

# A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood

## Chapter 41 - 50

**Chapter Forty-One** “What do you want?” Aleric yelled out to them. They either didn't hear or had no desire to answer because they approached us slowly without hesitation.

It was clear what their intention was. “Aleric?” I called out nervously. “What's wrong with them?” I could see from here that something was off. Wrong. Their clothes were dishevelled and they looked like they hadn't seen a proper bath in years. But not just that, they were also giving off some sort of weird vibe. Like they were sick...

...And dangerous.

“They look like rogues,” Aleric said, moving closer to my side to get into a defensive position. “You need to get out of here.”

“You're joking, right?” I snapped. “I can handle myself in a fight, Aleric. What do you think I've been doing all these months?”

But his explanation made sense given their appearance. Normally, anyone who left a pack could be accepted into another after due process and screening. So, this meant that the remainder of those not accepted, those who had failed that process, were usually criminals banished. They became rogues. But rogues were actually pretty hard to come by these days since territories had expanded so much. There wasn't really any one place they could stay for long without being driven out by the pack in charge. Something that made me wonder how they'd managed to make it so far into the Golden Blade territory, especially without being seen... and why they had come out of hiding to target us. “Why aren't they shifted?” I asked, warily eyeing them off as they paced around us.

There were four of them in total, each a fully grown male, and yet not one of them was in their wolf form. I could also see that one was far more muscular than the others and noted he was the one to be most careful of.

They were sizing us up, watching what we were doing carefully, and we were doing the same. Each side waiting for the other to move first.

“If I were to take a guess...,” Aleric said, looking around. “I would say it's to help hide their scent in getting this far. Running past the boundary in wolf form would be picked up faster by the patrols. The fur leaves a stronger scent.” I hadn't realised that was a real thing, but then again, I'd never dealt with rogues before, nor had I taken the time to notice the difference in potency back when I'd had my stronger sense of smell.

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The whole situation seemed wrong though. I could feel something there was something obvious I wasn't realising. But I had to push it aside, knowing I needed to

focus on what was in front of me if I didn't want to get killed. "You need to leave the minute there is an opening," Aleric said. "Aleric!" I yelled angrily. "Enough!" And then one of them finally came forward, charging towards me. I moved to face him, ready for when he got closer, but Aleric was quicker. He lunged forward and had him on the ground within seconds with a powerful hit to the rogue's head

There was no hesitation in Aleric's movements. Everything he did was confident and fluid. So much power displayed as tackled the rogue down, the man's head hitting the ground with such impact that there was no hope he had survived. He had died immediately.

This enraged the others, seeing the death of their comrade occur so fast. They advanced quickly on us before we'd even had a moment to get our bearings. Two went for Aleric, the largest of the bunch being one of them. The third ran towards me, but I was ready.

He swung his arm out to catch me in the face, but I moved back and dodged it effortlessly. His movements were sluggish compared to my father and Cai, but his body was more built, more muscled. I knew getting an effective hit on him would be hard and would need to focus on his weak points.

Next to me, Aleric was fighting off the other two. His main focus was on the larger one but he was having to keep his defence up against the second rogue as well. He didn't look to be in any trouble, or at least he didn't show it, but I could also see he wasn't making much progress against either of them in terms of offensive attack.

Before me, the man was still continuing his aggressive approach. But I wasn't letting him anywhere near me. I abruptly leapt backwards, catching him off guard as he tilted off-balance; the momentum of his flying fist having sent him forwards. I took the opportunity and managed to get my leg up with enough force to kick him back the way he came, my foot connecting with his face with enough power to hear a crunch. I assumed it was his nose.

He fell flat to the ground behind him and I quickly jumped on him, not wanting to miss the chance to finish him off. But blow after blow against him, I found I wasn't having any success. He was neither staying still nor passing out.

...But then I saw it.

His hand twitching towards something at his side, and for a brief second, I swore I saw a flash of the moonlight catch on a metal surface. Immediately, I realised what he was planning.

Still straddling him, I quickly moved my hand to where he was reaching. However, he had a firm grip on it now and was refusing to let go. I didn't let this sway my determination though.

I let go for only a second. Just enough to punch him as hard as I could in the nose, allowing for his hand to loosen, and quickly I unsheathed the dagger he had concealed there.

I didn't even hesitate or pause.

No, I immediately embedded it directly into his chest...

...And finally, he stopped moving. I sighed out in relief, knowing I'd stopped at least one of them and could help Aleric fight now. But then everything happened so quickly. Too fast for me to have done anything about it. I stood up, inspecting the body below me for movement, when suddenly I heard a panicked voice behind me. "Aria!" Aleric yelled.

