

A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood

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Chapter Thirty One

I stood outside the Elder's housing estate, staring up at the large black iron gates in front of me. They were intricate yet terrifying at the same time, but I knew what laid behind them would be even more nerve-wracking.

The doorman saw me and recognised who I was immediately, opening the gates without needing to identify myself or even speak. I entered quietly, heading towards the fate I knew would be waiting for me just inside the lavishly large building. The Elders were a group hand-selected and were only seven in total. A majority vote of both ranked and existing Elders was required to initiate any new members into the council and the process was quite strict. They all had to be over a certain age and bring some sort of credibility or merit to contribute to the betterment of the pack's future. The only exception to this rigorous selection process was the retired ranked members who were almost always guaranteed a position if one was available... and if they were able to live to the minimum age requirement.

I stepped inside and couldn't help but gasp a little at how extravagant the interior was. A better description for this place would have been a mansion, not a house. Everywhere I could see was filled with expensive furniture and decorations. I'd never had a reason to come here in the past and so seeing it for the first time was startling. I had no idea they were living in such luxury. "Ariadne," a deep voice called beside me. I turned my head and saw that Elder Luke was waiting for me, standing by the door for when I would arrive.

In comparison to the other Elders, Elder Luke was by far the youngest member with dark greying hair and light stubble across his jaw; he was never one for keeping a tidy appearance. His intellect had been a shoo-in for the council position, one which had become available not long after his minimum age requirement had been met.

He was always considered a pioneer for innovation and a change in how we looked at things. In fact, he was one of the first Elders to ever recommend me to join the table for strategy meetings. However, this ended up becoming one of the things the other Elders disliked about him. His modern approach to issues sometimes interfered with the more traditional ideas of the older members.

I bowed my head to show my respect. "Hello, Elder Luke," I greeted.

In this instance, Elder Luke held a status higher than my own now I was no longer a Luna. But I knew inside that I would have shown him the correct reverence he deserved regardless. I always admired his ability to logically find solutions, even before I'd

become Luna. He had been one of the people I had studied the work of in-depth during my years of strategy research. I knew that a part of who I was today was owed to him.

When I had started my journey of becoming the pack's leading strategist, Elder Luke had actually been the one who had previously held the title. I always wondered if inside he was mildly bitter about it, but he never indicated he felt that way in the slightest. I respected

him deeply though. If there was one person in the past who could have been considered close to being my equal on this subject, it was him.

He waved off my formality, smiling, and motioned for me to follow him down a hallway.

Every room we passed was just as fancy as the last. I found that, of the rooms which had their doors open, all of the spaces were taken up for personal offices and meeting rooms. It made me wonder just how big the place was if we hadn't even seen the personal living quarters on this route.

After a few more twists and turns, we eventually ended up in a large but tidy looking office. Unlike the others, there were minimal personal items and more of a focus on the papers and books that lined the walls and desk.

"My office," he announced and gestured for me to enter. I stepped inside, taking in the sheer amount of books that surrounded me. I thought I had read every academic book in the pack's library collection, but my eyes caught titles in here that I'd never seen before. It had been so long since I'd felt that rush of excitement that came with wanting to learn. If I could have even one afternoon alone in this office, I would be ecstatic.

"It's a large collection," I praised. "How did you manage to find some of these? I see several limited edition copies of books I thought were lost to our kind many years ago." "You have a good eye." He noted before smiling slyly. "I have come to find ways of acquiring books that would otherwise seem impossible."

I wanted to press him further for details, mostly so I could attempt to do the same, but I felt he probably wouldn't go around telling his secrets to a young teenager. Maybe one day I'd be able to persuade him to tell me.

"Please take a seat."

I walked over to a wide fabric stool where normally a visitor chair would have been placed. I knew this one would have been arranged so that Elder Luke would be able to inspect my mark with ease, removing the obstacle of a backrest interfering with the process. "So, Ariadne," he started. "How are you feeling?"

The question caught me off guard a little. I hadn't expected him to delay with idle chit-chat.

“Oh, um, please call me Aria. I’m doing well thanks. Yourself?”

He smiled. “I’m doing well too. I’m also feeling incredibly honoured. I hear you specifically requested that I assist you with this confirmation today.” His dark eyes had been watching me carefully since we’d entered the office, always holding this glint of careful questioning in them. I knew he would be studying me closely to figure out who I was and why I had this mark, because I would have been doing the same thing in his position. I had already prepared myself to be examined like a test subject for this process. After all, no one had held this mark for over a millennium.

“That’s correct,” I replied.

“May I ask what made you come to this decision? You don’t have to answer if you do not wish to though. This is a question stemming from pure curiosity, not anything to do with why we

are here today.” I took several moments to think about how best to reply. ‘Because you proved in my past life to not be an asshole like most of the others?’ ‘Because you’re the only one who didn’t try to kill me?’ I didn’t end up saying any of those options, of course. “Ah... I heard you are a logical thinker like myself. I trust you to be unbiased during our procedure today.” He raised an eyebrow at me. “I wasn’t aware that I had a reputation already given I’ve only been an Elder for a year now.” I silently cursed in my head. I’d forgotten to calculate in that I wasn’t supposed to know anything about him yet. The cases he worked on wouldn’t be published for at least another two years.

