

A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood

Chapter 26-30

Chapter Twenty-Six

"M-miss, please don't make me do something illegal," Lucy stuttered, taking a step back.

I held up my hands to calm her down. "Relax! Relax, jeez," I said and ran a hand through my hair, sighing at her dramatics. "I'm doing them a favour really."

She still looked incredibly uncomfortable. "Do you trust me, Lucy?" I asked. She was silent, hesitating over how to reply back. Probably trying to figure out how to not offend me.

"Okay, okay, don't answer that," I laughed. "Do you want to get paid while saving a young girl's life?"

She took a few seconds to consider before nodding. "See? It's not that bad. I promise nothing will go wrong. Just please ensure this gets to Alpha Raymond as soon as possible." She shakily took the letter from my hands. "Just don't think of it as blackmailing..." I said, trying to reassure her. "Just look at it more as a S.... exploiting a situation for the benefit of both parties... and then maybe some blackmail later.

And it really was the truth. Everything I'd told Lucy was correct, but I tried not to tell her too much to protect her from becoming liable should anything go wrong. Alpha Raymond was indeed the leader of an incredibly wealthy pack to the east. However, he didn't have many dealings on our side of the country so not many knew about him here. But I knew about him. In fact, in my past life, I'd had dealings with Raymond personally. He was an incredibly miserable old man who didn't even put up a fight when it came time to have him pledge allegiance to the Winter Mist. It was like he had no fight left in him as he offered up the tax payment without any issue whatsoever.

I'd found it a little unnerving how the whole takeover had been so easy and so I'd sent some of the Winter Mist spies out to enter their pack. My hope was to uncover if it was all just an elaborate trap. I was surprised when they came back to tell me that the old man really didn't care and was tormented by a tragic event that had happened several years earlier.

An event where his only daughter had been kidnapped and was eventually killed. I was told they didn't find her body until a year later when someone discovered the old abandoned house they had holed her up in. The spies had also included a graphic condition report but I decided to leave that be, not wanting to hear the exact details of what had happened to the poor girl.

The most tragic part about the entire thing was that it had been a ransom situation... but the demand letter had never reached its destination to Raymond. I could picture the girl tied up

and alone, waiting for her father to complete the payoff and save her, only to end up being killed. Had her final moments been of wondering whether her father valued his wealth more than her? Evidently, the kidnappers had believed that to be the case as they cut off all their loose ends very quickly and made a run for it. But things didn't need to turn out that way this time. My letter was asking for double the original ransom price in exchange for not only his daughter, but also her exact location where they could catch the culprits responsible. This would give them the advantage to hopefully take the kidnappers completely by surprise. And sure, it wasn't the most altruistic thing I'd ever done... but it by far wasn't the worse thing either. Having been given Raymond's financial statements in my previous life, I knew that double the ransom would still not even come close to making a dent in his wealth, and it would allow me to have a nice hefty sum to begin my personal investments.

And if he didn't believe me or didn't want to pay up... well, I knew a few of his dirty secrets, including some of the less legal means of how he was amassing money. I was hoping to keep this to just a case of exploitation, but I really would blackmail him for real if need be.

The next couple of months went by incredibly quickly after that.

My monetary ploy with Alpha Raymond Sullivan had resulted in a huge success. In fact, it only took two weeks from the time I'd sent the letter. As an added bonus, I also found out from Lucy that his daughter had been rescued safely and was completely unharmed. Hopefully, the old man wouldn't be so miserable now in the future, and I now had a very sizeable nest egg for my future endeavours.

Lucy also met with the private investigator on my behalf. I gave her a letter that included all the details I knew about Thea Woods which, admittedly, really wasn't all that much at all. It did feel a little odd to not know anything about her, but I chalked it up to avidly trying to avoid her all the time in the past. I knew at the very least she didn't originate from the Winter Mist since that would entail her being enrolled at my school, which she was not. I was assured that, if she was out there, that the PI would be able to find her

However, several months then passed and, during that time, I was yet to hear an encouraging update even once. But, despite his failures, I remained hopeful he would find her. He had to.

As for Cai, we had well and truly started training and the progress already was obvious, even in just the short amount of time we'd worked together. I quickly saw how the errors I'd made during my solo attempt were very stupid in comparison.

And Cai actually ended up being a really great teacher. During our one-on-one combat practice, he was careful to teach me the correct technique whilst avoiding my blows skillfully. Though every now and then I would manage to land a hit and I'd immediately become incredibly conceited, overjoyed at the fact I had managed to do some damage. In hindsight, it was always a very short-lived victory as it was constantly followed up by being thrown flat on my ass again before even five seconds had passed. But my progress in training was definitely evident. I looked healthier, stronger, and I was far more agile on my feet than before. In fact, that was the only advantage I ever managed to hold over Cai; he was a lot stronger with amazing skill, but my speed and agility were far better.

We had set up a clear schedule where I'd train with him Monday, Wednesday and Friday, and then on Tuesday and Thursday I was expected to work alone to build muscle and recover from whatever injuries I'd last sustained. It worked extremely well... even though Cai would show up ten to fifteen minutes late most days. I attributed this to the other commitments he had that required his attention. Sure, it irritated me how he wasn't punctual, but I tried my best to let it go knowing that he was doing me a favour at the end of the day.

During the four months that had passed, I was feeling content with how everything in my life was tracking.. Things were finally going smoothly.

Today, I was sitting in the school library with Myra during lunch and assisting with her homework. Her questions were always ridiculously easy but I enjoyed seeing her face light up with excitement as soon as she understood the topic. I always felt this weird warm feeling whenever I looked at her. Maybe because I'd saved her life? Did that equate to one less name I would need to atone for killing in my past life? "Um... Aria?" Myra asked hesitantly.