I instantly spun to where I'd heard his voice but found he was closer than I'd thought. In fact, his back was now directly in front of me, obscuring my view completely of whatever was happening... ...And all I proceeded to hear was a grunt, the sound of flesh being sliced open... followed by Aleric moving his arms in a forceful movement that created a sickening snapping noise. I realised what had happened straight away. I moved quickly, desperate to see for myself, and pushed my way forward to witness the scene before me.

Aleric stood there frozen, a knife in his stomach, with the body of a dead rogue before him; their head turned to an unnatural angle.

...And I screamed.

I screamed out over what I was seeing. Because I realised what had been nagging me this whole time.

It wasn't because of the rogues, or why they were here. It was because this was my vision. This was where it took place. The tree line, the dimly lit pathway. All of it.

This was where Aleric died.

I turned and looked at the last remaining rogue who was staring at me expectantly; the largest one of the bunch. But he couldn't have known what was waiting for him. It was like my body lost control and I moved faster than I had ever before, faster than I had ever thought possible. And before he could even register where I was, I had climbed my way up him, swinging myself around his torso until I sat upon his shoulders. He didn't even get a chance to lay a finger on me before I had snapped his neck, his body crumpling to the ground under

me. I didn't turn to inspect my handiwork this time though. Instead, I immediately left him and ran to Aleric.

His face was so pale as he looked down at the knife below him in surprise. I could see him start to go into shock over what had happened, his hand feebly reaching towards the knife but not touching it.

And then he began to sway, his legs starting to give out. I rushed forward to catch him before he fell to the ground, his head managing to land against my shoulder. My legs had almost buckled under the weight of him but somehow I kept standing

I wanted to be sick, the sound of my heart beating so loudly in my ears that I felt like I was going to go insane.

Everything was happening just as the vision had told me, but I had gotten it wrong. So wrong. It hadn't shown me the rogues. It hadn't shown me the battle. All it had given me was the way he died. I could feel the tip of the knife in his stomach as he rested against me and knew what would happen next.

He would push himself off me just as I grabbed at the hilt, making himself bleed out slowly to his death

But it was strange though. A knife like this shouldn't have hurt Aleric so badly. His accelerated healing should have meant that, whilst he would be wounded badly, he shouldn't bleed to death from it. So, what could have possibly caused what happened in my vision?

And then I realised it only left one possibility.

Before I could test anything though, Aleric suddenly groaned and I felt him begin to shift his weight. He was just about to push himself off me, but I quickly held onto him, preventing the vision from becoming reality. "Woah, wait, wait, wait," I quickly instructed, stopping him. "Just slowly. I'm going to help lay you down." As gently as I could, I lowered Aleric to the ground until he was finally laying flat. "Aria...", he mumbled, his hand reaching towards the stab wound. "Don't touch it," I ordered, though I wasn't sure if he could hear me. I firmly placed his hand by his side just in case. I didn't waste any more time after that and knew I needed to confirm my theory. Quickly, I began to inspect him. I pushed his skin down the blade just enough that I could squeeze my fingertip onto the surface, and immediately I felt the mild burn upon contact. As I had suspected, the knife was made of special silver. My heart sank. On a surface level against our skin, the silver would only cause mild irritation. But embedded into someone like this...? Well, there was no way he'd be able to heal himself. Even though he was not of age to shift yet, the silver would still stop his wolf DNA from accelerating the little healing ability he did have, keeping the wound open. And even if I removed the knife now, it would still take several hours before his skin would start to recover. This meant the best option was to leave the knife inside him... but even then, if

it's left in too long, it could also poison him. I could only assume this was why I had seen the vision; so I knew not to take the knife out yet. Removing it now would just cause him to bleed out quickly, but leaving it in for a bit longer may buy him some time. It was clear Aleric would need serious medical attention to survive. Something that I wasn't completely sure how to go about getting for him.

And then something came to me. Something familiar yet foreign.

...Something dark.

It was a voice coming from a small part of my mind. The voice of someone I'd been working to bury deep inside me since coming back.

And it spoke to me, convincing me to do something I would have never considered. ... You could just pull the knife out,' the voice said quietly. I looked down at Aleric's body, shocked that a part of me had even thought of doing that. How could I willingly kill him after everything that had just happened? 'You would be saving the lives of thousands if you did it,' it continued. 'No one would even know it was you. They'd say it was the rogues.'

...And I realised it was true.

