

## **A Gift from the Goddess Chapter 125 book 2 chapter 17 by Dawn Rosewood**

A Gift from the Goddess Chapter 125 By Dawn Rosewood Book 2- CH 17 – “I mean... there is no biological way that Eric Reid could have fathered you.” I stared at him blankly. Was this topic really coming up again? He’d already questioned this on the night of the charity event. A presumptuous perspective from someone who didn’t know any better. ...From someone who grew up with real parents. “Yes... I know,” I said, somewhat annoyed. But, for whatever reason, this response took Kieran by surprise. “Wait, you know?” he asked. “Yes...,” I said again. “I should hope he isn’t. Because if he were my biological father, I’d imagine that would have made our first meeting very awkward. What with him picking me up from the orphanage and all.”

“I don’t understand,” he said. “If you know he’s not your father, why are you being so loyal to him?” “Why?” I asked, unable to hide my irritation now. “Because he is still my father. He still raised me and took care of me. He rescued me from a shitty house where I was severely bullied, one where I was just another unwanted, unloved six year old in a bad system, and gave me a home. Gave me skills and purpose. Protected me from—.”

But I quickly stopped myself from saying the next words before it was too late. Because I could still recall it so vividly; that day when I had been adopted. I could remember because it had been the same day that I’d committed my first sin. I’d been relentlessly terrorised for being different, pushed around and abused by the other kids.

They didn’t know what I was but, thinking back now, they must have sensed it. Realised that I was nothing like them. That I held an underlying threat. ...But it was ultimately that sense of theirs, that treatment, which finally caused me to snap. Or maybe they ‘snapped’ was a more apt way to put it... their arms and legs to be exact. It was precisely after this encounter that my father then found me.... Standing in a pile of four older children. Covered in their blood. Shaking uncontrollably as I tried to come to terms with what I’d just done.

However, as he took one look at me, he didn’t seem even slightly disturbed by the scene before him.

He didn’t so much as bat an eyelid. No, he simply approached me slowly, crouched before me... and extended me his hand. He offered me a shelter that I had long since given up on.

A vow that if I abided by his rules and helped him, that I would forever be safe under his protection. That I had nothing to fear once I became his daughter. His raven. ...An offer which I quickly accepted. At his best moments, it was bliss.

His encouragement and affection were the very things that had been absent from my life up until then.

This was someone who saw me for what I was and still loved me regardless. Who wasn't afraid of the unnatural strength I possessed as a child. And so when he eventually placed a dagger in my hand and put me to work...

I did everything in my power to make him as happy as he made me. To pay him back by being as useful as possible. 1 Only, as I very quickly discovered, he possessed a side to him that was far more terrifying than I could have ever expected.

The day I made my first mistake was the day I learned what it truly meant to fail my father. When I was inevitably sent for punishment at just the young age of fourteen, I learnt my lesson the hard way. A lesson where being complacent and slipping had consequences. Because it was harder to forget the rules when they were painfully reinforced into your mind.

In a warped, twisted way, I now knew deep down that things weren't what they probably should be.

That it was unhealthy and dangerous, especially with the threat he held to both me and those around me. But... he was still my father. A part of me still wanted to believe that his actions were only in my best interest. ...Which was why I couldn't figure out his motive for poisoning me.

Why spend the last sixteen years raising me, spending thousands in both money and resources to meticulously craft me into who I was... only to then give me something so toxic? He gave me his name, called me daughter...

then tried to slowly kill me? What was the point? It just seemed like... a bad investment. Something that I knew my father was more careful about. Was I just delusional about what was really happening? "I don't expect you to understand," I said, pulling away from my thoughts.

"But he is the only family I've ever known. Just because he's not my blood, it doesn't mean he's any less important. Not everyone is fortunate enough to have their real parents alive." "I didn't... I didn't mean it that way," Kieran said. "I was just trying to—"

"I know what you were trying to do," I interrupted, holding up a hand to stop him. He'd said it with the hope that I'd suddenly change my mind about everything. That I'd think that I didn't actually have to stay... but it didn't make a difference. In fact, all it did was reaffirm just what was at stake.

