

A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood

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Chapter Thirty-Six Alpha

Tytus smiled between Alexander and I, clearly eager for whatever was about to ensue. In response, I couldn't help but squirm a little under his gaze.

Naturally, my father had to leave me to sit by Tytus given his rank. I watched him go and tried to not outwardly express just how nervous I was about him leaving me. But he needed to show that he was unbiased in this decision, and I needed to show that I didn't require my father to fight my battles for me.

"Okay, Aria," Tytus started. "Why don't you begin by telling us why you're here today?"

It was clear by those selected to attend that they all knew already what I was about to say, and yet he wanted to hear it from me anyway. Once again, I found myself having to tread carefully, stuck in the game I knew Tytus was laying out for me. I knew he wanted me to become Luna but I didn't know yet what he thought of my desire to be Beta.

Would it be enough for him to feel I was contained and not a threat? Or did he see through my plan to make myself immune, trapping his son should he ever cross me? "Alpha, I'm here today to appeal a process that has for too long been an outdated tradition of our kind," I spoke out confidently. I knew if he sensed any weakness in me that it would be game over. "I am here today to request you hear out my petition to succeed my father in his role as Beta when the time comes."

There was a small murmur amongst the Elders but it wasn't their whispers that worried me; it was the feeling of a cold stare on me, something I was too familiar with. I spared a glance to the Alpha's right for only a moment and caught Aleric's eye. As I'd thought, he wasn't happy with my announcement and was staring daggers at me.

My natural instinct was to shy away and submit to his icy gaze, but I held my own, only breaking eye contact to return my attention to the Alpha.

"Mmm... definitely an intriguing prospect coming from you, young Aria," he mused. "And Alexander? What say you about all of this?"

"My son is the most qualified person in this pack to succeed my older brother upon his retirement," my Uncle William replied.

"I believe I was asking Alexander, not you, William."

Tytus stared down sharply at my uncle enough to make him bow his head apologetically. The awkward silence that fell was only broken moments later by Alexander clearing his throat, clearly nervous over how badly this had already started.

“Alpha, it would be my greatest honour to support our pack by becoming Beta one day. I am at the service of you, Aleric and our fellow pack members.” Tytus inhaled deeply in thought having listened to the replies on both sides. His eyes then turned back to me.

“Aria, tell me something...,” he said, reclining into his chair. “The last time we spoke you mentioned having no desire for the Luna position... or any other role of substantial authority

for that matter. What has finally changed your mind?”

I looked to my father and saw him nod at me in encouragement. “...My father has, Alpha,” I said after a pause in thought. “He has shown me the kind of strength I am capable of possessing and how my body doesn’t need to define who I am allowed to become.”

It wasn’t a lie but it wasn’t the entire truth. If it hadn’t been for my father accepting who I was, who I am, and who I could be, there would have been no possible way I would be standing here now before Tytus. His training over this last month had proven to me that I was capable of changing who I was if I worked hard enough. That there was no reason to let others choose my fate for me; not even a Goddess. “I am the only direct descendant of the house of Chrysalis,” I continued. “As you know, we have been the only family for hundreds of generations now to produce Betas time and time again. Our family’s wits and strength have guaranteed our position, never failing in any challenge issued for our rank. It is our family’s right to hand over this title to the next in line.”

“Ridiculous!” Uncle William called out. “By your logic then, there should be no issue if my son takes over. We are your family too, after all.”

“Your son is not the direct descendant of this house,” I reminded him. “...I am.”

“Alpha, you’re not actually listening to this are you?” he laughed. “There has never been a female Beta, and for good reason too. They do not have the strength required to defend the pack against larger male wolves. By extension, my Alexander is still of Beta blood and already started his training over a year ago. To jeopardize our pack’s safety for the sake of taking a chance on her is ridiculous. We have a perfectly good heir right here.”

He patted his son on the back who looked embarrassed that his father was still speaking on his behalf.

But I could barely pay attention to anything he was doing as my blood began to boil. His arrogance and blatant disrespect for me was evident. Without even knowing what I was capable of, he had already written me off for the sake of his own greed. He most likely

only wanted his son to become Beta to better his own chances of being accepted as an Elder one day. Anything to feel important, for once.

I stepped towards him, a fire now burning within me, and spoke of the one thing I knew he would not be able to refute. It was something I had never wanted to use, something I had refused to invoke before now, but I knew that it was my best hope. When it came to breaking old habits of stubborn fools, sometimes you needed to take extreme measures. "Need I remind you who I am, uncle?" I yelled out, a chill in my words. Instantly, the room became dead silent.

My sudden stride towards Uncle William had also been enough to scare him backwards, even though I was still several feet away. His face was no longer laughing. "I am not some silly girl with hopeless ambitions as you may think," I snapped. "I am Ariadne the Saintess, the marked. The chosen. I was selected by the Goddess herself and a piece of her lives within me. I embody her will, her desires... and yet you are here, merely an insignificant unranked member of our pack, trying to tell me that my succession is not possible because of

the genitals I possess?" His face had paled considerably as he stared at me, unable to make even a single reply.

I laughed cynically at his pathetic appearance. "I didn't realise our deity's decrees would be met with such exclusive prerequisites these days. Since when have we held more faith in outdated procedures over the word of our great mother, Selene?"

I was obviously embellishing the truth a little. The Goddess, Selene, had made it clear her chosen fate for me was actually to be by Aleric's side as Luna. But it wasn't as if she was going to come down here and fact check me herself, nor would there be anyone in this room qualified to disagree with me. At the end of the day, she gave me the power to choose my own destiny, and this is what I had decided to do with it. I knew too well how she wouldn't interfere with the choices her children made, having lived through that abandoned hell myself. Finally, I was able to exploit that system for myself. 1 "Aria," Tytus said with a tone of warning. "You've made your point." I peeled my eyes off William's pitiful face only to turn back to the Alpha. "So, it would seem we have an interesting predicament here," Tytus continued, deep in thought.

