn't believe for a second that it came from Nolan.

"That mark isn't this," I said. Arya's eye twitched before she laughed.

"Not even going to check? Scared of the truth?" she taunted, trying to get under my skin.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," I said. "Nolan would never betray me."

"You're foolish to think that," Arya retorted. "Even fated mates betray their mates. You of all people should understand that."

Della growled, "Watch your mouth, you little psycho bi..."

"Della, enough," I snapped, stopping her. We needed Arya to talk, not get angry and shut down.

Arya's smile grew, cold and mean. "You think I'm lying? Or maybe you just think I'm crazy? Please explain the mark on my neck then. Accept reality. Your mate chose me after he got tired of you."

"This is pointless," Della said. "She just wants to mess with your head. Let's leave."

"If you go, you'll never figure out how to wake him up," Arya said.

I came closer, fed up. "The doctor said he'll wake on his own."

"The doctor is wrong. I injected him with a special sedative. He will not wake up on his own without the antidote," Arya stated. “If he goes too long without it, he might not wake up at all. Or something worse could happen.” Her eyes gleamed with satisfaction as she added, "You want the antidote? You'll have to do what I want."

"Stop playing games. Get to the point, Arya," I said.

"A fight. I want you to beat the truth out of me," Arya responded.

I almost laughed. "You want me to fight you for answers?"

A slow, cruel smile formed on her face. "Not just any fight. If you win, I'll tell you everything. I'll tell you how to save him. But if I win..."

"You won't," I interrupted, but she ignored me and kept talking.

"If I win, you admit you don't deserve him. You step down and let the pack pick a new leader." She glanced over Della. "Maybe they'll want a Luna who can protect her mate."

Della scoffed. "You don't have to fight her. Just give me five minutes alone with her, and she'll spill everything."

Arya shrugged. "If you don't accept, it doesn't matter what your friend does. I'll never tell you how to wake him up."

I kept my face blank so Arya wouldn't see how much her words got to me. I turned

to Marco. "Leave Della here with her. She'll get the answers."

Della grinned and cracked her knuckles. "Five minutes is all I need."

"Wait. Don't you want to know why I did all of this?" Arya called out. I stopped, annoyed with myself for hesitating. She could probably see my doubt just by the way I stood.

"I've admired Alpha Nolan for years. I tried so hard to impress him, to make him notice me, and he refused to see me when I became a top warrior because of you," Arya explained. "When my shift ended, I decided this was the perfect time to find out if you were really worthy of him."

I should have trusted my gut. Arya was just like Maggie. At least she hadn't teamed up with outsiders to hurt me. She did this by herself.

"Are you out of your fucking mind?" Marco scolded. "Do you know how you sound?"

I shook my head. "You're young and naive. Nolan would never choose you instead of me."

Arya's eyes narrowed, and she pointed a finger at the bite on her neck. "He already did. This is proof."

Della grabbed my wrist, squeezing hard. "Don't waste your time on her. She wants to mess with your head. You know better than to listen."

I could have asked Leslie to make an antidote, but I didn't want to put more pressure on her. She was already pregnant and helping Solon recover.

'Let's do it. We can give her the beating she deserves,' my wolf said within me.

"Fine. You want a fight? You've got one. Tomorrow at noon, the main training grounds."

Chapter 395

Talia's POV

As we left the dungeon, no one spoke. When we reached the stairs, Walden

stopped so suddenly that Della almost ran into him. “I'm sorry. I should have known Arya would try something like that."

"How could you have known?"

“I....."

"There was no way you could've known what she'd do," I continued before he fully responded. “You can't take responsibility for this. She's an adult now."

He nodded, still unsure. "Still, I should've seen the signs. I don't know why she changed like this."

"Make sure the guards who saw what happened keep quiet. No one else needs to know,” I said. “We will handle this discreetly.”

"As you wish, Luna,” Walden stated and then went back to speak with the guards in the dungeon.

Della joined my side as I walked back to the hospital. "You do not need to fight her. I could do it for you."

"And then she won't give us the antidote," I said.

"We can always ask Leslie,” Della suggested.

“Leslie has enough to be worried about that and don't you dare contact her," I said.

"Then, let me fight her for you. It is my duty as your Beta," Della argued.

I smiled and said, "Thanks, but this is between Arya and me."

"Do you want me to keep her sedated until the fight?" Marco suggested.