If I pulled the knife out this very second and let him die, no one would even know, and it would guarantee avoiding a future where he would tyrannically reign over the entire country. So many people would live. Countless families would never have to learn the heartbreak of losing a loved one from a needless war for power. My hand twitched at my side over the thought of doing it. It would be so easy. I could redeem myself for those I'd hurt in my past because of him.

But as I looked up at his face, oddly peaceful now he'd fallen unconscious, I wondered over what laid ahead for him. Wasn't it possible to change his future just as I was now changing mine?

'You saw him in that council room,' the voice said. "You saw he is still the same man deep inside.'

But the more I thought about it, the more I became conflicted.

...And I realised that, no, what I had thought was wrong.

I mentally shook off the thoughts inside me. I knew that wasn't the same. Back in that room, he'd acted out of a just cause of trying to defend me, not out of lust for power. He showed me he was capable of good even if he went about it the wrong way.

And so, I knew what I had to do.

I stood up, running a few steps towards the main building, and screamed. I screamed as loud as I possibly could, over and over again, pleading for someone to come help. And even when my throat burned, I still didn't stop. Thankfully, help arrived fairly quickly. The warriors rushed to his side and began inspecting the wound, but their faces didn't look hopeful. I tried to tune them out but it was hard not to listen when they were talking about his low chances of survival. And as I continued to watch over him, terrified that Aleric wasn't going to make it, I scolded

myself for having even considered something so abominable. Because in my head, I knew he was capable of changing. He had been willing to die for me, to shield me from having a knife plunged into my back. How could I even begin to doubt that he couldn't become a better man?

...But I couldn't help but think of one other reason also. Though whilst it was not nearly as important, there was one other thing that had been stuck in my mind the entire time the warriors worked over him.

And that was that he had called me Aria for the very first time.

## **A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 42**

**Chapter Forty-Two** I sat by Aleric's bed in the Golden Blade's hospital, having waited a few hours now for him to wake up. Much to my relief, the doctors said he would make a full recovery despite everything that had happened. They successfully managed to remove the knife and seal him up until his body's natural healing ability could kick in.

Any minute now he would be waking up... and that ended up being exactly the case. He opened his eyes slowly, looking around the room with eyelids still heavy, until he finally saw me.

"Aria...?" he mumbled weakly.

"I'm here," I replied, moving a bit closer. I guess the nickname was staying and I still wasn't sure how to feel about it. "What happened...?" I realised he must have had some drugs left in his system as he sounded a bit out of it all still. "It was a silver knife," I explained. "You're lucky to be alive."

He just nodded drowsily, settling back into the bed again.

"You realise you shouldn't have done that, right?" I asked. "You're the future of this pack. You can't go around tanking knives for the sake of a Beta. And need I also remind you that you actually have two Betas currently? There's no reason to risk your life." He groaned out a bit, but I didn't think it was from the pain. More so because I was nagging him.

“Contrary to what you may believe, Aria,” he said quietly, closing his eyes again. “...I would actually care if you got killed.”

I didn't know how to reply to that. Instead, I sort of just... stared at him.

Did he realise how close I came to killing him?

I felt sick just thinking about it now.

His face then became calm as if he were drifting back to sleep, and so I wasn't sure if he heard what I said next. But I did end up managing to reply to him ever so quietly. “If you got killed... I'd care too,” I whispered finally, though I wasn't sure if I was telling him or myself.

Regardless of who I'd once known, this boy in front of me deserved the benefit of the doubt. I had to have faith that he could change. That there was a better future ahead of us this time. Shortly after he fell asleep again, I finally got up to leave, satisfied that he was going to be okay. I had instructions to head home without him and knew whoever was coming to pick me up would be waiting.

I gathered up my things and left the hospital, however, I was surprised by who I found by the car. Waiting for me outside was my father, staring off to the side with a look on his face that told me he was extremely unimpressed.

“...Father? What are you doing here?” I asked. He looked up as soon as he heard my voice and instantly his body relaxed. He even made up the last few feet between us quickly and pulled me into a hug. “You scared me,” he said, relief flooded in his voice. “...I'm sorry.” Even though I was fine, it felt nice to be hugged by him. I still felt safe being with him, regardless of the fact that I had spent so long toughening up these last few months. His presence brought me an immeasurable comfort.

After a few seconds, he finally pulled away, shaking his head.

“You have nothing to be sorry for. If those damn warriors had done their fucking jobs, none of this would have happened.” I was surprised to hear my father swear for the first time. He really must have been furious. I could only imagine the punishment waiting for those poor warriors once they returned home. Not that it was their fault. Aleric and I had been the ones to wander off without telling them, after all.

