Barren Luna 421

Chapter 421

Arya's POV

I cleaned the claw marks slowly, working carefully around the deepest one. Henry

held still for me the whole time, only flinching when the antiseptic stung.

"Sorry," I said.

"It's fine," Henry said, his jaw tight. "Keep going."

I pressed the bandage over his skin and smoothed the tape across it.

"You look like something is on your mind," Henry said.

"There is, actually," I replied.

"Ask me anything," Henry said.

"What you said to my brother. About the throne, about disrespecting the Alpha King

and Talia," I said, keeping my eyes on the tape. "Was any of it true?"

"All of it," Henry answered.

"You're certain?" I asked.

"I was in the room when it happened, Arya. I saw it myself," Henry replied.

I sat down on the stool across from him. "Tell me what happened."

"After the war, Solon didn't recover as quickly as everyone hoped. The antidote cleared the toxin, but not before it damaged his organs and weakened his wolf. Recovery will take a long time," Henry explained.

"I know about that," I said.

"There was a meeting about it. Solon stood up in front of every Alpha and told them himself because he didn't want them hearing it as a rumor. Then he asked if anyone objected to Nolan and Talia staying on to help him run things," Henry continued.

"And Geoffrey objected?"

"Not exactly. He proposed replacing him as the Alpha King," Henry said. "No one else was thinking about that, especially not Talia and Nolan."

"Maybe he thought it needed saying if Solon really was that ill," I said.

"That's exactly how he framed it. But he'd already spoken to the other Alphas before that meeting, testing who might support removing Solon as Alpha King. By the time he proposed it, he already knew who would stand with him."

"For him to be Alpha King?" I asked.

"Yes. I think he thought Solon would be against being replaced, but he wasn't. When he agreed, he assumed Nolan would be selected and he had a plan to argue against Nolan, but Solon allowed a vote and the title ultimately went to Talia."

"What did he do after that?" I asked.

“Nothing. He had no choice but to accept it. It would have been Talia even without the vote because she's next in line by blood, but she proved herself with the other Alphas, so naturally she won the majority vote," Henry explained.

I was stunned. This was not the Geoffrey I remembered. The Geoffrey I grew up with would have never done something so conniving. 'He's not lying,' my wolf said, disappointing me even more.

"I find this all really hard to believe," I admitted.

"Why?" Henry asked.

"Because of who he was," I said. "He wasn't like this before we were separated. He stood up for those who couldn't defend themselves. He was my hero. I thought he died saving our parents and me.”

"Arya," Henry said quietly.

"I grieved him," I continued as I couldn't hold back the tears. "I've been proud of him my whole life. That's who Geoffrey is to me. And now I'm hearing he's turned into a monster."

Henry reached over and put his hand on my shoulder.

"Geoffrey can still be your hero. Nothing will change what he did for you, but that was years ago. Power changes people, Arya. He isn't the same man now," Henry said.

"And what am I supposed to do with that?" I asked.

"You need to get to know the man that your brother is now," Henry said, letting go of my shoulder. "Don't

rush it. You've got days to decidet?

But I tell you what I think, and then

I'll drop it. Your brother didnt travel all this way just for a birthday party. He came here for something else, and sooner or later he's going to tell you what it is. Wait until he does before you decide anything."

Henry stood up, put his shirt back

on, and left the treatment room,

leaving me to my thoughts. I had decide what to do with this information. On one side was my brother, who gave himself upto save me and changed because of it. On the other was the mate the Moon Goddess had chosen for me who told me the truth about Geoffrey even though it might drive me away.

I didn't know which one of them to trust. Why was this so hard?

'We need to hit something to clear our thoughts,' my wolf suggested, and I went to the training ground.

I hit the striking post until my knuckles were raw, then kept going until my shoulders ached too much to lift. When I couldn't punch anymore, I started kicking it.

"All right, that's enough, Arya," Walden called out. He walked over to me from the barracks. I didn't even notice he was there until he called out.

"I'm not done yet," I grunted as I continued to deliver kicks to the striking post. "You've been at it for two hours," Walden said. "You need to rest."

"I'm fine."

"You're going to wake up tomorrow unable to get out of bed, and then I'll have to explain to the Alpha why his deputy can't do her job properly," Walden said.

I shot Walden a glare, but I stopped kicking.

"Is this about the choice?" Walden asked.

I frowned. "What are you talking about?"

Walden raised an eyebrow. "You know what I'm talking about. Three days from now you have to make a decision. Doomfur with your brother, or Shadowclaw with your mate," he said.

I sat down in the dirt with my back against the post.

"Yes, it's about that," I admitted.

“You're overthinking it. Just make a decision and stand by it,” Walden said.

"Okay. Tell me who to choose then."

Walden laughed and then noticed my stern expression. "You're serious."

"Yes, I am serious because I don't know what to do."

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

"That's not true. I've been standing here for two hours trying to think my way out of

it."

"As I said, you're overthinking it. Forget what everyone else wants. If

no one was judging and no one got hurt, which would you choose? Deep down, you already know. Just listen to what you really feel."

I opened my mouth to argue, but no words came.

'Arya.' Geoffrey's voice came into my head, warm and pleased with itself. 'Skip your

night patrol. I have a surprise for you.'

Chapter 422

Arya's POV

'Why?'

'Because I have a surprise for you.' Geoffrey sounded light, but I could tell he was

up to something.

'What kind of surprise?'

'The kind you have to be there for.'

'Geoffrey, just tell me what it is.'

'Skip the patrol. Come to my room after your training, and I'll tell you then,' Geoffrey responded before closing the link.

I frowned, annoyed.

"That was your brother," Walden said.

"He wants me to skip patrol tonight. He won't say why. He says he has a surprise and just closed the link like when we were kids," I huffed.

“That's not so strange.” Walden slid off the fence and dusted off his hands. “The man thought you were dead for years, Arya. Now he's got three days left with you, and he's watching them run out. Of course he wants your evening."

"He could just say that."

"He's been an Alpha for a long time. Men like that stop asking for things directly." He shrugged, lips twisting in a wry smile. "It's easier to call it a surprise than to admit he misses you."

"I'm on the roster."

"Now you're not," Walden said. "It's a quiet week, and I could use the walk. Go see what your brother has planned."