"All I'm trying to say is that no one should treat their own daughter that way," he said. "He clearly doesn't love you in the way that you think. Not if he's willing to do all those things. A father should never want to hurt their child."

"...I guess I wouldn't know then," I said bitterly. "But I appreciate the insight from someone more fortunate." I turned my back and went to leave, but his voice quickly

stopped me. "...You're not the only one with a dead parent, Raven," he said, his voice strained. And, instantly, I felt a little guilty. '

I'd forgotten about what I'd read in Victor's file. It had mentioned being married but held no details of the wife. Usually this implied that the partner had died too long ago for our records, something I'd already assumed but didn't give it much thought.

...But that was Kieran's mother. It gave it an entirely new meaning now that I wasn't just reading words on a page. That was a living person. "I was just a kid when it happened but I was old enough to remember her," he continued." Truthfully, I don't know if that makes it better or worse... but I can at least understand your pain, if only a little. We have more in common than you think."

I felt myself holding my breath, this whole thing only adding more confusion to my already conflicted head. All of this was too much to process. ...No, I needed to leave before I really did do something I regretted. Without saying anything further, I opened the door and went to take a step over the threshold.

"Three days, Raven," he called out to me. "I'll wait three days. I really do hope you'll change your mind" It was enough to make me stop for a moment. But through gritted teeth and, with a final push of strength, I did what I needed to do. ... I finally left "Goodbye, Kieran," I said quietly. And I closed the door behind me.

The next few days felt painfully slow. With every second that passed, I was very aware of how it was another second wasted, knowing that Kieran was there. Waiting for me in that room, hoping that I'd reconsider. Wanting nothing from me other than to help me escape. .

.. It took every ounce of self-restraint I had not to give in. After having some time to cool down and reassess, I was willing to accept now that maybe what Kieran had told me held some merit. I did love my father... but I also equally feared him. It had been that way for many years now, but I'd become accustomed to it.

And so regardless of the motives behind his actions, I had to acknowledge that perhaps my firm belief might not be true. That perhaps there wasn't a good reason for why he gave me the medication.

...That maybe things were worse than I originally thought. It didn't do much for my present situation though. I was still trapped regardless, helpless to go anywhere. If Kieran knew just how far my father's reach really was, he wouldn't be speaking of escape so easily. No, I was still making the right choice.

This way, I could keep Kieran safe. This way... I could continue to pretend everything was okay. ...Or, at least, I thought that was the case. Because on the third day, something happened that made my blood turn cold. I was called into my father's office and saw on his desk the very thing I dreaded to see.

...Another manila folder. "Father," I greeted, unable to take my eyes off of it. "Apologies if you had to wait long. I only just heard from Gavin that you wanted to see me." "My dear daughter," he said, setting his drink down. "Yes, please... take a seat." Oh, no. I was never asked to be seated. Something about this felt... wrong.

Hesitantly, I pulled the chair back and did as he asked. "I've been hearing... some interesting stories," he said. "Stories... about you." At that, my entire body froze, momentarily forgetting how to breathe. Like a snake, it was as though I could feel my father's hold slowly winding around my neck, constricting my throat...

closing in.... ...And I knew that he'd caught me. I should have known better. No, I did know better. I knew all along that secrets were impossible in this house and yet I still tried. "I'm not... I'm not sure what you're referring to," I said, though I knew it was a dangerous game to play dumb here. "

Take a look for yourself," he said and proceeded to gesture towards the folder on the desk. Instantly, I swallowed nervously, staring at it intently once more. Just who's name would I find in there? Was it Noah's? Zac's? Kieran's? ...My own? With a shaky hand, I reached out... and opened the cover to reveal the contents. Only, what I found there wasn't a name...

but rather a photo. A photo of me getting out of a taxi in front of Kieran's hotel.

It was the night I'd gone to him for answers. The day my father was meant to be out of town. Somehow, it looked as though I'd been followed despite taking extra precautions. It meant that my father purposely had someone watching me without my knowledge.