I had been lost in my thoughts whilst eating my apple that I hadn't even realised she'd stopped to look at me.

"What's up? Are you stuck?"

I looked down at her homework but saw she had finished the question already.

"No! No... I was just wondering... if maybe you'd like to hang out on the weekend? ...With me?" Hang out? Like... go to a clothes shop or something? With someone else? It seemed like such a foreign concept to me. Wasn't that something young girls usually did with their friends? "Hang... out?" I repeated slowly. "I'm sorry if it seems like a dumb idea! You can just forget I said anything." She quickly turned her head back to her book.

I didn't really have time on the weekends... but I felt a pang of guilt seeing her look so disappointed. Suddenly, Cai entered the library before I could reply, a sight shocking in

itself. I had assumed he spent most of his lunches playing sports with the other guys at school.

“Hello, lovely ladies,” he suavely greeted us, throwing a wink in our direction.

I rolled my eyes at his cheesy attempt of charm. He really was incessant “What are you doing here, Cai?” I asked, mildly irritated that he was bothering our study session.

“Just checking up on my two favourite gals,” he replied and walked over to us. I watched in horror as he then grabbed the apple from out of my hand and took a massive bite out of it.

“What the hell, Cai? Are you really that bored?” I snatched my apple back and eyed the bite he’d taken with distaste. “Don’t you have someone else you can annoy?”

Not wanting to waste my only snack, I decided to continue to eat my apple despite his unsavoury action.

“So cruel to me, Aria,” he joked, placing a hand over his heart in mock pain. I turned to Myra to see if she was finding his crap just as annoying as me, but instead saw her staring at my apple with burning red cheeks. When she noticed I’d caught her looking she instantly blushed and turned her face away.

If I didn’t know any better, I’d say that look was almost as bad as if she’d just caught us making out on the table. I wondered what she would think if she saw how close we got during combat fighting, seeing that she was getting this worked up over just a shared apple. “Alright, leave us alone, you’re making Myra uncomfortable.” I shoved his shoulder to try and get him to leave. “I’ll see you at training this afternoon. Please try and not be late this time.”

However, it definitely turned out to be a case of famous last words.

Because that afternoon, I stood in the gym waiting for him... but he never arrived.

In fact, he didn’t arrive even after an hour had passed. I had sat by the door with nothing to do the entire time... and had just waited. Had my life really resulted in being forgotten so easily?

Frustrated, I grabbed my bag and walked out of the gym, not wanting to spend another minute waiting for that jerk. If he did end up showing up then I hoped he felt bad when he noticed I’d left already.

But as I walked through a few of the halls, I suddenly thought I could hear his voice. Had he really been here the whole time and didn’t even give me the courtesy of cancelling?

I was so angry I felt my blood suddenly rush through my veins. Ten or fifteen minutes late was excusable, but over an entire hour? And to not even let me know when he was just down a few halls? I was livid.

I stormed up to the classroom and threw the door open. "Cai, you absolute asshole. How could you do tha—" But I never got to finish my sentence. I never got to finish my sentence because I was completely taken off guard by the half-naked Cai who was clearly having his way with one of the female senior grade students.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven "Aria!?"

He had understandably been surprised to see me, so had the girl under him who was also missing her shirt

She was laying down on a school desk, legs wrapped around him, and I quickly averted my gaze before I saw anything else. "What the hell are you doing here?" he yelled. I could hear the sound of him zipping his pants back up and tugging a shirt on. "What am I doing here?" I repeated incredulously. "You mean why am I here after you made me wait for over an hour?!"

I turned back around to face him having assumed it was safe to do so now. "Oh shit, was that today?"

"Oh, really? You don't recall even though I literally reminded you only a few hours ago?!" He rubbed at the back of his neck staring at the ground. At least he looked a little guilty. But it didn't matter because I was furious. Nothing he was going to be able to say would make me calm down. It was like something inside me had been triggered and I could feel myself losing control.

"...I'm sorry, Aria." "You're sorry?! You were so preoccupied screwing this girl that you couldn't even let me know you wanted to cancel?"

He looked up to face me then and I felt that same familiar feeling of wanting so badly to buckle under the weight of those eyes. But not today. Today, I refused to back down as it fuelled my rage.

"Woah, hey," the girl interjected. "Let's leave me out of this, okay? I don't need to be caught u p in your weird... Goddess mark shit."

If I'd still had my wolf, I would have ripped her throat out right then and there. It was probably her lucky day that I was still underage. "Kira," Cai warned, making it clear that he didn't think what she'd said was appropriate. "I think it's best that you leave if you truly don't want to get involved." "Alright, fine. Enjoy your kiddie after school playtime," she said with a huff. I scrutinised her u p and down, watching as she

fixed her skirt until, finally, she walked towards the door. I was glad to see her hightail it out of here, but the feeling lasted only a few seconds.

“Freak,” she whispered as she walked past me.

I raised my hand so quick, seconds away from grabbing her, but suddenly Cai was there, restraining me in his grip. I conceded to just stare venomously at her until she left.

“Aria, calm down already.” “Is that how you see me?” I asked, ignoring his request. I turned towards him, feeling a wave of angry tears bubbling to the surface. I gritted my teeth in an attempt to stop them from falling but it didn’t work. “See you’?” he asked, confused. “Like a child! A charity case! ...A freak.” He let go of my arm in surprise. “What? No, of course not.” 1 “But you’d rather spend your time here in her skirt? Because I’m not as entertaining, right? Because you think I’m just a kid?”