He then turned to my father who had been watching me tear into William, a mild amusement in his eyes the entire time. "Jarred, I imagine you wouldn't have let her come in here today without having at least some trust in her capability to handle the job. So, tell us, what is your personal experience with Aria that would persuade us to put our faith in her?" My father turned toward me as he spoke. "Her ability is commendable in almost all aspects, Alpha," he started. "She has already proven to me in a short amount of time that, not only does she hold an acute mind for all traits a leader should possess, but her talent in fighting has already far surpassed any expectations I could have possibly had for her age."

“What good is your expectations when she will be knocked flat on her back the minute she is in a real battle, possibly even with a ranked male warrior?” my Uncle William chimed in, finally having found his voice again.

Unlike me, my father managed to keep his emotions mostly in check at his younger brother’s tasteless remark, choosing to only narrow his eyes just enough that most would have missed it.

“She may not be as physically strong as your male fighters, sure,” he replied, “but I think you’ll find that they will be lucky to just land a hit on her. Her agility and speed are like no other warrior I’ve ever seen. With continued training, I believe she may even become one of the best fighters in our pack.” “It’s great to hear she takes after her old man,” Tytus said kindly. “...But before we get to making a decision on this, let’s not forget to address one of the largest obstacles still here in this room.”

His tone and mannerism then suddenly changed almost instantly, scrutinising me where I stood.

“Aria has been prophesied to, not only be my son’s mate, but has also been foretold to bring us

great success should she accept that union. If we all choose to grant Aria her wish in this ambition of hers, then we must accept that we may lose that advantage as a possible side effect.”

“Alpha,” I interrupted, “with all due respect, I have already given you my word that I will act only in the interest of the pack to see us succeed. There is no reason to force any romantic union between Aleric and I when I am fully capable of fulfilling my duties – regardless of whether that be ranked or unranked. However, I feel becoming Beta would be the best compromise for us both, would it not?” I turned to look at Aleric and almost immediately regretted it. He was frowning in confusion, his eyes glaring at me. I wasn’t able to stop the slight tremor that went down my spine. But I didn’t have time to mull on his behaviour for long as the Alpha spoke once more. “Very well, Aria,” he conceded. “I will entertain the possibility that perhaps there is no real reason for you to be joined via mate bond. Perhaps the prophecy was misunderstood and it was merely pointing at the fact you both would hold positions of power to lead us forward.”

Another murmur went out amongst the Elders. I knew they didn’t agree with this interpretation at all, some of them having been actually present at the time when they allegedly came to this revelation of my future. “I think I’d like to take this to a vote,” Tytus finally concluded. “Aria, William, Alexander... please step outside for a moment whilst we converse. Both the discussion and the votes made from here on out will remain confidential from all involved parties.”

The three of us bowed and made our way out of the room.

The entire time we stood outside the door, Uncle William regarded me warily. I could tell he wanted to start an argument with me, his mouth opening and closing several times, but every time he was about to speak, he would just deflate again. A part of me wanted to smirk at how cowardly his true colours were.

Alexander on the other hand was silent, looking almost tired. I could only assume he was exhausted by his father's continued attempts at pushing something onto him that he seemed to not particularly care about either way. I assumed he was happy enough to accept the role, but he was lacking the same drive of ambition that I held. In a twisted way, it could be perceived as my uncle attempting to live through his son; wanting something for him that he had always been denied. I wondered if Alexander was ever able to free himself of his father over the years I became Luna

It felt like an eternity waiting for the council to decide. As every second ticked past, the more nervous I became. I ended up leaning against the wall, eyes closed in thought, while I reviewed everything that had just happened in my mind. However, next to me, my uncle had begun pacing nervously, something I was finding increasingly more annoying by the minute.

Some may say it was a good sign though, I told myself. If there had been a strong majority either way, then the voting would have been over already. The fact that it had dragged out, for what felt like an hour now, could only mean that they were having trouble reaching a final decision.

And then, suddenly, the doors opened behind us.

We all looked up towards the Elder who stood there, their face completely unreadable. "Thank you all for your patience," they said. "You can come in now..." "...We've reached a verdict."

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Chapter Thirty-Seven

We stood in front of the Alpha in silence as he glanced between Alexander and I. "Thank you for waiting, Alexander... Aria," he started. I still couldn't read his face, his expression not giving me any hints to the results.

"The council and I have discussed this at long length and the result was... a tie."

My mouth opened in shock as I stared at Tytus. A tie? What did that even mean for us then?

"It appears we were completely split in half, five to five. And so, Alexander..." "Yes, Alpha?" my cousin replied, straightening his back as his name was called. "You may continue with your training for Beta..." "Yes!" my uncle yelled out, ecstatic with the victory. I almost couldn't believe he had spoken so childishly in front of the entire council.

But my heart sank at Tytus' words. Had I really failed? In my head, I instantly began to think of ways I could overturn the decision and have someone change their deciding vote.

"And if William would have let me finish..." the Alpha continued, breaking my thoughts. "... Aria, you are to take up training also." Tytus glared my uncle down as he spoke. "We intend to have you both train for the position until Aria comes of age. Upon that time, both parties will undertake an exam... and will also duel for the right to succeed as Beta."

I couldn't help the small tug of a smile that played on my lips at this announcement.

Whilst no one could disagree that the exam would be easy for me, I knew most here would think I was at a clear disadvantage with the proposal for a duel. My cousin, being one year older than me, would be seen to have the upper hand having had at least a year to learn how to fight in his wolf form by then; something that takes time to master.

Unbeknownst to almost everyone in this room though, I was already well acquainted with my wolf. It was true I wasn't a fighter in the past, but I had mastered moving in her body flawlessly over the six years I had been able to shift. I knew when she eventually came back to me that it would be like greeting an old friend. I had missed her dearly already.

