Barren Luna 411

Chapter 411

Talia's POV

I looked up. Geoffrey stood there with a gift in his hand, wearing that same easy smile, acting as if he belonged. My wolf bristled within me, and I pushed back the urge to put space between us. I was the Alpha Queen now, and I would not be scared of a conniving, unruly Alpha.

"Good evening, Alpha Geoffrey," I greeted, keeping my voice even. "I didn't expect to see you here and with a gift no less."

"I would not have missed it for the world. This is the first celebration of the Alpha Queen. How would it look if I didn't attend?" Geoffrey said.

'We would've been just fine if he hadn't shown,' my wolf huffed.

"Congratulations. Truly. The twins especially," Geoffrey said as he held out the gift.

Before I could take it from him, Nolan did so. "Thank you. That is very thoughtful of you," I said, and Nolan nodded, but I knew Nolan was going to throw the gift into the trash the first chance he got.

"Don't cause any trouble tonight," I said, quiet enough that it stayed between the two of us. "This is not the time for politics. We are all trying to have a good time."

"You hurt me, Alpha Queen," Geoffrey said. "I know better than to ruin a momentous night for the Alpha Queen. I only came here to relax. I give you my word on that."

"You can stay as long as you keep your word," Nolan said, flat and even. Geoffrey looked at Nolan. For a split second, it looked like he wanted to say something, but Nolan continued. "One incident, one single thing I don't like, and you're gone. Do you understand?"

"Of course, consort. I understand completely," Geoffrey said, and I tensed at his words. How dare he not address Nolan properly?

"Enjoy the night, Geoffrey," Nolan responded. Geoffrey slid into the party, joining a group like he'd always been there. A few minutes later, he was already laughing with them, acting like nothing was wrong.

'Don't let him bother you. He is just upset that we called him out,' Nolan said through the mate bond.

'I wish we could just kick him out. He's going to cause a problem. He can't help himself,' I retorted.

'Have Marco keep an eye on him,' Nolan suggested.

I caught Marco's eye across the crowd and nodded toward Geoffrey. He understood right away and moved in that direction, slow and calm, not drawing any attention.

"You don't have to guard me. I think he knows better than to bother me tonight," I said.

Nolan kissed my forehead and said, "Well, then, I am off to do my Alpha duties. If you're feeling tired, make sure to take a break. No point in having a party if you have to go to bed early."

"I will. I promise," I said.

Nolan went to greet the Alphas, shaking hands and accepting congratulations again. I stayed at the cake table, handing out slices and thanking people for gifts I could barely remember. After a while, I realized I hadn't seen Arya since the ceremony ended.

"Have you seen Arya?" I asked Della, scanning the crowd for that unmistakable red dress.

She frowned. "Not for a bit, now that you mention it. She was so excited about tonight all day yesterday, kept asking me questions about who'd be here. Completely normal this morning too, when I saw her at breakfast. I don't know where she went."

I spotted Walden lingering by the drinks table and made my way over. "Walden, have you seen Arya?" I asked.

He glanced over his shoulder at the empty field beyond. "She left for the party grounds way early. Hours ago, actually. Before any of us even got here to set up."

Della and I kept searching. Della found her first, hidden behind some bushes. Arya sat with her knees pulled to her chest, nothing like the confident young warrior we knew.

"Hey." I crouched down next to her, picking a leaf out of her hair. "What's going on?" "I'm nervous," Arya admitted, not meeting my eyes. "About meeting my mate. What if he's not someone I actually want? What if I can't trust him?"

"The same warrior who once challenged me outright and faked a mate mark just to make a point is hiding behind a bar over nerves. I have to say, I did not see this coming."

That got a small, embarrassed smile out of her at least.

“Whoever he is,” I said, “Nolan and I will help you figure out if he's actually worth your time. You don't have to trust a stranger's word on it. You can trust ours."

Della crouched down on her other side, gentler than I'd ever seen her be with anyone outside her own family. "Look at Marco and me. It took Luna hounding us both for months to admit what was obvious to everyone else. We'll make sure you're not stuck with a jerk. We promise."

Arya finally looked up at both of us. "Okay. Okay. Let's go back out there before I lose my nerve again."

We smoothed out her dress and fixed her makeup. I walked her back to the party with my hand on her back, making sure she didn't run.

“Let's take some shots. Liquid courage will make you feel better,” Della suggested.

"Good idea," I said.

As we were almost to the bar, Arya froze, and in a voice low enough that I almost missed it, she whispered, "Mate.”

"That was fast," Della laughed.

"Really? Where?" I asked in excitement, but Arya didn't answer. She was still trying to pinpoint who her mate was.

I followed Arya's gaze to the bar. Two people were moving through the crowd toward

it.

Henry and Geoffrey were walking together. Neither of them noticed us.

I stood there, mind racing. I couldn't tell which one of them was Arya's mate.

Chapter 412

Arya's POV

'Mate!' My wolf's cry hit me so hard I nearly stumbled where I stood.

Two Alphas were crossing toward the bar. Both of them radiated the kind of authority that made a room quieter without either of them trying. One moved calmly and easily. He was the picture of an Alpha comfortable in his own strength, unhurried in a way that made everyone around him relax a little just by proximity. The other stopped me cold. Every thought in my head went silent at once.

He looked like my brother. My brother, who I had spent years believing was dead, buried somewhere I would never even get to visit.

"Arya," Talia said. "Which one is it? Which Alpha is your mate?"

I just stood there, frozen. I couldn't speak, couldn't even move. My wolf had locked us both in place, and all I could do was stare.

Then he saw me, and whatever he'd been saying to the man beside him died in his throat mid-sentence. He crossed the last of the distance at a dead run and pulled me into his arms before I knew what was happening.

"Arya?" His voice cracked on my name. "Is it really you? Arya?"

His scent hit me the same moment his arms did, like being thrown backward through every year that had passed since I'd last smelled it. I knew that scent. I had known it my whole childhood.

"Geoffrey?" His name came out as a sob. "Brother... you're alive. You're really alive."

I was crying too hard to say anything else, clinging to him like he might vanish if I let go, and I heard Talia's sharp breath beside us, heard Della go completely silent, both of them clearly as stunned as I was.