He sighed and shuffled uncomfortably. “...You’ll understand when you’re older.”

I burst into laughter. Was that really all he could say? I was mentally eight years older than

nerve to think I didn’t understand exactly what he had been doing and why.

I advanced on him quickly, striding towards him with an absolute conviction. With every step I took, he paced backwards in response, unsettled by my sudden approach. But I kept walking all the way until his back was up against the wall and finally trapped. And I stared up into his eyes with extreme seriousness. “Do you truly believe I don’t know anything, Cai?”

He was still trying to press himself further up against the wall, but it was a futile attempt. The only thing creating distance between us now was our height difference. When he eventually came to the same conclusion that there was no point in trying to move, he finally looked down at me, his eyes searching mine as if he was looking for something. I waited for his reply as he opened and closed his mouth several times, almost as if trying to find the right words to say but nothing would come out. Then, finally, I lost patience. I angrily sighed and turned away, heading towards the door. “You want to know which of us is the child? Go take a good, hard look at yourself, Cai.” “Aria, wait,” he called after me. “I’ll make it up to you. We can do some extra lessons and I’ll even teach you a special fighting technique only taught at my pack” I disregarded what he was saying and kept walking, choosing to reply without even turning to look at him. “Don’t bother, Cai. I’d rather not spend my time with someone who can’t even take me seriously.” “Well, then you’ll get your wish anyway,” he called out. “I’m not going to be here for much longer.”

I paused in my tracks and finally looked back at him.

“...What do you mean?”

“I mean my exchange is up in a week or so. I’m going to be forced to head home soon.”

Whatever feeling of calm I had managed to hold a few moments ago was abruptly thrown out the window, my fury being reignited. I wasn’t sure what made me angrier; the fact he’d ditched me for over an hour to get into a girl’s pants, or the fact he had been planning to leave so soon and hadn’t even brought it up until now. “Are you actually telling me right now that you were planning to go back home in a week, and you weren’t even going to tell me?!” “No! I was going to tell you! Of course, I was.” “When?! via a letter when you’d already returned?! I thought we were friends, Cai. What the fuck is wrong with you?” “No, don’t be stupid!”

I stormed back towards him, quickly making up the ground I’d previously made between us. “You want to make it up to me, Cai?” I asked rhetorically. “Fine then.” I threw a punch towards his face that he dodged effortlessly, moving his head to the side to avoid the blow.

“Aria... what are you doing?”

He took a step back to make some distance, but I didn’t let him get away. I swept my leg up at him in an attempt to hit his side, but he quickly blocked it with his arm. “What do you mean? You thought this was going to be fixable by just a simple make up training session, right? Well then, hit me, Cai!” I shifted my weight to my other leg and tried to surprise him with a kick from my other foot. The movement was fast enough that he did almost miss it, but at the last second, he grabbed my ankle, holding me in place. “Stop this,” he growled. I refused to listen to him, his request only making me want to hit him more for trying to tell me what to do.

He still hadn’t let go of my leg, so I took the opportunity to grab onto one of the desks behind me, using it as leverage to support my weight. Lifting myself into the air, I then kicked him square in the chest, forcing him to release my ankle and stumble several feet backwards.

“Hit me, Cai,” I said trying to goad him, covering the space I’d just made again.

“No.”

I went to punch him in the jaw, and, to my surprise, he didn’t even try to defend himself this time. My hit landed perfectly against the side of his face and I was left staring at my hand in disbelief.

“What are you doing..?” I asked in complete shock.

But he didn’t answer me. Unsure about what else to do, I then tried to hit him again; a right hook straight into his stomach. He coughed and stumbled back but, still, he didn’t try to defend himself.

I screamed out in anger at his refusal to engage and ran up to him, hitting him again and again several more times, all of which he endured and never once raised a hand against me.

“I said fucking hit me, Cai!” “No! I won’t!” he finally yelled back. “This isn’t the gym, this isn’t training. I’m not going to hurt you.” The weight of his words slowly started to wear me down as I continued to attack him, my punches against him slowly becoming weaker. “...Please... hit me...” I could feel my tears coming back and I swallowed hard to keep them at bay. He refused to answer and continued to let me come at him. When I finally admitted that he wasn’t going to react, I slumped to my knees in front of him, defeated. It had only taken a few more hits before I had finally stopped, my tears having fallen enough by that point to obscure my vision.

“Are you done?” he asked after several moments had passed. I couldn’t do it anymore. I couldn’t stand this feeling of being insignificant once again. Was it actually impossible to hope someone would put me first for once? That I would be someone’s priority? 1

Because I realised that was the real reason as to why I was so angry. It wasn’t about the girl, or about him being late... it was because I thought Cai had actually cared about me, that we were friends. But I knew there was no real reason for him to have felt that way. He was an incredibly charismatic and friendly guy to every person he met. The truth was he probably had a tonne of friends, maybe even a best friend waiting for him at home. And yet I’d had the audacity to assume that maybe I was equally that important to him. ... That maybe I mattered. “...Go,” I whispered quietly. “What did you just say?” he asked, sounding unsure as to whether he’d heard right.

“I said go, Cai!” I yelled, shooting my head up to meet his gaze. “Leave already! Go back to your territory and have a great life!” He didn’t hesitate for even a second longer. He just turned around and left straight out the door, not needing to be told a third time.

