

Luna Forsaken

Chapter 4: The Door James Closed

Arya's POV

The second Marcel was gone, James shut the door. Hard.

The sound filled the room like a warning.

He turned, and the first thing he did wasn't apologise.

He exhaled like I was the complication he'd been trying to keep under control.

"Arya, "

"Don't." My voice came out sharp. "Don't say my name like you didn't just let him call me a rogue bitch. Like you aren't to replace me as Luna!"

His jaw tightened. He rubbed the back of his neck, eyes flicking anywhere but mine. He wouldn't look at me. And I hated him for it.

"You barged in," he said.

I just stared at him. "That's what you took from all of that?"

"Unbelievable," I continued, "Why wouldn't I barge in? I should stay silent while you give away what I earned for a seat at his table? What about me James? Where do I fit in this 'Union membership' dream of yours? Where James? Because clearly you've already decided my place in all this."

"Arya, listen to me, "

"No, you listen." I stepped closer. My hands shook, and I hated that he could see it. "He stood there and said I was a rogue bitch and you sat there and said nothing. Nothing.. Like I wasn't your mate. Like I wasn't your Luna."

James's face hardened.

"Lower your voice."

That one sentence did something ugly to me.

A laugh came out of me and it wasn't even a laugh. "You're worried about my voice?"

"This isn't about pride," he snapped, then caught himself, forcing his tone down. "This is about survival."

"Survival?" I shot back. "Survival is what we've been doing. Every day. without letting someone spit in my face and calling it politics.."

He moved closer, palms raised like I was an animal he needed to calm.

"There are packs mobilising," he said tightly. "Packs that want to wipe us out. You know that."

"I know."

"And you know what happens if they attack and we're not under Union protection."

"We fight," I said. "Like we always have."

James's eyes flashed. "How many more fights do you want?" he snapped. "How many bodies before you stop digging your heels in?"

I looked at him. I couldn't recognise the man I was looking at.

I stared at him, stunned. "You are trying to imply that I am selfish."

He exhaled sharply, as if I was exhausting him. "Yes, Arya. Selfish. Because you're making this about you."

I stepped back like he'd struck me.

"About me?" My voice cracked. "You're talking about me when you're the one who agreed to bring another woman here? You are the one who agreed to replace me with his daughter? All my years of suffering by your side, chasing your dreams, was for nothing. How could you repay me like this James?" I said and held back my tears with all my might because my heart was breaking.

I already knew where this was going.

"I didn't want any of this, but I followed you. I followed you and chased your dreams with you. And after everything, now that you have it all, you betray me. You kick me to curb and replace me with another woman simply because her

father promised you a seat at the union's table. Had I not fought, sacrificed and bled, would you even have a pack to begin with, James? Had you died in battle that day when I took the hit for you, will you be here, James? Will you be alive to betray me?."

James's mouth tightened. "It's politics."

"It's betrayal." I countered calling it exactly what it was.

"It's necessary." He said more to himself than to convince me.

"No," I said, shaking my head. "Necessary is building patrols. Storing food. Training wolves. Necessary is the things we bled for. This," I gestured between us, disgust burning through me, "this is you throwing me under the bus because you want a seat at their table."

His eyes went cold. "Watch your words, Arya"

"Or what?" I snapped. "You'll excuse me again? Tell me to leave the room while men decide my future?"

"Arya, "

"You called me emotional," I said, voice shaking now. "I can hear it in every word. Like my anger is the problem. Like my pain is the threat. Like I'm the reason our pack might die."

James's face tightened in frustration.

"Because you are acting like it," he said. "You're not thinking. You're reacting."

I stared at him. "Reacting. How about the pack replace you James, won't you react? Oh, Let's suddenly decide we want a new alpha so we can be a part of the union. Wouldn't you react? "

He took a breath, trying to sound calm. Trying to talk me down like I was unreasonable.

"Marcel's help is required," he said. "We need the Union. And we need to play along."

"Play along," he said.

Like I was supposed to put on a smile and swallow it. Like my life was a costume I could put on and take off.

I swallowed hard. "Alpha Maxwell promised, "

James cut me off instantly.

"Maxwell promised us a year ago," he said, voice sharp. "One whole year, Arya. And what has he done?"

"He said they were observing us," I fired back. "He said we needed to prove ourselves. He said it would take time. That there is a waiting period,"

"And how long do you plan to keep waiting?" James demanded. "How long? Another year? Two? While we keep fighting off packs that want our land and our throats? How many more attacks do you think we will survive, Arya?"

His voice rose with each word, like he'd been storing this resentment for months and finally found a place to pour it.