Talia recovered first. "This is your brother? Alpha Geoffrey is your brother?"

"Yes, he's my brother." I stepped back a little so I could really look at him, still half sure I was dreaming.

"How? How did you not know?" Talia asked.

"Back in our old pack, Doomfur, our parents were just regular warriors. No fancy title. Pack members abused us, and it's kept getting worse every year. Eventually, our parents decided we had to leave before something awful happened," I explained, my voice shaking. I remembered how my father woke us up with blood on his face from the wound at the top of his head. He was urging us to flee. Geoffrey

pulled me into a hug, muttering, "I thought you were dead. I thought..." "You saved us. You didn't fail me," I told him before turning back to Talia. “Geoffrey stayed behind to give us a head start. He got caught. We heard he was tortured endlessly for helping us."

"Why didn't you say anything? I could have intervened," Nolan said.

"We were so wary that we just wanted to stay under the radar, and then there was nothing. Not a word for years. I spent all that time thinking they killed him for saving us. I had no way to know for sure."

Geoffrey wiped the tears off my face with his thumb, the same way he used to when I was little. "I survived. It took everything I had, but I survived, and I became Alpha. Doomfur is mine now."

I stared at him. Pride and disbelief crashed into each other in my chest until I couldn't tell which one was winning.

"I've been searching for you for years," he said. "Every lead, every rumor of a girl matching your description, I chased it. I never once thought to look at Bloodmoon. I never imagined you'd end up here."

"They treated us well here," I told him. "Better than Doomfur ever did. But our parents didn't last long after we settled. They were already too worn down by the time we arrived. They died not long after."

Something passed behind his eyes at that, grief settling in alongside everything else, but he didn't let it stop him.

"Have you found your mate?" he asked.

I looked over at the other Alpha. He had walked in beside Geoffrey and stood back this whole time, watching the reunion unfold without a word. He gave us space to have it without intruding on something that clearly wasn't his to interrupt.

"I'm her mate," he said, stepping forward at last. "I'm Alpha Henry of Shadowclaw. It is good to finally meet you."

My wolf noticed it first. 'He doesn't seem happy about us being mates,' she said.

There was no excitement, no big jolt of joy, none of that wild, fated-mate energy I'd always seen with others. Instead, he just said it calmly, but his eyes never left mine. "You don't seem thrilled," I said quietly.

"I'm not the type to make a scene," he replied, taking my hand in his. "But you're my mate, and I want you."

His deep, husky "I want you" was enough for me. There weren't any fireworks, but I still knew he was exactly the Alpha, the mate I wanted by my side.

Talia and Della were already grinning. "Damn, Henry, didn't know you had that kind of charm," Della laughed, and Marco covered his face.

"Hush," Talia said, nudging Della out of the way.

"Henry is a phenomenal Alpha," Talia said. "Genuinely, Arya, the Moon Goddess couldn't have picked a better mate for you."

"Congratulations," Della added, practically vibrating with excitement. "This is the best birthday twist I've ever witnessed in my life."

For the first time in a long time, I felt whole. My brother was alive and standing in front of me. My mate wanted me and was a great Alpha. Everyone around me was thrilled for both at the same time. For one full second, one entire breath, I let myself believe the night could be this good, with nothing left to complicate it.

Then Geoffrey's voice cut through it, flat and hard in a way it hadn't been a moment ago, all the warmth gone, as if it had never been there.

"I object!"

Chapter 413

Talia's POV

We stood there, tense and silent, while the party kept going as if nothing was wrong. Then Nolan pushed his way through the crowd, speed-walking toward us to avoid causing a scene. His eyes betrayed his worry.

"What happened?" Nolan demanded. He shot a look at Geoffrey, his whole body shifting as if ready for a fight. "Did he do something?"

"Keep your voice down," I muttered, keeping my voice down since people were

close by.

"What's wrong then? Why does everyone look like they found out someone just died?" Nolan said.

"Arya found her mate. It's Henry."

"That's wonderful. Arya, you..."

"And Geoffrey is her brother," I continued, cutting Nolan off. "The one she thought died years ago in Doomfur. He just objected to the bond."

Nolan glanced from Arya to Geoffrey to Henry, clearly stunned. Arya rubbed her face, trying to hide that she'd been crying. Her shoulders trembled, and she wouldn't meet anyone's gaze. Geoffrey stood right beside her, arms folded, frowning at Henry. Henry still held Arya's hand, looking calm, but I could see the tension in his jaw.

"Fate sure loves to mess with us," Nolan said. He looked straight at Geoffrey. "So, what's your issue with this?"

"Doomfur and Shadowclaw are adjacent," Geoffrey said. "But Henry and I have no close relationship. What little I do know about him doesn't give me much confidence." He glared at Henry. "He was Jason's Beta for years. He was a willing participant in the atrocities that Jason and Michael committed. Then, as soon as Jason was out, he switched to Talia like it was nothing. I can't trust someone who changes allegiance that fast, not with Arya."

Nolan raised an eyebrow. He stood a little straighter, glancing at Arya for a split second as if weighing her reaction. "So, just because he did not side with Jason when he committed treason against the Alpha King, you think he's only out for himself?"

"That's how it looks to me," Geoffrey replied.

"Or maybe he just didn't want to follow an incompetent Alpha," Nolan countered.

"Or maybe he's just obsessed with Talia. It wouldn't be the first time an Alpha lost his mind over her," Geoffrey said.

The word "obsession" set me off. My temper flared, and when I saw Arya's face, seeing how unsure she looked as she hugged herself, I got even angrier.

"Enough," I cut in, stepping forward. "You weren't there, Geoffrey."

“Then, tell me what I'm missing, Alpha Queen,” Geoffrey responded, not backing down.

"Henry always stood against Jason and Michael, and you know what happened when he did. They forced him with Alpha commands or just beat him down. Maybe you think he should've kept fighting, but what good would that do?" I said. Henry made a face at me, bringing up his history, but he hid it fast. I didn't want to share his past, but Geoffrey needed to hear it. “Henry supported me when I was Luna of Shadowclaw, even when no one else would. We're more than Alpha and Beta. We're real friends. Honestly, I trust him more than most people here, including you."