“No. Let her get what she wants,” I said. “She needs to be put in her place. I want her to have no doubt that I bested her, that she could never compare to the Alpha Queen."

I went right to Nolan's room when I got to the hospital. Marco and Della gave us space. I sat by Nolan's bed and sighed, "I should've listened to you. I should have never allowed you to accompany her for her shift."

His Alpha aura rolled off him and washed over me, calming my nerves. It seemed as if, even while unconscious, Nolan knew how much I needed him.

'That wasn't our mate's mark,' my wolf spoke up suddenly. 'His scent was not on her!'

I closed my eyes and recalled again. She was right. I remembered when Nolan first bit me. His scent stuck with me all day, clinging to my skin. Arya didn't smell like him at all.

"She lied," I said out loud, relief sweeping throughout me.

My wolf huffed, amused. "It almost worked."

I rested my head on the bed, exhaustion catching up with me. I stayed there until the lights went dim for the night shift. I must have fallen asleep, because the next thing I knew, someone was gently shaking my shoulder.

Della stood right over me, her hair pulled back and her eyes softer than usual. "You need to sleep in a real bed."

"Worried that I'll lose?" I asked.

"Never, but you still need to be well rested for tomorrow. We have no idea what she has planned," Della replied.

I wanted to argue, but she was right. I squeezed Nolan's hand one last time and went to my room.

I woke up before dawn, and kept training myself till my mind cleared and my wolf restless in anticipation. When it reached noon, I put on a red T-shirt and black workout capris and headed to the main grounds. Half the pack was already there, gathered along the edge. Walden stood near the center, looking like he'd rather be anywhere else.

He came over as soon as he saw me. "Gossip spread before I was able to stop it. I'm sorry, Luna."

I looked at the crowd. "Let them watch." I'd remind everyone why I was Luna, Nolan's mate, and Alpha Queen.

Marco and Della waited on the sidelines with a few nervous junior warriors. Arya stood in the center, stretching. She wore standard sparring gear, but had altered the collar to show off fresh bruises on her neck.

I walked to the center, stopping a couple of steps from Arya. She watched me carefully. I noticed a slight tremble in her hands before she hid them behind her back. "This is your last chance to back out, Arya, and take your punishment for your crime against your Alpha," I said.

She looked me up and down. "Are you scared, Luna? Afraid you'll lose to me and embarrass yourself in front of the whole pack?

My wolf bristled. 'Did this girl, who is barely an adult, really think she could beat me? We are going to enjoy this,' my wolf growled hungrily.

"Your lack of humility will be your downfall." That shut Arya up. She glared at me.

Walden cleared his throat and addressed the crowd. "This is an official challenge. Deputy Chief Warrior Arya has called for trial by combat. Luna Talia will defend her title and her honor." He looked at Arya, then at me. "No weapons. First submission ends it."

The pack first gasped in surprise as they originally thought this was just a simple spar. Now, knowing this was a challenge for the title, the pack burst into cheers. The majority of the pack were on my side.

"Talia is the only Luna I'll recognize!"

"She should prove herself!"

"Arya should know better!"

I faced Arya. I rolled my shoulders before saying, "You said if I won, you'd tell me what I needed to know to wake Nolan."

"And if I win, you admit I'm stronger, and you step down as Luna," Arya responded.

I didn't answer. Walden stepped back, and the crowd became silent. "Begin," he said.

Chapter 396

Talia's POV

Arya moved so quickly that I barely dodged her first attack. It was like she was trying to end the fight before it really began.

'Focus,' my wolf snapped, and I barely dodged her attempt to sweep my legs. I jumped back, and her kick missed me by inches.

Arya didn't give me a chance to recover as she pressed forward. I blocked a jab, but

she spun, and her elbow hit my shoulder. I stayed on the defensive as she never slowed, and every move was sharp and precise. Walden had made her the youngest deputy warrior, and now I saw why.

The bell rang, ending the first round. I hadn't landed a single hit. Arya smirked, barely out of breath, while I tried to catch mine and shook out my hands. I tasted blood on my lip from her lucky punch. My wolf inside me growled, 'She's fast, but she's predictable. Stay defensive and learn her patterns.'

Arya gave me a cocky grin. "Not bad," she taunted. "But you'll have to do better than that."

I wiped my mouth and gave a sharp smile. “Don't get cocky. The fight's not over."

Arya laughed. "Maybe not, but you're already bleeding."

"Second Round, begin!" Walden yelled.