"Do you know who's currently staying at this hotel?" he asked I wasn't sure what to say, already knowing that there wasn't anything I could do in this situation to make it better. After several moments had passed, of which I still hadn't replied, my father continued without waiting Kieran Lycroft," he answered.

"You might remember him from the Mayor's Charity event last week... You know, the assignment you failed to gather intel for?" "Think, Raven. Think," I started screaming in my head over and over again.

If I didn't find a way to fix this right now, everything would have been for nothing. Hell, I would be facing similar repercussions had I just tried to run away. But, most importantly, I'd now thrown Kieran in the firing line. Placing the very target I'd tried so hard to keep off of him. "Now, why might you be there, my raven?" he asked, curiosity filling in those grey eyes of his.

...Eyes that I'd come to know only too well over these last sixteen years. But it was within that familiarity that an idea then finally came to me. A way to save Kieran. Because I just needed to do what I'd always done... what I always tried to do. ...I just needed to please my father.

“...You’re right,” I said, finally finding my voice. “I was there. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I kept it a secret because I wanted it to be a surprise.” He frowned, his curiosity clearly only increasing. “After my punishment, I felt responsible for my actions,” I quickly continued. “Just as you had said...”

I didn’t act appropriately and I failed to do what was best for us. Best for the company. So... I wanted to make it up to you.” “...Is that so?” “I thought that if I could still somehow complete the mission, then you’d forgive me.

I felt awful knowing that I’d broken your trust and I didn’t want to tell you what I was doing in case I failed again. However, looking at it now, I can see how my actions were deceitful. I’m truly sorry, father.”

He paused in silence as he carefully scrutinised my face, and, in turn, I looked down at my hands in shame. I needed to play the part I normally would in a situation like this. One of submitting to my faults. “If you feel I should be punished, I would completely unders—.” “Were you successful?” he asked, not waiting for me to finish.

“Did you happen to find out about the documents?” ...Interesting. So he really was determined to find them. Even more so than to worry about my actions. If that was the case... I wondered if there was a way to spin this around.... What if... But, no, that was probably too much to hope for. Unless.... “...No,” I answered. “But I did manage to befriend the son.

He trusts me now. Almost too much. Just like you said, I gave him my best smile.” Come on... Take the bait. Please take it. Just this one thing. In all my years, please just give me this one thing. “And you feel like you are close to locating the documents?” my father replied, unable to hide his interest now.

I exhaled in mock frustration, doing my best to act as genuine as possible. “Truthfully... and I don’t mean to disappoint you further... but I don’t think the son knows anything about them.” I could see how he instantly deflated, unhappy with that. A response that was perfect for me.

It meant it was working. “That being said,” I continued. “...I think his father might. Kieran mentioned something along the lines of Victor needing to do important business in Ashwood. A major development that just came up.

In fact, I believe Kieran is heading home today to help. I’m just sorry that I wasn’t able to find out anything else, father. I really did try.” He didn’t even seem phased that I knew all of this and hadn’t told him yet. He was far too focused on just the information.

Thankfully, what I had said apparently lined up with whatever those documents were, something I had needed to bluff based purely on assumption. “It certainly is a shame...,” he said, lost in thought. “Hmmm. But, actually,” I continued, innocently bringing a finger to my chin in thought.“

Now that I think about it... you know, he did beg me to go with him.” He sharply looked back over to me, his interest now piqued once more. “If you wanted... I could maybe go there myself...” I said. “Find out about the documents from Víctor and then possibly even retrieve them.” ...Please take the bait. “...No one would even think that anything was strange.

Just another rich boy bringing home a pretty girl. Someone who held no threat nor caused any reason for them to be guarded.” Please.... “All I would need is your permission, of course.” Please.... Just this one thing. The only thing I’ve ever wanted this bad. Please just let me go with him.

And, as I met my father’s eyes, I’d never been so nervous as I waited for his answer. “...Very well,” he said. It was the best news I’d ever heard in my life. And though I wasn’t sure what to do long-term, or even about the documents I’d blatantly lied about... at least, for now, I had a chance to escape my cage without any fear. ...If only for a short time.