“But,” he said continuing, “I am glad you feel at ease with me. It will make things easier today. I admit, I’ve also been meaning to talk to you, Aria, so I’m grateful we now have this opportunity.” Talk to me? What would he need to talk to me about? “I was obviously present during your Alpha summons a few months ago. I heard your recommendation for handling the Jade Moon pack predicament.” I tensed up immediately. I’d been so focused during that meeting on trying to help that I’d forgotten that the person who would think of the strategy one day was in that very room. “We seem to think very similarly. I wanted to praise you for your outstanding advice and maturity shown.” I exhaled quietly in relief. Of course, I had nothing to worry about. There was no way he could have known it was originally his idea... because he, himself, hadn’t even thought of it yet. I did feel a bit guilty though. In a roundabout way, I had taken credit for something he had achieved. “I’m not sure if anyone told you,” he said, “but you ended up being correct about it all. It was, in fact, the Jade Moon pack, and the wolf in custody had been a ranked member. Alpha Tytus ended up carrying out your plan exactly as you had said. The entire negotiation with the other pack went smoothly and without a single casualty. If no one has thanked you yet, then let me be the first to extend our thanks on behalf of the pack.” I realised then that I’d completely forgotten to follow up on what happened with the Jade Moon pack. There had been no reason for me to feel stressed or uncertain since I already knew it would work. Though, hearing now that it had been successful still gave me a sense of comfort. Everyone who had died previously during the Jade Moon debacle would still be alive right now. “But, I feel we’ve

digressed enough... shall we begin with the confirmation?" I swallowed nervously and nodded my head. Elder Luke stood up and walked behind me, laying a book down beside me that surprisingly seemed to consist of information on Goddess marks. It was far more detailed than any of the books I'd vaguely seen on the subject in the past.

Knowing he would require to see my back today, I had purposely worn a dress with a back zipper. He waited patiently as I brushed my hair to the side, unzipping the back of the dress just enough for him to see but not enough for me to feel completely exposed. I was thankful that he allowed me to keep my dignity while I did everything and didn't handle me more than was necessary

With gentle hands, he then tucked the dress into itself a little in order to have a clear view of the mark. I hadn't thought of it before, but was this situation awkward for him? He was alone with a fourteen year old girl, one who was exposing her back to him. However, if he did feel uncomfortable, he didn't show it. He just diligently went about comparing the silver double crescent mark to the book next to me without any hesitation. After several minutes had passed, he finally stepped back and exhaled a little in surprise. "You know, I had my doubts that this was authentic," he said, walking back around to face me. I zipped my dress back up as he spoke and adjusted my hair to fall around my shoulders once more. "You seemed so reluctant to get the confirmation done that I thought maybe your family was making the entire thing up." I frowned. Was this what all the Elders had thought? "But I can see this is clearly the real deal," he concluded. "You have been marked by the Goddess herself. I must confess, I've always been partially sceptical she was even real. But seeing you here now, with that mark... well it's a bit hard to deny it."

I was surprised to hear that an Elder of all people doubted the legitimacy of the deity our kind had worshipped since the beginning of our existence. Though Elder Luke had always been a little different and put his trust in knowledge rather than faith.

"So, what do you plan to do about this?" he asked finally.

"Do' about it?" I repeated, confused. "Well, since it's authentic, I can now only assume you procrastinated having this confirmation done because you knew the ramifications involved with it." I debated over whether I should confide in him. Being an Elder he would disagree over my plans to abandon my future Luna position... but at the same time, I knew he'd proven to put bias aside time and time again. "Honestly, I'm unsure," I started, choosing to trust him. "I have no intention of taking over the pack to replace Aleric's authority. But I also know that I cannot become Luna, or rather I don't want to become Luna more than anything. I'm aware that this doesn't leave me with many choices though. I will be hunted down from the shadows if I prove a threat, but I'm sure no one will believe me when I say I have no desire to be Luna, even if I promise to serve without that title."

He leaned back, crossing his arms across his chest in thought. "I find it a little strange to hear that you don't wish to take up the offer of becoming Luna. You would easily be

granted the position regardless of whether you and Aleric become fated mates," he said. "However, I can see in your eyes that this decision of yours is deeply personal and final as of right now. I won't push you further on it."

And this was why I had chosen Elder Luke. He wouldn't push an agenda on me and was even speaking to me like an equal despite my age. "Elder Luke..." I said hesitantly. "I want you to know I respect you immensely and so... if you were me... what would you do?"

He raised an eyebrow at me once more, the question sparking his appetite for solving difficult problems, I was sure. "Such an interesting question to ask. What would I do...?" He mused. "Well... as an Elder, it is my duty to always speak in the best interest for the future of this pack. And that best interest is for you to become our Luna." My heart sank. Of course, he wouldn't be able to help me. It would be against his position as an Elder to not stand by the prophecy his colleagues had predicted. "However," he continued, "if we are speaking casually, from one academic to another, there is an answer that I'm surprised you haven't thought of yourself yet." Was there really an answer so obvious the whole time? I quickly tried to wrack my brain to see whatever he saw, something that was apparently so clear to him.

"What.?"

He leaned in closer, looking at me with all seriousness.

"Well... you are the Beta's daughter, are you not?"

I stared at him, not understanding where he was going with this. "...So just pledge your allegiance to Aleric... and become his Beta."

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Chapter Thirty-Two

"Beta? No... that's impossible." I sat staring at Elder Luke in disbelief, unsure if he really had just suggested that. "... Why?" Elder Luke argued. "Because I'm a female," I pointed out. "There is no such thing as a female Beta. It's not a rank we can hold."

"And neither is an Alpha female, but we both know you could claim that authority if you really wanted it."

He was referring to my new title of 'Saintess'. With it came the perk of overthrowing Aleric and becoming essentially an Alpha in the process. But Beta...? I paused in thought. No, it really wasn't possible. Being a leader was one thing. I knew I would be capable of making the correct choices for the pack as an 'Alpha', however, as a Beta, there would be more reliance on being able to carry out whatever those orders entailed; sometimes by means of fighting. I had never even managed to

win in a fight against Cai, there was no way I would be able to hold my own in a real battle

“I’m not strong enough. The Winter Mist would need someone more like my father to replace him one day. I know already that I would make an incredibly weak Beta.”

He half-smiled knowingly. “A little birdie told me that you were training with a certain Alpha heir from the Silver Lake pack. They mentioned that you showed quite good potential too.”

My jaw opened in surprise. How could someone have found out about that? Only Cai, Myra and I knew about it. Not only that but, whoever this person was that told him, they must have seen me in action at the gym. Otherwise, how else were they able to provide any sort of assessment of my skill?