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

I regretted the words as soon as they left my mouth. My mind kept trying to justify his actions, justify how he’d treated me. Really, it was probably my fault for thinking we were closer than he felt we were. I’d realised too late that I’d built up some sort of reliance on him without even knowing. It was such a bittersweet feeling to have had something I craved so close, only for it to be taken away having never realised it was there. And the worst part was that the entire time I’d been back, I’d been telling myself not to get close to anyone again... and yet here I was, crying over a stupid teenager of all people.

It had been self-indulgent of me to begin with given the circumstances. I didn’t know why I felt I deserved to feel validated by him. Did I think that, if we became friends, then what I did in my past life to him would be

forgiven? I still carried that burden around with me, one which still weighed heavily on my shoulders. It was something I'd completely buried within myself, had forced myself to forget, only for it to be dredged back up again once I'd found out who Cai really was. I stayed in the classroom for at least another half an hour. It was silly but, even though I knew Cai would have well and truly left already, I couldn't make myself move for fear I'd see him whilst trying to get home.

When I did eventually manage to pick myself up to leave, I could feel my muscles were sore and ached all over. I hadn't noticed it before, but my body had been shaking the entire time I'd stayed slumped on the cold ground. It had been too much stress, too much emotion to handle all at once, and my tiny young body had struggled to compensate.

I now wanted nothing more than to be left alone and to be allowed to think over everything that had just happened, everything I'd just done. And so, I arrived back at my house and entered silently, being greeted by an attendant at the front door as I walked past.

"Welcome home, Saintess," she said, bowing slightly. Ordinarily, I probably would have just ignored it but having the fresh reminder irritated me after everything I'd just been through.

"I'm not a Saintess yet," I snapped, narrowing my eyes at her.

"You're right," said a voice behind me. "You're not. And do you know why?"

I turned around and saw my mother leaning against the doorway to the living room with a stern look on her face. Her arms were folded as she looked down at me.

"Because you still haven't fulfilled the Elders' summons for you to have your confirmation completed," she continued, not waiting for me to reply. "They sent yet another letter today..."

-wait, have you been crying?" "No," I answered flatly, hinting at her to drop it. "And I don't want the confirmation. Just the mere possibility of having the mark is already terrifying enough to most of the pack, why would I want to make that worse?"

She sighed. "As much as I'd like to agree that you're safer without the official formalities, you can't just ignore them and expect that they'll stop asking you."

"Screw the Elders," I said flippantly and tried to keep walking to my room.

"Aria."

Her voice was one of warning that I'd gone too far, stopping me in my tracks. I wanted to scream at her that I didn't want to deal with this right now, but I didn't want to take my frustration out on her.

"Fine," I said, forfeiting. "Do you have one of their letters I can look at?"

She handed me a silver envelope with a wolf insignia on it and I read through it carefully, looking for anything that might help me. "It doesn't specify how many Elders are actually required for the confirmation." "Well... no, why would it?" she asked confused. "Does it need to be all of them or is only one technically required for the inspection process?"

"I'd need to check... but I'd assume just one would be sufficient..." she said slowly.

"Fine then. Set a date. But I have one condition." I handed her the envelope back and started walking to my room again. "I'll only go if it's conducted by Elder Luke, and only Elder Luke." "Aria, wait. Do you want to talk about what's going on? I can clearly see you're upset," she called up the stairs after me.

"I've had a long day. I need to rest."

I locked myself in my room after that and fell asleep quickly.

All night I was plagued with nightmares of Cai's death and the names of those I'd hurt before. The ordeal with him at school must have been prevalent enough inside my mind for my inner guilty conscience to drag up the unpleasant memories. I eventually awoke in the morning feeling more exhausted than when I had gone to sleep. It was a Saturday and so I, unfortunately, wouldn't be able to stay in bed for long; I would be expected to show up for Luna studies. The classes usually covered topics such as etiquette, event organisation, names of important figures and more. I had been trying to play along the last few months, pretending I didn't know the material she was teaching, but it was beginning to feel tiresome at this point and the tutor could probably tell.

Normally, the lessons should have been taught by a dowager Luna but, since my succession was still not confirmed via an official mate bond, I was given just an experienced tutor instead. She was an older lady named Helen Stewart who I think stemmed originally from a Beta family in a neighbouring territory. Her mate had been no one of importance, having been born the youngest in a family of five, but she had been close friends with the Luna of her pack before their passing, hence her vast amount of knowledge on the subject. And so, I found myself sitting at the dining room table across from the old lady, wishing I was anywhere else. She was going through and listing off all the influential houses of the northern packs in excruciating detail.

Eventually, I couldn't stand it anymore.

“And that brings us to the next family,” she said. “There is the Lycroft family with their Alpha

“David.”

I’d interjected so we both said the name at the same time.

She gave me a side-eye look of caution but continued anyway. “...And his three sons—”

“Jeremy, Thomas and Peter.”

She stopped talking and looked at me face-on, a little annoyed that I’d interrupted with the answers. I sighed, finally too tired to keep up the charade.

“Look, Helen,” I said, addressing her by her actual name for the first time. Typically, I would have had to address her as ‘Mrs Stewart’. “I know you’re a smart woman and so I know you’ve probably figured out by now that I’ve been feigning ignorance over everything you’ve been teaching me these last few months. I’m not even mad. In fact, I admire your commitment to not telling my parents in order to keep getting paid.” “...Pardon...?”

“So, what I’m going to do is,” I said, pulling out my cheque book. “I’m going to give you your full days pay right now, and then when my parents come home tonight, you’re going to tell them that I’m coming along nicely with all my studies. They will then proceed to also hand you your full days pay and you will get to walk out of here with double your wage. All you have to do is tell them I was here the whole day whilst I go out. How does that sound?”

