

A Gift from the Goddess Chapter 136 By Dawn Rosewood Book 2- CH 28

A Gift from the Goddess

Chapter 136

Book Two – Ch#28 Over two weeks had gone by since I first came to the Ashwood pack.

And things were going... pretty good, to be honest. There hadn't been any major incidents since my arrival and, though there were certainly still a lot of adjustments yet to be made, I was settling in quite nicely. I was learning more every day and even had a routine now. Sort of. Most of my mornings were spent reading or exploring; though the latter entailed an escort after what happened in the town square. I'd also found a library inside the packhouse that helped educate me a little more, albeit there were still a lot of gaps in my knowledge. But I was getting better. Slowly. And I was getting healthier too. In fact, I couldn't even remember the last time I'd felt a wave of real nausea. My head was finally starting to feel... clear.

And as for Kieran...? Well... things between us couldn't be better. Every day we had grown closer, discovering new things about the other. And when we weren't shackled up in bed, we were usually out sightseeing or training.

Which was where I was heading; a private one on one training with Kieran. The usual way I'd spent my afternoons over the course of my time here. It was the thing I usually most looked forward to, the exercise being both something I enjoyed as well as something familiar. I grabbed my sports bag from the table, and with one final look around the room, I left to go meet up with him. We normally met at the place we trained, him coming directly from whatever Alpha heir work he needed to do in the morning.

However, as I began my commute through the packhouse, I was surprised by one of the faces I saw. Not that he wasn't allowed here, just that... it wasn't normal for him to frequent this place. Nevertheless, I flashed him my best smile. "Afternoon, Sterling," I said without stopping.

It was intended to be just a quick greeting and nothing more, knowing I had somewhere to be.

After my last encounter with Kieran's uncle, I'd come to learn that only the eldest of ranked members were given titles, thus Sterling had no actual authority. The move he'd pulled on me during my welcome dinner was apparently a power play in spite of that. Not that I let his pettiness get to me.

I continued to walk past him towards the front door... however, his words behind me then gave me pause.

No... they made me freeze. "Where are you off to in such a rush, little bird?" he asked.

And my mind flashed to memories of my childhood; of during my early years with my father. He used to say similar things to me back then. His little bird... his raven.

IT

I shook it off.

This analogy was to be expected when introducing myself with a name like Raven'. I might not like it anymore, nor feel as though I wanted to be that person ... but it wasn't all that strange for a guy like Sterling to say it.

I couldn't let small things like this get to me.

"I'm ah... I'm meeting up with Kieran now," I said, keeping it vague. "He's expecting me any minute."

He held my gaze for a moment, sending a small chill through me, before finally nodding. "Fair enough," he said. "Better not keep my nephew waiting then." And with another polite smile, I left before he could say anything else, grateful for a valid excuse to leave.

It wasn't as though there was anything wrong with him, but the tension with his family was obvious now I knew the truth. From my perspective, I thought it would be best to just not get involved. Ranks and titles were still a learning curve for me and I didn't want to accidentally slip up like I had the first time.

Well, that... and I tended to avoid the topic of titles, especially around Kieran. The reminder of what a 'Luna' was still made me uncomfortable.

"There you are," Kieran said upon my arrival. "How was your morning?"

And I found myself stopping to smile like an idiot, just as I did every time I saw him these days. It didn't seem to matter if only a few hours had passed, seeing him always filled me with a rush of emotions that exhilarated me.

It was feeling even more intense of late, as though there was a scratching in my head to go find him as soon as we parted. A need to go be close to him that, at times, felt a bit strange. Almost as if it weren't entirely me thinking it and it was More... instinctual, perhaps?

But I was learning so many new things every day, both about the world and about my body, that it was natural for there to be dissonance. I was sure that one day I

would look back on this and wonder how I could have been so in the dark about it all

“It was good,” I said, composing myself. And he walked over to my side, immediately wrapping his arms around me as he placed a kiss on my lips. Tender enough for me to melt at his touch, the scratch inside soothing... but my mind was still focused on the task at hand.

“Ready to have your ass kicked?” I asked, biting my lip fiendishly. He raised a brow at me. “We’ll see about that.”

And we proceeded to jump straight into it. I’d thought that my time here would make me softer, no longer under the strict training regime of Gavin. But, if anything, I felt even more skilled than before. Kieran was one of the only people I’d met able to fully keep up with me, his technique almost as good as my own. It made him into a great training partner. He was able to show me new ways of fighting and, in turn, I shared my own knowledge. It was a way for us to both improve

Though... coming into this, I did have one major disadvantage against him. But it was one that I was slowly closing the gap on at an unexpected rate. A revelation that seemed to surprise us both.

Because as I managed to land a kick squarely across his chest, I hadn’t intended to send him flying backwards the way I did, his back roughly hitting the wall. “Kieran!” I yelled in shock, instantly running towards him. “I’m so sorry. Are you okay?”

Without meaning to, it seemed I’d put way too much force into the movement. Yet it didn’t feel like I’d done anything too different from normal.

I reached out to him in concern, but he just laughed off the whole thing.

“You’re ah... you’re getting pretty strong now, huh?” he said, trying to sound light-hearted.

Yes... strength. Before, Kieran had still held an edge of strength against me, making up for what he lacked in matching my speed. But I was getting stronger now too. So quickly that I was struggling to adjust my own movements to accommodate it.

“I’m sorry,” I apologised again. “Does it hurt?” But he shook his head. “I’m fine. It just took me by surprise more than anything.”

I would have felt relieved to hear that if it weren’t for the slight unmistakable

winner he did as I moved. “Seriously, Kac, I’m fine,” he said. “Don’t worry about

”
“Then don’t look so hurt,” I replied back. “It’s not to feel terrible here.”

“Well... then I guess you could kiss it watter luat would probably six the problem.”

And I looked up at him, my lips tugging back into a smile,

“Oh, is that so?” I laughed. “And where were you hurt again? Here”

I pointed to the spot on his chest wierecalled my leg hitting

“Munt... pretty sure it was higher up. Like probably tear my mouth,” he said

“Mmmm... pretty sure I hit you in the chest. Think you knocked your head a little too hard there, buddy”

“All the more reason for you to kiss it better then,” he said slyly.

I laughed but still moved in slowly, planting a trail of small kisses from his collarbone to where my leg had hit. And, as I did so, I could feel a small shiver run through him under my touch, feeding the excitement building inside me.

When I finally placed the last kiss at the perfect spot, I then looked back up at him, emptying him with my eyes. “And your lips as well..?” I asked innocently.

And he quickly leaned forward to catch my mouth, enveloping me against his

Which was exactly how we became absorbed for the next (few minutes that passed, his hands holding me to him as we embraced. A need for his body burning within me,

But, eventually, I managed to pull myself away. Just enough to tease him some more.