“How...?” I finally managed to ask. He chuckled softly. “I didn’t get to where I am today without help. Not all of us are born into ranked families.”

I had never thought much about it before, but it was true. I could vaguely remember hearing that Elder Luke had come from a completely average house with humble beginnings. He had gotten to where he was now due to his own dedication and hard work

“Even if I can fight a little, there is no way I would be accepted as a Beta,” I said, bringing the conversation back to the topic at hand. “I don’t see any way the Elders or Aleric would allow it. The Elders are adamant about me fulfilling the prophecy and becoming Aleric’s Luna. And Aleric... well there is no way he would tolerate a female Beta, let alone being stuck with me of all people.”

“You talk as if you already know exactly what will happen,” he said, making me become instantly tense. I had to remind myself that it was just a figure of speech to relax again. “I feel that you need to think about this more objectively. Out of all the options you have before you, which one seems the hardest to achieve your goal? Starting a political takeover and

overthrowing an existing hierarchy...? Or convincing a bunch of old coots and a teenager to give you a chance at a role that already has a current vacancy for an heir? I think you’d be surprised by how many Elders would be in favour of you becoming Beta just to ensure you remained compliant. It seems to me like it is the best compromise to keep both parties happy. Otherwise, there isn’t much to stop you from starting a rebellion or running away. Both of which would only cause more damage to the pack. They need your cooperation given your status.”

I bit at my lip, trying to think through the options properly. It still felt so unattainable even though he had laid it out nicely before me.

“Or you can just take the easy route... suck it up and become Luna.”

I shivered. No. To hold that title again would be a last resort, though I wasn't sure I could even call it that. To be stuck in that house at the mercy of Aleric once more was a fate that guaranteed my death. A death that I needed to remember was not just the end of me now, but possibly everyone.

So, would it be so impossible...? I had already been training and there were no males in my direct family line to compete with for the rank. Only Alexander, my cousin, could possibly stand in my way. In the past, he had begun his training around my current age and had ended up becoming Beta right before my death. If I was, by some miracle, accepted as a Beta heir then things between us may get uncomfortable. I was essentially robbing him of something he must have thought was a sure thing. How could he have anticipated that a female Beta may be possible? But if I were a male then he would have had no right to the succession anyway.

And then I took a moment to realise the real benefits of this. Becoming Beta basically guaranteed me almost absolute immunity in every way. By pledging myself as a Beta to Aleric, it would be impossible to be forced to become Luna by anyone. Once the oath is taken, another rank cannot be granted within that pack. It also gave me a legitimate reason to officially reject him without questions being asked, since dating what is effectively your boss would be frowned upon. If we went into battle against another pack, then we would need to be unbiased towards each other, therefore a relationship was definitely out of the question.

But the best perk of all? It meant that he couldn't lay a finger on me. Being both a Saintess and a Beta would make me completely untouchable. If he tried anything, then he'd risk the pack rising up against him since it would be seen as a direct attack against the Goddess herself. Then add in the fact that I was already second in command? He could forget keeping his position for long... and guess who would replace him as next in line? Me. It was effectively check-mate, unable to move or he'd be overthrown.

And maybe, for once in his life, he would have to respect me. Not just a ridiculous nod of acknowledgement, but actually value my input. He would be unable to outrightly contest the decisions I'd suggest, without good reason, and would be forced to have a real discussion with me as a valued ranked member. “No... you're right. Thank you, Elder Luke,” I said, still a bit lost in my thoughts. “You've given me a lot to think about.” Soon after we'd spoken, I ended up returning home. I didn't talk to my parents about what had happened in great detail but I did let them know that the mark was officially confirmed now. They looked worried for me, but I didn't let on how I was feeling inside. If they knew just how

conflicted and anxious I was, they would only become more concerned. I didn't want to say anything to them yet until I'd had time to process everything that had happened with Elder Luke.

Several weeks later and it was finally the day of Myra's big annual charity event. I'd chosen to wear a navy blue semi-formal dress and Lucy had done my hair up in a beautiful half-up style braid. It was probably the most I'd dressed up for any occasion since coming back, but I knew the event meant a lot to Myra. I wanted to show her I'd put the effort in. The function was being held at the orphanage itself so the children could participate. Whilst it was used mostly as a fundraiser, it was also a great opportunity for some of the guests to meet the children in a less pressured environment, and maybe even consider adopting. I had already planned to donate a large cheque under my alias name, and another smaller one on behalf of the Chrysalis family, with my parent's permission for that one, of course. Knowing Myra, she would have made me take the money back if she knew I was donating a very large sum, hence the need for my personal account donation. When I arrived, I was instantly greeted by the usual overly enthusiastic Myra. She pulled me into a hug and expressed how happy she was to see me. Much to my delight, I saw she was wearing the red dress I had bought her. But I had to admit, I was a little surprised to have found her so quickly given the number of people congregating around the outside. "Come with me, I have some people I'd like you to meet," she said smiling, grabbing my hand so I'd follow her through the crowds.

We walked behind the large building until we came to a less busy area. I could see this place must have been used primarily as a playground or backyard for the kids.

I had been looking around to take it all in, lost in my thoughts over how pretty the grounds were, when I was suddenly tackled around my waist. I swayed, throwing my feet out to keep my balance and looked down.

There, I found a small child had launched themselves at me.

"Billy!" Myra scolded, gently pulling him off me. "You need to ask permission first to touch someone. Apologise to Miss Aria right now." I felt awkward given I had no experience with children, and I definitely hadn't anticipated for one to latch themselves onto me so quickly. But I did my best to act the way one would expect to treat a child.

"I'm sorry, Miss Aria," the small blonde boy said, looking sad. "It's fine! Thank you for apologising." I smiled at him to let him know it was okay.