Of course, I would have preferred to have been given the title straight up, but this didn't seem like the worse compromise either. The exam would be a piece of cake, and a battle wouldn't be that difficult if I kept up with my training. If it meant working hard for another three years, then so be it. I would defeat my cousin, avoid becoming Luna, and get to see the heartbroken look on my uncle's face as I reigned victorious, all at once. Everyone in the room was a little unnerved by my mildly pleased reaction but I didn't care. "I accept," I said calmly. I locked eyes with Tytus as I said this and saw he had that same look of curiosity in them that I'd gotten to know so well now. The look that said he was eager to see what I'd do next, almost as if I was his favourite pet to watch. Well, I wasn't one to divulge the old man, but I certainly found his idea of resolving the dispute creative.

And so that's how I became a probationary Beta heir... subject to approval.

My life definitely became busy after that.

Much to my disappointment, I still wasn't allowed to drop school to focus on more important matters. The only benefit of this was that it allowed me to still see Myra, someone who I'd otherwise be too busy to see regularly anymore. Every day after school, and several hours over the weekend, I now spent with my father either training or learning about the new role requirements. Many of the duties for the Beta seemed not too dissimilar from the things I'd been looking after as a Luna. Because of this, I was picking up the differences very quickly.

The rest of the time that I wasn't in training or school, I was either attending council meetings or completing small errands. Some of which were with Aleric.

Typically, the Alpha and Beta heir were meant to start working together from around the age of sixteen onwards. Since I was still short of this age, most of his time was therefore spent with Alexander instead. I, of course, didn't mind this in the slightest.

But the times we did spend together, I found it was becoming slightly easier with every meeting. I did my best to ignore how nervous I was around him by throwing myself into my work. And whilst I still jumped and flinched whenever he came too close, it was definitely a lot better than it had been several months ago. But, that being said, as much as I'd managed to improve, it still didn't stop me from leaving the very second we were done with whatever our task was for that day.

By the time five months had passed, I felt like I was finally in a good place and had a clear path to achieving my goals.

And so, today, I found myself with a day off, much to my surprise given my normally very busy schedule. My father was out of town on a Beta errand and there were no meetings to be held for the day. I considered helping Lucy with managing some of the investments we'd recently looked into, but I'd forgotten she was seeing the private investigator today and wouldn't be back until tonight.

It was only the second time I'd ever had so much free time to myself and, once again, I felt a little at a loss for what to do. But, if it was true what people said and good things came in threes, I was hoping it wouldn't be the last time I'd get some of the much-needed downtime. With having nothing better to do and with no one to tell me otherwise, I did the only thing I could think of; I went to see Myra.

Sure, I probably should have taken the extra time to do some training alone, but it was such a rare opportunity that I didn't even care. I'd been working so hard the last few months and felt that I deserved to treat myself.

And what better way to treat myself than with junk food from a certain cottage cafe?

Within two hours, I was seated across from Myra with a plate full of fries in front of me. She stared at me with a fascination as I ate, her head resting against her hand as she watched.

“You know... they have other options to eat,” she said. I didn’t even reply as I was too absorbed in the food before me. Having experienced it for myself now, I could see how junk food could quickly become addictive.

She sighed. “You are a marvel, Aria.”

Myra then began eating her own food, a sad-looking chicken salad. It probably was actually delicious but it was the sort of food I was eating basically every day now. I still had a love and appreciation for it... but it wasn’t enough to make me want to order it of my own volition.

“So, what have you been up to?” I asked, sipping at some sort of vanilla milkshake thing. It had random pieces of cookie in it and I wasn’t sure what to make of it. Regardless of the weird addition, it still tasted nice, albeit a bit strange. “Not much,” she replied. “To be honest, I’ve mostly been busy helping my parents out... but, o h! ...Actually....”

Her face changed, a small crease forming between her brows.

“I wasn’t sure if I should tell you...,” she said slowly, “but I heard from Cai the other day. He sent me a letter.”

I tensed up at hearing his name.

“Oh...?” was all I could say, now staring intensely at the milkshake in front of me.

I hadn’t prepared myself for her to say it and so I wasn’t sure how to react. I didn’t want to sound too interested but I couldn’t lie that I had been curious over how he’d been going. We hadn’t spoken about Cai since the last time we were here as Myra knew it was a sensitive topic. But it wasn’t as fresh for me anymore and I reminded myself there wasn’t any reason to get upset. I’d been doing great over the last few months, having much more important things happening in my life.

But I still thought of him now and then. In fact, I had made several attempts at writing him a letter over the months he’d been gone... but every time I ended up throwing it out, having thought better of it. Based on the last time I saw him, I knew that if he wanted to talk to me he would reach out himself.

“And how is Cai?” I finally asked.

She pursed her lips a bit to the side, trying to gauge my reaction. “He’s going well. Busy, he said. He’s begun his full training for Alpha heir now. He asked how I’ve been and

wanted to check in to see if everything was still going well here in the Winter Mist." I nodded my head, absentmindedly. "That's good." I could feel her eyes on me as she spoke and I tried to act as casual as I could. But after what felt like at least a minute she finally continued reluctantly. "...And he asked how you were."

I snapped my eyes up to her then, unable to now hide my interest. Cai asked... about me? "...And what did you reply back with?" I said cautiously.

"... haven't replied yet," she admitted. "I was sort of procrastinating talking to you first." I inhaled deeply, thinking it through. Cai asked how I was... Did that mean he wasn't angry at me anymore? But if he wasn't angry, then why didn't he just send me a letter directly himself? Why would he go through Myra to find out how I was going? ...Was he just asking her to sound polite since he knew Myra and I were good friends? "You can tell him that I'm fine and leave it at that," I finally concluded.

"Aria...", she said, disappointed. "Wouldn't it be better to tell him what you've been up to? Maybe it'll help fix things between you two." "No," I said, a tone of finality in my voice. "If Cai wants to know how I'm going then he can reach out to me himself. And I mean to me, not via a third party." She sighed. "You're too stubborn sometimes."