Arya rushed at me even faster, trying to overpower me, but this time I was ready. I dodged one of her wild swings and slipped behind her. I slammed my elbow into her back, and she stumbled forward. Arya growled and swung at me, but I was already out of reach. For the first time, I saw doubt in her eyes.

"What's wrong, Arya? Am I doing better now?" I taunted her.

Arya lunged at me, but I blocked and grabbed her wrist. I used her speed against her, throwing her over my shoulders so she fell hard on her back. Each time she rushed in, I punished her for it. When the bell rang, her back was covered in dirt, and she gingerly got up.

Arya glared at me and wiped sweat from her forehead. "You think you're clever, don't you? I'm just letting you get the upper hand," she said.

"I told you. Your arrogance will be your downfall."

Arya sneered. "Next round, I'll end this."

I shrugged and smiled. "Show me."

"Final round. Begin!" Walden yelled.

Walden had barely finished speaking before Arya lunged at me, wild and desperate. She faked left, then spun right to catch me off guard. But she left her side open, so I grabbed her arm and whirled her around. I wrapped my arm around her neck and took her to the ground.

"That's it," Della said. "No one has ever gotten out of one of Talia's holds. Not even her own brother!"

Arya struggled, trying to buck me off. She rolled so I was underneath her, still I held on. I kept the pressure, waiting for her to pass out or give up. I pressed harder on her neck until she finally said, "I submit."

“Luna Talia is the winner!" Walden said proudly, and the crowd applauded.

I let Arya go, and she gasped for breath. She slumped to her knees, breathing hard.

Arya looked up at me and grinned. "You're stronger than I expected," she said, her voice rough. "I have no shame losing to you. Nolan is lucky to have you."

"Tell me how to wake him," I said bluntly, ignoring her compliment.

“Easy. Just inject your blood into him. Only true mates can break the anesthetic's hold. Your bond will awaken him."

"Marco, inform the doctor."

"Yes, Luna."

As Marco ran to get the doctor, Arya asked, "What happens to me now?"

“Execution,” Della said, and Arya's eyes grew wide in shock. "That's what I would recommend, but Luna Talia decided to be lenient. She's just going to take an arm.”

Arya looked at me in complete horror.

"Stop it, Della," I said. "You're scaring her."

"She should be scared. What kind of idiot does this to test her Luna?" Della said, then thumped Arya on the forehead. "You're lucky Talia didn't kill you now."

"Since she didn't really hurt Nolan, your punishment will be up to Walden. When Nolan wakes up, if he thinks your punishment was too light, you'll accept whatever he decides," I said.

Arya's shoulders sagged, but she nodded. "I accept it."

"I knew you were lying the whole time. There's no trace of Nolan's scent on you."

She stared at me, stunned. For a second, she looked so young, her bravado stripped away. "I... overlooked that."

Arya suddenly pulled a dagger from her boot and pressed it to her neck before I could stop her. "What are you doing?"

I panicked and grabbed her wrist, but she hadn't cut herself. Arya only sliced off a strip of fake skin; the mark was fake. Underneath was smooth skin, no injury at all. She smiled and said, "It's okay, Luna. It was fake from the very beginning."

I frowned, still shaken. "Never do that again. Understand?!"

"I understand. And... I'm sorry."

I handed Arya to Walden, and he took her away without a word. The crowd stepped aside as I hurried back to the hospital. The doctor was already waiting in Nolan's room. I pulled up my sleeve, and the doctor took my blood.

I sat beside Nolan's bed and took his limp hand. The doctor started the transfusion, letting my blood flow into his veins. I closed my eyes and focused on our bond, hoping he would come back to me. A gentle warmth grew in my chest and spread through me.

Minutes passed. Then Nolan's fingers twitched slightly in my hand. I looked up, hope rising. His eyelids fluttered. Slowly, he opened his eyes.

"Talia?"

Chapter 397

Nolan's POV

I woke up under the harsh hospital lights, everything around me blurry and strange.

My head throbbed with a dull ache, and my memories floated just out of reach. What happened? The last thing I remember was talking to Arya by a stream. How did I end up here?

'We are safe. Our mate has been watching over us,' my wolf said. As he reassured me, I realized someone was next to me. I turned my head to see Talia holding my hand. She looked relieved to see me awake.

"Talia?" My voice came out rough. My throat was dry. "What happened? Were we attacked? Where is Arya?"

"No, you're okay. Arya is fine," Talia said.