“I see you’ve made a full recovery,” said. “This method of medicine maybe has some merit after all.”

But instead of immediately resuming where we’d just stopped, he then seemed to pause, a crease forming between his brows.

“...What is it?” I asked, confused by the abrupt change.

“Your eyes...,” he said quietly, but then paused. It was only after a few seconds had passed that he then seemed to realise something, his face becoming happier, “Coincidence with me,” he said, quickly grabbing my hand, “Kietan?”

But he had a firm grip as he started to lead us outside, heading toward where a thicket of trees were in the distance. It was a small woods area that we promptly entered into, walking until we came to a small clearing within it.

“Are you going to tell me now?” I asked as we came to a stop.

And he turned back to look at me, now excited.

“It’s been over two weeks,” he simply said.

Which was something that didn’t really help clarify much,

“Two weeks? Like... two weeks since I arrived?”

“No... Well, yes, but I mean it’s been over two weeks since you’ve gone to the doctors,” he clarified, “Melissa said that it would be about two weeks needed for the medicine.”

“Oh... right,” I said. “...And?”

“And... have you been feeling anything weird? Like an almost foreign weird feeling in your head that doesn’t quite seem to belong to you?”

Always... but I was pretty sure I knew what he was specifically referring to. That new itch to be near him whenever he’d just left... like a whining inside. Yes, I’d noticed it recently.

“...Yes,” I answered. “Is it important?”

But his smile seemed to only grow more at the confirmation.

“That’s your wolf, Rae,” he said. “She’s finally able to break through the damage the suppressors left. It means you’re actually healing and the medicine is working.”

However, rather than reciprocating the excitement he felt, instead, I could feel as my body froze up a little at his words, my face paling.

Because whilst I knew this was probably going to happen eventually with the medicine, I didn’t expect it so soon. It was a renewed liability that I wasn’t sure how to deal with.. and that scared me. Ever since I’d come here with Kieran, I hadn’t experienced that sickening feeling of almost losing control or blacking out. Not even once. In fact, things had been pretty peaceful. So much so that I’d almost forgotten about the threat it posed.

But... hearing this now? Knowing that it was actually just growing stronger inside without me realising? Well, the very idea of it having more free reign over my body was disturbing. Especially after what had happened last time.., all the pain...

all the blood. What is next time it wasn't just a scratch? What if its next victim was Kieran?

And so, whilst I may have wanted to learn how to live amicably with it once... I now had my reservations about that.

"Okay... so then how do I learn to keep it out?" I asked.

But it seemed Kieran wasn't on the same wavelength as me, his next words contradicting my thoughts.

"Keep it out...? No, you learn to become one and embrace it," he said. "That's how you truly get better." "I don't..." I started, my voice trailing off in uncertainty.

But he interjected by then holding both my hands in his

"Do you trust me?" he asked.

...It was that question.

That same damn question. The one I'd heard from him now twice before. Both times prior I'd been unable to tell him what he wanted. But things were different now. He'd easily proven how he had my best interest at heart, making good on the promises he made me. And so I finally caved and answered truthfully.

I answered truthfully... even though I had a feeling I was about to instantly regret

"Yes..." I said. "Yes, Kieran... I trust you." And with a completely serious look on his face, he then held my gaze... ..And asked a question that instantly filled me with dread. "Then let me help you to shift," he said. "The proper way, this time."

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...I couldn't believe I was actually thinking of doing this.

Again

I should have already learnt my lesson by now... no, I really shouldn't be trying to make it stronger. I already knew how dangerous that side of me was. And yet Kieran looked at me with those puppy dog eyes, making it feel impossible to deny him.

...So here I was.

Contemplating doing the very thing I was sure would make him happier than it would make me.

I knew he wanted me to be completely healthy again, to be able to do the things he could do, to try and... fix me. Which wasn't a bad thing, per se. It was great. It's just... I wasn't sure if I was ready for that yet. This wasn't like asking me something trivial. He was asking me to connect with a beast who had terrorised me for years.

A shiver went through me as I recalled every time it had happened, remembering the blood and bodies. Remembering... the pain. Not even Kieran had been safe last time, it having lashed out at him as well. "I'll be right here with you, I promise," Kieran said, disrupting my thoughts. It won't be like the last time. You don't need to worry."

Right.

Because the medicine should have stopped the suppressors by now... which should theoretically stop the pain... which should then stop the blackouts... and the death toll after it.

So simple. Logical

Surely nothing bad would happen again. I could do this.

And so I held my breath tentatively. "...Okay, Kieran," I said, feeling numb. "I'll do it." And I agreed to do the very thing that terrified me.

I stood a foot or so away from him as we got started, watching him carefully. A small tremor was shaking through me, but I did my best to push through it. Now, more than ever, I needed to focus entirely on what Kieran was trying to tell me.

It quite literally could mean life or death.

"Deep breath, Rae," he said, doing it himself as if to remind me how.

Yes... thank you for that.

But I still did it regardless.

"Okay, now... close your eyes... and reach deep inside. Try to connect with her," he instructed

I wanted to be sick.

“Rac... close your eyes,” he repeated, seeing me hesitate.

...And I did as he asked.

So basic. This was meant to be straightforward biology. Because turning into a woli was meant to be normal. Yep, just a totally ordinary thing to do.

But as I reached down towards it inside, I felt a spark of revulsion. One that stemmed from the idea of letting it control me once more. It was like tempting fate, opening the door to allow it to hurt others; something that I had sworn to leave behind as I began my new life.

And so I said... no. No more Never again.

If we were to do this... then we were going to do it my way

And I quickly grabbed ahold of the creature lurking, its teeth bared at me from the shadows of my mind and I threw it to the surface. I threw it to the surface and held it in place, forcing it to do what I willed it to.

An action that was then swiftly followed by the sound of my joint cracking.

SNAP

...And another...

*SNAPPpo

...And another....

And soon I felt pain overcome me, my body shifting and twisting in all sorts of ways I didn't think possible. Contorting into new shapes, burning with every modification ... a loud orchestra of flesh and bone moving that overwhelmed my

ras

“Are you still with me?” I heard Kieran say.

III

Yes, I was still here the pain wasn't as bad as the last time. It felt manageable... And I kept it that way. Though it was something that took my entire

concentration to achieve.

At some point, Kieran had moved to my side, I could tell that much. Maybe to try and get a reply from me. But it wouldn't matter for long. No, I could feel the end soon ahead, just within reach.

...And it only took another moment before everything stilled. The world stopped moving, my nausea slowly passed... and, finally, it was over.

"Rae?" Kieran asked.

IP

FDE

I looked up towards him, my vision now different. Though truthfully, it wasn't just my vision. As I moved my head, it seemed as though everything was now... sharper, my senses feeling heightened tenfold. "Are you okay? You still in there?" Barely.