Suddenly more children appeared and before long, I had a small group of six kids surrounding me, their faces filled with so much excitement over just meeting me. Myra went through and introduced them all to me one-by-one. The eldest in the group was nine, the youngest was six. Myra mentioned there were more around somewhere and that they would probably be disappointed to find out later they hadn't gotten the chance to meet me personally.

"Umm, Miss Aria?" a little girl named Lily spoke up.

I crouched down to talk to her at eye level. “Yes, Miss Lily?” “My name is just Lily, not Miss,” she corrected. “I was wondering if you’d... if um...if you’d like to play with us.” “Miss Aria is not here to play today, Lily,” Myra replied. I smiled at them both. “No, it’s okay. What would you like to play?” “I want to play tag,” said one of the boys, Trevor. The children all began to cheer in agreement at that idea. And so, we did. We played tag. I couldn’t deny that it definitely wasn’t the easiest game I’d ever played, given my attire, but luckily they found it more fun when I was too slow to catch them. Or rather pretended I was too slow. By the end of the game, they were all huddled together in the middle of the field, completely out of breath. Taking advantage of their exhausted states, I decided to take a seat under one of the nearby trees that had a bench.

“Looks like you had fun,” Myra said. She had spent the time looking on fondly at us playing together over by the sidelines. I had been watching the kids chatting away happily that I hadn’t even seen Myra approach.

“You should join in next time.”

I looked up to her but then, to my surprise, I saw her expression change from a smile to suddenly one of worry very quickly. “Are you okay, Aria?” she asked. Her voice was thick with concern. I frowned. “Of course, why?” “...You’re crying.” Confused, I gently brought a hand up to my face and, sure enough, there were tears on my cheek

“What...?” “Are you feeling okay?” she asked. Was I feeling okay? I had been having a nice time with the kids, I wasn’t sure what could have

possibly upset me so much. And then I realised what my body had been trying to tell me. I looked down and saw I had subconsciously placed a hand over my belly without even realising it. I must have done it when I had been watching over them. I knew then what had upset me. A part of me was remembering the fact that I would never be able to have a child of my own. I was crying over the baby I had never been able to conceive in my past life.

“Oh...,” was all I managed to say.

But I didn’t get a chance to talk my way out of it as suddenly all the children were in a frenzy again, someone else having arrived. I pushed all my negative thoughts to the side and forced a small smile on my face at seeing how they were able to become energetic again so quickly. However, the expression died on my face just as quickly as it had arrived as I looked over to see who they were running towards. Because it was Aleric who had arrived.

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Chapter Thirty-Three

(AUTHOR NOTE: Just a reminder that single quotes' are things only said in Aria's head when they appear like speech.)

'Stop them,' my mind hissed at me as I watched the children laugh and jump all over Aleric. He had scooped a few up and was playing happily with them. They ran around him, tugging at his clothes while he pretended to be a scary monster. Every time he would roar, they would all squeal and run a few steps away, having the time of their life.

"He is a murderer,' my mind reminded me. 'He is dangerous. Don't let him touch them.' But the scene in front of me was baffling, freezing me in place. I had never seen Aleric around children before and so his affectionate behaviour towards them was shocking, to say the least. Would he have been like this in the past had he been given a child of his own? ...If my body had been capable of such a thing?

As the thoughts urging me to protect the children continued to hound at me, I did my best to push them away. I had to remind myself that a sixteen year old Aleric was not yet the man he would be one day. He didn't have blood on his hands... yet. Myra could sense I was suddenly extremely uncomfortable at his arrival and gently touched my hand. She probably didn't understand but it was nice of her to try and comfort me regardless.

Finally, Aleric looked up towards the tree and saw us sitting there. I flinched as his eyes caught my own, hoping more than anything he would leave. 1 But, to my dismay, he immediately put down the kid that was thrown over his shoulder and started to walk to where we were. My heart started to race but I told myself I was more mentally prepared this time. I wouldn't let the trial ground memories haunt me like the last time.

I took several deep breaths, calming my mind, but with every step he made towards us, the more I began to doubt my ability to handle it. Would I actually be able to keep it together this time? It had been so many months now since I'd seen him... so many months since I had died. Would the memories still be as fresh?

But standing in front of me, I realised just how weak and insignificant I still was. As he towered over my small frame, I knew that, even with all of the training I'd done over the last few months, it would still not even be remotely good enough to defend myself against him.

"Ariadne, Myra," he greeted. His voice made my stomach drop and I instantly felt sick and weak. My name on his lips felt more like a curse.

Myra and I were both already on our feet by this point and we bowed our heads in respect upon his greeting.

"Alpha heir," Myra said, welcoming him. "We are honoured to receive you at our event today. Thank you for coming." I couldn't get the words out of my mouth to return his greeting, my head pounding at the internal conflict happening within. I was sure he had

noticed my silence though. He had to have. Aleric smiled. "It is a pleasure to be here and to finally meet you, Myra. My father extends his regards for the invitation and wishes to thank you for your family's continued hard work at the facility."

I couldn't bring myself to look at his face, choosing to keep my eyes cast down. It was taking all of my concentration just to not visibly shake from just being so close to him.

"Thank you, Alpha heir." Myra bowed again quickly.

"However, unfortunately, it seems I will need to find you later to talk further. I have some matters to discuss with Ariadne right now. But I look forward to catching up properly and please let your parents know that I have arrived." My breath stopped mid-exhale from surprise. Why would he need to talk to me of all people? I could feel Myra hesitate for a second, but we both knew there was nothing she could do to help me here. With one last final bow, she left, looking back several times with a worried expression. Soon, I was suddenly facing the man who still haunted my nightmares.

Alone.

And an icy silence hung between us.

"Are you going to at least talk to me this time?" he asked, finally breaking the quiet. "Or should I call for Caius to come back and whisk you away again?"

It was like his facade of being polite in front of Myra had instantly fallen like a curtain. Now that it was only the two of us, he became closer to the Aleric I knew. Unnecessarily cruel, and occasionally sarcastic to the point of trying to put me down.

