

Chapter 9 The Joining Felt Like a Sentence - Luna Forsaken

Arya's POV

The day of the joining finally arrived and it felt like someone reading my punishment aloud

No one was allowed to miss it. Not the warriors. Not the kitchen hands. Not the elders. Not me.

James made sure of that.

So I dressed like I was going to watch something die.

For the first time, I wore a halter-neck gown, high enough to cover James's mark, high enough to pretend he'd never put his mouth on my skin and sworn I was his.

I adjusted the fabric once, staring at my reflection with a face that didn't feel like mine.

Good. Let them stare. Let them guess wrong.

Let them forget, if they were so eager.

Lesley was nowhere to be found, and the relief hit me so hard I nearly shook.

She'd made herself scarce, deliberately.

And I was grateful.

It bought me time.

Time to breathe. Time to think. Time to plan.

Because I'd already accepted the truth: I'd lost James.

But I would not lose my child too.

Not to Marcel.

Not to "the Union."

Not to James's ambition.

When I stepped into the hall, the noise struck me immediately, music, cheers, forced celebration. Faces turned. Eyes followed.

Some people looked away quickly, guilty.

Others didn't bother pretending.

People who used to call me Luna watched me like I was a risk to their new "safety."

I walked anyway.

Head up. Spine straight. Hand steady at my side.

No tears today.

They'd used enough of my tears already.

Rebecca Rainhorn sat like a queen, Leah beside her, glowing with that smug, untouched confidence that came from knowing she was protected, by her father, by the Union, by my mate's silence.

James stood near the front, formal, controlled, every inch the Alpha playing his part.

He didn't look at me. Even from here he looked unfair, beautiful in that cold, controlled way that used to make my stomach flip. Now it just made the grief sharper.

Looking at me would require admitting I existed.

I found an empty seat near the edge, where I could breathe without being crowded by their satisfaction.

Then the doors opened again.

People straightened, subtle, immediate. Not excitement. Not joy.

Respect.

It moved like a wave.

Alpha Maxwell entered.

And beside him was a man I didn't recognise, tall, broad-shouldered, put together like he'd never once had to prove himself.

Not pretty-boy handsome. The other kind. The kind that makes a room recalibrate without meaning to.

His face was calm, his eyes sharp, and he carried himself like time belonged to him.

He didn't need to perform.

Alpha Maxwell's gaze found me quickly. He headed straight for my table, the man with him following without hurry.

People stepped aside for Maxwell.

They didn't step aside for me.

I noticed.

Maxwell stopped at my table. "Arya."

I didn't stand. I didn't bow. I didn't perform.

"Alpha Maxwell."

His eyes flicked to my covered neck for half a second, then away. Something tight crossed his face.

He pulled the chair out and sat opposite me. The man sat beside him, still quiet. He smelled faintly of winter air and something smoky, like he'd stepped out of the cold and brought it with him.

Maxwell tilted his head slightly. "This is Lev."

Lev glanced at me, then at the covered neckline, like he understood more than I wanted him to.

A faint curve touched his mouth, barely there. "Evening," he said. His voice was low, quiet and impossible to ignore.

"Lev," I said.

His eyes met mine. Green. Steady. Sharp in a way that felt... rare.

“Luna,” Maxwell said quietly, and the title landed in my chest like something sore.

“I’m not, ” I began.

Maxwell cut me off with a look. Not harsh. Just firm.

“Today,” he said. “You don’t have to explain yourself to me.”

I swallowed the knot in my throat and looked away.

Maxwell’s jaw tightened. “James is doing this for the alliance.”

“That’s what everyone keeps saying,” I replied, voice flat.

Maxwell leaned forward slightly. “I’m disappointed he didn’t wait. I wonder how he plans to pull this off. I doubt the Union council will bend its rules for Marcel’s sake,”

Then Maxwell’s eyes flickered toward James at the front. “It seems James is in a hurry.”

I let out a quiet breath. “That’s one word for it.”

Maxwell lowered his voice. “I told him a year ago, if he held the line, if he built stability, I would connect him to someone who could open the right doors.”

I laughed without humour. “a year ago.”

Maxwell didn’t flinch. “Yes. Because the “Union people don’t move fast,” Maxwell said. “They watch. They wait. They make you beg. There is a stipulated waiting period you know. And I have never seen them break that rule for anyone. I’d know. I am part of the union council after all”

I leaned back. “He didn’t want to wait. So , he chose Marcel.”

Maxwell’s expression darkened. “And I hope James knows what that means.”

I stared at the table. “He knows what he wants.”

Maxwell’s voice was low now, almost grim. “No one gets into a deal with Marcel and keeps their pack.”

My fingers tightened on my lap.

Maxwell watched me closely. “Do you understand what you’re tied to, Arya?”

I lifted my eyes slowly. “It’s none of my business anymore.”

That came out colder than I expected.

Maxwell’s gaze held mine. “That’s not true.”

“It is,” I said, sharper now. “He made sure of that. He made it very clear where I stand.”

Maxwell’s eyes narrowed slightly. “He hurt you.”