I was still holding the creature hostage inside, its teeth snapping at me for control. But not this time. This time, I wouldn't allow it even an inch of leeway. I was stronger now.

Perhaps Kieran had found a way to be with his wolf in peace, which was great for him... but that didn't mean it had to be that way for everyone. Whatever I was doing was clearly working and it meant that I could feel more reassured. Reassured that it wouldn't hurt anyone ever again.

I looked at Kieran in a way that I hoped conveyed my presence and nodded my head.

This is what he wanted. To prove I was better. Well... here I was.

A wolf.

Moving in the skin of the monster I loathed.

"Did you want to try going for a run?" Did I?

No... not particularly. I think I mostly just wanted to change back.

+

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However, it seemed that running was the assumed next step as he proceeded to start shifting himself. And, before too long had passed, his dark brown wolf was soon greeting me.

I could tell the difference now. How there was Kieran and then there was his wolf. When I'd first seen him in this form, it had very clearly been Kieran in control so to not scare me. But now... I guess with him presuming that I was the same, I

could feel as his wolf was more in charge. It felt more... animalistic and playful as he moved.

Could he tell I was holding that side of me back? That there was something a bit... off?

Well, if he could, he didn't show it.

And though he wanted me to follow him, I could feel my anxiety building inside instead.

It built... and built... and built... and by the time I was finally taking my first steps, moving for the very first time as myself in this form... I felt as my hold began to

thin.

Thinning until, suddenly... it broke. **Shift back. NOW*, '1 demanded inside.

2.2

The beast was trying to take control, attempting to push me aside so quickly it was like an elastic band that had snapped. But I managed to command this one last thing, saying it a second before it was too late. And, to my relief, my body started to revert back to normal.

It was over... for now. "What was that?" Kieran asked, a few moments later. "Is everything okay?" He'd been much faster at shifting forms than me, as was to be expected.

"Sorry, I'm fine," I replied. "I'm just... learning."

My body was now shaking uncontrollably as I spoke, unable to hide the adrenaline that fear had shot through me. I'd been so close to losing control... so close to letting it loose.

ICT

"Hey... you did so well," he said, coming over to hug me.

But, even in his arms, I was unable to relax.

"I'm sure you'll be shifting like a pro in no time. Don't worry about it." Oh, but I was worried. Of course, I was. This was yet another thing I needed to overcome. Another

thing to prove my worth to stay here. And so, just as I learned to fight, I was determined to learn how to conquer this as well.

Conquer... *t*

The beast inside.

“Are you ready to leave?” Kieran asked as I left my room.

We had another formal dinner tonight, the first since the one held for my welcoming. I assumed it would be easier than the last given I knew a lot more now. I'd had time to get to know the people better and settle in, and, though I was still a bit shaken from the events earlier that day, I was relieved for a distraction. Anything to take my mind off shifting

“Ready.” I smiled.

And we left for the dining hall to meet the others.

It was a pretty normal dinner, all things considered. Allison was seated next to me once again, happily chatting away. I was thankful that she could carry the conversation easily without much help needed on my end. Truthfully, her presence still put me on edge, but I'd been getting better at focusing my mind. Now, I could sit here talking to her without paying it much attention at all. Like an annoying buzzing background noise that I'd learned to live with, but instead of noise, it was an urge to lash out at her. Putting it to the back of my head was just a way to enjoy her company in a weird, convoluted way. Whatever worked though, I guess. “...And then after I went to the temple, I went for lunch at that café I showed you last week,” she said, finishing the incredibly detailed recount of her day.

“That sounds nice,” I said, meaning it genuinely.

But it was her next words that then took me by surprise, not expecting the topic.

“Oh, and I went for a run,” she added casually, much to my discomfort. “I love having the time to do that. The wind always feels amazing against your fur, don't you think? Anyway... what did you get up today?”

My mind instantly flashed to the shifting incident, feeling sick at the whole thing. And suddenly I felt the burning need for a drink. Or perhaps some air. Or maybe

both.

“Oh... um, nothing much. The usual,” I vaguely replied.

“Did you – ,”

"I'm just going to go to the bathroom quick," I said, cutting her off. "I'm so sorry, I'll be right back."

I felt a little bad about the abruptness, but I hadn't meant it maliciously. I was just starting to feel suffocated.

"Rac?" Kieran asked, probably realising it was odd timing,

But I smiled at him. "Back in a minute," I reassured. And I left towards the bathroom, moving before anyone could stop me.

As I walked, I was consumed by my own thoughts, feeling... unsettled and inadequate. Like I was out of place. I knew Allison hadn't intentionally meant any harm, but her words had been a badly timed sting. I didn't know the feeling she spoke about, I didn't know how it felt to casually go running... I didn't even know how to enjoy those things. I wasn't... normal.

"Always in such a rush," then came a voice to my left. I had interrupted my concentration so harshly that it made me jump, and I looked up sharply to find Sterling there.

Great

He had a drink in hand, his eyes watching me in a way that sent a cold shiver through me. The very last person I wanted to talk to right now.

"What can I say? I'm a busy gal," I said, smiling politely

"A busy gal indeed, and a pretty one at that," he said. "Your dress is very beautiful and yet it pales in comparison to you."

He was drunk. He had to be. There was no way he would say these things to me in a sober mind, knowing I was Kieran's mate

"Thank you. Have a great night," I said, brushing it off to leave.

But his words stopped me. They stopped me... and caused a panic to start filling inside

"I never expected you to come here," he said. "Though... I can't say I expected you to go anywhere. Not with your upbringing." "Excuse me?"

I instantly spun back around to look at him, my heart pounding loudly in my

"Nothing." I smiled "I meant no harm"

And he took his drink up at me as though I were toasting to something girou

“HAVE’ pleasant overing, Raven,” he said and leisurely turned around to look out a window

It took a minute before I could start to walk again, my breathing shallow as I processed what he’d just said. But the more I thought on it, the more I couldn’t shake the feeling that there was something in his words. As if he knew more about me than he led on, more than just how I was raised by humans.

...And soon I found myself heading in the opposite direction of the bathroom, my pace slowly increasing in speed until I was almost running, darting through the hallways of the packhouse, narrowly avoiding attendants as they watched me pass by in shock.

IT

I ran until I finally reached my room, quickly throwing open the door and grabbing my mobile phone. The phone I hadn’t checked in a few days, almost forgetting about it amongst everything that had happened with Kieran recently. I immediately turned it on... the screen flashing up... and it showed me I had missed calls. Seven missed calls and four text messages, to be exact. All from Zac.

Fuck.

I dialled the number straightaway, grateful to see I had two bars of service in here, though my fingers trembled uncontrollably as I tried to maneuver it. “Rae? Where have you been? I’ve been trying to call you,” Zac’s voice then said on the other end.