"Walden."

"Go on. Don't make me regret it," Walden said.

I left Walden by the fence. My boots crunched on the gravel as I crossed the yard. In my room, I washed off the sweat and dust, changed into clean clothes, and forced myself to walk down the long hall to Geoffrey's door.

He opened the door before I finished knocking. He must have been standing there, waiting for me.

Geoffrey smirked. "There she is, my obedient little sister," he said as he stepped aside to allow me into the room.

I rolled my eyes and said, "I'm not obedient, and I'm not little." I moved past him into the room. “I'm a grown warrior, Geoffrey. I'm the Deputy Chief Warrior of this pack. You've only been back in my life for two days, and you still talk to me like I'm nine and hiding behind your leg."

"It's just a habit." He shut the door. "Sit down."

"I'll stand. What's the surprise?"

“It's a plan.” He leaned back against the desk, arms crossed.

"A plan?"

"Sit down, and I'll tell you."

"No, I'd rather stand."

Amusement flickered in his eyes. “You're as stubborn as you were at six," Geoffrey said. “Tell me something. Do you want to be Chief Warrior?"

"Yes, why?"

"How long?"

"Since I was fifteen. That's why I train so hard."

"Good." He smiled, but it was sharp and cold. "It's already handled. When Walden is gone, your name will be the only one considered. No one else stands a chance. You'll get it years sooner, and you won't have to worry about Walden holding you back. Sometimes you have to make your own opportunities."

Silence filled the room.

"Say that again."

"You heard me."

"Once Walden is gone," I repeated. "What does that mean, Geoffrey? What are you trying to say?"

"It means that I will get rid of the obstacle that keeps you from being Chief Warrior," Geoffrey answered.

"He's not an obstacle. He's a warrior of this pack." I snapped. "He's been good to me since I got here. He covered my patrol tonight so I could come see you."

"Then he's useful as well as convenient."

My wolf's hackles rose, a low snarl vibrating at the back of my mind. 'He talks about people like they're pawns,' she snapped. 'Be careful, Arya.'

'I know,' I replied. Geoffrey would sacrifice anyone, even those who helped us. I had to be careful around him now.

"Geoffrey." My hands had started shaking. "Whatever you're planning, you stop it. Right now. You don't touch him, you don't go near him. Do you understand me? Never."

"Sacrifices have to be made." He spoke with infuriating calm, as if we were just talking about the weather "Nobody gives you anything worth having There's always a puce. That's just how it works. Pretending it doesn't is exactly why our parents died with nothing."

Henry's voice came back to me then. "Your brother didn't travel all this way just for a birthday party. He came here for something else, and sooner or later he'de you going what it is Henry had said. This was the moment he was talking about.

"Do you want to be Alpha King?" I demanded.

Geoffrey's smile grew. "Yes."

"And you needed me for it?"

"I need a Chief Warrior in Bloodmoon Rack who answers to me, to let me know the weaknesses that I can exploit. My own sister, in that seat, in the pack of the Alpha Queen. Do you know what that worth?" Geoffrey explained. His eyes were bright, almost feverish. It scared me.

"It's worth a man's life to you, apparently."

"It's worth more than that."

"Listen to yourself." I stared at him, horrified. "You sound insane. What are you

going to tell me next?"

"I am listening to myself. I've thought about very little else for years."

"You've changed," I said it softly, almost to myself.

Geoffrey's smile faded as he said, "I've grown up and so should you."

“I have,” I stated firmly. "What you're trying to do is wrong, Geoffrey."

"Did you already forget what it was like at Doomfur? We were weak, Arya. We were nobodies, and it nearly killed this entire family. I'm never going to be weak again." "That has nothing to do with it," I retorted. "You can't.....”

"I won't apologize for it, and I won't let you convince me otherwise either," Geoffrey snapped, cutting me off. "You're my sister, my blood. Your loyalty belongs to me.”

My wolf bared her teeth at that, furious. ‘Our loyalty is earned,' she spat. 'We bow to no one. Not even him.'

'Arya, where are you?' Marco's voice cut into my head, fast and hard. 'Walden was attacked with wolfsbane. He's at the hospital. Get there right now!'

Cold ran through me. Geoffrey leaned back in his chair, smiling at me, as if he knew what I just found out.

"Walden has been poisoned,” I said.

Geoffrey said nothing. He didn't ask what had happened. He just looked at me, his

face completely still, and waited for me to finish.

"Say something," I pleaded desperately. “Tell me it wasn't you. That's all you have to do."

Still, he said nothing.

"If he dies," I warned, "I will never forgive you. Not ever. Brother or not.”

I ran.

All the way there I prayed to the Moon Goddess, over and over, the same words. Let

him live. Please, let him live!

Chapter 423

Talia's POV

I had barely gotten situated in my room to take a bath after dinner when the door to our room slammed open. Della was standing in the doorway, out of breath. I immediately tugged my shirt back on and asked, "What's wrong?"

"Rogues attacked the eastern border," she replied.

Nolan exited the bathroom, sleeves still rolled up, and asked, "How many?"

"Just a few. The patrol took care of it quickly." She leaned heavily against the doorframe, chest rising and falling, as she was trying to catch her breath. "But Walden got hurt. They used wolfsbane on him."

"How long ago?" I asked as I put my shoes back on.

"Half an hour, maybe less. Marco's there with Walden now at the hospital," Della explained.

We went straight there. My mind raced with questions, but I was relieved Walden was only poisoned with wolfsbane; it was still a dangerous and potent poison.

'He is strong. He will survive this,' my wolf reassured me.

Marco stood outside the operating room when we arrived. Della walked over to him, and Marco turned around to face us. Before I could ask for an update, Marco had already started talking.

“Walden is no longer poisoned. They were able to apply the antidote in time,” Marco said. “He has multiple injuries, and he hasn't woken up yet."

"Why would rogues do this?" I asked as I sat down. "Do you think these are rogues that were loyal to the Rogue King?"

"I don't know. It was only six of them," Marco answered.

"Six?" I repeated in surprise.

"I was surprised too. They didn't stand a chance against a patrol, but they still attacked," Marco said.