I slowly sat up, and Talia gave me a cup of water. I drank it down and then a second cup before I said, "If nothing happened, why am I in the hospital?"

"First, tell me what you remember. How did Arya's shift ceremony go?"

Her question caught me off guard. I tried to remember. "It went well. Arya finished her shift without any problems. I helped her. She was nervous, but she did great." Talia nodded, her fingers tightening around mine. "What else do you remember?"

I took a shaky breath. "After the ceremony, Arya was excited. She wanted to run and see how strong she was. We ran through the forest under the moon until we were both too tired to keep going."

Talia squeezed my hand. "And then?"

"We ended up by the stream. Arya wanted to do more. She asked if we could swim, but I told her it wasn't a good idea after her shift. She looked disappointed, so we just sat by the water."

I paused, looking at Talia. "What's going on, Talia? Why are you asking me this?" "Please just tell me everything," Talia said.

"Arya talked about her parents. Both were warriors. She wants to be like them. She told me how hard she trains. She sounded proud, but also sad. I told her she's already becoming a great warrior."

Talia's eyes softened. "You did the right thing."

I nodded. "While she talked, I started feeling tired. I don't remember falling asleep. I just remember her voice and the stream. Then I woke up here."

Talia looked relieved. Before I could ask again, she said, "Arya gave you something while you were resting. I still don't know how she did it without you noticing."

My heart skipped a beat. "She what?"

"She injected you with an anesthetic to knock you out," Talia explained.

I tried to make sense of Arya's actions. I felt a flicker of resentment and regret

because she betrayed me after I helped her through her first shift.

I thought back to the time at the stream. Did I remember feeling a pinch? I couldn't remember, but I also knew if I had, my wolf would have warned me.

Talia kept going. “While you were unconscious, I couldn't connect with you. So we went looking. We found Arya on top of you."

"What?!" I stared at Talia, shocked. "Why would she do that?"

"Arya has always looked up to you. Maybe a bit too much. She acted without thinking.'

"That is not acting without thinking," I retorted. "She planned this."

I frowned, remembering how my wolf had always been wary of Arya. My wolf had warned me she was acting like Maggie. Now, my wolf smugly huffed, 'I told you so. At least nothing worse happened.'

'That we know of,' I responded.

"What did she do when you found her?" I asked.

"She said you marked her as your mate. She even showed us a mark on her neck, and it looked just like mine," Talia said.

My breath caught. "That's impossible. I never did that. Talia, I would never do that."

She raised her hand to stop me. "I know. I never doubted you. I checked the mark. It was fake."

"So she drugged her Alpha and used dark magic?" I said, disgusted. "Can this get any worse?"

"No, she didn't use dark magic," Talia said. "Arya used fake skin."

"Okay, but why do I feel that is not the end of it?"

"Arya challenged me for my title. She said I wasn't worthy of you," Talia said after a pause.

My wolf bristled as my initial shock turned to anger. "She tried to take your title?" Challenging the Luna means challenging the order and stability of the entire pack. To go after the title is a serious act.

"I want her banished." We couldn't have someone like that around us. It didn't matter how young she was.

“She made a mistake. She's young and confused. She didn't mean harm. She just wanted to prove herself. I defeated her. Now she knows where she stands,” Talia said.

“I hate that I missed that,” I said. My anger faded a little, replaced by relief.

“Della would be happy to recant it for you, play by play, if you asked,” Talia said.

Talia's trust made me feel safe. I hugged her tight, grateful. "Thank you for believing in me."

She smiled into my shoulder, her voice soft and a little shaky. "Always."

Even as I held her, unease stayed in my chest. Arya had gone too far. I couldn't ignore it. For the pack and for myself, I had to talk to her. She would get one warning, one chance to make it right.

If she chose to refuse, she would have to face the consequences: exile or losing her place in the pack.

Chapter 398

Talia's POV

"I need to speak to her now," Nolan said.

"What? Why?" I blurted, unable to hide my apprehension.

"I need to set things straight with her," Nolan replied. "As her Alpha."

I hesitated. "Nolan, I've already ordered Walden to punish her," I said. "Maybe this can wait? Allow yourself more time to recover."

Nolan didn't listen. He swung his legs off the bed. When I tried to help him stand, he gently moved my hand away and stood up as if he hadn't been unconscious only moments ago.

"No. It has to be now," he said. I was worried, but I could tell he was set on this. "Okay, then," I relented.