“I’m sorry, I... I don’t have great reception here, remember? I haven’t been able to check my phone until now.”

A half lie.

Did you find out anything? Did Noah give you a name for the supplier of the drugs?

I heard Zac sigh. “Yeah, yeah, it was a whole ordeal. We had to go track down Miles’ old ledgers which was an adventure in itself. The guy kept it in some remote ass place in the middle of nowhere. Since Noah is meant to be dead, it took us a week to just get to the office safely and sift through all the junk-” “A name, Zac,” I said, quickly interrupting. “I need a name.” “Right, okay, jeez, I was getting to that,” he said defensively. “Anyway, we got the ledger, found the drugs and yeah, the ingredients were a bit weird. And... yes, there was a name. Someone supplying the drugs from a place not too far from where we found the ledgers.”

“Who? Who was it?”

My hand was gripping the phone so tightly I probably could have broken it. But

this was it. The most important information that could make or break my chances of staying here.

To stop anyone investigating into my past.

To be allowed to remain by Kieran's side.

"I don't know, some dude I've never heard of."

"Who, Zac?!" I almost screamed in frustration.

"Freaking hell, chill," he said. "Ah... I think his name was... Sterling."

And my breathing immediately choked to a stop in my throat.

"Sterling Lycroft."

"...Sterling... Lycroft...?" I repeated slowly, hoping I was just hearing wrong.

But before Zac could reconfirm, I then suddenly heard footsteps behind me.

"You called for me, little bird?" the voice said.

...And I watched as Sterling entered my room, closing the door behind him.

*Click

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A Gift from the Goddess

Chapter 138

Book Two – Ch.# 30 "...Never mind. I've got to go," I said quietly into the phone. "Rae, wait. What's-."

But I hung up before Zac could finish his sentence.

Sterling's eyes looked from my face... to where I held the phone in my hands, and slowly clicked his tongue in disapproval. "That would be a cellular device, I assume?" he asked, gradually approaching. "Are you aware that it's quite a serious offence to use that here? A crime punishable by permanent banishment from the pack... or worse."

I swallowed back the bile in my throat, feeling sick from just looking at Sterling. And yet he had the audacity to threaten me. I wasn't the one who'd been selling illegal drugs for years. "I know it was you," I said. "I know you were the one selling the suppressors to my father."

And his approach then came to a stop, his head nodding in understanding.

"Ah... I see," he said. "Then I suppose you'll be wanting an explanation? A reason for why I did what I did? Maybe then you'll be able to see this from my perspective. How... I'm not entirely the bad guy in all of this."

I didn't reply. It seemed too good to be true for him to just start telling me what surely had to be his darkest secret. Did he believe he had leverage over me now, knowing I had used the phone here? Or was this something else? "I wouldn't expect you to know this, but Victor and I are actually twins. Fraternal, of course," he started. "Our mother had a complicated birth and, as a result, the two of us were delivered by C-section. Do you know what that means?"

I hesitated but shook my head. I wasn't sure where he was going with this or how it related to the drugs, but I thought it best to just go along with it. "It means that the doctor who ripped my brother out first was the one who decided which of us would become Alpha. A fact that has plagued me my entire life. I was always not quite good enough in the eyes of everyone else."

Right... because only the eldest was given the title. I'd been told that ranks were based on birth, not merit. "It's due to that unfortunate reality that I've coveted many of the things denied to me, things only bestowed upon my brother and nephew," he continued,

looking away as if in deep thought. "I watched as my brother was praised as a strong leader, saw his success, his victory in battles. I saw as he brought stability and peace to, not only this pack, but to an entire nation that had previously been divided by war for almost a century. And when he was finished, his work finally done... I found myself happy. Not for his accomplishments or his triumphs No, I was happy... because his mate then fell into a coma... and eventually died. It was due to his actions that ultimately led to her demise, reminding the world that the perfect man did in fact have flaws. And it was on that day I realised I could carve my own destiny, my own future. I could... create my own pack. One where I would be the Alpha. Just as I always should have been."

His own pack? It was clear that he'd been wallowing in his own envy for so long that he couldn't see what he already had. A pack and family who I was certain loved him. A place to call home. Things that were denied to me for almost my whole life.

“...So I got to work immediately. Of course, I needed my own money to be able to fund such a feat and, as a result, I started selling the very drugs my brother had outlawed. This is what I did for years, working hard on establishing a small black market network that specialised in suppressors, a secret formula known only to our pack. But, at the end of the day, it still wasn't enough money.” He then paused, his eyes moving back over to meet my own. “It wasn't enough... until one day, I was approached by a smuggler, one looking to acquire some customised silver suppressors on behalf of a wealthy human businessman.”

...Miles. That had to be Miles, working as a smuggler on behalf of my father. “Of course, I was wary; after all, blessed silver is not an easy thing to get your hands on,” he said. “But he'd found the right man for the job. Because it's not completely impossible when you're the son of the previous Alpha, ranked or not. Luckily, I'd grown up surrounded by the very people in charge of the resource's management.” “So you decided to poison me?” I asked.

He chuckled darkly. “I didn't know who you were, little bird,” he said. “I dug only so deep as to discover Eric Reid had a secret daughter and I put the pieces together. My information stopped at basically your name and, ultimately, I didn't care to look further. The deal was for the money and nothing more. It wasn't... personal. Truthfully, I thought you'd be dead in a month anyway from the silver. So imagine my surprise when you, not only survived all these years, but then also somehow found your way here, mated to my nephew no less.” “I don't understand... why are you telling me all of this now?” I asked, still

LI

confused about why he was being so candid. There was only one explanation I could think of for why he would tell me... and it wasn't pleasant. No, it was one that made my eyes dart to where I'd concealed my dagger, only a few feet away under the mattress of my bed. I focused my mind, quickly preparing myself to move... and asked the question. “...Are you planning to kill me?” However, instead of a fight instantly breaking out like I anticipated, he simply laughed instead. I jumped in surprise, the abrupt noise making my chest race. “Like I said... I'm a man who has always coveted the things I couldn't have,” he smiled. “Truthfully, I had planned to kill you the day we met. When I realised who you were and the threat of information you posed, I knew it would be important to cut off the loose end. But... but then everything changed.”

TILTE

IL

LI

“...What changed?” I asked slowly.

And I knew I was about to regret asking when the way he looked at me then changed. His gaze scanned over me as if he were undressing me with his eyes, churning a feeling of revulsion inside me.

“What changed? Well... you smiled at me,” he said, taking another step towards me. “You shook my hand and... genuinely smiled at me, making me feel something inside I had never felt before. And when I still couldn’t shake that feeling for several days, no matter how hard I tried, it was then that I conceded that, when I did create my new pack, I would be in need of a Luna. One to continue my legacy.” I stared at him incredulously, in disbelief I was really hearing this right now. That he actually thought I would ever consider going with him. “You, little bird, were chosen by a higher power to become a Luna,” he said, holding his hand out towards me in invitation. “...And I want that for myself.”