I grabbed at my wrist to stop it from trembling. I needed to be stronger than this. I needed to be able to at least speak to him. He sighed in mild frustration, his tone suddenly changing. "Look... I'm sorry. I didn't ask to talk with you so I could start an argument."

I could see him cross his arms together and shuffle on his feet. It was as if he were uncomfortable with how to say whatever it was he needed to say.

"The truth is," he continued, "my father informed me of what happened with Myra and the Jade Moon pack. I realise now that I need to apologise for how I acted after you met with the council. So... I am sorry, Ariadne. You had been badly injured and it was no way for me to have spoken to you." This caught me off guard. Aleric was... apologising to me? For something he had said? I couldn't ever recall a moment in our past he'd done such a thing.

"But, all of that aside... I'm here to request that you have tea with me." My eyes then snapped to his face, wide in disbelief.

Why would he, of all people, want to willingly have tea with me? I didn't have to wait long for my answer though.

"Or rather, my father suggested that we have tea together," he clarified. "There are still a few hours before the main event for the fundraiser and he's asked if you could lend me some of your time."

I needed to speak, to say something. Anything. "Um," I feebly said, before clearing my throat. "I'm sure you have far more important things that require your attention today, Alpha heir. I would hate to keep you from those." His green eyes narrowed at me and I instantly looked back down again. "Sorry if I didn't make it clear enough before," he said, "but this wasn't really a.. suggestion.. from my father. He's actually insisted on this." I then understood the meaning behind his words. This wasn't an innocent request. This had been an order from his father. We were both now bound to abide by the Alpha's wish. And so, that's how I suddenly found myself sitting for some tea... opposite the man who murdered me.

It was a bit of a surreal experience. The last time we had sat together, as just the two of us for a meal, was not long after our rise to Alpha and Luna... Though, back then, he had stared daggers at me the entire time and left after twenty minutes to go see Thea. A small area in the adjacent garden had been set up specifically to enable us to have a private gathering. The outdoor table and chairs had already been a part of the decor, however, some attendants had gone out of their way to make the area look more 'suitable'.

Flowers had been picked and arranged in a vase on the table, and a trolley next to this showed off a large array of tea and snacks that had been prepared. Surrounding us was also a mixture of colourful flowers and fauna growing in the garden, all perfectly maintained. It really would have been beautiful, if it weren't for the company I would be keeping. But after several minutes had passed, still neither of us had spoken a single word to each other.

I knew what this setup was, of course. Alpha Tytus was forcing Aleric and I to spend time together so we'd hopefully 'play nice' and become close. This was probably some weird version of a surprise date in the hopes I'd concede to becoming Aleric's Luna one day. Tytus probably assumed, and correctly so, that I would decline to a real meetup, and so chose to force us to participate during a time we would both already be dressed up and nearby. I wondered how many more of these 'dates' I was going to have to endure before he finally respected my choice not to be with his son.

Aleric then cleared his throat, bringing my attention back to him. "So, my father wanted me to thank you for your recommendation over handling the Jade Moon pack," he started, breaking the silence finally. "It turned out to be successful in the end. He said your actions during the fight and your solutions for handling the aftermath were

hanter Thirty Threpe commendable.”

I nodded. “Thank you, Alpha heir.”

Silence again. All I could think about was the seconds as they slowly ticked by. I wanted nothing more than to run far, far away from here.

“Is the food not to your liking?” he asked, noticing my plate. “You’ve barely touched anything.”

I looked down at the small piece of cake that sat in front of me with only two tiny bites taken out of it. The entire time we’d been sitting together, I had been so nervous that I’d barely been able to eat or drink from the spread provided. I wouldn’t have been able to even tell him the flavour of anything I’d consumed so far; I hadn’t been able to taste a single thing from the stress of being in this situation. “The food is delicious,” I lied, having no idea. “Thank you, Alpha heir.” It was clear his father had ordered him to talk nicely to me. They both probably realised they needed me on their side and Tytus would have known how his son’s usual behaviours would have been perceived by me. Aleric wasn’t exactly known for his patience. But, if I was honest, the forced attempt at trying to talk politely to me was by far one of the most unnerving experiences I’d ever had. Never had I received any courtesy from Aleric before and so this new persona of his was unpredictable to me. I found Aleric far less frightening when I could tell exactly what he may do next. Abruptly, he then sighed and brought his hand up so fast my body couldn’t help but react. I flinched at his sudden movement. He frowned at me for a second, but continued to brush the hair out of his face, finding my reaction strange. The teacup in my hand had almost completely spilled all over myself in my fright. “Are you sick?” he asked. He could see how much my hands were trembling now.

“N-no,” I stuttered out, cursing internally at my body for betraying how I felt. “Thank you for your concern, Alpha heir.”

“Ariadne, I can see you’re shaking,” he said. He stood up and went to reach for me. “Here just put this down for a—.”

I didn’t hear whatever he was about to say though because I recoiled so quick from him that the plate in front of me smashed against the trolley, falling to the ground in pieces. My arm had swept across the table so fast that there hadn’t been any time to stop it from falling. I turned and stared up at him in a panic, petrified of what he would do to me for my show of carelessness. I wanted to apologise, to beg him to forgive me, but I felt like I couldn’t breathe. Nothing would pass my lips as a coherent sentence. “Ariadne,” he said in an annoyed tone. And then he reached towards me again and I turned my face to the side, shutting my eyes as tightly as they would go to anticipate whatever he was about to do to me.

...But nothing ever came. It felt like an eternity waiting before I finally heard him sigh again. I carefully opened my eyes to look at him, but not fast enough to anger him further. He was rubbing his face in frustration, clearly irritated over everything I'd just done. "Okay, I tried," I thought I heard him whisper under his breath. He looked back up at me, forcing a smile on his face, and stood up. A chill went down my spine at seeing that familiar smile. I knew it so well; the kind that said he was hiding his true emotion from me.