I ignored her, concentrating on the small cookie pieces inside my drink as if it were suddenly the most interesting thing at the table. Myra ended up having plans for the afternoon and so we finished up our breakfast earlier than I would have liked. The absence of having any plans left me with too much time inside my own head, mulling over things I would have rather moved on from. Or at least, I thought that would be the case. Instead, I arrived back home only to find an attendant I didn't recognise in my house. "Saintess," they greeted me, bowing. I groaned internally at the title. "Yes?" "I have been sent today to inform you that you are to prepare yourself for dinner with the Alpha heir," they said. "He will be arriving tonight at around seven o'clock." My face paled. "Arriving... where?" "Here," they confirmed. "You will be hosting the Alpha heir here, tonight, at your residence for dinner." Ah... well, fuck.

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Chapter Thirty-Eight

It had Alpha Tytus written all over it. He had 'coincidentally' chosen a night my father was out of town and my mother was shifted to work at the hospital. This meant it would be just me... and Aleric. It seemed I had assumed incorrectly that Tytus was done trying to play matchmaker with us. When I had been accepted as a probationary Beta heir, naturally I had thought the surprise dates would come to an end. Did he think I was going to fail in my endeavour to best Alexander? Or was his idea that I could be persuaded to drop out of the running for the title if I fell for Aleric?

Putting all of that aside, I now found myself with less than seven hours to get the entire house ready.

To have the Alpha or Alpha heir come for dinner was considered a high enough honour already, but hosting Aleric would just make things more difficult. I'd never found him an easy person to please in my past.

I worked tirelessly, from the moment I found out he was coming, to organise everything down to the most minute detail. From briefing the attendants on behaviours to avoid around him, to creating a menu for the cooks so they could prepare Aleric's preferred foods, nothing was left to chance.

By the time I was finally finished organising, I found I only had an hour for myself to get ready and dressed.

And then, finally, the time came.

As Aleric entered the house, I saw him pause a moment to take it all in. I wondered what was going through his mind and couldn't recall if he'd ever come here before. But judging from his face, he didn't remember either.

"Greetings, Alpha heir," I said, bowing my head.

"Evening, Ariadne," he replied.

I looked up and saw him staring at me strangely already. Had I done something off? I wracked my brain but couldn't think of anything.

"It's an honour to receive you tonight," I continued. "If you'll follow me to the parlour, we can sit there while we wait for our meals to be ready..."

We walked into the large sitting area with two couches. I stood at the doorway, allowing him to move first to choose where he would sit. When he'd made himself comfortable, I purposely sat on the opposite couch with just enough distance. Close enough to not be rude, but far away enough that I didn't have to worry about flinching at any of his sudden movements.

"So, how have you been, Ariadne?" he asked finally, after several moments of silence had passed. "It's been... a week since our last meeting?" "Yes, Alpha heir," I said. "I've been well. Yourself?"

"I've been good..." he said, his face turning that same odd frown again. "You can call me Aleric, you realise? You're a Beta heir now. The formalities aren't required." Oh... so this was why he'd given me that look at the door. I'd found it easier to call him Alpha heir these last few months, the sound of his real name on my lips always leaving a bitter taste.

I clenched my jaw, preparing myself to force words out. "Apologies... Aleric." He regarded me warily. Obviously, something else was still bothering him that he hadn't mentioned.

But he didn't end up bringing it up as, not long afterwards, one of the attendants came in to announce dinner was ready. I breathed out a sigh of relief. At least having food in front of me would give me an excuse to not keep the conversation going. We sat down in the dining room, Aleric at the head of the table, myself to his right; just as it always had been. I could feel the anxiety begin to creep into my chest at his proximity, knowing I was within arms reach of him at any given moment. But I pushed it aside. I was stronger than that now.

The food started to come out then and I was grateful everything had been prepared exactly the way I had instructed. The spread was diverse enough for even four people, but I hadn't wanted to leave anything to chance. I looked up to check on Aleric, to gauge his reaction, but he seemed completely fine; this being at least one comfort to my anxiety. I knew I'd never know for sure though since he was impossible to read.

"Is everything to your liking... Aleric?" I asked.

"Yes, it's all great," he said. "Thank you." That didn't tell me much but at the very least he hadn't hated it right away.

And with that, we both began to eat.

However, several minutes in, I realised he still hadn't said anything... and I was beginning to worry I'd done something wrong. I cleared my throat. "So... how was your exchange?" He looked directly up at me as he spoke, and I tried not to jump at the sudden eye contact. "It was good. I went to a northern territory called the Opal Tide. It's the central pack for the region up there." I wasn't overly familiar with them but I knew they were a fairly powerful pack. Aleric had spared them during his tyrant years. I guess now I knew why. "That's... good," I said before taking another bite of my food.

"Ariadne..." he said, trailing off. "Yes?"

He looked confused, as if he wanted to talk about something but wasn't sure if he should.

"Nevermind."

to the airport

He clenched his jaw and went back to eating his food. A part of me was curious and wanted to know what he'd wanted to say, but I thought better of pushing him for answers.

We ended up eating the rest of our meal in silence after that. I wasn't sure what to talk about or whether I should even try to start a conversation or not, and so I let him be.

When he was finally done, he placed his utensils on the table. "That was delicious, thank you. Please tell the cook they did a great job." "I'm glad to hear that," I said, genuinely relieved everything had gone as planned. "Do you think I could trouble you for a cup of tea?" Oh, he wanted tea? I suppose I could make him some. I stood up and began walking to the kitchen. "Ariadne, what are you..."

I stared at him confused. He said he wanted tea? I was getting him tea....

"...Nevermind," he said again, leaning back into his chair. I paused another moment, still unsure over whatever that was, but proceeded on my way to the kitchen anyway. I asked the attendant there to boil me some water as I prepared the tea leaves. They, too, gave me an odd look that I still couldn't decipher. Several moments later, I was on my way back with his tea in hand, walking straight up to him.

I was about to place it on the table in front of him when suddenly his arm shot out towards me.