Silence. Had he really just said that? I knew there was only one way to react to this, the most appropriate response for this very situation. ...And I spat at the ground by his feet. “You’re disgusting,” I hissed, taking a step backwards. But he then moved that hand over his chest as if in mock pain. “Am I? It hurts me to hear you say that. I thought we’d really connected,” he said sadly. “Perhaps

you’ll change your mind eventually. Maybe after a few pups, you’ll find a way to love me too.” “You’re insane. You don’t love me. You just love the idea of screwing a girl who is already mated to your nephew; the future alpha,” I snapped. “This is just some twisted way of feeling like you got what you always wanted; what your brother’s birth denied you.”

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However, he didn’t seem perturbed by my words in the slightest, as if he didn’t see any issue with what I was pointing out. No... he already knew and accepted it completely.

“I see no mark upon your neck,” he said. “He has yet to claim you as his. After tonight, he’ll no longer have that choice. Not when I take you as a chosen mate.”

He started to close the distance between us and I matched his step backwards, confused by what he was saying. Another example of my lack of knowledge worsening a situation. “...What? Mark? I don’t... I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I kept trying to move away, walking until I eventually felt the wall behind me. There was nowhere left to go.

I was trapped.

“A mark is the final step in solidifying a mate bond,” he explained. “Think like human marriages where it’s a vow between two people... except, instead of being able to divorce one day, a marked mate can only be parted by death. As opposed to the

conventional method of mate bonds, ones fated by the Goddess herself, a chosen mate is simply when two people mark each other by choice in spite of that system. A bite to the neck, claiming the other as theirs. That is the future I see for us, little bird.”

...A bite to the neck... that’s what my body had been craving from Kieran. So... it was a biological response. A result of the mate bond between us. That must have been why he was holding off, knowing the level of commitment involved. If a human proposed marriage after only a few weeks of dating, they would be seen as crazy. So I could only imagine how serious a mark would be. “Don’t fight it,” Sterling said, still moving towards me. “Come quietly and I’ll be gentle. I have everything ready for the new pack; my suitcase is in the car and I’ve already left a note. All that remains now... is you. The final piece to my perfect world awaiting me.”

He was close now. Too close. And with me having nowhere else to go, I could only react on instinct when he reached as if to caress my cheek.

...And I quickly slapped his hand away.

“Don’t touch me,” I warned. But my words fell on deaf ears.

And, as he attempted to reach for me again, I instantly shoved him backwards. Just hard enough for his legs to hit a table behind him, the corner looking as though it scraped his skin harshly.

“...You bitch,” he winced in pain, his teeth gritted. “I’m trying to do this without hurting you, don’t make me regret that sentiment. If you don’t come with me, you’ll be kicked out of Ashwood for the phone anyway. Really, I’m helping you.”

“I’m warning you, Sterling. Don’.....”

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But, of course, he didn’t listen. And when he tried to move towards me again, aiming to grab at me more forcibly this time, I made sure he got the message.

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...And I punched him across the face so hard that I heard his nose crack, blood immediately proceeding to seep from the area. "I said don't touch me!" I growled. Hunched over, he looked back towards me, up through where his hand was trying to stop the bleeding, and I watched as a new determination then came over him. A look that told me this wasn't over... but, in fact, just beginning, Something that then quickly came to fruition as he pushed me to the ground. He tried to overpower me, relying on the extra weight he had over me to keep me down, but he had severely underestimated just how strong I really was. Within a matter of seconds, I had twisted my way back around to be on top, and swiftly

slammed his head against the ground. "Enough, Sterling!" I said, holding his head down by his hair. I could feel him squirming under me, trying to get free, but I had him overpowered.

"You were meant to be weak," he huffed out slowly. "A poisoned whore ripe for The taking. Yet your strength doesn't strike me as someone who's been ingesting blessed silver and suppressors for four years." Arold laugh left me at that, amused by his new choice of words for me. How quickly his attitude changed.

"Then maybe up the dosage next time," I said. "Seems to me that your attempt at poisoning me was as pathetic as your life story."

... That hit a nerve.

A low growl sounded from his chest as he looked at me with icy hatred.

"I should have killed you," he said. "I should have taken the deal Miles proposed, killed you, and then stolen whatever was left of your father's fortune." But the mention of Miles took me off-guard. I didn't know anything about a new deal but... I wondered if maybe Sterling was more involved than I originally thought.

"Deal?" I asked. "This being Miles Kennedy, I presume?"

His lip twitched into a bitter smile. "That's the one. He works for your father so I guess you would know him too. How is he doing these days?"

But now it was my turn to smile.

"Dead," I answered honestly. "...I killed him myself." Sterling's face immediately paled.

"You're lying... He's not dead. He only told me a few weeks ago that he'd gotten his hands on the documents. We're meeting in a few days."

...Wait... did he say... documents? And I felt myself freeze as realisation hit me. The contact for Miles had never been Victor... it'd been a different Lycroft all along, It had been... Sterling. "Documents...? What documents?" I asked. But of all the times for him

to stop answering my questions, he chose now. Now, just as I was finally discovering the information that had started all of this.

Because he then bit his lip and did his best to look away despite my grip. "What documents, Sterling? Where are they? What is in them?"

"None of your business, little bird." ...And, just like that, I felt as something inside me then... snapped. Because it was my business. It was my family's business and I knew those documents were important enough for my father to jeopardise so much to get them back. The very reason for me being allowed to come here.

And whether it was brought on by an accumulated hatred for everything Sterling

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had done to me, or.. my own overwhelming feelings of inadequacy that, despite working so hard to fit in at Ashwood and be better, had built up slowly every day, or... Whether it was just an ingrained loyalty to my father that would never truly leave me... I felt that darker side of me awaken, now at my limit for just how much more I could handle.

I started to feel like... my old self. And I'd never had very much patience. "...That's 'Raven' to you," I corrected quietly, a calmness washing over me. And as I proceeded to snap his finger along the joint, only his cries of pain sounded out in reply to my words. Not to worry though. I would have him talking soon enough.

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A Gift from the Goddess

Chapter 139

Book TWO – Ch.# 31 *CRACK*

...Another finger joint. The third now in under five minutes, him still refusing to answer me.

Truthfully, I was a little surprised he was holding out for as long as he was. He was still determined to resist my questioning and refused to cooperate. Was this really the hill he wanted to die on? After everything he'd been working so hard on for at least a decade? "You know... I've been doing a lot of research lately," I said. "Thanks to you, my health has become a point of focus for me and I've actually learnt a lot about our kind's anatomy."

And I grabbed another finger, pressing it tightly in a way that conveyed the threat. Just hard enough for a pathetic whimper to leave him.