I didn’t answer.

Because if I opened my mouth, something in me would crack.

Lev spoke for the first time, his voice calm, controlled.

“You look like you’re one comment away from setting this place on fire. Are you alright?””

The question was simple.

It almost destroyed me.

I blinked quickly, forcing my throat to work. “I’m fine.”

Lev studied me for a beat longer than polite. Then he looked away as if he’d decided not to push.

Maxwell’s voice softened, barely. “Arya,”

“Please,” I cut in, quietly. “Not today.”

Maxwell nodded once, understanding.

Silence settled over our table while the ceremony continued, vows, formal words, cheers that sounded too eager, too loud, too rehearsed.

I didn’t look at James.

I couldn't.

Because I didn't trust my face not to betray me.

Then the music changed.

A dance began, planned, symbolic, performative. Everything felt staged

Lev turned slightly toward me.

"Dance with me," Lev said, like it was the most normal thing in the world.

I stared at him. "Why?"

"Because you're sitting here like you've been put in time-out," he said, eyes flicking to the room. "And I don't like bullies."

My pulse jumped.

Maxwell's brows lifted slightly, like he was surprised Lev spoke at all.

I swallowed. The whole hall was watching Leah, watching Rebecca, watching James.

No one was watching me.

And maybe that was the point.

"Alright," I said.

Lev stood first, then extended his hand.

I hesitated for one heartbeat.

Then I placed my hand in his.

His grip was steady, warm, sure, and my body reacted before my pride could stop it.

As we stepped into the open space, the murmurs started immediately.

I caught my name, then "rogue," then that ugly one, "bed warmer", and my stomach clenched.

I heard laughter that tried to be subtle and failed.

I kept walking.

Lev kept walking.

We didn't rush. We didn't flinch.

And the fact that he didn't flinch, did something to me I didn't want to name. Someone was proud to be seen with me in the midst of all this.

We were a few steps from the dance floor when the air shifted again.

Marcel Rainhorn moved like a shadow with entitlement, sliding into our path as if he had every right to interrupt.

He smiled at Lev, real respect on his face, the kind I'd never once seen aimed at me. That was when I knew Lev had to be a very important man

"Lev," Marcel greeted, voice smooth. "It's an honour. I did not expect Radimir to send his nephew to honour my daughter's wedding."

"I am not here for this," he responded, his voice cold and authoritative. Not gentle like the one he used when talking to me. It just meant whoever he was, he wasn't someone Marcel wanted to mess with. I felt somewhat good knowing there was someone out there that Marcel couldn't bully.

"I am here as Luna arya's guest," he said

Marcel's eyes flicked to me, dismissal returning like habit.

Then he said it.

"Careful, Lev," Marcel said, loud enough for the room. "You don't want your name tangled up with a rogue."

The words hit the room like a slap.

Gasps. A ripple of shocked laughter. Eyes snapping to me like they were starving for my reaction.

My hand tightened around Lev's involuntarily.

My chest went hot.

Lev didn't look at me.

He looked at Marcel.

And something in Lev's gaze turned sharp.

Offended.

Not on his own behalf.

On mine.

Lev's voice was calm, but it carried.

"You're getting too comfortable," he said calmly.

The room froze.

Marcel's smile twitched. "Lev, I only meant, "

"What you meant," Lev cut in, cool and precise, "is none of my concern."

Marcel blinked.

Lev took a small step forward, not aggressive, just enough to make Marcel feel the difference in power.

"Whom I choose to dance with," Lev said evenly, "is not your business."

Marcel's jaw tightened slightly.

Lev continued, louder now, for the room.

"Also," Lev added, eyes still on Marcel, "you're talking about one of the hosts. The Luna."

The words hit like a weapon.

I felt heads snap around. Confusion. Recalculation. Fear of offending the wrong person.

Marcel's face shifted, slowly, reluctantly, like his mind was racing through consequences.

Lev's voice dropped to something colder.

"I would take offence," he said, "seeing as you seem to be in the habit of disregarding people."

Marcel swallowed.

Lev lifted his chin slightly.

"And I will make sure," Lev added, "that I inform my uncle of your conduct."

The effect was immediate.

Marcel's confidence drained so fast it was almost visible.

Fear flashed in his eyes.

Real fear.

The kind men like Marcel never showed unless they were standing in front of someone who could destroy them.

Marcel's voice changed completely.

"Of course," he said quickly. "You have my apologies."

His smile returned, but it was strained now. Controlled. Forced.

He dipped his head toward Lev in respect.

Then, toward me, barely.

"Please forgive my... misstep," Marcel said, and it sounded like swallowing glass.

Lev didn't respond.

He didn't need to.

Marcel took a step back, still apologetic, still careful.

"Excuse me," Marcel said politely.

And he walked away, fast enough that the entire hall could see he was retreating.

“That word again,” Lev murmured, glancing at me. “Bed warmer. They’re obsessed. Are you always this popular, Luna?” He teased and I managed a smile.

Somewhere across the hall, I felt the bond twitch toward James, old instinct. And I hated that my body still remembered him while my heart was bleeding out.