"It doesn't add up," I said. "Why would rogues attack Bloodmoon? They know they can't win. We're the biggest, oldest pack in the area. We have more fighters at that border than anyone."

"They've never tried it before," Nolan added.

"That's what I thought," Della said. "So I asked the patrol what actually happened out there. Every one of them said the same thing. The rogues didn't fight the patrol. They went around them. All of them went for Walden and nobody else."

A slow, creeping dread settled over me. Walden wasn't just another warrior. He was the Chief Warrior, the reason why the pack could sleep safely at night because security was his priority. If someone wanted him gone, they wanted to weaken Bloodmoon.

"All of them?" I repeated. "All of them went for Walden?"

"Every single one." Della's jaw was tight. "None tried to get past the patrol. Nobody ran when things went bad." She paused. "Their knives were coated with wolfsbane. They kept stabbing him even after he was down, even after they were mortally wounded."

I was horrified. Rogues didn't act like that. This seemed like a hit job. "Someone told them to do it, and they were making sure they killed him," I said.

"If the healers had been ten minutes slower, he would have."

Nolan turned around. "Rogues raid for food and they run when it costs them. They don't pick one man out of a patrol and focus all their efforts on him."

"Somebody told them who to kill and made sure they stayed on him until it was done."

"You think it was arranged?" Marco asked.

"What else could it have been? Someone told them Walden would be on patrol in that area tonight. Who would have known that?" I replied.

"It could be anyone," Marco said.

“No. I checked the roster. Walden wasn't supposed to be on patrol tonight. So, the change happened today," Della confirmed.

"Where was Geoffrey during the attack?" Nolan asked.

"With Arya in his room," Marco said evenly, the way he said everything. "Our scouts reported he didn't leave the room, not once since noon."

"Convenient," Della scoffed.

Nolan didn't answer either of them, but I saw his jaw set, and I understood exactly where his mind had gone. So did Marco, from the look on his face.

The doors at the end of the corridor banged open, and Arya came through them at a run.

"Is he alive?" she asked after sliding to a stop.

"He's alive," I said. "He's out of surgery."

Arya put both hands over her face for a second. When she lowered them, her eyes

were red as she was trying to control her emotions.

"I want to see him," she said.

"Nobody's seeing him just yet," I said.

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"I should have been there," Arya said. "That was my patrol. He only took it because of me." She pressed her hand to her mouth and shut her eyes, her breath shaky, shoulders trembling beneath the weight of regret. Her pain radiated through the aus raw and

space between us aw

immediate, more honest than any

confession. "If I'd just gone like I was

supposed to, maybe it wouldn't have happened."

"Why didn't you go?" I asked.

She didn't answer straight away.

"Arya, why did Walden take your patrol?" I asked.

"Geoffrey asked me to skip it," Arya answered. "He wanted to spend the evening with me because he had

surprise for me. I told Walden and he said he'd take my shift so could

go

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Nolan didn't react, but he glanced

me. I could tell we were both

thinking the same thing

somehow was behind this. The question was: Is Arya in on it too?

at

"Did your brother do anything unusual tonight?" Nolan asked. "Did he ask you about

the patrols, or about Walden? Did he seem like he was waiting on something?"

"Why would you ask me that?" Arya asked.

"Answer the question, Arya," Nolan said firmly.

Arya's face changed. I watched it happen: the confusion leaving her, and something

much worse coming in behind it.

"You think Geoffrey set this up?" she asked, looking at us both. "That's why you asked about him. You already suspect him?"

Chapter 424

Talia's POV

"Yes, I do," Nolan said. "We suspect he may have had something to do with what happened to Walden."

A tremor ran through Arya's jaw, but her gaze didn't waver. "You think my brother would help rogues hurt Walden?"

I shook my head. "We don't want to believe it, but things aren't adding up. If you know anything, anything at all, you need to tell us."

Arya hesitated, her eyes searching each of our faces. "Geoffrey... he's changed. He's not the brother I remembered." She took a breath. "But I don't believe he'd be part of something like this. He wouldn't work with rogues."

Nolan's voice lost some of its edge, but he stayed firm. "We get it, but don't let your feelings get in the way. You're not just Geoffrey's sister. You're Bloodmoon's Deputy Chief Warrior. We trust you to put the pack first."

Arya pressed her hands to her sides. "If Geoffrey did this, I won't protect him, but you need to be sure. I want proof, not just suspicion."

A commotion from inside the room drew all our attention. A nurse emerged, looking relieved. "Walden is awake. You can see him now."

We rushed inside. Arya went first, her face tight with guilt and relief. I felt the tension ease as I saw Walden alive and awake. Walden sat up in bed, pale, watching each of us as we gathered around him.

Marco's shoulders finally relaxed as he said, "Thank the Goddess you're awake." "A couple of stab wounds weren't going to put me down," Walden said.

Nolan looked relieved too, even though he tried to stay serious. "It wasn't just a few, but if you can make jokes, I know you're going to be okay, old man."

Arya took his hand. "I'm so sorry. I should've been there."

"So, you could be stabbed? Don't be ridiculous," Walden responded, managing a faint smile. "This wasn't your fault."

Arya frowned before she let out a quiet breath. She squeezed his hand and said, "Okay."

I came over, and Arya stepped back to let me sit next to Walden's bed. "Walden, can you tell us what happened?" I asked.

"They said my name. That's what caught me off guard," Walden replied.

My eyes widened in surprise. So, it was a planned attack. Rogues would not know who the Chief Warrior was. They'd know him by looks but never by his name.

"They looked like ordinary rogues. They weren't mad rogues. There was nothing special about them," Walden continued. "But their daggers, they were too well crafted for rogues. Someone gave them those weapons."

Marco nodded grimly. "Whoever sent them wanted you dead."

Della stepped closer, her brow knitted. "I found traces of a faint, oily residue. I sent it

to the lab, but preliminary tests suggest it's wolfsbane."

"That's not something a rogue could easily get their hands on," Marco added.

"I figured as much," Walden groaned, shifting to get comfortable. Della adjusted his pillow, moving carefully. We all drew closer as if being near away "As

him could keep all knew

soon as they said my name, oknew

they were coming for me. The other

warriors did their best, but those rogues were relentless."