## **A Gift from the Goddess Chapter 126 book 2 chapter 18 by Dawn Rosewood**

A Gift from the Goddess Chapter 126 By Dawn Rosewood Book 2- CH 18 \*knock\*  
\*knock\* C’mo... please... \*knock\* \*knock\* \*knock\* Please open the door... \*knock\*  
\*knock\* \*knock\* Kieran... \*knock\* \*knock\* \*knock\* \*knock\* \*knock\* \*knock\* \*knock\*  
\*knock\* \*kno—, I was beginning to panic, thinking that I’d left it too late but then, finally,  
the door opened. “Raven,” Kieran said, almost in disbelief. “You actually came. You’re—  
.” But I didn’t wait for him to finish. Without missing a beat, I instantly moved forward  
and threw my arms around his waist. His scent was mixed in with soap and water,  
clearly having interrupted him from a shower. But it was the best thing I had ever smelt.

Already, I could feel my body start to relax from the warmth coming off of him.  
Something much needed to help calm the adrenaline pumping through me. Hesitantly,  
his arms then moved to encircle me, reciprocating the hug. Almost as if he was still in  
shock I’d arrived. “I was starting to think that you weren’t going to change your mind,” he  
said. “I’ve been putting off leaving for a few hours now, stubbornly in denial.” “I’m glad  
you were stubborn... Thank you for waiting.” He pulled away slightly so he could look at  
my face, bringing a hand to touch my cheek.

“How though? Are you in danger or...?” But I quickly shook my head. “I’m fine... I just  
don’t want to talk about it, if that’s okay.” It wasn’t that I wanted to hide it from Kieran... I  
just wasn’t sure what to say yet. I didn’t entirely know myself what I was doing.

Was I truly escaping? Or was I just merely playing along with what my father wanted? It  
felt like I was hedging my bets rather than actually making a decision. Waiting to see  
how things would turn out first. Kieran held my gaze for a few seconds, obviously trying  
to tell if I was lying about being fine, but finally he nodded.

“Okay... I’ll grab my things and we can go.” I sat on the couch as I waited for him to get his luggage together, happily watching him move about. Every now and then he would look over at me, almost as if he were expecting me to not be there, and I would give him a small wave in reassurance.

By the time he was done, all I could feel was intense nervousness fluttering inside. We took all our bags outside to his car and, once everything was loaded up, he then turned to me, politely holding open the passenger seat door. “Are you ready for this?” he asked. “There will be a lot to learn.”

But I’d never been so sure in my entire life. I walked right up and smiled at him, now buzzing with anticipation. “I’m glad to have such a great teacher then.”

Only, as I expected him to return the expression, instead, he seemed almost taken aback. “What is it?” I asked, thinking something was wrong. He looked almost in a daze, but my voice seemed to pull him out of it. “Nothing, nothing,” he quickly replied, but he then brought his hand up to my face and brushed his thumb gently against my lips.

“It’s just... that’s the first time you’ve done that.” Immediately, I felt myself succumbing once more to those sparks. That feeling of being captivated by the way he spoke... the way he felt... the way he touched me. “Done what...?” I managed to ask quietly, though I couldn’t help but notice how he had moved in closer.

“\_Smiled at me. That’s the first time that you’ve genuinely smiled at me.” I started to become flustered, feeling a little guilty for faking during our first meeting. But he continued before I could get an apology out. ...And it was something that made me forget whatever was in my head.

“It’s so beautiful,” he whispered, his eyes focused on my lips. \*Thump\* My cheeks started to burn and I quickly turned my head to the side, feeling embarrassed. How did he do that to me so easily? I could have melted into a puddle from just the way he looked at me alone... and yet his words were making me want to evaporate entirely.

I was experienced in persuading men to fall for me, that had been something I’d picked up quickly in my job, but that experience did little to defend myself against every little thing Kieran did. He had me completely under a spell... one that I was finding impossible to deny. Carefully, his hand then moved my face, coercing me to look at him once more, and my gaze locked with his.