Geoffrey's face stayed blank. I looked at Henry, hoping he'd finally say something for himself.

Henry looked right at Geoffrey, calm. “Just wait. You'll see who I am."

My wolf scoffed in my head, 'That's all he's going to say? He's not even trying. Maybe Henry's not so sure about this bond either. Maybe he doesn't want to be involved with Geoffrey either.'

Geoffrey gave a smug grin. "See? He won't even speak up for himself." He turned to Arya, his voice gentler. "You heard him, Arya. If he can't stand up for himself, he isn't good enough for you. Let the bond go. Come back to Doomfur. I've rebuilt everything. You'll have a real home, respect, family. You don't need some outsider. Your brother's here for you."

Arya's lips parted, but no sound came out. The word "home" clearly struck something in her. Arya looked at Geoffrey and then Henry. She looked conflicted. I was about to speak up when Nolan cut in.

"Are you out of your mind?" he said. “Henry and Arya are fated mates."

"He doesn't deserve her," Geoffrey responded.

"That's not up to you," Nolan said. “It's up to Arya and Henry, and since Henry does want her, it is Arya's decision to accept him. No one else gets to decide." He looked at her, softer now. "Arya, what do you want?"

All eyes were on her. Arya looked between Geoffrey and Henry, and I could see her start to panic. Her breaths came quicker, and her hands shook. She was always so fearless in training, charging into drills without hesitation. Right now, she looked lost as if she was about to bolt. For a second, it seemed like she might speak, but the words caught in her throat.

“I.....I don't know. I really don't know," Arya finally said.

"Take as long as you need. No one's rushing you, especially not him. We'll go home, and you can think it through there," Geoffrey said, taking her hand into his.

"She should," Henry agreed. "And maybe you both can get to know me instead of you judging me based on the one-sided opinion you have of me."

The two of them stood there, each holding one of her hands and glaring at each other over her head. Arya stood in the middle of it and looked like she'd rather be facing down a pack of rogues.

Chapter 414

Talia's POV

Part of me felt relieved. No matter how indifferent Henry looked, he still held her hand and stayed by her side. He wasn't ready to give up on her, just because Geoffrey opposed their mate bond.

'Perhaps he does care,' my wolf mused.

'Can you blame him for not being happy about his mate being related to Geoffrey? Henry has the decency to not air out his dirty laundry to make a point,' I said.

But I could also tell where this was going. Tension was building fast between the two men, both staring each other down, and we were still right at the bar, in the middle of my birthday party. People were beginning to stare.

"Get your hand off my sister," Geoffrey growled.

"Make me," Henry responded firmly.

I stepped between them before things got out of hand.

"That's enough, both of you," I said, pulling Arya out of the middle. "Don't make me command you both to behave."

"As you wish, Alpha Queen," Henry said, and Geoffrey scoffed, but did not move toward Henry.

"Arya needs time and space, and you're not helping by arguing," I scolded. "No one is deciding anything tonight. It's my birthday, and I want at least an hour of peace before it ends. Go enjoy the party separately."

Arya nodded quickly, looking relieved, her shoulders finally relaxing a little. "I do need time."

"Here's what I suggest. Geoffrey, Henry, both of you are staying at Bloodmoon for a week," I said. "Arya gets time to figure out what she wants. At the end of the week, she decides."

"There will be no arguments, no pressure, no trying to convince her, and no cornering her," Nolan said. "Only one week."

Henry gave a quick nod. Geoffrey just said, "Fine." Neither of them looked happy, but I figured that was as fair as it was going to get.

People started having fun again as the party picked back up. Henry turned to Arya, took her hand, and kissed it.

"I look forward to getting to know you, Arya," Henry said before leaving the bar. Arya stood there, blushing, and Della couldn't help but giggle.

Geoffrey glared at Henry as he walked off. "Be safe, sister. We'll talk in the morning," he said before leaving the bar as well.

I leaned toward Della and lowered my voice. "Stick with Arya this week. Don't crowd her, just keep an eye out. I don't want Geoffrey cornering her and pressuring her all week."

"Of course. You can count on me," Della said. "Okay, now, what about those shots?" I asked.

Arya shot me a look. "You can't drink, Luna."

I grinned. “That's why you're drinking for me!”

When the party was finally over, most of the visiting Alphas stopped by to say goodbye. Colin shook Nolan's hand and promised to check in once he got home. Landon kissed my hand and wished the twins well. The meadow cleared out as everyone said their goodbyes. Marco and Walden stuck around to help clean up. Della walked Arya back to her room, holding her up since Arya was pretty drunk. Nolan and I didn't get back to our room until after midnight. I was so tired I could barely keep my eyes open when we walked in.

He sat me on the edge of the bed, then knelt in front of me and placed his hands gently on my stomach like he did every night, hoping to feel the twins move. Then he helped me out of my dress and started rubbing my lower back. I couldn't help but let out a soft moan at how good it felt.

"You did too much today," he said.

"It was my birthday. Doing too much was the whole point." I sighed and let my head fall forward as he worked.

"Not when you're pregnant with twins," Nolan scolded.

"Have you noticed something always goes wrong at our parties? Every single time. You challenged my father at one. I got kidnapped by another. Solon collapsed at the other one, and now, Geoffrey tries to ruin my birthday party. Maybe we should stop throwing parties."

Nolan laughed against my shoulder. "I'll put it on the invitations."

“I am happy for Arya," I said, softer. "She found her fated mate and her brother. This should be the best day of her life.”

“And yet the biggest thing standing in her way would be her own brother, back from the dead," Nolan huffed.

"He's going to try to break them up all week," I said. "He knows he can't push Henry around, so he's going to try to manipulate Arya."

"I know," Nolan said, rubbing my back in slow circles.

"Then, what are we going to do about him?" I asked.

Nolan's mouth tightened. "I'll have Marco and Della keep an eye on him this week. Between the two of them, he won't do anything we don't know about."

I let out a long breath. "Do you really think Geoffrey was surprised to see Arya?"

"Honestly? I do," Nolan said. "I didn't see his face when it happened, but from what you described, it sounds like he was really shocked."