Her eyes went as wide as saucers having been taken completely aback by my very sudden change in attitude.

“Won’t they notice when two debits for my pay come out of their account?”

“Oh, you mean because of this?” I asked, pointing to the small booklet. “Don’t worry about that. This is my own personal account. My parents have no control over these funds.”

She looked as if she didn’t know how to reply. It was almost as if I could see her brain turning, trying to figure out exactly what was actually happening. “I really feel like we can come to a mutual understanding that will benefit both of us here, Helen.”

She took a few moments to consider further before mutely nodding her head in agreement.

“Brilliant. I’ve always thought you were a very, very intelligent woman, Helen. One of the many things I admire about you,” I said as I started writing out her cheque. “I’ll be back before my parents get home tonight.”

I stood up and walked past her towards the front door, placing the cheque in front of her as I went without even looking back. Even when I had left the house entirely, she still never managed to say a single word to me.

I stepped outside into the fresh air that smelt like freedom and wondered what to do. This would be the very first Saturday off to myself out of both of the lives I’d lived.

So... what did young girls do when they had too much time on their hands and an abundance of wealth? And then suddenly I had an amazing idea.

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

Within the hour, I found myself at a clothing store in town with one very over excited Myra by my side.

The look of her complete unabridged joy when I’d shown up at her door to ask if she wanted to hang out, had been worth the bribe to skip out on Luna studies. I didn’t particularly need clothes, nor have any desire to impress anyone, but spending time with the one positive presence I could always count on was refreshing. Seeing her flutter around looking at the different outfits while gushing about how good they’d look on was so simplistic and easy. I was able to relax and shut my mind off to everything that had gone wrong the day before.

However, after we’d gone to several shops, I started to notice a trend with Myra. She seemed to love so many of the clothes she would try on, which was a fair amount of them, but every time she would leave the store without buying anything. When we had reached the fifth shop, I watched her coming out of the changing room with a

gorgeous red dress on. It complimented her hair and figure perfectly.

“Wow, Myra, I really love that one,” I said encouragingly.

“Yes! It’s so pretty!” she did a spin in the mirror, checking it from all angles. When she was finally satisfied with how it looked, she went back into the changing room to return to her normal clothes.

“Ready to go to the next store?” she asked once she’d finished dressing. I watched and saw how, once again, she returned the dress back to the clothing rack without purchasing it. “Aren’t you going to buy it? It really did look amazing on you.” She smiled a little timidly. “No, that’s ok.”

I frowned, confused as to why she wouldn't want to buy something when I was under the impression the whole point of the shopping trip was to... Well, shop.

"No seriously, I think you should get it! It will be great for semi-formal events!"

Her cheeks suddenly became red and she looked away a little awkwardly.

"Ah... the truth is," she said hesitantly, "the stores around here are a little out of my price range."

I stared down at the price tag on the dress but only got more confused. I'd chosen this strip of stores in town because they always looked to have a lower price range. And it wasn't even an expensive dress by any means. I knew I had been born into a wealthy family, but I still had an understanding of what would constitute as expensive. And this dress definitely wasn't that pricey. "Where do you normally shop then?"

"Oh, downtown. There are some really nice second-hand shops there that usually have some amazing finds."

I stared at her, seeing her now in a completely new light. Of course, that perspective wasn't due to the fact she had minimal spare funds, but rather because she had always acted so kind and cheery to people regardless of her home situation. She had never let on that things were any different from the other kids at school. "... You never told me," I said finally. "Because it's not a big deal!" she said with a smile. "I'm actually really fine with how things in my life are. My family owns the local orphanage and so we donate a lot of what we have to help support the children in our care."

It was probably the most goodwill life story I'd ever heard. It only made me want to protect Myra even more and never let anything ever hurt her. She was too precious for this world. "That's really incredible of you and your family to do that," I said. "No, it's fine! But, oh, actually..." she said, touching a finger to her lip in thought, "if you're interested, it would really mean a lot if you'd come to our big annual charity event that we'll be hosting soon. I'm sure the children would love to meet you in person. A few of them look up to you already."

Look up... to me? Like a role model? I'd never aspired to call myself that, or even ever considered that it could be possible. I didn't understand why anyone would want to be like me. If they ever truly found out who I was then they would probably all be terrified of me.

Myra saw my conflicted expression and immediately backtracked. "It's fine if you don't want to come! It wasn't meant to pressure you into doing something you didn't want to do." "No! No... it's fine," I replied with a smile. "I'd love to come. Let me know all the details and I'll definitely be there."

Her face lit up with excitement and immediately squealed, pulling me into a hug. I was taken completely off guard by her sudden embrace and it took a few seconds before I finally put an arm around her in return.

She must have felt my uneasiness because she pulled away almost immediately.

“Sorry, sorry!” she stammered. I shook my head, a small smile of my own to show her I was okay. “Don’t be.”

Truthfully, I didn’t mind. I wasn’t exactly the most affectionate of people by any means, given my past history, but I was pretty sure Myra was by far one of the most pure-hearted people I’d ever met.

I think a part of me had always known that though. Every day, subconsciously, I had been putting on the moonstone necklace she’d given me and I felt a slight glimmer of peace whenever I touched it. It reminded me that I was capable of doing good and that there were good people out there, even when I refused to acknowledge it. Maybe I had been relying on *Myra* this entire time too, just like I had been *Cai*.

My eyes wandered to the red dress again behind her, a small nagging in my head ensuing. And

so, I reached for the dress, folding it over my arm. “What are you doing?” she asked, surprised. “If you’re going to be hosting a big annual charity event then you need to look the part.” Her jaw dropped. She looked as if I’d just told her she was expelled from school. 1

“No, Aria, you can’t! It’s too much.” She tried to tug the dress out of my arms but I pulled it away from her.