Della stepped forward, holding one of the recovered daggers in a cloth. "The daggers were custom-made. I've checked with every trader and contact I know. No one recognizes the maker's mark."

outher

Arya held out her hand. "Let me see it." Della placed the dagger in her palm. Arya inspected the engraving closely, her thumb lingering on the makers mark. She let out a short breath of relief before returning the dagger. "It's not a Doomfur dagger," she confirmed.

"One thing about Geoffrey is that he's careful. He'd never use his own daggers for something like this," Della told Arya.

"You've already condemned him," Arya said defensively.

"All I'm saying is that just because this isn't a Doomfur blade doesn't mean he's innocent," Della responded.

A chill ran up my spine. “This is just like when Michael poisoned my father. He didn't stop until my father was dead. Whoever did this will want to finish the job."

Nolan's gaze flicked to Arya. "If you believe Geoffrey is innocent, then we need your help to prove it. No one else knows him as you do."

"I'll do whatever it takes to find out," Arya committed.

I turned to Della and said, "Move Walden to the VIP suite discreetly. I want him safe

and out of sight."

"I'll take care of it," Della said.

"Have Henry stay here in Walden's current room," I told Marco.

"You're laying a trap?" Marco asked.

"Of course," I confirmed.

"We'll let the pack think Walden survived the poison but is still weak, still in this hospital room. The news will spread. The real mastermind will want to finish the job," Nolan said.

"And then they'll be caught red-handed. There'll be no question that they are the ones responsible," I added.

Marco grinned. "I'll let Henry know."

'If Geoffrey is behind this, this will give Henry an opportunity to get back at Geoffrey,'

my wolf said smugly.

'For Arya's sake, let's hope he's not behind it,' I responded.

Della's lips curled into a fierce smile. "We'll be ready."

Arya stood beside the bed, her hand resting gently on Walden's arm. “I'll talk to Geoffrey. Find out where he was, who he saw. If he's hiding something, I'll know."

Nolan placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "We trust you, Arya. Bloodmoon comes first. Help us protect it."

She nodded. "I won't let you down."

Chapter 425

Talia's POV

The next morning, we sat at the table, barely touching our food. My stomach was tight with nerves, but I forced myself to eat a little so no one would worry. Sometimes, I noticed Nolan watching me, like he could tell how anxious I felt. He looked lost in his own thoughts, too. The attack on Walden had shaken everyone, and now the whole pack felt tense and unsure, like we were all waiting for something bad to happen.

"We've been back for days," Nolan said quietly. "All we've done is rest and recover. Maybe that was a mistake."

I nodded, resting my hand on my belly. "We needed a break. Don't feel bad about us taking a little time to celebrate."

"I know," Nolan said. "I don't regret it. I'm just..."

"I get it. Walden's still healing, and now I carried twins. Someone might see that as a chance to attack us," I said. If we were in dire need, I could use Moonfire, but I didn't know what that would do to the twins.

Nolan's eyes narrowed. "There are four wolves that would be bold enough to do that, and three of them are dead."

"Geoffrey," I said.

"Exactly what I was thinking," Nolan stated.

Geoffrey was the only one openly after the Alpha King title. He always wanted more power and never seemed happy with his place. It didn't seem like a coincidence that Walden was attacked while Geoffrey was here. He was never shy about wanting control, but now he seemed more patient and determined, like he'd do anything to get what he wanted.

"Do you really think he would do that while staying here?" I asked.

"I believe he would only because he's egotistical. He thinks he's smarter than everyone in the room, and perhaps he is in some places, but not around people that can see through his lies," Nolan answered.

"Why would he go for Walden and not you or me?" I asked.

"That would be too difficult. Remember, Geoffrey can be very patient. If he planned the rogue attack," Nolan said, "it was to make us look weak to show that Bloodmoon needs new leaders, or you're not fit to be Alpha Queen. Then, he could petition a meeting and repeat exactly what he did to Solon with you."

"No one would vote against me," I said.

"He probably thinks that, since he's Arya's brother, he can win over the warriors. If he gets Arya to owe him or control her, that would be his chance to become Alpha King, or at least that's what he's probably thinking," Nolan said.

"But he's forgetting something," I said quietly. "Bloodmoon's warriors are loyal to the Alpha and Luna first, and then the Chief Warrior. They only listen to Walden because we told them to."

Nolan gave a small, grim smile. "He's underestimating us."

"Good. That gives us the advantage," I said, taking a sip of tea.

After breakfast, we walked to the training grounds. The sound of weapons and shouting warriors was oddly reassuring. It meant everything was normal for now. Arya stood in the middle, giving instructions.

Two warriors started bickering

about how to stand defensively, so

Arya stepped in. "If you think you do it better, show me. Out there, making fast choices can be the difference between life and death. Tyler fix how you're holding your weapon uro, if you believe you have a better chance, prove it in the ring right now. Defend against Connor's attacks." They both became quiet and followed her lead. Even as acting Chief Warrior, Arya commanded respect.

"I see why Walden chose her," I said.

As we got closer, I saw Geoffrey sitting off to the side, watching Arya. He noticed us and walked over, acting friendly. "Arya's doing great," he said. "You must be proud."

I nodded. "We are. But real strength isn't just about skill. It's about making the right choices. That's what earns respect."

Geoffrey's eyes narrowed, but he nodded, catching my meaning. "But only the winner decides what's 'right," he said.

Nolan's expression hardened. "Don't think for a second we won't find out who poisoned Walden. If it's you, you'll regret it."

Geoffrey scoffed, brushing dust from his sleeve. "There's no evidence to tie the attack to me. Don't let your bias cloud your judgment."

Nolan started to step forward, but I touched his wrist. As soon as I did, I felt calmer. A warm wave spread through us Our mate bond Caried my silent message: 'He's just trying to get a reaction. Don't take the bait.'

'I know, but please, just once, let me punch him in the face,' Nolan grumbled.

'No,' I laughed. 'But if he is responsible, you'll be able to do more than just punch him.'

"Maybe Walden should step down. He's not young anymore. As the Chief Warrior, he should never have allowed rogues to get the upper hand. It is embarrassing, don't you think?" Geoffrey added.