He looked like he was going to kiss me... and I really hoped that he did. I could still remember it from the other day, how perfect it had felt. But, due to circumstances at that time, it had been cut far too short. Now, with little else standing in the way, I allowed myself to wonder what more than a kiss felt like.

Wonder... what his skin would feel like as it moved against mine... what his “We should get going,” he said quietly, taking a step back. And, for a moment, I thought his eyes

had appeared darker again. Was that normal or was I just seeing wrong every time! “We have a long trip ahead of us.”

But as disappointment filled me, having been denied the kiss I’d craved, I quickly did my best to push it out of mind, seating myself down in the car. ...And, as it turned out, it did end up being a long trip indeed.

Even though the ‘public’ border was only a few hours’ drive, according to Kieran, the actual town itself was located a lot further up north. Along the journey, he did his best to fill me in on basic things I needed to know.

Things like basic terminology, details about the ‘pack’, and a general rundown of how their weird hierarchy worked “Okay, so... Alpha, Beta... and then Gamma...,” I said aloud, trying to remember the right names. “And then you have warriors, each with their own ranks... and then... Elders? Which are who again?” “They’re a small collective made up of the older generation,” he answered. “Unlike the birth ranks, the Elders don’t necessarily need to be born into an influential family. Their position is voted by merit and intelligence.”

“The birth ranks being... the Alpha, Beta and Gamma, right?” All of this seemed a bit strange, but I was doing my best to understand. “That’s right.” “And... You’re the Alpha’s son?” “Right. But I’m also the eldest son of Victor, so I therefore get a birth title as well. Mine would be Alpha heir. It means that I’ll take over as leader one day.”

My father’s comments made more sense now; the ones he’d said during the charity event. I remember him asking if it was common to elect mayoral representatives based on family. It made me realise that, even though my father must have known what I was, he clearly didn’t have an understanding of everything werewolf related.

If he did, I doubted that he would have agreed to let me go with Kieran and his family for a while. Especially if he’d been trying to suppress that part of me. “I do need to warn you that the etiquette is a bit old-fashioned,” he said, a little awkwardly. “You’ll see a few formalities and it might seem odd, but you’ll get used to it eventually.

Personally, all that you’ll need to worry about is just remaining respectful to my father. Not that I think you’ll have any trouble with that. As for everyone else, they would technically be considered benea, ah...” He then stopped himself mid-sentence, thinking about his phrasing.

“Just... you don’t need to worry about everyone else as much. You’re my... guest.” “Okay...,” I said, frowning. “...And one more thing.” His voice then became lower, more serious. “...I’d love to be able to say that my pack is perfect but, the reality is, the town is still made up of varying opinions and people.” “What do you mean?” “I mean...

there is a chance that some people might not like you. I doubt you’ll encounter anyone brave enough to say it to your face, but... just prepare yourself.”



Oh. "Because... I'm Eric Reid's daughter?" I asked. But he gave me a small smile at that. "No, I doubt any of them even know who your father is. I barely knew and I've been allowed into the city a few times. No, Ashwood is just a very closed – off place... which is why they might be wary of you. Just ignore it as best you can."

I heard the warning but I was too focused on what he'd said first; The part where no one was going to know who my father was. I was... anonymous. No stigma or preconceived opinions, I was free to be Raven Reid without any ties. Only... was that what I even wanted? To be Raven Reid? It was another reminder of the decision I was yet to make. "We're nearing the checkpoint," he then said, and I felt as the car started slowing down.

Checkpoint? Just how closed-off was this place? A few moments later, a man came out of a small booth, walking into the middle of the road as he waited for us to stop. He looked extremely athletic and was able to see me clearly despite being still a distance away inside the car.

Which told me one thing; ...He was the same as me. But I didn't feel any instant connection as I met his eyes, nor did I particularly think anything special about the man. No abrupt urge to kiss him.