"You think I enjoy this?" he snapped. "You think I enjoy bending my neck to a Rainhorn?"

"You enjoyed it enough to let him call me a bitch," I said, low and deadly.

James flinched, actually flinched, then hardened again.

"That was strategy."

"Cowardice," I said.

His eyes darkened. "If my strategy keeps our people alive, then call it whatever you want."

I shook my head, breath ragged. "So this is what I am to you now? A sacrifice you can justify?"

"Arya, stop, "

"No." I stepped in again, forcing him to look at me. "Answer me. Disregarding our bond and mating with another woman, was that the 'right thing'?"

James's throat bobbed. He looked away for half a second.

Then he forced himself to meet my eyes.

“It’s transactional,” he said quickly, like he’d rehearsed it. “It’s politics. Marcel wants his daughter placed. He wants influence here. That’s the price.”

“The price.” My voice dropped to a whisper. “And I’m what? The inconvenience standing in the way of your price?”

“You’re my mate,” he said, frustrated. “You know that.”

“Then act like it. Be an alpha, my alpha” I said breaking inside tears threatening to fall.

He exhaled, voice turning sharp again. “You want me to risk the pack for your feelings?”

My face went still.

My heart didn’t. My heart felt like it tore.

“My feelings,” I repeated, almost laughing, almost sobbing. “You mean our bond. My place. My life.”

“What happens to me?” I asked, voice barely holding. “When she comes. When you play husband to Marcel’s daughter in front of everyone. What happens to me?”

James stepped closer, reaching for my hands.

I jerked back.

“Arya, I won’t neglect you,” he said fast. “I won’t. You’ll still have me. You’ll still be provided for. You’ll still, ”

“Provided for,” I echoed. “Like I’m not your wife. Like I’m a problem with a budget.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“That’s exactly what you meant.” My eyes burned. “You’re already speaking like I’m something you’ll manage. Something you’ll keep quiet so it doesn’t ruin your plans.”

He ran a hand through his hair, anger flashing.

“Do you understand what will happen if we don’t join the Union?” he demanded. “Do you understand how quickly the other packs will come when they know we’re unprotected? There will be no consequences. No intervention. They will butcher our people and take this land.”

“If the pack finds out that we had a chance to avert the attacks. To protect them and you were the reason we couldn’t get it . What do you think they will do?” he asked trying to drive in his reason.

He leaned in, voice low, urgent.

“They’ll turn on you,” he said, voice low. “They’ll blame you for it. They’ll say you cost them protection.”

My breath caught.

He wasn’t warning me.

He was threatening me with reality, one he was willing to use.

“I took in most of them. I fed and clothed them. Gave them a home and a pack. They wouldn’t have a home if it weren’t for me. You dare threaten to turn them against me?” I asked and he sighed as if I was being unreasonable.

He reached for me again, pleading now.

“Arya, please,” he said. “Please. Just, play along. Three days. Let her arrive. Let Marcel feel secure. We get the Union. We get protection. We keep our people alive. And then we figure the rest out.”

“Figure the rest out,” I echoed, numb.

Because the “rest” was me.

The “rest” was my dignity.

The “rest” was my bond being turned into a bargaining chip.

I looked at him, really looked.

And it hit me, there was no getting through.

His decision was already made.

And it hadn't included me.

My voice came out quiet. Too quiet.

"Did you ever plan to let me have a say?"

James swallowed.

"Arya, "

"No," I said, cutting him off. "Answer me. When you asked me to come with you, when you asked me to chase your dream with you, did you ever plan to share the throne?"

His mouth opened.

Nothing came.

Not one word.

Not even a lie.

The silence went straight through me.

I nodded slowly, like my body was accepting what my heart couldn't.

and I realised, all at once, I didn't have an exit..

Because I couldn't just walk away.

If I left, I'd be rogue again. And rogues don't get mercy.

Not me. Not a baby.

And I saw it in James's eyes, he knew that too.

He knew I had no safe exit.

He knew I was cornered.

And he was using it.

My voice shook, small and wrecked.

“So... this is it,” I whispered. “You’ve already decided. And I’m just supposed to survive it.”

James stepped forward. “Arya, ”

I held up a hand, stopping him.

“Don’t touch me,” I said, my words trembling. “Not when your hands are already reaching for someone else.”

I stared at him until my vision blurred, until the pain turned sharp enough to breathe.

And when I spoke again, it was barely a sound.

“Tell me the truth,” I said. “Was I ever your partner...or was I just the thing you used to get here?”

He couldn’t answer.