“Myra, it’s fine! Seriously.” I laughed at her overreaction to something so small.

“Then I’ll try and pay you back! I promise!” I rolled my eyes. “I really didn’t want to have to point this out because I’m not trying to show off... but this dress’ price is literally pocket change for me, Myra.”

She paused and stopped protesting for a second to think.

“Seriously, if I can’t spoil my... friend, then what’s the point?” It was such a difficult thing to say. ‘Friend’. Just one word and yet I was terrified of it; terrified of the vulnerability it might open me up to. And whilst it was true that I still held my reservations about the whole thing, I had to admit that Myra was probably just a genuinely nice girl through and through.

I couldn’t see myself ever truly opening up to anyone, not even Myra, but I needed to realise that having her in my life had been nice. And at a basic level, that’s what

friendship was; a mutual want to be around another person because they made you happy.

She had never given me any indication that I was anything less than someone she just enjoyed being around. In fact, her original invitation to hang out with me had been her decision. She hadn't seen me have a meltdown in front of Aleric or cry in front of Cai. I knew she wasn't hanging out with me because she felt bad for me. Her motive had been pure, as evident when she spoke to me first even before I'd saved her life. It took a few seconds for her to register exactly what I'd just said, but as soon as it clicked her whole face lit back up, realising I'd just called her my friend. "Aria, oh my gosh, thank you!" She threw her arms back around me but I was still carrying the dress, stopping me from being able to hug her back. Her excitement almost made me lose balance and fall to the ground. "Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!"

I laughed and pulled away from the overly enthusiastic Myra before she completely toppled me over. "It's fine, don't even mention it."

The reality was that I could have bought her every dress in the store and it wouldn't have even made a dent in the funds I'd accumulated so far. The investments I'd made were already

ridiculously successful since I knew from my past life exactly which businesses would spike in profit quickly. A part of me wanted to offer to buy Myra whatever her heart desired, no matter the cost, but I didn't want her to feel as if I was flaunting my wealth at her. I would need to just subtly spoil her from time to time without being too obvious.

I bought the dress, and we were leaving to go to the next store, when suddenly she pointed at something she saw outside.

"Hey, isn't that Cai?"

And I swore my heart stopped. Every part of my body tensed up immediately at the sound of his name. I followed her finger to where she was looking and, sure enough, Cai was there. It looked as though he had been grabbing some supplies from the shop across the street. "We should go say hi," Myra said, about to drag me over to where he was. "No!" I said a little too loudly. She looked at me strangely and I had to compose myself before continuing again. "No, he's probably busy. Let's not bother him." "Why? He's leaving tomorrow. This will be our last chance to see him." I shot my head back to look at her, shocked. "...What do you mean? I thought he wasn't leaving for another week?" "What? Didn't he tell you?" she asked, surprised to hear Cai hadn't spoken to me. She probably thought it was odd given how close we seemed. "He stopped by my house after school last night to say he had something come up and was having to head home sooner than expected."

My chest tightened. Had I been that 'something' that had come up? I quickly shook the thought off though as I realised I was doing it again. I was assuming that I was more

important to him than I really was. He probably had a home emergency come up and was needing to leave sooner than expected. "... Right, okay," I said absent-mindedly, turning back to stare at him through the window. So, this really would be the last chance I'd have to see Cai before he left then. It seemed like such a strange concept given how much of my new life he'd taken up. Did I really want to leave things the way we had? I knew that at his age and being an Alpha heir, he would now become extremely busy undertaking new duties upon arriving home. Because of this, it was very likely we would never see each other again. It had already been a strange fate for us to have met the way we had in this life and so the chances of meeting again seemed very improbable.

And then another horrible thought hit me. If I never saw him again, what would happen to his future? Would his father still come to the Winter Mist and be killed by Aleric if nothing changed? Would Cai still end up bleeding out on that battlefield? I felt like I wanted to throw up just thinking about it. Maybe I should have told him the truth, told him to keep his father as far away from here as possible. Was it selfish to have kept it from him in order to protect myself instead? Who was I to put his life in my hands once again? I was lost in my head, debating over what I should do, when suddenly his golden eyes looked up towards the store. ...And he caught me staring right at him.

A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 30

Chapter Thirty

A million thoughts and feelings swept through me as I scrambled to figure out what to do. Should I wave? Smile? Walk over to him? ...Pretend that I'm actually looking at the shop behind him? It was a sort of nervous energy that made my legs shuffle under me and my heart race.

I had so much to say to him, yet so much I shouldn't have said to begin with.

And yet the most important thing, at the forefront of my mind, was still the debate as to whether I should tell him about the future. Because I knew he had a right to know, even if I ended up sounding insane.

I took a step towards him and began to hold up my hand to wave.

"Cai..."

But I didn't get to finish my sentence as he instantly looked away, turning back down to pack his bag. All I could do was watch mutely as he got onto his motorbike and kick it into ignition, not even bothering to look at me again before he rode off. It was as if he'd just slammed a door in my face. I stood there shocked with my hand still partially raised, embarrassment creeping up on me. My cheeks burned at being left looking stupid on the side of the street. "...Aria?" Myra asked, sounding unsure over whether she should ask about what just happened. I balled my hand up into a loose fist and brought it down to hold against my chest. It was fine. I deserved that. Cai may not realise how much

danger he would be in one day, but I did. And I still had a chance to make a change for the better. Even if I never saw him again, even if he never thought of me ever again, I would still do my best to keep him safe. Whatever it took. I vowed to never let Aleric start that war which would become the beginning of the end. It was a horrifying reminder that I'd been procrastinating figuring out just what laid ahead for my future. If I embraced my Sainthood and declared ultimate authority, then I would need to be amassing allies right now for the eventual political takeover within the pack. It was something I didn't want to initiate if possible as it put my entire family at risk and would only serve to create a civil war. But then that didn't leave me with many options.