“It's okay, I'm fine,” I assured him. “Weirdly enough... Aleric saved my life.”

“Yes.... I heard.”

His face then became conflicted like he wanted to say something. “What is it...?” I asked. I found his reaction odd since it was unusual these days for him to hide anything from me, especially after what we'd shared. “Well, it's not that strange to hear

he saved you...," he finally said. "I've been wanting to tell you this for months now but I couldn't. In fact, I still shouldn't. But I think it's important so you can get the full picture given your history." I frowned, worried over whatever he was about to say.

"The day of the meeting for your admittance to be trained as a Beta heir," he started. "The confidential discussion didn't play out the way you probably thought. The way it was standing was a four to five sway... and Aleric held the last vote to decide. If he didn't vote in your favour, Aria, you would have lost."

I stood shocked, unsure what to make of that. If that were true, then he knowingly agreed to, not only work alongside me as a team, but also supported what would inevitably mean rejecting him as my mate one day. Multiple different theories started going through my mind as to why he would give me a chance to become Beta, but none of them really made sense. Not really, anyway.

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If anything, all I felt now was more confused. I agreed to keep the information my father told me to myself. After all, none of the participants were meant to know what went on during that meeting room whilst we stood outside. If I told anyone then my father would end up with pretty severe consequences.

A lot of time passed after the events at the Golden Blade. For starters, I turned sixteen finally.

It was something I had been waiting to happen for so long, and I was already extremely excited to start my full responsibilities as Beta heir. With it also came the added bonus of finally being able to drop high school and begin full-time training for the future ranked position

The relationship between Aleric and I became much better also. We now spent a lot of our days in the gym sparring and practising, even doing close combat. It didn't feel as weird anymore and, on a certain level, we had even built up a level of trust with each other; as most would expect after he had saved my life. Some might even say we were friendly now. However, neither of us had brought up what he'd said in the hospital since coming home, and I didn't dare ask if he'd heard my last words either... but I was getting used to him calling me Aria now at the very least. It seemed like such a small insignificant thing and yet... it had been something that held a lot of weight for me in my past life. My full name had always been something that seemed to create more distance between us, like a wall he used to keep me out.

But there were more changes too.

Ever since that day with the rogues, there had been a shift within myself too. A split. I felt like there were two Arias now. There was the 'me' now, who was strong, determined

and constantly fighting for change... and the old 'me', who was broken, anxious and constantly terrified at any given moment she would be hurt. That she would be rejected again... or worse.

Seeing Aleric dying with his life in my hands that day had only seemed to cause something inside my brain to crack, and now it was becoming painfully obvious just how different we were. It had been her voice I'd heard inside my head. The voice of a girl who would succumb to murder as a means of survival, both present and past.

And I saw her, the old Aria, every time I caught my own reflection in the mirror. It was like she was constantly there, scared and insecure, peering out from behind my eyes. Because of that, I found it difficult at times to assure myself that I was on the right path. I knew she was always so close by, just hiding behind the surface. ...Whispering every now and then my worst fears. But there was something else that bothered me too. Something that had been disturbing me for a few months now. And yet, every time I went to remember what it was, it would escape me instantly. I found my memory would begin to have lapses like this every now and then, slowly becoming more frequent the more time that went by in my new life.

Then, finally, after all these months later, it came time for Aleric's coming of age ceremony. He had turned eighteen and the event being thrown tonight was considered no light matter.

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Tonight, he would shift for the very first time and learn to become one with his wolf. The Alpha heir's eighteenth was considered the biggest event of the entire generation and took literally months of planning.

And so, of course, I was expected to attend also.

I debated wearing attire more fitting for a Beta heir; maybe some pants and a shirt. Something that would tell others I took my role seriously. But it didn't take long for me to realise how dumb that was. I hadn't spent all this time arguing for my right to be taken seriously as a female Beta just to try and impress anyone now by dressing more masculine. If they were going to doubt me over just the clothes I wore then they weren't worth my time anyway. I had a right to feel both pretty and pretty badass at the same time without their judgment. And so I went with a violet dress that matched my eyes. It was definitely more embellished and delicate than what I would have chosen normally, but given the event, I felt it was necessary. Lucy also had a ridiculous amount of fun styling my hair, something I'd normally tell her not to fuss over. But she took it to the next level and the results were, admittedly, actually very stunning.