"Thank you for your time today, Ariadne," he said, going back to being overly polite. "It was an absolute pleasure. I hope we can do this again some time."

It was all a lie and we both knew it. He was following formality to not incur the wrath of his father when he returned home.

He waited several seconds for me to reply, but I couldn't bring myself to speak. It was only after I eventually managed to give him a half bow of my head in acknowledgement that he took it as good enough confirmation to take his leave.

I sat staring into space for a long time after he left, unsure how to process everything that had just happened. I felt just like the broken plate that laid shattered next to me; both of us having no idea how we became like this, but both feeling like only minutes ago everything had been just fine.

I'd thought I was ready, that I was stronger now. But I was wrong. It was clear that Aleric was still so very much in control of me.

And there was only one way I was going to be able to change it. There was no other option. I needed to become untouchable.

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Chapter Thirty-Four

Despite my resolve, it still took another two months before I finally worked up the courage to begin the difficult journey of becoming Beta. The rest of Myra's charity event had gone well that day and I didn't see Aleric for the remainder of the fundraiser, which was perfectly fine by me. I could tell Myra was a bit worried about me though and I had to palm it off as no big deal. I didn't want to worry her. It was her first time seeing me so scared by anything and I could only imagine what might have been going through her mind. In the two months that had passed, I somehow had reached my fifteenth birthday. I requested that it be kept a quiet affair and so we ended up celebrating it with just my parents and Myra. There were minimal gifts, also per my request, and we all sat and had a nice dinner at my house. Really, I was just happy to be amongst all the people who genuinely cared about me. I'd spent too many birthdays in the past being almost completely alone and forgotten. And so finally, today, I stood at the door of my father's office, peering in nervously. He was concentrating on reports in front of him and

I was scared of disturbing him. From here, I could see his silver hair and violet eyes, and I thought about how similar we really did look. If it weren't for me having mostly my mother's face shape, I would have looked like a cut and pasted female version of him. "I can feel you staring at me from here," he called out without even looking up from his work.

I jumped at the sound of his voice, having not expected him to know I was here. He looked up and finally met my eyes. "What can I help you with, Aria?" I stepped inside the door cautiously, clearing my throat. "I need to talk to you, Father. Do you have a moment?" I could hear the slight quaver in my voice as I spoke. I needed to get a hold of myself though. I wouldn't be able to convince him I was suitable for this if I didn't sound like I believed it myself. But it was a bit strange how nervous I was. Exploiting a foreign government for money? No issues. Asking my father to hear me out while I explained why I wanted to be a Beta? Terrifying. His opinion mattered to me and I didn't want his perception of me to change because of this. It didn't help that I was also having to constantly remind myself that this version of my father was different from the one I had been with before my death. He was almost ten years younger than the father who had cried with me inside the jail cells. At this point in our lives right now, our relationship was very formal. I remembered how scared I'd been of ever disappointing or annoying him... a feeling that didn't change up until he had himself arrested for defending my honour. He looked at me closely, a curiosity in his eyes. "Sure, take a seat on the couch." I followed his instruction and he walked over to join me. Sitting like this together, casually on the settee, I honestly couldn't tell if it made me feel

comfortable or even more nervous. Perhaps if I could have treated this as a business negotiation and sat across from him at a desk, then I wouldn't have been so afraid. "You haven't come to my office like this since you were little," he mused. "Did you want some tea?"

I shook my head, knowing I wouldn't be able to drink at a time like this. I couldn't even recall the last time I had dared to disturb his work but I knew I'd procrastinated this conversation long enough. Time was running out if I wanted to be given a chance to earn my spot as Beta heir. I also knew that I would need help in training if I had any hope of improving my skill in a fight. I'd reached a plateau and hadn't seen any real difference in my strength for over a month now. I realised the only way I was going to get better from here would be to have someone show me how to improve and, with Cai gone, it meant there really was only one person in my life that could help. My father.

I watched as he poured himself a tea and settled back into the couch. "So, what did you want to talk about?" I hesitated, unsure where to start. I'd practised what I had wanted to say in the mirror almost every day but, now it was actually happening, it was like my mind had gone blank

"Um," I started.

'Brilliant, Aria. So intelligent,' I scolded myself internally.

Quickly, I pushed my thoughts away, trying to refocus. "...I've been thinking a lot about the future," I said. "We haven't really had a conversation about it since the night after the Alpha's summons, back when Myra was attacked." He raised an eyebrow at me. "Did you want to finally discuss why you told the Alpha you didn't want to become Luna? Why you kept your mother and I in the dark about your intentions?"

I paused. It sounded like he was still irritated about the whole thing. I could recall the argument we got into vividly and remembered how they had been so furious at my decision. It had scared me off enough to start keeping more secrets from them. "It wasn't my intention to hide it from you," I said. "I hadn't planned to tell the Alpha anything of the sort, but this mark on me changed everything. I needed to establish that I wasn't a threat to Tytus or Aleric." I then took a deep breath. "But, Father... I need you to know that, from the bottom of my heart... I really don't want to be Luna. What I said to them that day was the truth. I really am sorry I kept it from you and Mother."

I almost said 'don't want to be Luna *again*' but managed to stop myself right before I spoke. What a disaster that would have been. "...Why?" he finally asked, after he'd taken some time to think. "...I don't have any desire for the position."

He frowned. "I doubt you would have come all the way in here to tell me this without a reason.

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There is obviously something else you wanted." I bit my lip, my nerves threatening to take over. "The truth is... I'd like to take over for you one day... and become Beta," I said slowly. To his credit, he didn't outwardly refuse me immediately. Instead, he just nodded his head, placing his teacup back on the table, and reclined into the couch in thought. I was too scared to say anything in case it just made his rejection quicker. After some time, he looked over to me and stared down at my hands, narrowing his eyes. "So, for how long now?" he asked.