I jumped, not expecting him to have moved so quickly, and dropped the teacup...

...Right onto his leg.

He stood up immediately and cursed in pain. I realised too late that he had actually just been reaching for the cup in my hand, but I hadn't expected it. I hadn't thought he would move so abruptly. "Oh, Goddess, no...", was all I could say. Instinctively, I had already begun pacing backward until I found myself up against the wall. "Please... no, I'm so sorry." He was patting at his leg with a napkin, wincing from the pain, when suddenly his eyes looked up to meet mine. I had messed up. I had messed up so badly. "I'm sorry, please, I'm so sorry," I kept repeating, my body beginning to shake. "It's fine," he said. But I could barely hear him as I was so scared over whatever he would do to me.

He saw how I was, how my face had completely paled. "I said it's fine, Ariadne," he repeated with a tone of irritation now. And then he started walking towards me, looking unsettled by my reaction as I continued to

apologise over and over again. "Are you not listening to me? What's wrong with you?" I recoiled away but there was nowhere to move. I was already trapped by the wall. And then finally he'd had enough. "Why do you always have this reaction to me, Ariadne?"

he snapped, frustrated. "I don't get it! What have I done to you? What could I possibly have done to always make you fear me this much?"

I stared at him mutely, unable to find my voice.

"Before you became Beta heir, we literally had only spoken maybe five times growing up. So, what the hell did I do?"

And then I saw him. Really saw him for the first time since coming back.

This wasn't the adult man who had gone on a killing spree. This wasn't the man who had trapped and used me. This was a teenage boy who was probably still learning who he was himself. He had the same midnight curls and green eyes, but his face didn't have the same lines from battle he'd acquired over the years. He was younger, purer. I'd been so caught up in the past that I'd been unable to look at him in the present.

"Help me understand, Ariadne, because I can't take it anymore."

He looked at me then with a sad desperation, as if this had been something piling up inside him for a long time now. "Because whenever I look into your eyes, all I see is a reflection of myself, seen in the form of some kind of monster. And it makes me feel sick. Like I need to be apologising for something when I don't even know what I've done wrong."

I wanted to say something, to give a plausible explanation for why I was so scared of him. But there was no good reason I could think of that didn't involve mentioning my past life. What could I possibly tell him? Because he glares at me in meetings? Because he was sarcastic at me that one time? Because he gets angry when other men carry me off?

"Ariadne! Please, talk to me," he said and grabbed at my arms gently. "Help me understand what it is I've done. I'm sick of having to feel so disgusted by myself whenever I'm near you. What did I do, Ariadne?" I couldn't focus, I couldn't think anymore. My head was spinning... and my vision was beginning to blur. And I realised then what was happening... but it was too late. This wasn't trauma anymore.

No... now, I was having a vision.

I clenched my teeth to hold it off as long as possible. I knew I couldn't let him see me when I eventually appeared to pass out. Too many questions I didn't want to share answers to. "Ariadne?" he called again, still waiting for me to reply. He didn't even realise anything was off about me. Aleric probably just assumed I was ignoring him. so

many great But I could barely see him now, struggling against whatever it was that caused the visions. It was pushing at me, trying to overpower my body, but I held on as

much as I could. I shook my head. It was the only thing I could muster as there was no way I could reply with actual words. Not now anyway.

He sighed in annoyance, finally letting me go.

“I don’t know why I even tried to organise dinner,” he said before I heard his footsteps begin to leave Aleric... organised the dinner? Not Tytus? I didn’t get time to think on it further though, as suddenly I felt myself falling, and my eyesight evaporated. ...And then... there was blood.

So much blood. All over me.

I couldn’t see it but I could feel it. The hot sticky sensation on my hands I knew could only be one thing. I was sure that if I looked down that I would find it everywhere.

But that wasn’t all. I was standing with the weight of someone leaning against me, their neck against my shoulder. I couldn’t see their face, or even their head, but I could feel they were heavy.

And then I realised this wasn’t like any other vision I’d had previously. No, I wasn’t watching it happen to someone else this time. I was here, present at that moment. This was happening in my future.

But it was strange though... it was like my vision was frozen, a snapshot in time, allowing me a moment to get a grasp on what was happening. I couldn’t move or speak and everything around me was eerily paused in motion.

I tried to keep calm and looked around, hoping to figure out where I was, but I didn’t recognise the area at all in the dark. I could only see the tree line of a forest and a pathway leading from a dimly lit area at night. None of this was helpful. Suddenly, the person against me groaned out in pain and everything began to move again; time resuming.

They grabbed at my shoulder and pushed themselves off me, falling to the ground in front of me. And it was then that I realised what was happening. What my vision was showing me.

Because in my hand was a knife. A hot, sticky knife that had caused the source of all the blood.

...And in front of me laid a dying Aleric, slowly bleeding out.

I understood why I was here this time, why I was a participant and not a spectator. ...Because I was going to kill Aleric.

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Chapter Thirty-Nine

“Miss?” a voice called out to me. My vision had slowly faded after the shocking realisation of what was happening, and I looked up to see Lucy leaning over me. “Aria?” she called again, worried enough to drop the honorifics. I blinked several times, coming back to reality, but I could still feel my entire body shaking. ‘I was going to kill Aleric.’ The thought kept repeating itself in my head and I didn’t know what to do. In the past, my visions had shown me things caused by others that I needed to stop. But this time... this time it was me causing harm. How could things become so bad between us... that I ended up wanting to kill him?

“Aria?” Lucy called again.

“Lucy... sorry,” was all I could say, letting her know I was fine.

“Miss, you scared me!”

She threw her arms around me and hugged me tightly. It was nice to know that even after all the hell and extra duties I gave her, she still seemed to care about me. “I’m sorry,” I said and wrapped an arm around her in return, still in shock.

After a few moments of hugging, she finally pulled away.

“What happened to you? It was like you were passed out... but your eyes were open.”