Nolan glared at him. "This is not the Doomfur Pack. Here, we respect our elders. We don't just throw them away when it is convenient."

Arya walked over, wiping sweat from

her forehead. Geoffrey switched gears right away trying to sound nicer "Congrats on being Chier Warrior, Arya," he said, then added, "Even if it's only temporary

Arya looked uncomfortable, so I stepped in. "Alpha Geoffrey will leave in three days.

Arya, I trust you'll make the right choice and choose your mate, won't you?"

Geoffrey suddenly snapped. "What? No. Arya belongs to me!"

Chapter 426

Talia's POV

Geoffrey's words echoed. Some warriors turned to stare. I froze, shocked. I always knew he was possessive of Arya, but hearing him say it out loud was different.

Arya's eyes flashed with anger. "I am not an object to be possessed," Arya snapped. "I belong to no one but myself."

Geoffrey seemed to realize his mistake. He quickly composed himself, bowing his head. "Forgive me. I spoke out of turn."

Arya glared at him. Geoffrey put on a smile, pretending nothing happened. "Anyway, I won't distract you from your duties, Arya. I'll talk to you later," he said, then walked off.

When he was out of earshot, I drew Arya aside, speaking in a low voice. "Is Henry ready in Walden's room? We can't risk Geoffrey getting suspicious."

Arya nodded. "Yes, Luna. Everything is ready for tonight."

"Good. Whoever attacked Walden will make their move tonight. I'm sure of it." "We'll be ready," Nolan said.

We waited in the hospital lounge all night. Nolan paced, restless, glancing at me every few minutes like he thought I might disappear. The chairs were hard, but I barely noticed. My mind kept going back to Walden and Geoffrey's outburst. I watched Nolan's hands clench and relax. I wished I could calm us both.

Now and then, Marco poked his head in to check on us, with a tense smile before disappearing back into the hallway.

"Still nothing?” I questioned softly one time.

Marco shook his head. "Nothing yet. Della and I are going to patrol outside again. If we see anything, we'll let you know."

Time dragged. I tried counting tiles, but it didn't help. Sometimes a nurse's footsteps echoed down the hall. We barely spoke. Waiting made me notice every heartbeat, every shallow breath.

"You're making me nauseous, pacing in circles like that," I groaned.

"Sorry," Nolan said, stopping. "But you should go back and sleep. You've got the twins to think about. Marco and I can handle Geoffrey if he shows up."

I shook my head. "As Alpha Queen, I have to protect my pack." Nolan meant well,

but he was always overprotective. Tonight seemed like a turning point. Every choice mattered.

"Yes, but you can always delegate," Nolan said.

"You're not going to change my mind, Nolan."

Nolan sighed and sat next to me. He brushed his fingers over my hand. He

whispered, "I still think you should be resting."

"I can rest once this is settled," I replied, squeezing his hand in reassurance. "I need

to be at your side tonight."

"At least take a nap," Nolan offered.

"So you can conveniently forget to wake me up? No thanks." I said.

We sat in silence, watching the clock. Seconds seemed like hours. The tension in the room grew. I looked at the landscape paintings on the wall. Their dull colors calmed me a little.

Finally, Nolan spoke. "What if we're wrong about tonight? What if nothing happens?"

I shook my head. "Then we lose a little sleep. But if we're right, we're ready."

He nodded, but I saw him fighting the urge to start pacing again.

I tried to calm down, focusing on my breathing. My wolf was restless, just as alert as was. I thought about messaging Arya, but she needed to stay focused tonight. Instead, R reached out to Henry through the

ndlink Henry we're right outside. If anything suspicious happens, let us know right away.'

'Shouldn't you be resting?' Henry responded.

'Don't you start with me too,' I said.

Henry chuckled. 'I will let you know if I see anything suspicious.'

The hospital was strangely quiet. At some point, I had fallen asleep. Around midnight, my wolf said, 'Someone is here.'

I shot upright. Down the hall, I heard the guards outside Walden's room go down. There was no telling if it was due to poison or an attack, but it was clear that something was wrong.

"Nolan," I started.

"I've already informed Marco and Della to get back here right now," Nolan said. 'He's here,' Henry said through the mind link. 'Geoffrey...' The connection was abruptly cut off.

Nolan and I ran down the hallway. The door to Walden's room hung half open. Inside, furniture was overturned and glass covered the floor.

Inside, Henry grappled with Geoffrey, blocking blow after blow. Henry landed a punch to Geoffrey's jaw, but Geoffrey's dagger sliced his forearm. Henry grunted in pain and blocked another blow.

"Stay behind me," Nolan shouted and then threw himself forward, grabbing Geoffrey from behind to pull him away from Henry. Marco stormed in next, helping to restrain Geoffrey as he thrashed wildty. Della came in right after him.

Della delivered swift punches to Geoffrey's abs, but he still struggled against Nolan's hold. The dagger cut across Della's face. She hissed in pain. Marco snarled in anger and gripped Geoffrey's forearm of the arm that held the dagger, almost so hard I thought it would snap. But Geoffrey still held on to the dagger.

"Hold him still!" Nolan shouted.

"We're trying," Della grunted.

Geoffrey was flailing like a wild animal. Even with two Alphas and a Beta, he was still causing them to struggle. His eyes were wild. Geoffrey knew if he were caught, that would be the end of him.

I wanted all of this to end. While I was preparing to use the Alpha Queen command, Arya darted in, ducked under Geoffrey's arm, and slammed her fist down on his wrist. "Drop it!" Arya growled.

The dagger flew out of his grip and skittered across the tiles, far from his reach.

Della quickly picked up the dropped dagger and gave it to me.

The second I looked at it, I recognized it.

It matched the weapons from the rogue attack on Walden.

Chapter 427

Talia's POV

"You conspired with rogues to kill my Chief Warrior," I said angrily and held the dagger up for everyone to see. "The six rogues that attacked Walden had the same dagger. Do you understand how that looks?"

"I did no such thing," Geoffrey said as he finally stopped struggling. Nolan finally released him as he, Marco, and Henry created a defensive circle around him. "I was defending myself against Alpha Henry."

"You liar. I..."

"Let him finish," I said, interrupting Henry.

"I only came to see how Walden was, and Alpha Henry attacked me," Geoffrey explained.