We headed outside after leaving the hospital. Nolan seemed alright, but I kept looking over at him just to be sure.

"Stop staring, Talia. I am not going to collapse," Nolan finally said.

"You can't blame me for checking," I said. "You should be in bed right now. We don't know if there are any side effects."

“I promise that I am okay,” Nolan reassured. “I just.....I didn't want this to linger."

My mind raced with possible outcomes. I tried to guess what Nolan was thinking. What was he going to say to her? Was he going to banish her immediately if she didn't respond appropriately?

'If he banishes her, you will not stop him,' my wolf said.

'But she just made a poor decision,' I said.

'That could have had terrible consequences if things were different. Think about what would have happened if Geoffrey was around to notice this,' my wolf said, and I couldn't argue with that.

Geoffrey would have taken the opportunity to challenge me himself for the title of Alpha King. If Arya wanted to challenge me for my title, she could've just done it. She didn't need to drug Nolan.

Walden's voice snapped me out of my thoughts as he shouted orders. "You have four more, and I am not trying to spend all night out here, Arya!"

Arya kept running laps on the field. She was soaked with sweat and looked worn out, but she pushed herself to keep moving.

"Pick up your pace, Arya! That's not good enough!” Walden shouted.

Arya staggered, breathing hard, but made herself keep running even though she was worn out. "Keep moving or I'll add two more laps," Walden warned, not letting up as she got more tired.

"I see why Bloodmoon warriors are one of the best. Walden is no joke," I said. "Actually, he's being nicer than he should be," Nolan responded.

When Walden finally caught sight of us, relief flickered across his sharp eyes. "Alpha," Walden said. "It is good to see you're okay."

"Walden," Nolan greeted. "So, this is the deputy warrior you promoted?"

Walden flinched and dipped his head. "I'm sorry for not keeping a tighter rein on Arya. Her challenge to Luna was uncalled for. I am punishing her as we speak."

"I'm surprised, Walden. You're going soft on her," Nolan stated. "What Arya did goes beyond recklessness. It's a violation of our rules. She needs to face real consequences."

Walden nodded and yelled, "Arya, come over here!"

Arya's face lit up when she saw Nolan. She jogged over, wiping sweat from her forehead, and gave us a cautious smile. "Good evening, Alpha, Luna," she said, pretending everything was normal. Nolan's face was serious. "Kneel."

Arya's smile faded. She glanced at me, hoping I'd step in, but I didn't react. Smiling wasn't going to get her out of trouble this time. Arya finally dropped to one knee, head down and shoulders slumped.

"Explain yourself," Nolan demanded.

"I'm sorry, Alpha. I was only thinking about the wellbeing of the pack. I..."

"No. You were being selfish. What you did was reckless," he said, interrupting her. "If you were anyone else, you'd be facing expulsion."

Arya's head snapped up. "I only challenged Luna because I had doubts about some of her choices. I needed to know she was right for Alpha

"It was not your place to make that determination. Do you think you know better than me?" Nolan growled. Arya's eyes darted to mine, desperate for me to understand. I knew she meant well, and I could see how much she wanted me to speak up for her. Still, I could not ignore that she had crossed a line.

I turned to Nolan. "Let Walden handle her punishment. Arya's actions came from a place of concern for the pack, not malice."

Walden nodded solemnly. "I promise to discipline her more strictly, Alpha." It was clear the warriors had let Arya get away with a lot, but that wasn't going to happen anymore.

Arya looked down, embarrassed. "I won't do anything like this again, I promise."

Nolan eased up a little, but his voice remained firm. "Running isn't your punishment. After you finish, you'll clean the whole training ground. If you don't finish by dawn, there will be harsher consequences." He looked at me to see if I agreed, and I nodded. Nolan was making the right call.

"The training ground is huge," Arya said in exasperation.

The training grounds covered almost ten miles and had a five-mile running track that went around the property. There were different areas for all kinds of training: spaces for sword practice with dummies and sparring mats, open spots for martial arts, and

a shooting range at the far end. Even I was unsure of how Arya was going to clean it all by dawn.

"Then you'd best get started," Nolan replied, his tone final. "Or would you prefer to be banished?"

"I'll get it done, Alpha," Arya said, her voice low and tired.

Chapter 399

Talia's POV

Nolan had been unconscious for almost the entire day from the sedative, but he still crashed right after dinner. He stretched out on the bed and started snoring, finally relaxed. I lay awake for hours, replaying everything Arya said.