“Oh...,” I said. I had forgotten how freaky it looked to onlookers. I knew that if I told her the truth, it would be too difficult and emotional for me to go into detail right then. But at the same time, I couldn’t tell her it was nothing. Because obviously, it wasn’t nothing. It was the same predicament I’d found myself in with Cai last year. To give too little detail and I’d be sent to the hospital for a full check-up, yet to say too much would only be more trouble.

“...It’s a side effect of the mark,” I finally said. “It gives me nightmares sometimes when I become stressed.”

I told her the same line I’d once fed Cai and hoped it would satisfy her enough to leave me be.

But she only looked at me as if she had so many questions, like nothing I’d said was making sense, and in all honesty, I couldn’t disagree with that reaction. But I couldn’t give her any more answers for now. Not yet anyway. “Come on, Miss,” she said finally, helping me to my feet. “Let’s get you into bed so you can lie

down.”

She must have known me well enough by now to realise I had secrets I couldn't tell her. After everything she'd helped me with since coming back, how could she not? By pushing aside her

doubts and questions, I was eternally grateful that she was able to leave the topic be for now. "... Thank you, Lucy." She held me by the hand and helped me up the stairs to my room, my body still trembling slightly at the graphic scene I'd just lived through. So, when my head finally hit the pillow, allowing me to relax, I was happy for just the small amount of peace it gave me. "Stay here a moment, Miss," Lucy said once she was satisfied I was comfortable. "I'll be back in a minute." I frowned. "Where are you going, Lucy?" "Oh, I need to inform the Alpha heir you're okay," she said. "He was the one who came and found me. He said something was wrong with you and that he thought it would be best to leave it to me."

"...Where is he?" I asked, hesitant about whether I actually wanted to know the answer. "He's been waiting in the parlour," she replied. "I'm just going to go down and let him know you're fine so he can head home... maybe make you a cup of tea whilst I'm there." I tensed up immediately. I could have sworn he'd left but, after thinking it through, I realised I never actually saw him leave. It was just the sound of his footsteps walking away I'd heard right before the vision. ...So... he had gone to Lucy to ask her to help me? And was waiting in the parlour this whole time?

Why...?

And then I realised what may have been going through his head. Did he think it was like the last time with Cai? He saw me breaking down again before him and, the last time that happened, he knew it was because of him. Cai had rescued me then... did that mean Aleric left because he thought he was the cause of my stress? It wasn't necessarily incorrect, but the real reason I'd been unable to get a hold of myself to answer him wasn't because of his presence. It was because of the vision that was slowly about to make me pass out. "Okay...", I finally managed to say, allowing her to go. The minute Lucy left though, I realised that I was now alone in my own thoughts... and it wasn't a pleasant place. So much had happened tonight, so many mixed emotions. Aleric had shown me a side of him I'd never seen before, someone who felt vulnerable. It was something I was struggling to come to terms with since, the image of him inside my head, was one that had been cemented over years of suffering. But could I have been making that image a reality by projecting my fears onto him so early? It wasn't until hours later that I finally managed to push all my thoughts away, trying my best to shut my mind off, until, finally, I fell asleep. And from then on, things between Aleric and I... were weird.

Not weird in a bad way, just... weird. Or, at least, I was.

I found I didn't know how to act around him anymore. Was I changing him further by being so afraid? But then when I did talk to him, I wondered what could possibly happen in the future to make me finally snap and kill him.

Though, to his credit, Aleric was completely professional despite my awkwardness, and that was something I hadn't expected in the slightest. To be honest, I had completely anticipated that he would be angry or even annoyed at how I had behaved at dinner. But he didn't show any signs of that at all. In fact, he always spoke to me calmly and politely as we worked alongside each other, and I was beyond grateful for that.

It allowed me to continue to throw myself into our work and get my mind off everything. Over time, I even found the small doses of being around him in a work environment were slowly allowing me to heal, and that was far more valuable than anything else. However, it was still a bit strange though. It was a version of Aleric I had only ever witnessed occasionally from afar with others, someone who had never shown their face to me in the past. Was this what it was like to not feel terrified of being around him? Had things really changed so much that I didn't need to be scared of him losing his temper at any given minute? Though, whenever I thought about it all, the only thing I achieved was in giving myself a headache. I had more questions than I knew what to do with at this point, and knew that only time would be able to give me the answers.

By the time a couple of months had passed since the dinner, I still didn't have any better idea of what was going on. To my dismay though, I found that I was going to be hard-pressed to figure it out soon.

... Because the Alpha had summoned me.

A day later, I found myself standing before Alpha Tytus in the meeting hall, Aleric to my left.

"Alec, Aria," he greeted. "Thank you for coming to see me."

We both bowed our heads.

"I've asked you both to come here today because of an interesting predicament I found myself in," he started. "You see, we've been in negotiations with another pack for a few months now and they haven't exactly been making our lives easy." I frowned. I wasn't sure what this would have to do with me. At most, my errands consisted of paperwork based tasks or checking in with warriors for status reports. Negotiation input was definitely above my current job requirement. "It seems the Golden Blade pack believe our conditions for the alliance are unsuitable, and are even underestimating the threat we pose." I could feel Tytus watching me carefully as he spoke, almost as if he was trying to see what was going on inside my brain. "Well... I told them, of course, that our

pack was currently revered by the Goddess herself, so therefore the price of the alliance was more than fair. Unsurprisingly, they didn't believe me."

And finally I understood where this was going.

"So I said 'we have a living Saintess amongst us'," Tytus continued. "And, well... they still

didn't believe me. So, in conclusion, you will both be going to the Golden Blade pack to act as ambassadors in the negotiations. This treaty is imperative to the Winter Mist so failure is not an option."

I had expected this to be the case, but hearing it said aloud still made me shocked,

"Alpha, I'm not sure that it would be suitable for me to accompany Aleric. I'm not yet sixteen and I haven't undertaken my full duties yet," I argued.

I was sure he was purely doing this to show off and avoid paying more for negotiations, rather than for any real concern he had about the treaty itself. He easily could have just increased the trade agreement benefits without the need to involve me.