To me, he just seemed like a completely normal guy. ...And yet, as I looked back over to Kieran, I felt that same little jolt of longing I felt every time I saw him. Just as I always did. So... that strange connection really wasn't a way to recognise others of our kind.

But if that was the case, then what made Kieran so special? What was this thing between us? He'd said it was 'complicated' but never actually explained. "Wait here," Kieran instructed as we parked, and he proceeded to get out to speak to him.

The entire time that I watched him approach, I felt the intense stare of the man waiting. As if he were trying to figure out who I was. Something that was probably just a part of his job, but it made me a little uncomfortable regardless. It was only once Kieran walked up that he finally looked away. And though I couldn't hear what they were saying, I could see a few of the man's expressions. He seemed confused... then surprised... happy... and then back to confused again.

Based on that alone, I was at a loss for what Kieran was telling him. After a few minutes had passed, it looked as though everything was cleared up and Kieran finally started walking back towards the car... but, as he was halfway back, he quickly stopped again. Because it was then that a howl ripped through the air, so close that it made me jump in surprise.

Everyone instantly became defensive. Within seconds, the man was wielding a dagger and even Kieran started scanning the area, concentrating on the nearby trees. Were we in danger? It certainly seemed that way.

I quickly moved to open the passenger door, but before I could even open it, suddenly someone was running towards Kieran. They appeared out of nowhere and moved so fast. beelining in his direction without any hesitation. Too fast to stop them. And it was then, in frozen terror, that I watched as they tackled Kieran to the ground... a fight ensuing

## **A Gift from the Goddess Chapter 127 book 2 chapter 19 by Dawn Rosewood**

Book Two – Ch.# 19 “KIERAN!”

I screamed, throwing the car door open. After the initial shock of watching the scene unfold, my senses finally kicked back in and I jumped into action. There was no longer any hesitation within me. I just immediately sprinted towards him.

Moving as fast as I could, I was already reaching for my dagger before my feet had hit the ground, And the closer I got, the more of the commotion I could hear.

There was growling, a significant amount, and grunts of pain as the two rolled along the ground engaged in combat. But it was only as Kieran finally placed the man in a headlock that something truly bizarre happened.

Strange enough to make me instantly skid to a halt, now only a few feet away.

...Because despite the attacker being made completely powerless, he just easily gave up the fight without a fuss... and started to laugh.

I stood wide-eyed with adrenaline as I tried to figure out the situation, however Kieran proceeded to just smile and help the assailant to his feet. A man with dirty-blond hair and brown eyes.

“I see you didn’t lose your touch during the city vacation,” he said jokingly. “For the last time; it wasn’t a vacation,” Kieran argued. “I was working. At least one of us has to take our job seriously because you clearly like abusing yours.” He then raised an eyebrow. “A warning howl, Daniel? Really? Was that absolutely necessary?”

The man named Daniel rubbed his neck and smiled guiltily. “I just wanted to make sure our fearsome future leader didn’t get soft whilst hanging out with the humans.” “Why? You looking to take my job?” But Daniel just laughed at that and grabbed his shoulder in comradery. “No thanks. I already have it hard enough keeping you in check as it is. I don’t need more responsibi—.”

Abruptly, he then stopped and turned towards me. “Woah, I didn’t even notice you. Where did you come from?”

Realising that there was no danger, I quickly sheathed my dagger before he could see it. Whoever this was, he was evidently a part of the town. I knew it wouldn't be a very good first impression to be seen attacking him.

...After all, I'd already done that once with Kieran, "Ah... I'm here with... -."

I couldn't get the words out though as Daniel then sniffed at the air and looked confused.

"You reek of Kieran," he said as if that were a perfectly normal thing to say.

Immediately, my mind went blank as I wasn't sure how to respond. Should I be denying it or brushing it off? It wasn't as though we were officially dating or anything. Truthfully, I didn't even know myself what was happening between the two of us, let alone be able to start labelling it. If they really were old-fashioned here, did people need to be married first?