Arya didn't mean to hurt me, but her words stuck. The more I thought about it, the more I realized she was right. I hadn't always made the best choices as Luna. Losing my father haunted me the most. Maybe things would be different if I'd been smarter or braver.

I watched Nolan sleep, calm and peaceful. I wondered if he ever doubted himself like I did. Probably not. He always seemed sure of himself.

'I am sure he does,' my wolf said.

'He always gets it right,' I sighed.

'Nobody can always get it right, not even our mate,' my wolf replied. 'We have Moonfire, not the ability to see the future. You chose what you considered to be the best way in the past. Your father knew that you had good intentions.'

I wanted to believe her, but regret wouldn't let go. I tossed and turned, my mind racing. Finally, I gave up on sleep. The room was quiet except for Nolan's breathing.

I slipped out of bed and went outside.

The moon cast a pale silver glow over the yard. I left the packhouse without thinking, my feet carrying me toward the training grounds.

I heard the steady scrape of a brush near the training ground. Arya was still cleaning

after everyone else had gone to bed. Her hair was a mess, gathered back in a rough ponytail. Sweat soaked her shirt, and her hands were red from scrubbing. She looked exhausted even from afar, but she didn't stop.

'She deserves this, and she can't afford to stop. Our mate won't go easy on her again,' my wolf said.

Arya had broken the rules when she challenged me for Nolan. Now, if she failed to complete the only task given to her, she could be cast out.

I felt a pang of guilt, but my wolf pushed it away. 'Do not feel guilty. She did this to herself. It is good that she is owning her mistakes,' my wolf said. 'It will make her a better person and a better warrior in the future.'

I walked over and squatted beside her. Arya looked up, surprised but silent. I picked up another brush and started to help.

“Alpha will be angry if he finds out you're helping," Arya said. “I'm almost done. Go back and rest, Luna."

"You're more likely to pass out before you finish,” I said. “And Nolan won't find out. To be honest, even if he did, I don't care."

"What's wrong, Luna? You didn't just come out here to help me," Arya said.

"I wanted to tell you that you were right," I said.

Arya stopped scrubbing to look at me. Her brush hung loosely in her hand. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"I haven't always made the right calls. Some of my choices hurt people that I love. My mistakes even played a part in losing my father," I admitted.

Arya didn't say anything and I continued. "If you ever think I'm making the wrong call or hurting the pack, just tell me. Pull me aside, or talk to me after meetings. However you want. I want to get better."

For a moment we said nothing. Arya then nodded, her face serious. "Alright," she promised.

We worked without talking. The sole sounds were the brushes and crickets all around us. My body ached from cleaning for so long, but I didn't care. I liked being outside and doing something good. When we finished, the sky was turning pink with the sunrise.

"We did it," I said while we sat on the cool grass, shoulder to shoulder.

"Thank Goddess," Arya sighed in relief.

I yawned, ready for bed. I needed to get back before Nolan woke up, even though I knew he wouldn't mind, because I didn't want him giving Arya another punishment for the help I had given.

Arya hugged her knees and looked up at the sky in that way she looked younger and more vulnerable.

"I'm sorry," she said in a soft voice. "My mother always used to tell me to be brave and to go after what I wanted, particularly love. I think I have gone too far. I was arrogant, and I shouldn't have challenged you."

I gave her a tired smile. "It's good to be brave, but you have to respect the mate bond, especially when it's a fated one. You deserve more than someone who's already taken."

"You're right, Luna," Arya said.

I considered all the things I wanted to have said to Maggie and remarked, "You deserve to be with someone who is meant for you and who treasures you. Someone who thanks the Moon Goddess for having you."

Arya grimaced, regret clear on her face. "I shouldn't have messed with you at the party," she sighed. "I probably missed my chance to meet someone else."

"My birthday is coming up. I'll invite more people. Maybe you'll meet someone new," I said.

“Thanks, Luna! I'll cook dinner tonight, to say thank you!" Arya jumped up and stretched her arms over her head. The idea of cooking seemed to energize her. It was as if she hadn't been cleaning all night.

"Are you sure you can cook? Do you even know how?" I asked, raising an eyebrow suspiciously.

"Of course! After a quick nap, I'll be ready to go," Arya said, and then she put her hands on her hips and pretended to be offended. "I'm not just good at training and drinking. I can cook, too!"

I laughed. “Then I'll be looking forward to it."

For the first time, the tension between us finally faded.