"So you don't think he came because he knew she was here?"

"No. He looked off his game. Seeing her here completely threw him."

"Then, what did he come here for? I don't believe he came to celebrate my birthday."

Nolan's eyes hardened. "I agree. Finding Arya wasn't part of his plan. It just changed it. Maybe even made it better for him."

"So we don't say anything," I said. "We play along as if we believe him, and we watch what he does next."

Chapter 415

Talia's POV

Breakfast the next morning was a full spread. Pancakes, bacon, eggs, sausage, loaded hash browns, and even a fruit tart that I ate more than I meant to.

I leaned back after my third plate and caught my reflection in the window. My face was definitely rounder than last month. "Clara, I'm getting fatter because of you. Your food is just too good."

Annie giggled. "Same! I've been eating so well, none of my old clothes fit. Della had to take me shopping twice."

"I'll take that as a compliment, and Annie, you're a growing girl. You need all the nutrients," Clara said.

"I can't keep eating like this," I complained, without any conviction at all, since I was already eyeing another pancake.

"You can and you will," Nolan laughed, placing the pancake on my plate and pouring syrup on it. "Clara isn't just feeding you. She's making sure the twins are healthy. It's her mission now."

"A mission I will not fail," Clara agreed, serious, her hand over her heart.

"Speaking of the twins," Nolan said, "we should get you in for a checkup."

"We just went three weeks ago. Once a month, remember? The doctor told you that." I pointed my fork at him. "You'd drag me in there twice a week if you could."

"I would," he said, not the least bit ashamed.

Clara popped her head in. "I've written down every appointment, with notes from the doctor. I'll remind you both, so nothing gets missed."

"Clara, you're the best," Nolan said, and Clara went back to the kitchen, absolutely beaming.

Nolan and I wandered through the rose garden after breakfast. The rose bushes were packed with late blooms, still wet with dew. The scent of roses and fresh earth hung heavy in the air. Behind us, the pack house was starting to bustle: doors banging, voices echoing, and Clara already working on lunch.

'She is going to make me fat,' I thought.

'No, she's making sure we and our pups are properly fed. Stop resisting. You know you like the attention,' my wolf teased, and she was right. I did enjoy it. It felt like I was having all the experiences I should have had when I first became Luna.

I tried to focus on that and enjoy the walk, but my mind kept wandering back to Arya and how happy she looked until Geoffrey objected. Why couldn't he have waited? Why did he have to confront Henry in front of Arya like that?

"You're thinking about Arya," Nolan said, interrupting my thoughts.

"Yes, I was wondering what Arya thought of Henry after last night," I said, tracing my fingers along a rose as we walked.

"Henry didn't leave a good impression, especially not after what Geoffrey said," Nolan replied.

I nodded. "Henry is a good guy, Nolan. Back at Shadowclaw, he was the only one I never had to worry about. He's practically another big brother to me."

"You don't have to convince me, Talia. Henry has proven himself multiple times that he's a good person and Alpha," Nolan said.

"I know that, but Arya doesn't know that."

"You're worried she'll reject him?"

"She's young," I said. "Impressionable and impulsive. We've seen how quickly she makes up her mind and refuses to back down."

"That we do. She nearly nuked our pack by challenging you."

"Then you understand my concern. If Geoffrey gets the chance, he's going to lean on his previous relationship and Arya's guilt for not looking for him," I said. "If he keeps it up all week, Arya might turn Henry down just to keep Geoffrey happy, which isn't fair to her."

"That's possible." Nolan didn't soften it, which was one of the things I loved about him and occasionally hated in the moment. "But it's her bond and her life."

"I get that, but we have to help," I argued.

"She has to make the choice herself, and she has to live with whatever it costs," Nolan said firmly. "Remember how you felt when decisions were made for you. You hated it. If we decide for her, we're no better than Geoffrey."

Nolan's words stung because he was right. I remembered how angry and powerless I felt when other people made choices for me, like I didn't have a say in my own life. That same frustration came rushing back. I never want Arya to feel that way, even if I want to keep her safe.

"I know. You're right, I know." I stopped at the end of the row, turning to face him. "But I'm still her Luna, and I'm allowed to hope she makes the right one. She can't choose Henry if she never gets a real chance to know him."

"What are you planning to do?" Nolan asked.

"As I said, she deserves a fair chance at getting to know Henry. Geoffrey had years before they were separated. Henry's had a single night, and most of that was spent defending himself." I mulled it over, a plan coming together. "I'll talk to Henry and see how we can get him and Arya some real time together this week, just them, nothing forced or awkward, and definitely not with Geoffrey watching their every move."

"I'll come with you."

“No,” I said. “I need you somewhere more useful. Go by the training grounds and check on Arya. She'll be out there this morning. See how she's doing. And see whether Geoffrey's already found his way to her, because if he's half as smart as I think he is, that's exactly where he'll be."

Nolan raised my hand and kissed the back of it. "On it."

Chapter 416

Talia's POV

I walked to Henry's room and knocked. He opened the door, his eyes wide when he

saw me.

"Luna Talia, what are you doing here?" Henry said as he stepped aside. "You came all the way here?"

"I did. It's just a hallway, Henry. Not a mountain trail," I said as I stepped inside.

"You're having twins." He said it as calmly as always, which somehow made it worse. "You could have mind-linked me. I would've come. You don't need to be on your feet. You need to be resting."

"Seriously, Henry? I'm pregnant, not fragile. Do you tell all the pregnant women here not to walk down a hallway?"

"No. Goddess, no,” Henry said. “I didn't mean it like that. I only meant that if you needed something, I'd rather come to you than have you come to me. That's all. I apologize."

When I didn't answer, Henry started to panic. He kept searching for the right words. When I felt I'd messed with him enough, I finally smiled. "Relax. I'm not upset. You've gotten so serious as you've gotten older."

He exhaled in relief. "You're cruel, Talia. You know that?"

"A little." I glanced around. The room was neat and minimal, just like I expected. He'd only been here one night, but everything was already in place. "Are you settled in? Need anything?"

"It's more than enough. Bloodmoon's been generous," Henry replied. "You didn't come just to check on me, did you?"