I didn't know what he was referring to. "How long...?" I repeated. "Your hands," he said, nodding towards them. "I've just realised how calloused they look How long have you been training in secret?" It was a question that would have been answered eventually, but nevertheless, I wished it had been something he found out about only if he had agreed to support me. I tightened my hands into fists on my lap, staring at them. "Maybe... eight months now? Nine? I started not long after the Alpha summons."

He was silent again. I wished he would just talk plainly to me instead of making me guess whatever he was thinking inside. It was excruciating.

“So, this is something you’ve taken a few months in deciding to pursue then?” That wasn’t exactly correct. I had started training with the original intent of defending myself from Aleric, not for the purpose of becoming Beta. But it was true I had spent the last two months thinking through my options thoroughly. This was something I wanted to do. Something that I *needed* to do. “I’ve weighed all of my options with great care, Father” I replied. “This is the only choice I have that allows me to both refuse the Luna position and protect myself from those threatened by my mark” He was silent once again. “I can see why you may think I might not be worthy,” I finally said after he hadn’t said anything for an extended period of time. “I understand that you would want to see me succeed, and becoming Luna would be viewed as the highest honour for your daughter to achieve. I also realise that being a female, you may think I’m not up to the task.”

I looked up to meet his eyes and saw he was looking at me, a crease between his brows. “Aria, you don’t need to become a Luna for your mother and I to be proud of you,” he said. “I also don’t care whether you’re a male or female. To me, any child of mine naturally has a right to succeed me as Beta.” My heart leapt at hearing his words. I was pleased to know his stance on my position hadn’t changed in ten years. He really did care. Had the wall between us been only something I created in my mind the entire time?

“Thank you, Father,” I said, wholeheartedly.

I felt out of breath. It was a relief to finally hear the words from him, to know that he supported me.

“But, Aria,” he continued, his tone serious. “I’m disappointed that you kept this from me – from us. I thought you understood how much we didn’t appreciate you cutting us out after last time. Keeping secrets from me was not the way to gain my support in this.”

I froze. Had I really made a mistake in how I’d handled it? This entire time I thought I was doing the right thing, scared of what they might think of me if were to tell them of my real desires and worries. “A Beta is someone trustworthy, someone who can be relied upon,” he said. “Someone who is able to fight and support those around them as a team. Your actions have shown me that you prefer to work alone without the support of your fellow pack. I don’t see how others will respect or follow you when you refuse to be transparent in your motives. You need more than intelligence to be a leader, Aria.”

If I felt like I was out of breath before, then it really felt like I was drowning now. I had always worked alone, always from the shadows forgotten. But having him say it outright like this made it extremely clear; the barriers I’d made around myself were in complete contrast to the person I needed to be in order to become Beta. I hadn’t opened myself up enough to others, wanting to avoid putting myself in a vulnerable position to be hurt or rejected again. I could see now how my attempts at protecting myself could actually hold me back in my pursuit of becoming Beta.

I glared down at my hands, unable to look at him, and could feel the start of angry tears begin to bubble at my eyes. I was furious at myself for not realising earlier how my father would view the decisions I'd made. There was no way for him to have known why I was the way I was. "So, Aria," he said, breaking me from my thoughts. "Are you going to tell me the truth now?" I quickly looked back up at him confused.

"If you want my support then it's about time you start being honest with me."

"...But I've been truthful. I've finally told you what I've been doing and how I don't want to be Luna," I replied.

He exhaled slowly, obviously disappointed in my answer.

"Well... to start with, you could tell me about what happened to you ten months ago, when I suddenly found out my daughter had been marked by the Goddess. Something that, for generations now, we had all grown up thinking was just a myth." And then I realised what truth he wanted. He wanted to know what had happened to me. Why I had changed so much in such a short period of time. Why I was no longer acting like the quiet diligent daughter I had been my entire life.

In order to become Beta, he was asking that I tell him about my past.... A past that was also my future. I could feel the tears begin to fall down my face and I shook my head. "No... I can't," I said, gritting my teeth. I could see it all again so clearly. The cells, my father, the trial ground, the sword... and Aleric. I realised then that, a part of the reason I hadn't told anyone about my past before now, wasn't only because I needed to keep myself safe, but because I physically couldn't talk about it before. It was too painful. It felt like if I said the words aloud then it would be making it real...

...And if it was real, then there would be no way I could even remotely say that maybe, just maybe, my past life had been just a bad dream.

"Aria, you need to be honest and upfront with me now if I'm going to be backing you here. The journey for you to become a Beta will be hard enough as it is."

"It's not that simple," I said, still shaking my head in denial. "You need to trust me when I say I can't become Luna, that becoming Beta is the only way forward." "Aria! No," he said sharply and began to raise his voice, irritated that I was still deliberately being difficult. "Enough is enough. I will not help you until you tell me the truth! So, what the hell happened? Why won't you tell me,"

"Because I died, Father!" I yelled, cutting him off. "...I died." The words had fallen out of my mouth before I could stop them. But once they were finally out, they hung in the open between us, never to be taken back again. As soon as I'd said them though, I gasped at the air; a weight lifting from me as I told the truth, finally allowing me to breathe again.

“...What?”

His face was beyond confused, having been taken aback by what I'd just told him.

“I've lived this before already. All of this,” I said through my tears and heaving breaths. “I became Aleric's mate. I became the Luna. I even helped lead us all to become the country's most powerful pack there ever was, just as the Elders predicted. I did everything that was ever asked of me! But it wasn't enough, Father... I wasn't enough.” “...I don't understand...” His eyes were wide. This probably wasn't the sort of confession he had been expecting. “How could...?”

I wanted to explain further, to give him the kind of explanation he could understand, but instead, all I could do was break down in front of him, my body crumbling into complete heart-wrenching sobs.

“...Because he didn't love me, papa,” was all I could choke out. “...He didn't love me.”