Were werewolf weddings a thing? "She's with me," Kieran finally answered, taking a step forward. "What? Like—" "She's... \*with me\*," Kieran repeated, emphasising the words. I couldn't see his face but I got the feeling he was trying to tell Daniel something. A little irritating, to say the least, but I was still too confused by the whole situation to press for answers.

Recognition seemed to cross Daniel's expression though. Whatever had been said was apparently enough to quell any prior issues as he then promptly turned to Kieran and threw his arms around him in a hug. "Oh, man, I'm so happy for you," he said. "It took you long enough." Kieran patted his back a few times, giving a light chuckle, but tried to pull away as soon as possible. Clearly attempting to downplay what was happening. Something I was still very perplexed about

Only it didn't stop there either.

Daniel then turned his attention towards me and walked right up, bowing his head slightly as a hand covered his chest.

...And I simply stared at him.

What was he doing...? Was this what Kieran had meant by saying the people here were extremely formal? I wasn't entirely sure what to do as he had failed to mention it in the car. ...Should I be bowing back, or..? I stood there a little awkwardly but thankfully the whole thing only lasted about a second. As he finally came back up, he proceeded to smile and held a hand out for me to shake. A gesture I was much more familiar with and one I quickly reciprocated.

"I'm Daniel Cooper. The Beta heir of the Ashwood Pack," he said. "And Kieran's best friend... though he will sometimes vehemently deny it."

Right. I knew what that was... it meant that he was the eldest son of the second in charge. The son of the Beta.

"Nice to meet you," I said, giving a small, polite smile. "You can call me... Raven... Raven Reid."

I felt a little uneasy saying it, especially in light of the conflict with my father. But I knew the reminders would continue to haunt me until I made a final decision. A choice to be left for another day and another time.

"Reid'?" Daniel asked, his brow creasing. "I'm not familiar with any northern families with that name. Which pack are you from? Is it from the east?" I shuffled a little uncomfortably. "Oh, well... I don't actually belong to a pack..." Apparently, this was the wrong thing to say. Instantly, Daniel's demeanour changed. I saw as his eyes sharpened and all trace of the friendly persona vanish. Almost as though he were a completely new person.

...A person who was dangerous. And I took a step back, my hand instinctively starting to twitch towards where my dagger was waiting. "What do you mean? Are you saying you're a rogu—"

But before he could get the question out, Kieran then suddenly stepped in and threw a hand over his mouth, pulling Daniel away. It happened so quickly that I flinched in surprise.

Was it a bad question...? I had no idea. But whispering was soon the only thing I could hear, and although it was too quiet to pick up anything important, I did manage to catch a few words. 'Human' and 'Father' being the most significant.

...Spiking yet another flare of irritation from me. I didn't enjoy being kept in the dark.

'Calm. I need to be calm,' I told myself.

And, internally, I sighed, pushing it out of mind. Not knowing enough about this place, and wanting to avoid a fuss, I needed to do my best to not let things bother me.

When they did finally come back over, I admittedly felt a little stunned to see Kieran push a very ashamed-looking Daniel towards me.

"Apologise," Kieran said, appearing annoyed. Daniel scratched his head and chuckled guiltily. "Sorry, Raven... I hope I didn't come across as rude. We're just a little strict on... outsiders. The war might have ended a long time ago but I guess you can't be too careful."

It was similar to what Kieran had already told me; the closed-off nature of Ashwood. But I couldn't help but pick up the mention of a war again. I assumed this had to be the same one the suppressors were initially designed for.

The very medicine that was still in my system.

Cautiously, I just nodded my head in response, still wary of whatever had just transpired.

"Let the others know that we've arrived," Kieran said, his friendly tone now gone. "We'll head to the house soon for introductions. Please also make sure that my father is advised."

Daniel's expression instantly became serious at that, a look exchanging between them that ended with a nod in understanding. It didn't take long before he left to do what was asked.