"No, I didn't."

"This is about Arya."

"Of course it is." I sat by the window, my back already aching. I remembered the tense silence when Geoffrey tore into Henry, and the way Arya looked when Henry stayed quiet. I needed to know where Henry stood with Arya.

"What do you want to know?" Henry asked.

"I'm just going to come out with it," I said. "Do you want to fight for your mate bond, Henry? Last night, you didn't act like yourself, and I want to know what you're thinking."

He was silent long enough that I thought he might not answer.

"She's my mate," Henry finally said. "The Moon Goddess chose her for me, and I knew it the moment I saw her. Of course I want her."

"But?"

He sat on the edge of the bed. "But her brother is Geoffrey. He's been conniving and ruthless for years. He wants power more than anything, and he's patient. He acts more like a cat than a wolf. It's unsettling."

"And you're worried Arya might be like him."

Henry shrugged. "I don't know. That's the problem."

"Talk to me, Henry. Just be honest."

"What if I commit to her and find out she wants the same things he does, and I'm just part of her plan? She did try to take your place," Henry said. "I don't want to be bound to someone like that. I don't think I could do the right thing if she betrayed us."

"You're right about Geoffrey," I said. "He's ambitious, and it's taken him too far already. I've seen it myself, and I don't trust him."

"So you get why I'm hesitant."

"I understand, but I think you've gotten the wrong impression about Geoffrey," I said.

"I never thought I'd see you defend him," Henry said.

"Trust me, I'm not," I said. "When Geoffrey stayed behind in Doomfur, he did it to ensure his family could get out, and he lost years of his life for them. It wasn't about chasing power. It was about surviving and protecting the people he loved."

"And now he's an Alpha who wants much more than that," Henry said.

"Because somewhere along the way, what he wanted changed. You're right to worry about that, but Arya isn't Geoffrey," I said. "I didn't see her grow up, but she came here with nothing and became one of Bloodmoon's best warriors."

"And how is that not different from Geoffrey?"

"Arya wanted to be strong so she could protect the people she loved and never lose them again. Geoffrey had that same determination at first, but at some point he started caring only about himself."

"But she could."

"So could a lot of people, but if Arya hasn't done so by now, I don't think she ever will. It's just not in her to be selfish."

Henry sat with that for a moment before finally saying, "You're right. I judged her harshly because of Geoffrey. That's not fair to her or to me."

"So don't do it again. Don't let your experiences with Geoffrey decide what you think about your own mate."

"And if she still chooses him at the end of the week?"

"Then she chooses him, and at least you were honest with her." I let my voice soften. "Give it a week. Actually talk to her. Find out who she is, not just who her brother is."

"What should I expect?"

"She's young and impulsive. She'll probably say things this week that make you want to tear your hair out," I said. Henry chuckled. "But she has a good heart."

He stood up and hugged me before I could react.

"Thank you," Henry said. "I needed to hear that."

"You're welcome." I patted his back, laughing a little. "You're allowed to be happy about this, you know. That's what a mate is for."

The door opened.

Arya stood in the doorway. Her smile vanished when she saw us. For a split second, something sharp flickered in her eyes. Hurt, maybe, or suspicion. She straightened, jaw tight.

"What," she said, "is going on here?"

Chapter 417

Talia's POV

Arya's eyes went from me to Henry and back again, and I watched her arrive at entirely the wrong conclusion.

"Are you betraying Alpha Nolan?"

"Arya, let's take a breath."

"No." She shook her head hard, answering herself before I could get a word in. “No. You wouldn't do that. Not you." Her eyes cut to Henry. "It's him, then. He's the one who wants you."

"That is not what is going on here."

"You don't have to cover for him," Arya said, her voice cracking. “I'm not stupid. I just saw him hugging you right now."

"You don't have context. Give me thirty seconds to explain,” Henry said, stepping

toward Arya.

"I don't have thirty seconds," Arya said as she was backing out of the doorway. "Enjoy your conversation." She was gone down the corridor before either of us had moved.

Henry got out the door first. I went after them with one hand under my belly, silently cursing as I couldn't run as fast as I wanted. When it became obvious I wasn't going to catch her, I stopped in the middle of the hallway, bent forward, and yelped in pain.

"Luna!"

It worked immediately. Arya was back at my side before Henry had finished turning around.

"What's wrong? Are you in pain?" Henry asked.

"My stomach," I groaned, keeping my hand pressed low on my stomach. "Give me a moment."

"Get out of the way," Arya snapped at Henry, steering me toward the bench along the wall with more strength than she probably meant to use. "Should I get the healer? I'm getting the healer."

"That won't be necessary," I said as I leaned back. "It's passed. Funny how quickly it passed once you stopped running."

Arya stared at me. She first looked confused and then outraged. "You lied to me!"

"I did."

"You're pregnant! You can't fake something like that. You almost gave me a heart attack!"

"You wouldn't stand still long enough for the truth, so I found something you would stop for," I explained and then, I patted the bench next to me. "Sit. Please."

Arya hesitated only for a second and then sat, arms crossed, glaring at me.

"I went to Henry's room this morning," I said, “because I wanted to know how he actually feels about you. That's the entire reason. And what I found out is that he wants to be with you, and he was hoping I might help him with that.”

Henry's head came up. "I didn't..."

I gave him a look. He closed his mouth and let me keep going.

"Then why was he holding you?" Arya said.

“It was a simple hug, Arya. He hugged me because I told him something he needed

to hear about the woman he's trying to court, and he was grateful. That was it,” I explained.

"I find that hard to believe," Arya said.

"Why?"

"He barely reacted to me last night," she said quietly, and then her voice rose in frustration. “But with you, he looked at you like you mattered and he looked at me like...like...I was a mistake, a problem waiting to happen."

Henry stepped forward to speak, but I spoke first. "What exactly did you want him to do?"

"I don't know. Something," Arya said as she pulled at a loose thread on her sleeve. "My whole life I've heard what it's supposed to be like when you find your mate. Everybody says you can't think straight. He barely said anything, and then he stood there."

“He looked at you like a man embarrassed that in front of his mate he was being called a liar and a traitor by his mate's brother. Would you have preferred that he fought Geoffrey?" I said.