“Like for example... did you know that our joints heal faster than all other injuries?” I asked. “Faster than cuts, gashes... faster than even bones breaking? It’s something to do with how our joints relate to our ability to shift. They naturally have to heal quicker in order to compensate for that.”

CRACK

Another finger. “...But evidently that doesn’t mean it hurts any less,” I added.

“Please... stop...,” he cried.

Though it did him little good. He already knew what I wanted to know and could end this whenever he so desired.

“I did the math...,” I said, ignoring him. “I could hypothetically dislocate all of your fingers about five times within the next hour without any issues. That means I can repeat this process approximately every twelve minutes. The only question is... how long will it take before you finally answer me? Another round? Another four? ...Ten?”

“Goddess... enough... I’m begging you.”

*CRACK

And I leaned in, right next to his ear.

“Then tell me where the documents are, Sterling,” I whispered. “Tell me what they contain.”

Only his cries replied, screaming out from the pain. Something that merely annoyed me enough to then grab his next hand, ready to start again with a fresh set of digits.

But, finally, it seemed that was enough for him to speak. “Why do you care?!” he shouted back. “You’re angry at me but I wasn’t the one who dosed you. I was just the supplier, commission to make them. The man you’re trying to protect right now is the one you should be torturing,” I knew that. Of course, I did. To a certain degree, I should be pissed at my father.. and I was. But this went beyond simply protecting him now. This was my only chance to locate the documents and... and, well, after that I could choose what to do with them. An internal debate for myself another time. All that mattered right now was getting the information... and making Sterling pay. “I’m the one asking the questions,” I reminded, “You’re not in any position to be arguing right now.” ...And I grabbed another of his joints firmly... readying to snap it at any second... giving him one last chance.... “Okay, okay!” he yelled. “Okay... I’ll tell you. Just... please. Please stop. I-I can’t take it anymore.” “Where are they?” I wasn’t keen on wasting any

more time. Despite being several floors up from the dining hall, there was every possibility someone could hear should they wander this way. Not that they should have a reason to. It was meant to be a private level for the Alpha heir and all the attendants would be on duty serving the dinner guests.

“Where are they, Sterling?” I repeated again, him taking too long to answer.

“I... I think they're in Miles' warehouse,” he said. “It's located near the border between Lockdale and Ashwood.” Right... I already knew about that warehouse. My father had been the one to originally tell me about it. But if it was that simple, the documents would have been retrieved already. The first thing he would have done is send someone to look there.

“Where exactly in the warehouse?” I asked. “In a safe? A hidden compartment?”

It seemed he thought that simply mentioning the warehouse would be enough to satisfy my question, his eyes becoming more stressed as I pressed for details.

“I... I'm not sure. All I know is that it's in the warehouse,” he said. “Please... let me go now. I told you all I know.”

Did he think I was stupid? This wasn't amateur hour, I'd had plenty of experience in situations like this. I'd been taught to be an expert in getting answers, no matter how I went about it. If he actually thought that I would believe him so easily, then he really was naïve.

And so I snapped another finger... making sure to get my point across. “Tell me where exactly in the warehouse they are,” I repeated. “I'm losing patience.”

Instantly, he cried out again, squirming under me enough that I had to press my knee harder into his back. A reminder that he was still overpowered. “I don't... I don't know,” he whimpered pathetically.

And I grabbed another finger. “One...,” I simply replied, holding it firmly. His denials sped up in speed, becoming more frantic. “...Two...,” I continued, bending it backwards slowly. He was almost screaming now, shouting that he didn't know as if it was somehow going to save him. Which, of course, it wouldn't. Oh, well. He did it to himself.

“... Three-”

But before I could finish, he then cut me off. “A FLOORBOARD!” he yelled. “A floorboard in his office, under a rug! He always kept all of his important things in there, but... I don't know anything else. I swear.”

I sighed in exhaustion.

"Now was that so hard?" I asked, leaning back a little. "Funny how your memory seems to work better when subjected to pain. So, I wonder then... if that's the case, have you finally had enough? Or do I need to keep going until you remember what's inside the documents too?" "I don't .,"

"Do you really want to finish that sentence?" I warned. "Because if you knew

about some deal Miles was coming to you with, then you would definitely know what the documents contained. Please don't insult my intelligence by telling me you don't know. I feel like we're past that point now."

He only huffed and cried in response, a sight that was truly pitiful to watch. And yet he wanted to be an Alpha? I was only just beginning to learn what that was and even I could tell he was far from fit for the job.

It was something that made me almost thankful for the upbringing I had, for the skills and strength I possessed. Because I knew that is some poor, inexperienced girl had been in this situation, facing the insanity of this sick perverted man, then this situation might have played out very, very differently. An outcome that made me shudder to think about. "Sterling," I prompted. He still hadn't replied, "I swear... if you don't tell me right now, I'll..." "Wait... wait..." he begged. "I-I only know what Miles told me. Just that it."

H...Rae?"

A voice then spoke from behind me.

I instantly recognised it. "...Kieran," I gasped, turning to look at him. "What are you... what are you doing? Is that... Sterling?" he asked, confused by what he was seeing in front of him. How I had his uncle pinned to the ground, crying uncontrollably. "It was Sterling all along," I quickly said. He was the one selling the suppressors. He tried to attack-" But, somehow in the time I'd been distracted, Sterling had gotten his hands on one of my spare shoes that I'd left by the bedside table. And before I could finish explaining to Kieran what was happening, he then swiftly embedded the heel of the stiletto into my thigh. "Rae!" Kieran yelled, watching as Sterling then pushed me to the side,

I screamed out in pain as I pulled the shoe out, but it was too late to pin Sterling back down. He'd already gotten back onto his feet, moving towards me as if he were going to serve a kick straight into my gut.

However, Kieran then moved in quickly to intercept. "Don't touch her," he growled, pushing Sterling away. "That bitch has it coming," he spat. "Do you have any idea what she did to me?"

What she is truly like? I bet that image of a beautiful, sweet girl will be shattered once I tell you what she's capable of." "He planned to kidnap me," I said, cutting in before

Sterling could say anything else. "He followed me upstairs and told me he was going to mark me. Force me into becoming a Luna for some new pack he was going to start. He tried to claim me as a chosen mate."

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"Lies!" Sterling yelled.

"How else would I know what marking is? What a chosen mate is?" I asked. "You never told me about that, Kieran. Think about it." But Kieran's eyes had already darkened in a threatening way, my explanation alone already being enough for him to turn on his uncle. "...You tried to do what?" he demanded. And Sterling's face paled. "Nothing," he said. "She's lying. She—"

*Tell me the truth. Right now." Kieran ordered.