I hated to admit it but, when the time came, I knew I may need to prepare myself for the worst-case scenario in order to save the people I cared about, including Cai. If there really were no options left after exhausting all possibilities, then maybe, one day... I would need to take up my Luna position once more. "Aria?" Myra asked again, having become worried over my extended silence. It pulled me out of the deep thoughts I'd been trapped in. A rabbit hole of grim reminders I didn't want to think about just yet. I had to forcefully push them aside inside my mind. There was no reason to get caught up thinking about it yet. There were still so many years before I'd be hard-pressed to make a

decision. "...Sorry," I said, still a little out of it. She frowned, pursing her lip a little. "What was that? Cai definitely saw you right?" I rubbed at my forearm feeling a little awkward still. "...I guess not." She was silent in thought but let it go. Myra knew me well enough by now to know that, if I didn't feel like talking about something, then I wouldn't. She was used to my normally reserved attitude.

"...Did you want to get something to eat?" she finally asked. And I forced a smile on my face. "That's a great idea."

A few minutes later, we'd walked down to the food district and were checking out all the different cafes and restaurants. There was a pretty great variety and I was excited to try something different. Normally all the special meals I had were either prepared at the house of someone important, or we'd attend one of the upscale restaurants reserved for the upper ranked only. It was refreshing to not feel pressured to act so carefully with my words and actions for once.

As we rounded the corner, a small cottage style cafe then caught my eye suddenly, almost obscured completely by trees and plants. It would be easy for someone to walk by without seeing it. There was a sort of beauty about it and I knew this was the place I wanted to eat at for my very first average citizen meal. "Let's got here, Myra," I said, pointing to the little cafe. We both walked up to it and inspected the menu outside on a little podium. "Oh, Aria, I don't know. It's a little expensive. Maybe we can try somewhere else?" But I was adamant about wanting to eat here. I didn't care what it meant in order to persuade her. I had told myself I wasn't going to try and buy her things often, knowing it may make her feel awkward, but I really did have my heart set on this little place. It was so beautiful yet private. "It's fine, I'll pay for your meal." "Aria, you

can't pay for everything in my life," she said. "I can do things myself too." "But this is my first time going to a normal cafe. Please, can we go?" I looked at her with hopeful eyes and finally her frown softened. "...Okay, fine," she said, yielding. I smiled brightly at her and was about to tell her how excited I was but she cut me off before I could. "...On one condition." "Condition?"

"You have to tell me what happened between you and Cai," she said with a serious face. "And don't even try to tell me nothing happened because I've gotten to know both of you pretty

well over these last few months. Something is off."

I bit at the inside of my cheek and debated over whether it was really worth telling her. I didn't know how to talk about the things that had happened or why they had affected me so much. To give her the full picture it would require me to tell her about my previous life, of which I couldn't do.

"Does it really matter? It's not like we're ever going to see him again."

She flinched at my overly harsh words and I instantly felt bad about it. "You know, I normally don't push you on things like this," she said, "but I care about both you and Cai. Can you please tell me just this once?" I sighed. I could probably give her a basic rundown of the events without going into too much detail. She might think I overreacted, and to an extent I probably did, but I wouldn't be able to tell her why it hurt me so badly. "...Okay," I agreed reluctantly. She smiled and grabbed my hand to pull me into the little cafe. Inside it was completely stunning. There was a small patio that wrapped around the back which had vines creeping along the walls and fencing. Though it looked like it may have been a bit older on the outside, the interior was heavily renovated and modern in a homey kind of way.

A waitress greeted us by the door and her eyes went wide when she realised who I was, my silver hair and violet eyes being something I couldn't exactly hide from other pack members in public. But it was easy to ignore her reaction since I had also been getting the same expression from the store vendors all day.

She quickly led us to a spot on the patio that overlooked a forest below us and, much to my delight, we could even see some of the mountains in the distance. It was obviously the best seat in the house and I was definitely impressed. It acted as a nice reminder of how large and diverse, not only our pack was, but also the territory we lived on.

"What are you thinking of ordering?" I asked after we'd settled down. Myra had spent some time studying the menu in front of me with great focus.

"I'm not sure... but they're still serving breakfast this late, so maybe an eggs benedict or omelette?"

Both of those seemed like pretty standard choices... but I had my eye on something far better.

"What about you?" she asked.

"Hmm... I'm getting the chicken nuggets and fries." She stared at me blankly. "What...? You mean the kid's menu item?" "Oh, was it only on the kid's menu? Do you think they'll make a full plate if I ask them?" "Aria, why do you want nuggets?" she asked confused. "There are so many other nicer options.