“No, but he could've grabbed me, kissed me, something," Arya argued.

'Oh no. She's a hopeless romantic,' my wolf groaned.

"He's ten years past the age where he would allow his instincts to influence his decisions. He's mature, and he's reserved. That's not the same as indifferent, and you know it."

"Do I?"

“Think about it honestly. You've watched people find their mates your whole life. Have you ever once seen someone not care, and if they did, did they not reject the bond immediately?"

Arya opened her mouth, and then she closed it.

"No," Arya admitted.

"Exactly. Even Nolan failed to ravish me when he found out I was his mate because it doesn't work like that, and it's not working like that for Henry either." I looked over her head at Henry, who had been standing there letting me talk the entire time. "Which he can tell you himself, since he's right there."

Henry crouched down in front of her so she wasn't looking up at him. "I feel the bond. I felt it the second I saw you at that bar, and I've felt it every hour since.”

"Do you even want me?" Arya asked.

"Of course. I want more time with you, so you can decide who I am from knowing me instead of from what your brother says about me," Henry answered. "And whatever you decide at the end of it, I'll accept. I won't push you, and I won't hold it against you."

Arya went red from her collarbone to her hairline.

"Fine," she said, to the floor. "That's reasonable."

I sighed in relief. I thought this conversation would be more difficult. Thank the Goddess it wasn't. My stomach growled and then I said, "Excellent. Now that's settled. I'm starving, and both of you are coming to lunch."

The dining hall was loud and half full when we walked in, and the greetings started before we'd cleared the doorway. Two warriors called out to Arya from separate tables. Someone shouted a question at her about whether afternoon drills were still happening. A boy no older than nine darted past, pushed a folded piece of paper into her hand without stopping, and disappeared into the crowd.

"What was that?" I asked.

"He's been drawing me for a week," Arya said as she unfolded the paper, looked at it, and tucked it into her pocket without showing either of us. "He's getting better. I'm sure he'll be a great artist when he's older."

Henry watched the whole thing with a faint smile. "He looks up to you."

"Well, I'm a big deal. I'm Bloodmoon's first female deputy chief warrior," Arya said, chin up, thoroughly pleased with herself. “Everyone likes me."

"I see that," Henry chuckled.

We had just reached a table, and I was lowering myself into a chair when a shadow crossed the seat between Henry and Arya, and Geoffrey dropped into it like it had been saved for him.

"You don't mind, do you?"

Chapter 418

Talia's POV

"It's fine," Arya said through gritted teeth. I could tell she was lying.

"Alpha Geoffrey." I forced a civil smile. "Go ahead."

"Alpha Henry. My Alpha Queen." Geoffrey nodded, acting polite. "Do you know how long I've been looking for you? Years, Arya, and now here you are, just having lunch as if nothing happened."

"Trying to have lunch," Arya muttered.

Geoffrey laughed, but there was a look in his eyes that made my skin crawl. He then reached over and ruffled Arya's hair. "Honestly, I almost forgot what you looked like."

"Stop that," Arya said, jerking her head away and flattening her hair with a scowl. "I'm not a child. Eat your food and leave."

"Leave? I just found you again, Arya." Geoffrey spread his arms, looking around the table for support. "You're really going to push me away like that? In front of everyone?"

"You know what I mean. We have time to catch up. It doesn't have to be right now," Arya said. I smiled, glad she wasn't falling for Geoffrey's tricks.

'He needs to be careful. His sister is no fool. Acting like this will push her away,' my wolf said, and I agreed.

"So rude," Geoffrey said, putting a hand to his chest. "I just want to hang out with my little sister. Is that so terrible?" He looked at me, as though expecting me to take his side.

"You're putting on a show," I said, keeping my tone even. "Let's just eat in peace, Geoffrey."

"Don't be like that, Alpha Queen."

"Your Queen is hungry and would like one meal today that doesn't end with a mess. So, please, Geoffrey, stop talking," I said.

Geoffrey laughed and finally let it go. Food arrived, and the hall filled with noise gain. For a while, things felt almost normal. Arya relaxed en gh to argue with Henry about northern scout training, her voice loud and full of opinions.

"You just like to criticize because you never had to do the drills," Arya shot at Henry.

Henry smirked. "That's where you're wrong, but I have never heard of scouts getting lost in their own territory."

Arya rolled her eyes. "The storm was pretty bad, okay, and they were new to it." Then he noticed Arya's plate. "Do you not like beans?" Henry asked.

Arya picked every bean out of her stew and pushed them into a pile at the edge of her bowl. She wrinkled her nose at each one, lining them up on her plate. I doubted she even noticed she was doing it.

"There it is!" Geoffrey grinned, pointing at the bean pile. "You still do that! Some things never change, huh?"

"Do what?" Arya snapped, glancing up quickly, her cheeks reddened.

"I've done that since I was a kid. Arya would sit next to me and copy everything: same food, same weird habits. She was basically my shadow for years. Remember when you tried to eat a whole chili just because I did?"

"That was years ago," Arya muttered, eyes still on her bowl. "I'm not the same anymore." Her hands curled around her spoon as if she wanted to throw it.

"You're picking out beans right now, Arya," Geoffrey smirked, but there was a bitterness to it.

"I've been picking out beans for years without you around, Geoffrey. It's got nothing to do with you anymore."

"Two people can both hate beans and have nothing else in common," Henry commented.

Geoffrey set his fork down and turned to Henry. His smile vanished, and his eyes went cold.

"Sounds like you have something to say," Geoffrey said. "Go on. Say it. Or are you too much of a coward to do it yourself? Or are you going to let the Alpha Queen speak for you again?"

I mind-linked Nolan before Geoffrey had finished the sentence.

'Dining hall. Now. Geoffrey and Henry are seconds away from fighting,' I said quickly.

'How bad?'

'Bad enough that it may become a brawl if you don't get here right now.'

'On my way,' Nolan sent back. Just keep them busy till I get there.'

"Let's not do this. It's been a relatively good day," I said out loud, forcing a smile. "Let's keep it that way and enjoy our lunch."

Neither of them listened.