But there was something in the way he spoke. It wasn't like anything else I'd experienced. He wasn't simply asking the question, more so there was an almost ... tangible force behind his words, one that even I could feel. A weight that compelled without room for argument. All directed at Sterling.

"I...", he started, squirming under the pressure. "I... goddammit..."

He was fighting it. Whatever it was, it looked as though he was physically struggling against the order, refusing to answer Kieran. "I... J... renounce my loyalty to the Ashwood pack, its Alpha, Victor Lycroft, and the heir, Kieran Lycroft," he finally spat out. "From this day forth, I no longer serve you."

And, just like that, it seemed he freed himself from whatever Kieran had done.

"This is the road you're choosing?" Kieran asked, "After everything we have done for you?" "You have done nothing but look down at me, pup." Sterling spat. "And had your whore not been a freak, I would have relished every second I spent looking down at *her" as she writhed under me in pleasure."

...That did it.

That was enough.

And as Kieran moved towards Sterling, intending to begin a fight... he hadn't quite been quick enough.

Because in the second after Sterling had spoken, I immediately retrieved my dagger and moved towards him. Going so fast that he didn't even see me.

No, he didn't see me... nor did he see my dagger as it swiftly sliced through his throat.

T

A last, lethal blow that there would be no coming back from.

... It was done.

LI

I breathed heavily as I pulled the knife back out slowly, shaking with rage as I did so. Because unlike Sterling's reasoning for why he had poisoned me, this had in fact been personal. Personal *for me*.

And I had wanted him dead. Unable to hurt anyone ever again. Not me, not Kieran ... not any other poor soul he might come across one day.

I wanted him gone. Gone for good.

... *Clank*

The dagger fell from my fingers, loudly hitting the ground, and the noise was then enough to break me from my trance.

It crashed me back into reality... and I started to cry.

Sobs shaking through my chest as I realised Kieran had seen what I'd done, how I'd just killed his uncle. How... no matter how hard I tried to be different, I would always have this side inside me. But instead of being upset or angry, instead, I then felt as Kieran walked up... and wrapped his arms around me.

He stroked my hair soothingly, allowing me to cry into his chest. I hadn't realised I'd needed it so badly but I clutched onto him as if I were clinging on for life. Holding on like he would suddenly disappear the moment I let go.

"I've got you," he said quietly. "You're safe now." And I only cried louder.

A Gift from the Goddess Chapter 140 By Dawn Rosewood Book 2- CH 32

A Gift from the Goddess

Chapter 140

Book Two – Ch.# 32 The time that elapsed after Sterling's death was intense. Both internally and externally. Because the longer that went by, the more I began to wonder what the full implications of my actions would be. Already, my reputation in town had

been dubious, being attacked once before for being a 'Rogue Luna'. So just what would happen this time when word got out that I'd killed the Alpha's brother? I could hear Kieran saying something in a hushed voice from outside the room, leaving me to stare at the motionless corpse that may very well be my undoing. It seemed almost poetic that Sterling would find another way to potentially ruin my life, now from beyond the grave. Though I couldn't blame him for dying. That had been entirely my doing. In that moment, it had felt as if everything overwhelmed me all at once, vividly imagining what he would be capable of doing should he have been allowed to live. And though morally that wasn't my decision to make, I couldn't help but wonder what my life would have been like had he not been so greedy. Had I been allowed to shift normally and connect with my wolf as everyone else seemed to have.

S

But no matter how I looked at it, murder for the right reasons was still murder. And it was something that I was all too familiar with

"Rae," Kieran said, breaking me from my thoughts.

I tore my eyes away from Sterling's lifeless stare to look up at him. "Are you okay?" he asked.

I nodded.

"They're getting things ready to move the body," he said. "We can move your luggage into my room if you'd like."

Since Kieran and I had become intimate, I'd spent my nights with him in his room anyway and only used this place as a glorified wardrobe. Moving my things there wouldn't be that big of a change. But as I turned to start packing my belongings, it was then that I heard footsteps rushing towards the room. Moving quickly with a sense of urgency, and I had a feeling I knew who it belonged to. "Sterling?!" Victor's voice boomed. He stood at the entrance, his pace stopping the second his eyes found his brother

on the ground.

"What's the meaning of this?!" he demanded, "Who did this to him?" A knot twisted in my stomach at the thought of telling him. Would he believe me? He was very clearly upset, as was to be expected. But I swallowed back my fear... and stepped forward, knowing I needed to do this. "Victor... I'm so sorry this happened," I said gently, lowering my head. "I can't imagine the pain you must be feeling but... the truth is... Sterling" "Sterling attacked her," Kieran interrupted, walking back over to my side. "He stalked her to this room and intended to force himself on her... to mark her as his."

Victor's eyes widened in confusion, "What...? Then who..." And before I could get the words out, Kieran then spoke, his words instantly making me look sharply up at him. "I killed him," he said. "L... killed Sterling" ...He was taking the fall for me. Lying to his father no less. Didn't he realise what that meant? That he would be forever labelled as someone capable of killing their own family? The real reason behind his death wouldn't really matter to some. I knew too well how people could speculate and gossip... how they could twist the truth for their own narrative. If people wanted to believe something, they would, no matter how accurate it was. He was simply jeopardising his own reputation for mine.

"...You did this, Kieran?" Victor asked, the pain on his face contorting. "He renounced his loyalty to Ashwood, intending to start a new pack," he said calmly. "And after he admitted his disgusting intentions towards Rae, after he stabbed her right in front of me... I lost control." "...Kieran," I whispered, grabbing his hand to hint he should stop protecting me. But he wouldn't look at me. He just held firm in his decision, never looking away from his father. "The blood on your leg." Victor then said to me. "That is yours?" In amongst everything happening, I'd almost forgotten about the hole in my thigh. The entire situation we were in had made me feel numb. "Yes... Alpha. A heel of a shoe embedded by Sterling." And he nodded his head in understanding. "Then you should get it seen to by a

doctor immediately."

Without wasting any time, he then gestured for an attendant to come over." Please escort Raven to the hospital. Make sure she's looked after."

"I should stay with her," Kieran said quickly. "She was just attacked by someone twice her size. It must be incredibly traumatic for her."

Not that it wasn't traumatic, but Kieran knew full well that Sterling wasn't a match for me. It was a little odd that he was changing the story to this degree,

even to the point of hiding my own capability. Would Victor assume it was me if Kieran told him I was able to fight?

IT

...And, as I thought on it some more, I realised then that no one in the pack even knew I was skilled in combat. Kieran had made a point of ensuring our Training sessions were always private. Was it just another archaic viewpoint to do with women? Or... was there another reason?

"You need to stay here until I can confirm what's happened," Victor said. "Take responsibility for your actions, Kieran."

But Kieran didn't seem to like that response, him already moving to argue again.

However, if he thought that I'd let him endure the entire scrutiny without helping, he was sorely mistaken.