"Do you really expect us to believe that?" I scoffed.

"You are condemning me for having that dagger?"

"I have."

"Why? I know I am not one of your favorites, but you can't believe me, an Alpha, would work with rogues. Anyone in this territory could have bought those daggers and given them to the rogues. Half the smiths on the eastern road would sell to whoever paid."

"Then explain what you're doing in this room tonight," I demanded.

"I told you I wanted to check on Walden," Geoffrey repeated.

“It's the middle of the night," I went on. “Walden is not your pack, not your friend, and not your business. You have no reason to be standing over his bed. So tell me what brought you here."

He stayed silent.

"Geoffrey, please say something. Tell them why you're here. Just explain it," Arya pleaded.

Geoffrey's calm demeanor shifted to anger. "You're standing with them," he accused.

"I'm asking you to explain!"

"You're picking them over me? Over your own brother?" Geoffrey demanded. "You tried to kill two people! I won't be a murderer or an accomplice," Arya argued. "How have they brainwashed you, Arya? You know what it was like for us, how we were always left out, treated like we didn't belong. I swore I'd never be powerless again," Geoffrey continued.

"Geoffrey," Arya started.

"You damn naive fool," Geoffrey snapped, cutting her off. "If you'd just listened, we could have been on top, both of us. I had every step figured out. All you had to do was go along. I just wanted us to finally matter, but now you look at me like I'm nothing to you."

Arya didn't answer. She stared at her brother, pain flickering across her face. Then she looked down, shoulders curling in like she was bracing for a hit. She stayed quiet.

"Look at me when I'm talking to you!" Geoffrey snarled.

"That's enough," Nolan cut in. "You've had your chance to explain yourself, and you've used it to shout at your sister. We're not listening to another word."

"Alpha, you're going to regret....”

"Not another word!" Nolan said.

"Marco, Henry, take him to the dungeon. He stays there tonight, and he stands trial in the morning," I ordered.

Marco stepped up on Geoffrey's other side. With both of them there, Geoffrey didn't fight. He didn't look at Arya as they took him out, and she kept her head down.

The door shut behind them.

Arya's legs gave out. Della caught her and helped her sit on the end of the bed. Arya pressed her face into her hands, shoulders shaking as she sobbed without a sound.

"He did it," she wept. "He actually did it."

"Arya." Della crouched in front of her. "What plan was he talking about? What did he ask you to let happen?"

"He told me he had a surprise for me. That was why I skipped my patrol." She wiped her face with the back of her wrist. "But his surprise

was telling me he had a way to make me Chief Warrior Geoffrey sard once Walden disappeared, the position would be mine."

Della's head came up sharply. “He said that to you? In those words?"

"He said Walden would disappear," Arya confirmed.

"Why didn't you tell us?" Della demanded.

"I warned Geoffrey not to hurt Waldon. He said sacrifices have to be made," Arya explained. “I thought he was just talking, trying to sound tough. I never thought he meant it. I never thought he'd actually do it."

Della sighed in frustration. "You wanted to believe he wasn't a monster."

"I warned him. I promise I did, but it didn't matter. By the time he told me about the plan, Geoffrey had already done it,” Arya said. "I wasn't hiding it. I just didn't want to believe he really did it."

I wanted to be angry with her for keeping things from us, but all I felt was pity. Arya found her brother after thinking he was dead, only to lose him again like this. At least I knew Arya was loyal to us.

"You understand what he's done is a serious crime," Nolan said, and Arya nodded.

Arya nodded. "What will happen to him?" she asked.

"He paid rogues to kill a ranking warrior of a pack governed by the Alpha Queen. That alone is treason If Walden or even Henry had died tonight it would have thrown the whole territory into chaos and threatened the life of the Alpha Queen and Bloodmoon," Nolan explained.

"Will he be exiled?" Arya asked.

“No, I'm afraid not," I responded. I couldn't bear to tell her the truth. Nolan felt my

conflict through the mate bond and decided to tell her.

"Bloodmoon law is old, and it isn't

flexible," Nolan said. "For conspiring with rogues; gravely injuring the Chief Warrior, and threatening the safety of the Alpha Queen and Luna, he will stand trial. With the overwhelming evidence, he will be found guilty, and he will be executed."

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Arya let out a broken, heart-wrenching cry. She could barely breathe between sobs. She slid off the bed onto the floor, and Della went with her, holding her while she cried. None of us said anything as nothing would have helped.

"Please," she begged, grabbing my leg. "Just let me see him before the trial. I just want to talk to my brother one last time before you take him from me."

"You can see him tonight," I promised. “I'll arrange it myself."

Chapter 428

Arya's POV

I made my way down to the dungeon while my mind raced. What was I going to say

to Geoffrey? There was no way I could get him out of this mess without becoming an enemy of Bloodmoon.

'There is nothing you can do,' my wolf told me. 'He has to accept the consequences of his actions, and so do you.'

Marco and Henry flanked the entrance. Henry's arm was now patched, and he wouldn't meet my gaze. Marco looked at me with suspicion. When I approached, Henry stepped forward, blocking my path with a gentle but firm hand.

"Are you sure about this?" he asked, searching my face for hesitation.

"I need to see him," I replied. “Luna and Alpha already approved my request."

Marco exchanged a look with Henry, then sighed. "Fine. You're only getting 10 minutes."

Marco's keys rattled as he unlocked the door. The hinges groaned. The dungeon was cold and dark, lit only by a single torch on the wall. Geoffrey sat against the far wall, thick silver chains cutting into his wrists and ankles. Red burns marked his skin, but his face stayed calm.

Geoffrey looked up when he heard me. For a second, I saw the brother I

remembered from childhood. Relief flickered in his eyes and he almost smiled. Then his face hardened again.

"I didn't think you'd come," he said

I knelt near him. "Of course I came."

From outside, I heard Henry and Marco's muffled voices, arguing over whether I should be left alone. Marco's voice rose, but I ignored them, focusing on Geoffrey. “Tell me the truth. Did you really do this? Did you really work with rogues?"

Geoffrey met my gaze without flinching. "I allied with the rogues. I planned to kill Walden, and as you can see, I failed."

"Why? Why would you do this?"