"Fine." Henry put his fork down, too. "You're nothing like Arya." He leaned forward, voice low. "You pretend to care about family, but all you've ever wanted is power."

"You know nothing about me," Geoffrey said.

"While the former Alpha King was recovering from being poisoned, you decided to ambush him in front of everyone to force him to resign from his position," Henry said. "Was that sympathy, or just good timing for you?"

"I raised a concern that needed raising."

"Really? You filed all the complaints yourself. Don't think we didn't notice," Henry retorted. "Then you showed up at the Alpha Queen's birthday, in her mate's territory, and the first thing you did after finding your long-lost sister was to tear down her happiness by claiming her mate was a liar and a traitor. Did you even consider how Arya felt at the time?" Henry's hand curled into a fist on the table.

"I said what I observed."

"See, that's the problem. You're selfish and only think about yourself," Henry continued, voice rising. "You act like you're the only one who's ever lost anything." "That is not true," Geoffrey said. His voice wavered just enough to betray his anger. "You want the throne, Geoffrey. Everyone at this table knows it. You've disrespected Talia and Nolan under their own roof twice now. And you don't seem to know your place at any table you sit down at, including this one."

"Come on, let's not do this," I said.

Geoffrey stood up so fast his chair toppled behind him. He loomed over Henry, and Henry stood up to face him.

"So you want to talk about where I belong?" Geoffrey said, his tone low and dangerous. "I'll show you."

Geoffrey punched Henry. The sound was sharp, raw. Gasps rang out from the nearby tables.

Henry took the punch, then lunged at Geoffrey, slamming them both into the next table so hard it slid across the floor. Bowls smashed, stew flying everywhere. The hall exploded into chaos. Pack members grabbed their kids, benches scraped back, and half the pack pushed against the walls to stay out of the Alphas' fight.

"Stop!" Arya yelled as she tried to get between the two. "Both of you, stop right now!"

Neither of them listened. Geoffrey grabbed Henry's shirt and slammed him into the wall. Henry punched Geoffrey off him and tackled him into our table, launching my lunch across the room.

I let my Queen's aura out. It rushed through the dining hall. Every wolf dropped to a knee.

"You two will stop right now!" I snarled.

Chapter 419

Nolan's POV

"ENOUGH!"

Talia's command rolled down the hall, heavy with the Alpha Queen's aura. Every wolf dropped to the floor. Marco grabbed the wall to steady himself.

"They're already fighting," I said, and ran.

The dining hall was chaotic. One table was flipped, another shoved aside. Broken dishes and spilled stew covered the floor, filling the air with the sharp smell of herbs and meat. Wolves pressed against the walls, eyes wide and ears flat. Near the door, a woman crouched in front of two shaking children, her arm out to shield them.

Henry and Geoffrey stood a few feet apart, breathing hard and glaring at each other.

Talia stood between them, gripping the back of a chair so hard her knuckles turned white. Her chest heaved as she tried to stay in control. Arya stood at her side, pale and tense, fists clenched. She glanced at the twins behind a toppled bench, worry in her eyes, then straightened her shoulders.

"Marco, clear the room."

"On it!" Marco barked, striding forward. "Everyone out! Now! Move! Take the kids with you. If you're hurt, go straight to the hospital."

People started to leave, but too slowly. Most of them kept watching, waiting to see what would happen.

I rushed to Talia and grabbed her by the shoulders, looking her over. "Are you hurt? Did anyone touch you?"

"I'm fine. No one touched me."

"Are the twins okay?"

"Nolan, I'm fine." She squeezed my wrist. "I stopped it before it got worse."

I turned to face Henry and Geoffrey.

“You fought in the dining hall,” I said, looking at both of them. “In front of kids. In front of half the pack during lunch."

"Alpha, can I say something?"

“No, you cannot. I was clear on what I said before," I said firmly. "The rule is simple: there's no fighting in my packhouse for any reason. If you need to settle a grievance, take it to the training grounds with a supervisor, like adults."

Henry clenched his jaw and wiped blood from his lip, but he wouldn't meet my eyes. Geoffrey's face was blank, but his hands twitched at his sides, knuckles bloody. The tension between them was sharp and heavy.

“Neither of you belong to Bloodmoon, so I don't expect you to know my rules, so I'll let it go this time." I put more authority in my voice. "But this is my first and last warning. Cause trouble again, and you're out. You will not be welcome back. Ever. Is that clear?"

"It is,” Henry said quickly. “I'm sorry, Alpha. This won't happen again."

Arya stepped forward, voice trembling. "I'm sorry too. They were fighting because of me. Geoffrey thought Henry insulted me, and then..." She trailed off, glancing between the two men with a pleading look. "I should have stopped it sooner."

"I was not speaking to you, Arya,” I said, turning my attention to Geoffrey. "Do you have a problem with my rule, Alpha Geoffrey?”

Geoffrey stared at me, jaw tight as he thought. His eyes flicked to Arya, then to the pack members nearby. My wolf bristled inside me, ready to take over and throw Geoffrey out if he made a move. The silence was thick with challenge.

"Noted," Geoffrey said at last, his tone flat. He didn't bother to look at me.

"That's not an apology."

"No, it's not." He shrugged. "That's all I've got."

Talia narrowed her eyes at Geoffrey. I could feel her anger through the mate bond, but she refrained from confronting Geoffrey in case another fight broke out. This was going to be the longest week of my life.

Geoffrey grabbed his jacket, shook it out, and patted Arya's shoulder as he passed. "We'll talk later," he muttered.

The door thudded shut behind Geoffrey, leaving an uneasy silence. I turned to Arya and said, "What happened here?”

"He was making comparisons, and I didn't like it. Henry came to my defense, and things just got out of hand," Arya explained.

"You need to get him under control."

"He doesn't listen to me."

"Then figure out how to make him listen. If this keeps happening, he will be punished and thrown into the dungeon.”

"Alpha, he's my brother!"

"Am I supposed to make an exception because he's your brother?" I asked.

"No. I meant that..."

I raised my hand to stop her.

"He's a guest in my pack, and he put an ally through a table. I'll say this now so there's no confusion. If he steps out of line again, you will never see him again, and you will not be permitted to leave Bloodmoon. I don't care if he's the only family you

have left," I said.