It was the words that had been ingrained in my mind for far too long. Since coming back, I had told myself multiple times that my past feelings for Aleric didn't bother me anymore, that I didn't care. But the truth was, even though this body didn't know yet of the void left by Aleric's physical rejection, I still remembered.

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Chapter Thirty Five

I still remembered the excruciating pain of being hurt every single day I lived in that hell, years before he even rejected me officially. The kind of pain that could only arise from loving someone with your entire being.

I was no longer able to stop the flood of emotions coming up all at once and I was sure my father had no idea what was going on. But he must have understood enough to see that, whatever it was I was trying to tell him, it was enough to cause me to be in this much emotional distress just from talking about it.

He pulled me into his arms and held tightly onto me as I cried against him. Everything had spilled out of me all at once. Things I had sworn to never tell anyone, things I didn't think I would ever be able to share with someone. But I didn't care anymore if he thought I was insane. I couldn't live like this.

“Shhh, Aria,” he soothed. “It's okay.” I just clung to him tighter, burying my sobbing face further into his chest. “Please... help me, papa.” He didn't say anything else after that, he just held me in his arms until I'd exhausted myself.

I was grateful that he didn't push the topic again for that night. By the time I had finished shedding every last tear in my body, he just picked me up and took me to bed. It was a

moment that I was glad to still be small enough for him to carry me as he did, knowing that there was no way I would have been able to rely on my legs again for that day.

And when we finally got to my bedroom, he stayed with me as I continued to cling to him for dear life. He stayed with me until finally, I drifted to sleep.

It was a blessing I was too exhausted to dream that night.

As expected, the next morning my father was obviously wanting an explanation for what had happened the night before.

And so, I told him. I told him everything. And the more I spoke, the more that poured out of me, and soon I found that I couldn't stop myself from giving every little detail.

I told him how I had ended up as Luna and how I'd become Aleric's blade in his war against the world for power. How I had so desperately fought for his love... only for it to have been given to another. And lastly, I told him about the trial, how we'd said our final goodbyes in the cells... and how Aleric had finally killed me.

He was silent the entire time, taking in every word I said and never interrupting.

But by the time I finally finished, I looked up to my father and saw a few tears had escaped his eyes. Something I had only seen him do once before... right before I had died.

Having confessed about my prior life to my father, I felt liberated at last. I now had someone I knew I could rely on completely and who would help me with what I needed to achieve in order to avoid the same fate.

He'd had a lot of questions, many of which I couldn't answer, but he was content with the answers I could provide him. We spoke about Aleric, how I felt about him now and how I'd been since coming back. And we agreed that, in order to move forward, I needed to stop US

looking back... that the only way I was going to be able to truly find a new fate was if I stopped being haunted around every corner. This included working on letting my feelings for Aleric go eventually. I knew it would be tough, and wouldn't happen overnight, but we both knew I wasn't going to be able to become Beta if I was terrified of the very Alpha I was pledged to. I could see this would be the hardest part of my journey; learning to accept what had happened to me and trying to move forward. The next day, my father went to Alpha Tytus to propose a meeting be held in order to discuss the current Beta heir position, mentioning also that I would be present. I was told he was extremely intrigued by the idea of me attending and immediately agreed for it to be scheduled

In the meantime, whilst we were waiting for the big day to occur, my father and I had begun training after school and on weekends. I wasn't sure what he had ended up telling but he had somehow managed to convince her to let me drop Luna studies. Father and I both now knew that I didn't need the extra lessons and it allowed me to spend my time preparing myself physically for the difficult road ahead of me. The only person who probably ended up unhappy with the new arrangements was my former Luna studies tutor, Helen, who had been enjoying the easy paycheques up until recently. I also found my father definitely lived up to his reputation when it came to fighting. His lessons were informative and I saw myself making the progress I'd so badly been lacking the last few months without Cai. And though their fighting styles were completely different, I eventually was able to adjust to my father's techniques with ease. He pushed me further than Cai ever had and I appreciated that he didn't go easy on me. One of the most vital ways I was going to succeed in this crazy endeavour to become Beta was if I could, by some miracle, prove my merit in battle. That I was just as good as a male heir.

Before long, the day of the meeting then arrived. It had taken over a month to find a time in the Alpha's schedule where he was free for smaller matters, and I found myself incredibly nervous to be facing him.

I stood outside the meeting hall doors with my father, staring at the wood as if it could somehow show me what was waiting for me on the other side. We both knew how much would be riding on this discussion today. "You don't need to be so anxious," my father said to me. "You've done things far more nerve wracking and crazy than this before." I knew he was right but somehow it still felt like one of the biggest moments I'd had in either of my lives. I couldn't help but feel sick. "Hey," he said, making me look up to meet his eyes. "Just show them who you are and what you're capable of. You have nothing to worry about." I clenched my jaw and nodded at him. I could do this. He pushed open the doors and inside I was surprised at what I saw. It looked as if this meeting wasn't just going to be a small chat with my father and the Alpha. No, there were several key figures here, leading me to believe this was a far more serious affair than I had anticipated earlier.

In their usual seats sat the Elders, including Elder Luke who gave me a small nod when our eyes met. However, standing before the council to the left was my Uncle William and cousin, Alexander.

My Uncle William looked so similar to my father that it was almost uncanny. The only difference being his usually very sour personality. He'd made almost no attempts at being a part of my life growing up and so I wasn't surprised to see that it took potentially robbing his son of a rank for him to get up and meet with me. I honestly felt bad for Alexander.

Suddenly, the doors behind us then opened, and Alpha Tytus walked in... followed by Aleric.

The usual fear that tightened in my chest constricted me per normal when I saw him, but I could feel it wasn't as bad today. It looked as if talking to my father had helped somewhat; even if it was just to help stop me from wanting to run away immediately at the sight of him.

We all bowed our heads in respect at their approach and waited until they were seated. "Alright," Tytus said in an oddly excited tone. "Shall we get started then?"