"A letter," I said loudly before Kieran could speak. They both turned to look at me. "It feels as though you want evidence and answers for what happened to

your brother, Victor, and I completely understand that. So you should know that, when Sterling spoke of his plans to kidnap me, he mentioned already having packed a suitcase... and leaving a letter. You'll find his luggage inside his car... and I assume the letter will have been left somewhere you frequent."

And though his eyes were full of anger and pain, a moment of understanding seemed to wash over him as I provided him with what he needed... a way to accept that his brother truly was the despicable man he was accused of being

"I'll be fine," I said to Kieran, pressing his hand in comfort. "Be with your father. He needs you more than I do."

That was the last thing we said before we shared a meaningful look and I left for the hospital. Leaving Kieran behind to clean up the mess of my own making... to take the blame for my actions.

And, in doing so, potentially altering the future forever. Both mine... and his

Four days had passed since Sterling's death.

The evidence was located, the record set straight, and his funeral was held two days after his passing. An event that was heavily contended by some given the weight of his alleged crimes, not to mention the fact he'd formally voiced his rejection of Ashwood. Nevertheless though, he was still the brother of the Alpha, son of the prior one, and, despite his actions, some were still saddened by his death.

I'd spoken to Kieran after the events, protesting his protection of me, but he'd told me that if I hadn't killed him, he would have anyway. That he hadn't entirely lied to Victor about losing control and that I'd simply beaten him to it. It made me feel slightly more reassured... though I still couldn't shake the feeling of guilt. Whether that was now guilt over killing Sterling, or for continuing to hide things about myself from Kieran, I wasn't quite sure.

This felt especially the case now that the location of the documents was revealed. It was like a nagging in my head, wondering what I should do with the information. Even if it was purely curiosity over what they contained, I knew that to go looking for them was a slippery stepping stone towards my father. But then to simply disregard the information made me wonder just how long I could continue to ignore the prevalent issue still ahead, the one of cutting ties with my father entirely. It was a jumbled mess of so many thoughts in my head that all weighed on me.

And... I didn't know what to do.

"Raven?" I heard someone ask.

I looked up to see Allison.

I was sitting outside the packhouse, enjoying the sun as I tried to think on my dilemma. It seemed Allison had found me on her way to go somewhere, looking as though she was leaving for the day. "Hi Allison," I said, giving her a gentle smile.

But she tilted her head a little at me, frowning "You seem worried," she said. "Is everything okay?" Goddanin siblings. Their ability to read me was almost unnerving, "Oh... yes, I'm fine," I lied. "How are you?" "I've been better," she said.

And I knew that was the truth. We hadn't spoken too much, but the signs were there.

Lately, Allison had been particularly quiet. A strange demeanour to see on her for so long. Truthfully, I think she had loved her uncle but, after hearing the news of his transgressions, she hadn't acted overly surprised. Not shocked, just... sad.

"But... that's just life, I suppose," she continued. "It's conflicting to feel upset yet angry by someone I loved. Things aren't always so... black and white." Truer words had never been spoken. "What is upsetting you?" she then asked. "...If you don't mind me asking. Is it to do with Sterling?"

But I hesitated, shifting uncomfortably. "You don't have to tell me," she softly smiled, "But you don't need to feel so alone either. If you want, you could accompany me. I'm on my way to the temple."

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"The temple... for the Moon Goddess?" I asked.

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She nodded. "I find that sometimes talking to her about my problems helps to clear my mind."

"Does she talk back?"

Kieran had mentioned their deity was allegedly real, not just faith-based. The question sounded ridiculous as it left my mouth, but it was meant with sincerity. However, a small

giggle lest Allison's lips. The first time in many days. I was so relieved to see her happy that it overshadowed my embarrassment.

"No," she said, covering her mouth. "But we all need to make our own decisions in life. It's not for Selene to tell us what to do." And though I didn't completely believe in their religion, I thought that maybe there wouldn't be any harm in going with her. At the very least, it would be a nice distraction from the turmoil in my mind. "Okay... I'll join you," I said, standing up. "Let's go."

And Allison's face sparked a little with life, excited by my intention to go with her.

It took us around ten minutes to arrive at the temple and it was a sight that definitely took my breath away. The place seemed ancient, a sort of ageless beauty about it as the white walls glistened in the sunlight. But above all else, there was a large collection of stones mounted at the entrance that stole my attention. It seemed to reflect a rainbow within its surface, placed in a delicate swirl design.

"They're moonstones," Allison explained, seeing my interest. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

Of course, I agreed.

Inside was just as stunning with paintings and stained-glass windows lining the walls. But it seemed almost empty in terms of seating options, much to my surprise.

"Do... not many people come here?" I asked, a little awkwardly. "It doesn't look like there's space here to seat a whole town." "Traditionally, we perform most rituals outside," she said. "When the moon is at its highest in the sky, looking down upon us, that is the point in which we are most connected to our Great Mother. We have a sacred spot in the woods where we go for those occasions. But this is just a temple. Somewhere we come to be

surrounded by her life force during the day."

T

Well, that explained that. I suppose it made sense when she was literally referred to as a 'Moon' Goddess.

"I'm going to go grab us some candles from the back," Allison said, turning to leave. "Feel free to look around. I'll be a few minutes."

And so I did just that... spending the time she was gone to look at all the paintings on the walls. Most were of a woman who I assumed was Selene... depictions of wolves and blessings. All staged within a light from the moon.

But it was as I was nearing a dustier corner that something then caught my eye. Because where the other paintings had all been positive, I couldn't help but notice that the images here were a lot more... darker.

They seemed to be telling a story of a battle, one with many casualties and pain. I was taken aback by just how different these were and how horrific they seemed. And yet one stood out amongst them all, centred within the middle with a light within its darkness.

LI

It was of a woman with flowing silver hair, so bright in colour that it seemed possessed by moonlight itself. She stood with her arms outstretched as she stared up to the sky, an expression of contrition across her face. And yet... and yet, in complete contrast to that, she was depicted with blood covering her clothes, standing atop a pile of bodies. I frowned as I continued to analyse it, feeling uncomfortable by its graphic tone. "Oh... horrible, right?" Allison's voice spoke behind me, making me jump. I sharply turned to look at her, finding her staring at the painting with distaste.

LI

"...Who is she?" I asked. "This one seems very... different to the others."

But Allison just approached slowly, her eyes fixated on the picture as if it had a hold over her.

IL

"This is of the Silver Saintess, Ariadne," she said quietly. "... The false prophet who walked amongst us one hundred years ago. She was a creature who declared themselves an embodiment of the Goddess, and yet saw to change the world to her will. A world in the image of her insanity." Her eyes then finally snapped back to my own, showing me the hatred burning within them. "She was an evil that has never been forgotten... A Devil of the Mist."