"You'd stop me?" Arya asked in surprise.

"I decide who leaves this pack and when. An Alpha who hurts a wolf under my

protection doesn't get to walk out with one of my warriors. Now tell me why my Luna had to step in and handle this."

"I tried, but I couldn't get near them."

"You're the Deputy Chief Warrior of

Bloodmoon Rack. What do you

mean you couldn't get near them?" snapped. Arya flinched. "Get your priorities straight. Keeping the peace here is your job Geoffrey being your brother doesn't give him a pass. If this happens again, you'll be demoted. Do you understand me?

Arya stared at me, and I expected her to argue, but her facial expression became

serious. She nodded and said firmly, "You're right. It won't happen again."

"Good."

She turned to go, but Talia stopped her.

"Arya, wait." She raised her voice a bit. "Henry, come here."

I followed Talia's eyes and spotted blood soaking Henry's shoulder. His shirt was shredded, and blood was running down his arm, leaving drops on the floor There were four deep, angry scratches. Geoffrey must have caught him with his claws when they fought.

'Dirty fighter,' my wolf growled. 'He shifted his hand during the fight.'

“He's bleeding badly,” Talia said, “and it's your brother's fault. Take him to the

hospital and get it checked."

Arya hesitated, glancing between Henry's wound and the door.

"That's an order,” I said. "It is not up for discussion."

"Yes, Alpha.” Arya's tone softened as she turned to Henry. "Come on, Henry. Can

you lift your arm? Does it hurt too much?"

Chapter 420

Nolan's POV

"Clean up this mess," I ordered the guards and omegas that were still in the dining hall. They put the tables back, wiped up the spilled food and drinks, and swept away the broken dishes.

I led Talia out of the dining hall. Her movements seemed sluggish, and I caught her pressing a hand to her stomach. Then, I heard her stomach growl.

"You didn't eat, did you?"

Talia tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "No, I barely ate anything before Henry and Geoffrey started arguing."

"Let's go back to the pack house. Clara can get you something to eat, and you can rest," I suggested.

“No, not yet,” Talia refused. “What if Geoffrey finds them before they reach the hospital? He's upset and knows where they're going. I need to check myself."

"I can send two guards to watch over them," I offered. "They'll tell me right away if something happens."

"That won't work," Talia said, shaking her head. "Guards can't warn us fast enough if they start fighting again. And next time, Henry might not hold back. He's reserved, but he's not a pushover."

"Then what do you want to do?" I asked.

“I just want to make sure they get to the hospital safely,” Talia replied.

"They're not going to like that. They're adults, not teenagers who need a chaperone."

"I have no intention of letting them know I'm following them."

"Alright," I said. "I'm coming with you, but after this, you're going back to the packhouse to eat and rest."

"Thank you," Talia said.

We trailed Arya and Henry for ten minutes down the nearly empty hallway. Our steps were soft on the shiny floor. Whenever they paused, or Henry glanced back, we ducked into doorways and tried not to make a sound.

'This is so silly,' I said through the mate bond, both amused and embarrassed. 'We look ridiculous sneaking around.'

'You didn't have to come with me.'

'Of course I did. I want to make sure you don't get involved in their drama. They need to figure it out themselves.'

'So you're okay with Geoffrey taking Arya and convincing her to reject Henry?' Talia shot back.

'Of course not.'

'Doing nothing is basically letting Geoffrey do what he wants.'

Arya slowed down to match Henry's pace. I saw her turning, and I grabbed Talia,

pulling her down another hallway to keep Arya from seeing us.

'I never said I'd let him. I don't want to interfere with Arya's choices. That's different,' I said.

'It's pretty much the same.'

At the hospital, we spotted a window overlooking the treatment room. We crouched by the glass, careful to keep out of sight.

Henry sat on the hospital bed with his shirt off. Arya dipped a cloth in a bowl and gently cleaned the swollen claw marks on his shoulder. Henry winced. "That stuff burns," he muttered through gritted teeth.

Arya gave him a small, teasing smile. "It means it's working. It won't burn for long. Stop being a baby."

Henry huffed but stayed still. "You'd complain too if it was your shoulder."

"Thank goodness they're finally getting along," Talia whispered, her voice shaky with relief.

A nurse came around the corner with a clipboard and stopped, surprised to see us crouched by the window.

"My Luna? Is everything alright?" she asked.

"We're fine," I said quickly, wrapping an arm around Talia and guiding her toward the

exit before Arya saw us. I gave the nurse an apologetic smile. "Don't mind us."

I guided Talia briskly out of the

hospital, keeping my arm around her

until we were well outside Once

outside, she drew in a deep breath, small smile spreading across her face, though she still glanced nervously back at the hospital doors.

"You know you can relax now," I said. "They're getting along."

"I know." She kept smiling, her eyes shining with emotion. "They finally have time together. That's all I wanted. I just wanted a little peace without everyone telling them what to do."

"Henry had to get hurt for this to happen."

"If I'd known, I would've just hit him myself and saved us some trouble," Talia said

with a tired smile. I laughed, finally feeling the tension lift.

"I just want her to be happy," Talia said, her voice soft and aching. "She's been alone for so long."

"I know, but she's tough. She can handle this."

Talia shook her head, eyes bright with unshed tears. "She's tough, but that's not the same. I don't want her to regret letting Henry go just because Geoffrey told her to." "Arya's smart. She'll figure it out."

Then, Talia began to cry quietly. "What's wrong? There's nothing more we can do. Please don't cry."

"I'm fine. Everything makes me emotional now." She laughed, wiping a tear away: "I watched her and è Geoffrey argue over beans at lunch and wondered, what if our kids end up like that? Two rebellious pups fighting with me in front of everyone."

"They'll be perfect little angels compared to Leslie and Solon's daughter. She's been kicking nonstop for months and she's not even born yet. Ours will seem like angels compared to that," I said, grinning at the thought of the chaos that that little girl was going to cause at Silverfang.

Talia laughed. She leaned against me as we walked, her steps easier now.

I just hoped Henry and Arya wouldn't start fighting again at the hospital.