But, of course, that wouldn't have been as fun for him.

"Ah, well, I think we both know you're perfectly mature enough to handle this," he replied. "And besides, wouldn't this be a great first mission for the two of you to undertake?"

Oh, so that's how it was. He was also using it as a way for Aleric and I to become closer. I had only just gotten somewhat used to talking to Aleric, and now I was supposed to be going on a long-distance trip away with him? I felt sick from the stress of just thinking about it.

"Both of us are not yet of age," I pointed out. "Do you really think it would be wise to send us alone? Two unshifted ranked heirs would be an easy target for other packs wishing to start a war." I had posed the question even though I knew nothing would probably change his mind.

He laughed. "Of course, of course, young Aria. You are quite correct. That's why I will be sending a few warriors to accompany you." I internally sighed in defeat. There was no use in trying to persuade him. "Oh, don't look so gloomy you two, it's going to be fun!" Tytus chuckled. "You're going to have a great time, trust me. Just show them the mark, negotiate us a great deal with that intelligent little head of yours, Aria, and you'll both be back in no time." I looked over and, sure enough, Aleric seemed just as unenthusiastic as I did. But it wasn't the same look as me who was irritated at being used as a pawn for Tytus. No, his face looked almost... sad.

I tried not to think too hard on it for the time being though. If there was one thing these last few months had made me realise, it was that I was spending too much time worrying about what was going on inside Aleric's head.

And I had more pressing things to deal with right now. Like how I was going to explain to my parents that their fifteen year old daughter was going on a road trip to a foreign land... with an older teenage boy.

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Chapter Forty

The conversation with my parents hadn't really ended up being much of a conversation. There wasn't much they could do when the Alpha was personally ordering it. My father did give me a look of concern though, which I reciprocated with a nod of encouragement. I didn't like it either, but I'd told myself I was going to be okay. Within the week, I was packed and waiting outside for when my lift would arrive. I had been told to be ready by six in the morning because it would take all day to arrive at the Golden Blade pack. I wasn't looking forward to the long drive but I was outside waiting in the cold morning nonetheless.

Finally, a black car pulled up and I opened the boot, throwing my suitcase in. Normally someone would have come out to do it for me, but it wasn't exactly like I needed anyone to do it. I was perfectly capable of doing it... it was just odd.

I walked over to get in but, when I went to sit in the back seat, suddenly the door to the passenger side opened from the inside. I peered in slowly and saw Aleric leaning over to unlock it from the driver's seat. "Morning," he said groggily as he straightened back up again "...Good morning." I was surprised to see him in the same car as me, let alone driving it. He looked tired, as if he didn't like having to be up so early, and was dressed in comfortable clothes. His wavy black hair was even curlier in places than normal, not having been brushed at all today. It was the first time seeing him looking so dishevelled yet casual.

"...Where are the warriors?" I asked. I thought for sure they would be the ones driving us.

"They're taking a car behind us. Get in."

I didn't question it further and followed his instruction, sitting in the seat next to him. I didn't know what to do though, and so I ended up staring ahead awkwardly as he began driving. It was a silent drive, neither of us having said anything since I'd sat down, and I wondered about what I could do.

My eyes then spotted the music console and I naturally reached out to turn it on, thinking music would break the awkward air. But right as I was about to

touch it, I thought better of the idea. I didn't want to annoy him so early in the day if he didn't want to listen to anything. Especially when he looked so tired. I put my hand back into my lap and decided to just stare out the window instead. Ten seconds later though, the music was suddenly playing. I quickly looked over and saw Aleric adjusting the settings, looking for something to listen to. "Anything in particular?" he asked. I stared at him in surprise. "...No."

years old

He ended up playing some random song I'd never heard before but it really made me wonder. I realised I'd never gotten to know Aleric's interests in the past. What he had liked, what he'd enjoyed doing. Everything had always been about the pack with us or nothing at all. The rest of the drive was spent listening to different songs, only small talk very occasionally. And by the time we finally arrived, I was thoroughly exhausted from the long journey. We both got out of the car in zombie-like states and stretched. Already, the sun was going down and I wondered how Aleric had managed to make the whole trip with only minimal breaks along the way.

A representative greeted us not long after our car drove in and escorted us to the lodgings we would be staying in. Luckily the housing looked to be close by to the main meeting hall so we wouldn't need to worry about driving anywhere tomorrow. And so, both being exhausted, we said our goodnights and quickly went to sleep in our separate rooms. The next day, the negotiations began. Much to my dismay, and humiliation, the Golden Blade insisted that I get my mark reconfirmed by their own pack Elders. I had to remind myself that I was acting as an ambassador today just so I didn't cause a scene in front of them all.

I ended up conceding on the condition that it would be done by their sole female Elder to which they agreed. It was a much quicker process than last time and I attributed it to their lack of resources compared to the Winter Mist. The Elder was using a book that looked to have barely any details, and it really made me appreciate and miss Elder Luke's amazing study. I reminded myself to go back one day and beg until he allowed me to read everything his study had to offer.

With the confirmation out of the way, the hard part began. Unsurprisingly, it wasn't convincing them of my legitimacy that was hard, but it was the fact that none of them wanted to deal directly with a fifteen year old. Which was fair, all things considered.

"Listen to me," I stressed

through my clenched jaw for the hundredth time that day. "You're clearly getting a good deal here. To associate yourself with our pack, plus the added trade benefits, your economy is obviously going to be getting the most value out of this."

"Tell me again why she's discussing business with us?" one of them spoke up. I think it was their Beta but couldn't recall

his name. "I thought they were bringing the girl to show proof, not because we'd be dealing with her directly."

I was internally at the point of wanting to just jump across the table and rip his throat out, but I didn't think that would be an effective negotiation tactic. Behind me, Aleric had been sitting back in his chair, watching the entire thing take place. I could tell he was just as unhappy with how they were treating me, his eyes narrowing every time one of them tried to dismiss me. "I agree," spoke one of the Elders. "We should be discussing this with someone who at least has a bit more experience."