"Because power is all that matters. I'm not like the rest of you, content to wait for scraps. I was tired of being nothing. I had to keep climbing, even if it meant killing."

"Is that all we were to you?" I asked. "Just a means to climb?"

Geoffrey shook his head. "No. You were the only one I wished would understand, but I was careless. I underestimated Walden. I underestimated everyone."

Anger flared in me, but grief quickly overtook it. "You show no regret."

He laughed, a short, bitter sound. "Regret is wasted on the weak. I curse Walden and the rest for their luck, not for what I did. If I could do it over," His voice broke, but he forced it steady. "I'd be more careful. I'd win."

Tears streamed down my face. "If you'd just let yourself be ordinary, this wouldn't be happening. We could have started over and regained the time we lost. It wouldn't have mattered if you were Alpha or even just a regular pack member, but now I'm going to lose you."

He softened, just for a moment. “You were always too soft for this world."

"Please, Geoffrey. Please beg for mercy at the trial. They might spare your life. You are my only family," I said as I reached for his hand and took it into mine.

He shook his head. "No. I won't grovel for them. You know I won't. You'll have to let me go. Henry...he's strong. He'll protect you."

A sob racked my chest. “No. I want my brother to stay with me."

Geoffrey squeezed my hand. "That's not something I can give you."

We sat in silence. Only his chains made a sound. At last, he nodded. "There's something in my pocket. Take it."

I reached into his tunic, confused. My fingers closed around something heavy pulled out a delicate dagger. It was beautifully crafted with my name carved into the hilt. Mbreath caught. "You made this for me?"

Geoffrey nodded. “When I found you again, I wanted you to have it, as a gift. I thought maybe it would keep you safe. You should try it."

"What?"

"You should try it. NOW."

"I don't understand."

Before I could move, he lunged at me. The silver chains snapped. His hands closed around my throat, tight enough to make me gasp, but not to hurt me. Panic and betrayal crashed through me.

"Geoffrey, stop! What are you doing?"

Geoffrey's voice was urgent, almost pleading. “You have to do it. You have to kill

me. They'll never let me live. If you do it, it'll be mercy. Please, Arya."

I shook my head frantically, tears blurring my vision. "No! I won't!"

He pressed his forehead to mine, his grip trembling. "Please. Let it be you."

My scream echoed off the stone walls. Henry and Marco burst into the dungeon, eyes wide with horror Marco shouted, Henry reached for Geoffrey, but Geoffrey only held me fighter, urging me on. "Now, Arya Please."

I sobbed as I raised the dagger. My hands shook so much I could barely hold it. Geoffrey watched me, his eyes calm. "You have to. It has to be you Geoffrey pleaded again and then I drove the blade into his heart.

Geoffrey gasped and his arms went limp. He pulled me close and whispered, "You did well, my little sister." The dagger slipped from my hand and hit the floor.

“No, no, help me, Henry, Marco, help me!” I pleaded as I cradled him in my arms.

"Don't...I love... you," Geoffrey said as blood filled his mouth. His face turned red. He choked, and then the light left his eyes.

Henry and Marco pulled me away, but I barely noticed. All I could do was cry for my dead brother.

Chapter 429

Talia's POV

Nolan and I sat at the table that morning, picking at our food. The pack house was quiet as we were the first ones up. Only our voices broke the silence as we talked about Geoffrey's trial. We thought catching him would fix things, that he was behind what happened to Walden. But it didn't help. I kept seeing Arya on the floor, crying when she learned her brother would be executed. That image wouldn't leave me. Nolan rubbed his eyes, his voice low and weary. "This whole thing is such a mess.”

"I regret involving Arya in catching Geoffrey. We should have kept her out of it," I said.

"Do you think Arya's going to be okay?" Nolan asked.

"I don't know,” I said. "This would be a blow for anyone."

"I just hope she can get through this," Nolan said. "But I would not be surprised if she no longer wanted anything to do with Bloodmoon."

"Would you let her leave?" I asked.

"Of course. I only stopped her from going with Geoffrey because he was trying to control her," Nolan explained, his tone full of regret. "If she ends up resenting us now, I would never force her to stay."

Before I could reply, hurried footsteps approached. The door swung open, and Marco rushed inside. Nolan frowned and said, "Please tell me Geoffrey did not escape."

"He's dead," Marco stated. "Geoffrey's dead."

"What?" I exclaimed. "Did he commit suicide?"

Marco shook his head and said, "No. Arya killed him herself last night."

I just stared at Marco, trying to process what he said. "Wait, what do you mean? Are you serious, Marco?"

Marco nodded. "I saw it happen. She did it. She killed him."

A cold shock ran through me. Arya killed him? She couldn't have. Arya wanted him

to have a chance at the trial. Why would she do this before he could even speak for himself?

Nolan tapped his fingers restlessly. Like me, he was trying to make sense of it. "Did you arrest her?"

"No," Marco answered. "Henry took her home."

Nolan ran a hand across his mouth, then shook his head. "As acting Chief Warrior, it was within Arya's right to deliver punishment without our guidance. Bloodmoon's judgment is done. Arrange for Geoffrey's body to be sent back to Doomfur for a proper funeral."

"Yes, Alpha," Marco said and hurried out of the room. The door shut behind him, and I barely waited a second later before blurting, "Why would Arya do something like this?"

"I have no idea, but we are going to ask her," Nolan said.

We moved quickly, left the kitchen, and hurried out of the packhouse. A cold wind struck my face when we went outside, but I barely felt it. My mind raced through every conversation I'd had with Arya, searching for a clue.

Halfway to Arya's place, Della cut us off. She looked pale, hugging herself like she was trying to hold in her worry What happened?" she asked I've been trying to mind link Arya, but she won't answer. Is she still mad at us about Geoffrey?"

"She killed Geoffrey last night," Nolan said.

Della gasped, "No!" Her hand flew to her mouth, but she fell in beside us, her steps quickening.

"We're on our way to see her now," Nolan continued.

None of us spoke as we hurried toward Arya's house.

When we got there, Henry was already pacing outside Arya's door. He looked worn out. Dark bags beneath his eyes, and his hair was a mess. He kept looking at the closed door.

Nolan called out, "Henry, what's going on?"