Despite not stepping foot in the town yet, I already could sense the drastic differences from the city I was raised in. The manner, the speech, the terminology... it was crazy how swiftly it could change into something entirely foreign. I was merely a few hours' drive away and yet it felt like a whole different country. And Kieran seemed... different too. Though not in a bad way. I was used to seeing him being caring and funny, but this was my first time seeing him in a new light. The light of someone who was a leader. A definition that seemed vastly contrasted to what I knew of human mayors. He walked to my side and I could tell he was still angry. Whatever Daniel had tried to say was

apparently bad enough that Kieran seemed outraged on my behalf. "I really am sorry if he freaked you out," he said, looking at me with genuine concern. "Your situation is a little... \*unique\* and I didn't have any time to send word that you were coming.

He's not a bad guy, I swear. He just... doesn't really think sometimes." Though I still wasn't sure what Daniel had said, I'd only become guarded due to the circumstances. But if he really was Kieran's friend, then there was probably no danger at all. Just a misunderstanding. If anything, this was a good reminder that I didn't need to act so cautious. That I wasn't in constant danger and didn't have to treat this like a job if I didn't want to. I could just... be normal

Be... someone new. Maybe someone less grim and a bit more positive. And so I reached out and grabbed his hand gently, instantly making his shoulders visibly relax. "I'm okay," I said, weaving my fingers with his, "I know better than most when it comes to people with trust issues. After all, how long did it take you to convince me?"

I gave him a small smile to lighten the mood, trying to persuade him that I really was fine. And, to my relief, it seemed to work. He quietly exhaled, releasing the last bit of tension he was holding on to "I haven't even made it to Ashwood yet," I joked. "You can't be getting this worked up already. Besides, I'm tougher than I look."

He finally cracked a small smile at that, his normal manner returning.

“Come on then. Let me show you around.”

And we returned to the car.

After being waved across the border, Kieran began driving us up to the town. Only, it was nothing like what I expected. In my mind, this place had been a tiny settlement of houses and a few facilities, as would be expected from somewhere I'd barely heard of. But it was actually far from it. Though not quite as large as Lockdale City, the town still had a bustling life about it.

After driving through a suburban area of nice houses, we finally made it into the heart of the town where it was complete with shops of all different varieties and even restaurants. If I didn't know any better, I would have just assumed it was the wealthy outer suburbs of Lockdale,

How they managed to keep this place a secret though baffled me. A town this size so close by? I could easily see it being a popular holiday area. And yet they'd kept up the illusion of being a small country town this whole time. It was impressive.

Along the way, Kieran was pointing out notable things, landmarks and other interesting places, but it was as we rounded a corner onto a new strip of shops that I saw something. A building that completely absorbed my attention.

“Wait, slow the car,” I quickly said, unable to look away.

He pulled over to the side as requested and I spent a moment taking in the detail. Though nothing more than a restaurant, the place looked far fancier than all the others we had passed. Even from within the car, I could vaguely make out an open floor and beautiful furnishings, something I normally wouldn't care about. But with this place, I felt an indescribable pull.

Kieran leaned over to see what I was staring at and laughed. “Ah, yeah, that's Rose & Thorn. Really great food. It's actually my favourite restaurant.”

“It is?”

He nodded. “I'll have to take you sometime.”

“...I would like that.”

It was then that I finally tore my eyes away from the building to look over at him, only I found him much closer than expected. And, instinctively, my gaze moved to his lips. Almost as if I were subconsciously drawn to them.

That urge to kiss him was now stronger than ever, but I knew it was most likely caused by just the excitement of everything happening. A new place, a new world of possibilities. I was giddy from it all.

“Um... did you say we were meeting people somewhere?” I managed to ask quietly.

“Oh, yeah,” he said, moving back over to the wheel. He hadn’t seemed to notice my momentary change in focus. “Everyone should be there by now.”

And so we continued back on our journey, driving for another few minutes until we finally pulled up at a large property. Based on the gardens surrounding it, it seemed almost like a residential lot. Except, instead of a normal house, there was a multi-levelled structure that seemed a little strange.

“What is this place?” I asked.

But he just turned the car off and gave me a smile.

“This is my home,” he said. “...Welcome to the Ashwood Packhouse, Raven.”