I had six years of experience conquering an entire country, but sure, I was the one without any experience.

And so, finally, I snapped. Fed up with the entire process that had already taken us well into the night.

"Look," I said loudly, making everyone go silent and stare at me. "Either take the fucking deal or I swear, by the Goddess who lives in me, that I will personally smite every single one of you. You've all shown an extreme lack of professionalism here today and I am at the end of my rope showing you a courtesy sorely lacking towards myself." It wasn't like I had any God powers that could actually smite anyone... but they didn't know that. And judging from their terrible book collection, they had no way of figuring it out either. Instantly, they all paled, unsure what to say next. That is until finally, their Alpha chimed in.

"Alpha heir Aleric, are you really so low as to let the girl speak to us like that during such an important meeting?" he spat out, flustering over his words. "Reel her in right now if you have even a shred of hope remaining that we'll agree to your terms set here today."

It was like I could see the instant switch go off in Aleric's head, and I mentally shied away, recognising the look that came over his face. If they thought that I was bad, they had no idea who they were actually dealing with. He didn't even have to stand up, he merely leaned forward in his chair closer. But it was enough. It was enough for everyone in their entire council to instantly flinch backwards, the sharpness in Aleric's eyes a threat within itself.

And for a split second, I saw it. I saw the old Aleric inside him.

And not just him... but myself also.

Here we were, once again standing in a council room, attempting to force an alliance by means of tricks and violent threats.

I wanted to throw up.

"Alpha," Aleric said in a cold voice. That one word was enough to make a shiver go down my spine and it wasn't even directed at me. "I think you'll find the terms set by our pack's Beta heir here today are actually incredibly reasonable. She has given you a

very fair deal in my opinion and I believe we have also allowed you ample time to consider it in depth over the last several hours.”

I could see the instant regret in all of their eyes. They realised quickly they had messed up by getting him involved.

“But, if the terms aren’t to your liking...,” he continued, his voice becoming dangerously low.” Then I can assure you that if our Saintess here doesn’t smite you, that I, personally, will ensure to come back here with the entire Winter Mist’s army. And I, personally, will endeavour to track down every single one of you and tear you apart... piece by piece.”

It was safe to say we came to an agreement very quickly after that.

Scanned with CamScanner

But after the meeting was done, I was still upset. Furious even. We had both stooped so low in something that could have been handled peacefully.

“Aleric,” I called, getting his attention.

I found him by the wall away from the others, watching over everyone as they completed the last bits of paperwork.

He looked at me confused. “What’s wrong?” “What’s wrong?” I hissed. “What’s wrong?! What was that?”

“What?”

“You didn’t need to threaten them like that!” He looked at me incredulously. “You mean I didn’t need to threaten them... just like you did?” I clenched my jaw.

“That’s not the point. I’m not in the right here either but you took it too far.

I looked around and saw too many people were watching us now, having spoken too loudly.

I grabbed him by the arm and started leading him away from the main building so others wouldn’t see us. But after walking for a minute or two, Aleric finally pulled away and brought us to a stop. “I don’t get why you’re so angry,” he argued. “I tried to let you handle it yourself but they weren’t going to listen. Surely you saw that too. All I did was try to help you.” “I didn’t need your help! I could handle it! And since when do you care about what people say about me anyway?” I yelled.

“What are you even talking about?” he spat back. “There you go again, talking about me like I’m a fucking criminal. We’ve been over this! I still don’t know what I could have possibly done to give you that impression! Before recently, we had barely even spent

any time together growing up. But suddenly you're terrified of me one day? And then every time you see me, you look about ready to cry or run away. Neither leaves a good impression for a mate or a Beta, by the way. Both of those would require you being able to stomach being in the same room as me!

We stared at each other, both of us out of breath from the yelling we'd just done. Both of us with intense fury in our eyes.

I could feel the blood rushing through my veins and heart pulsing hard in my chest. I needed to calm down.

I turned around away from him, taking a second to breathe without us being in each other's faces. Obviously, I knew I was being unreasonable. The only reason I had been so mad at him for what he'd done in that meeting room... was because it had scared me. Because over these last few months, I had seen a glimmer of hope that he could become a different person, and now suddenly seeing a flash of the old Aleric was a cold reminder. And he was right. In this life we had barely known each other before I came back. And yet I'd changed the future so much, that it was now debatable that we'd spoken more in this life than

the entirety of the previous one. So, from his perspective, I could see how all of my actions since coming back would have warranted the reactions he'd had.... When we first met again, I had broken down and had a full panic attack just because he had entered a room; and then needed to be picked up by another man just to escape him. I recoiled away every single time he moved anywhere near me, enough that I'd even broken a plate in my attempt to flee and accidentally hurt him with hot tea. I'd told the entire Winter Mist council that I didn't want anything to do with Aleric or to ever become his Luna, and even orchestrated the overturn of a tradition dating back thousands of years... just to avoid being with him.

If Aleric had done this to me in my past life, without me having any knowledge of the future, I would have been devastated. I had been devastated. It wasn't exactly the same or even close to being as bad, but to an extent, Aleric had put me through something similar. I didn't begin to discover Aleric's true nature until I was eighteen and we were mated. Was it possible that maybe he had been a different person before? Had me coming back actually made an impact? Because if I was able to admit that I was capable of becoming a different person now, didn't that mean that it was possible that people from my original timeline could change also?

Only... I couldn't forget what was yet to happen. His attempt at showing he cared now was probably nothing more than the result of being told I was his mate his entire life. He didn't have real feelings for me, he was just angry I was rejecting him for what seemed like no reason. But I knew better.

I knew that, when Thea arrived, he would forget about me. Just like he had in the past.

I was about to turn back and apologise for at least my part in overreacting... but I didn't get the chance.

Because suddenly several people emerged from the trees and surrounded us. And I realised very quickly that we were under attack.