Henry looked relieved to see us. "She's locked herself in there. I've tried knocking, begging. Nothing," he Said, sounding tired. "She wont open the door, and the curtains are all shut. She hasn't come out since last night."

I pictured Arya inside, curled up in grief and shock. The guilt of killing her own brother was probably weighing or her. I could not imagine how she must be feeling. When I thought I had to kill Solon, it almost drove me insane.

"She must have had a reason," Della said quietly. "Arya wouldn't do this unless she had no choice."

I nodded, but doubt stayed with me. What could ever justify this? What did they say to each other in those last moments?

Nolan glared at the door, frustration showing in his eyes. "If she won't open up, maybe the guards should break in. We can't leave her alone like this."

I shook my head, putting myself between Nolan and the door. "No. Arya doesn't need to be confronted with force. She needs comfort. She needs someone who loves her."

"We cannot have a strong, emotionally compromised wolf in our territory," Nolan argued. “I want to allow Arya to grieve, but we need to make sure she is not a threat to others."

I frowned and said, "Don't you think I know that?”

"She's not a threat. I know she isn't,” Henry said. “She's just hurting right now." "Henry, you're her mate. If anyone can get through to her, it's you."

Henry hesitated, his expression torn between hope and despair. “She won't listen. Not after what happened."

Della's gaze swept the house, and then she pointed. "There. The window is half open. Henry, you can go through there. She might not let anyone else in, but she might let you."

I nodded and squeezed Henry's shoulder in encouragement. “Go. Help her. She needs you now more than ever."

Taking a shaky breath, Henry nodded and said, “Okay.” He slipped around the side of the house. We watched as he quietly pushed the window further open and climbed inside, careful not to make a sound.

Chapter 430

Arya's POV

I lay curled up on my bed, knees tight against my body. The sheets were bunched

up and wrapped around my legs, making it hard to move. Outside, the sky was gray and rainy, just like how I felt inside.

'You can't hide away like this forever,' my wolf said.

I ignored her and put my head down on my arms. Geoffrey's dying eyes kept haunting me.

'It wasn't your fault, Arya,' my wolf tried again.

'How can you say that? I stabbed him. I killed him,' I said.

'You did what he asked you to do. You are not to blame for this,' my wolf insisted.

'Why couldn't he have listened? Why did he have to try to kill Walden? If he hadn't...'

'He made his choice, Arya,' my wolf said.

I shook my head and hugged myself tighter. 'He could have made a different choice,' I whispered. 'He could've chosen me.'

"Geoffrey did," my wolf said. "He just did it the wrong way. He wanted things to end like this, and he wanted you to be the one to end it. You know how proud he was. He couldn't bear the humiliation of the trial."

I started to cry again. 'I wish it wasn't me,' I managed to say. 'I wish someone else had done it, or that he found a means to live with the shame.'

'I'm sorry, Arya,' my wolf whispered.

A loud crash from my living room brought me out of my thoughts. My wolf bristled as we both thought the same thing.

Alpha and Luna sent warriors to arrest me.

'We have to deal with it,' my wolf said.

'I know,' I muttered as I made myself get out of bed and peek out of my room. I was surprised to see Henry. He was soaked from the rain, trying to climb through the window, and he slipped a little, looking embarrassed.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

Henry jumped in surprise, nearly falling again. "Your door was locked. I just wanted to make sure you were okay," Henry explained, and then he looked at the broken glass on the ground. "I will fix your window too."

"My door was locked for a reason," I said flatly.

"I know.....but... Um, do you want to go for a walk? Maybe some fresh air would help?" Henry said.

I stared at him like he'd lost his mind. What was he thinking? Why was he acting as

if he hadn't just watched me kill my own brother?

Henry started to reach for the curtains to pull them fully open. "Stop," I snapped. "Just stop!"

Henry froze and started, "I'm sorry. I was just...”

I turned away, feeling embarrassed and guilty. "You should go," I said quietly. "I'm a

murderer. You shouldn't be around me." I let out a short, awkward laugh. "You really should have figured that out already."

"I'm not afraid of you, Arya," Henry

said gently as he walked over to me. "You're not going to scare me off." felt his hands grip my arms, and tense I wanted to resist, but the mate bond came to life from his touch. His ginger-and-cinnamon scent filled my senses, calming me. Henry pulled me into his arms, holding me from behind. I turned around to lean into his chest and started crying again.

"I'm here. I'm not going anywhere," Henry said as he gently rubbed my back.

Eventually, exhaustion from crying caught up with me, and my stomach growled, embarrassing me.

Henry stepped back and smiled softly. "You should eat," he said.

I nodded and followed him into the

kitchen like a stray pup. He looked through the fridge for a moment, then made us some peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. "This is all we've got for now unless you want to go to the dining hall," he told me.

I took a bite of my sandwich, but right away I thought of Geoffrey's last words. "Henry will be a good mate," he had told me. I tried to push that memory away, but it stuck with me and made my chest ache.

Henry slid a glass of water toward me and sat in the chair across from me. "You okay?" he asked, watching me as I chewed slowly. I nodded, not trusting myself to speak.

"I couldn't have messed up peanut butter jelly sandwiches," Henry joked.

"No, it's fine," I replied. Actually, the food tasted like nothing to me, but at least my

stomach was full. When I finished eating, I pushed my plate away.

I rubbed my eyes and felt exhausted. "I just want to sleep," I said.

Henry nodded and got up. “Then let's get you back in bed."

He came over and picked me up, much to my surprise.

“Put me down, Henry. I can walk,” I said, but Henry ignored me, and I was too tired

to resist.

Henry brought me into the bedroom and laid me down on the unmade bed. He pulled the blanket over me and I glanced up at his face searching for any hint he was upset with me. But his eyes were soft and understanding, not angry or scared at all.

"Our mate isn't lying to us. He accepts us no matter what," my wolf said, and I didn't

know how to process it. I was a monster.

Henry gently moved some hair away from my forehead and let his hand linger for a second. He sat next to me, not too close, making sure I had room.

“I'll be in the other room. Just call if you need something,” he told me.

When he started to stand up, I reached out and held onto his sleeve. "Please don't leave," I whispered. "Stay...stay with me."