I thought about it and realised that perhaps my choice might have seemed odd to her. But she

homoea ERITREA

didn't really understand where I was coming from, what my upbringing had been like. "This is my first time being able to choose what I want to eat without being pressured and I've never had junk food before. I think my parents would have a heart attack if I told them I was thinking of eating it." Her frown eased, finally understanding. Thankfully, she didn't question me further on it. It was true that I'd never eaten a proper unhealthy meal before. In my past life, my diet had always been strict even after I became Luna. I'd never touched anything greasy once I had come of age for fear it would make Aleric think I was unrefined. But I was living a new life now and was so much healthier than I had ever been. I wasn't trying to impress anyone anymore and I'd already lived one life of little to no luxury. In my head, I didn't need to justify it any further. I was getting the damn nuggets. It took some persuasion but the waitress eventually agreed to give me a larger serving of the kid's meal after several strange looks. I didn't care though. When it finally came out and I took my first bite, I swear I could have died again right then and there a happy girl. Myra watched on while I ate, her face curious over my reaction, but I didn't let her stare interrupt me. I was having a whole new experience that was so good it must have been a blessing from a higher power. "So... are you going to tell me?" she finally asked after I'd finished having an intimate moment with my food. I knew what she meant of course. She was asking me to uphold my end of the deal.

And so, I started to tell her what had happened; how Cai hadn't shown up and hadn't bothered to cancel when he was so close by, how I'd found him and how he'd acted at first like I was in the one in the wrong. And finally, I told her how he didn't even tell me he was leaving.

She took it all in and listened silently, nodding occasionally. When I was finally done, she sat in thought for a few moments. "Sounds like you're both in the wrong," she concluded.

I sighed. "I can't disagree with that statement. I was going to apologise but it looks as though I've run out of time. He made it pretty clear today he doesn't want to talk to me."

Myra shifted and rested her head against her hand on the table, a small crease forming between her brows as looked to be thinking.

“One thing doesn’t make sense to me though,” she said. “At the time, you seemed to get really upset over the situation quite quickly.”

I suddenly felt really nervous and wasn’t sure how to reply. “Oh... well...”

“Aria...,” she started, “umm, don’t take this wrong way but... seeing Cai like that suddenly...”

Myra adjusted in her chair to sit up, looking unsure as to whether she should ask what she was about to. And I could say with absolute certainty that I definitely wasn’t expecting the next words out of her mouth.

“Aria... could you have maybe been... jealous?” It probably seemed a little harsh given how serious she was about the question, but I couldn’t help it. I burst out into laughter. “Me...? Jealous...?” I asked whilst still chuckling. “Shouldn’t I be the one asking you that, Myra?”

Her cheeks blushed. “What are you talking about?” I leaned in closer, raising a brow at her questioningly. “You think I don’t see how you always stare at him with those big eyes? How you always blush whenever he was near?” “I do not!” she protested.

“Your cheeks are literally turning red just talking about it,” I pointed out.

She covered her hands over her face in an attempt to hide it. “Stop teasing me, Aria,” she whined. I couldn’t help but laugh harder. “Ok, ok, I’ll stop. I’m sorry.” It seemed like such a ridiculous idea to have been jealous. Cai was renowned for his playboy antics, I knew that already.

“Besides,” I said, taking a sip of my water. I’d been laughing so hard my throat had gone completely *dry*. “I already have enough boy troubles as it is. Or have you forgotten who I am, Myra?”

She was confused for a second before realisation spread across her face. “Oh, right. We never really talk about the other side of your life so I’d forgotten. Aleric, right?” I nodded. “Unfortunately.” “...Unfortunately? I thought being mated to the Alpha was every girl’s dream? They’re so strong, handsome, and...” “Arrogant,” I finished for her. Not to mention insane, emotionally unstable and murderous, but I didn’t add that part aloud for her to hear.

“Is he?” she asked, curious now. “I’ve never met him so I wouldn’t know.” “I guess most of the pack just sees the poster boy they make him out to be. They have to talk him up since he’s going to be our leader one day.” I internally cringed thinking back to how at one point I’d felt naively the same way as Myra. As a young girl, they really had liked to

talk about how amazing it would be if you were mated to a n Alpha. Or rather, more specifically, mated to Aleric since he was the young, handsome heir o four pack. All the non-ranked girls were basically drooling at the idea of becoming Luna. However, their dreams had been dashed pretty quickly for the Winter Mist position when the prophecy about Aleric and I was announced by the Elders.

“Well, if you’re so against it then, who knows? Maybe you won’t even turn out to be mates. It was just what the Elder’s said would happen, right?”

I had to hold in another bout of laughter trying to escape my lips. She would ask what was so funny but it would be hard to explain the universal joke of me being stuck with Aleric, lest my entire being be torn apart and remade from scratch. No, I had already tried and failed at that negotiation once, and with a Goddess no less. I just smiled at her. “Maybe.”

We ended up spending the rest of the day together shopping. Myra was adamant about forcing me to try on and even buy a few clothes, which I obliged out of wanting to make her happy rather than any particular interest I had in the garments myself. It ended up being an extremely pleasant day, for the most part, which felt like it ended too soon.

I managed to get home with ample time to spare after dropping Myra off at home in a taxi. Helen was extremely happy and relieved to see me return safely too. Though, in comparison, the happiness she felt when my parents handed her the second cheque of the day obviously had a greater impact on her good mood. School resumed just as it always had over the weeks that followed. I couldn’t deny I felt a little empty inside, having lost something that used to be a large part of my life. I continued to train every day, working harder using the techniques Cai had taught me, but I noticed my skill improvement didn’t increase as quickly as I’d hoped it would without him. There was nothing I could change about that and knew I would need to make do with what I had.

Without consciously doing it, I realised I would still look out into the halls at school to see if I’d find his friendly face waving at me. And every time a part of me felt disappointed when there was nothing there. Cai was gone, and I needed to accept that. And so, after another month of procrastinating, the day finally arrived.

The day I would be going to receive my Goddess mark confirmation, thereby earning the official title of ‘Saintess’. From now on, nothing would be the same.