An hour later I finally arrived at the event. A large and very swanky looking building in town had been rented out for the occasion. It was double story and had a balcony surrounding it that overlooked the forest down below. Later tonight, Aleric and a few other selected pack members would go down to that forest and witness his first shift. I wouldn't be there for that part though; it was tradition for those witnessing to be already of age so they could go running in the woods after. Looking around inside, there were a lot of faces I did recognise, and many I did not. But everyone was impeccably well dressed in their formal attire for the evening. A few I assumed were representatives from alliances in a show of good faith for Aleric's future, others I assumed were here in the hopes of finding their mates. It was common to travel to other packs if they had no luck in finding their other half within their own territories. I was grateful to not have to worry about any of that tonight myself. Whilst Aleric would be coming of age, he would still need to wait until I was eighteen for the mate bond to be formed. Until then, neither of us would feel it. Not that it mattered though. I planned on becoming Beta and doing what was necessary to fulfil that. It wasn't long after everyone arrived that Alpha Tytus gathered a crowd for a few speeches and announcements. All of which were thankfully fairly short.

I looked up at Aleric from within the crowd and saw a slight happiness in his eyes that I couldn't recall having seen the last time I'd gone to this party. He wore the same expensive and nicely fitted suit, his black wavy hair still perfectly tamed, and yet it was his expression that stood out the most. He seemed happier, if that was even possible for his usually very stoic face.

In the past, I had been paraded next to him for this entire event, the assumed future Luna. It was one of the first times we'd ever really spent an extended amount of time together. I could remember being in silent awe of him, wondering if he would really be mine one day. In true Aleric fashion though, he had barely even looked at me the whole night. I was grateful this time that no one was pressuring me to fulfil a role based on that assumption; the one where we'd be romantically involved one day. Though I doubted many would even dare to insinuate it now. These days, I'd spent so long asserting my position to be treated as a Beta heir, that I knew they'd be too scared to mention it. And so, I looked on at Aleric from the crowd only, our eyes only meeting once the speeches had finally ended. He walked over to me when everyone started to disperse and I dramatically bowed in jest at his approach, smiling

"Happy birthday, Alpha heir. May the Goddess smile upon you."

His lip tugged ever so slightly in a smile, narrowing his eyes at the scene I was making. "Cut that out, Aria." I laughed. "Well, I'm glad you look to be enjoying yourself at least." But before he could reply, suddenly Tytus shouted back over the crowd and everyone went silent.

"Oh, I almost forgot, everyone!" he yelled, getting the room's attention again. "To kick off the event, Aleric will need to partake in the first dance."

I tensed up. I remembered that dance too well. They couldn't actually make me do it again this time... could they? But to my dismay, Tytus' eyes moved to me and I realised he had thought of this already. "Aria, you are the highest-ranked female in our pack who is of similar age to Aleric. Would you mind joining him in starting tonight's festivities?" I sighed internally. I shouldn't have expected anything less from him. "It would be my honour, Alpha," I replied, a forced smile on my face. I turned to Aleric, bowing my head, before curtsying to signify my invitation. Even though I knew he wouldn't decline, I was still relieved when he held his hand out towards me.

And without any further delay, we started to dance. The music was classical and somewhat upbeat, but I managed to keep up. I had spent hours practising this type of dance in the past and yet, despite it being a very long time, I still remembered the steps perfectly

Aleric's hand was at my waist, my own against his shoulder, and it was a nice feeling to be so close to him without being afraid. We had spent so many months training together now that it had oddly brought us closer. We moved together effortlessly, everyone standing around to watch us. I expected to feel nervous by the crowd's stares, scared of making a mistake at any minute, but instead I felt comfortable enough to keep my head up. I had to remind myself I wasn't \*her\*. The old Aria. I was stronger than that.

Before long, the song came to an end and we stepped back to bow to one another, the entire crowd clapping. I smiled at him and was thankful the entire thing had gone by without a hitch. Very quickly after that did everyone around us begin to talk loudly as they walked off or went to dance themselves; the music for the next song already having started up.

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"You look really..." Aleric started to say, but his voice was cut off by the noise of the crowd and music.

I frowned, having not heard anything he said. "What did you say?" I yelled back. But I didn't get the chance to hear whatever it was because suddenly I felt a hand on my shoulder, the voice of someone by my ear. "Do you mind if I cut in for the next dance?" they asked.

I could feel my heart race and legs become weak. Because that voice was so familiar.

But it couldn't be. Could it...?

I sharply turned around and there, standing right before me... Was Cai.

Cai.

In the flesh. He was here. Really here.

He smiled at me, his golden eyes striking and somehow even brighter than how I had remembered them. "Hey, little one," he said in a casual tone. "Been a long time, aye?"

## A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 43

### Chapter Forty-Three

I stared at him in disbelief.

I never thought I was going to see him again, and yet here he was. "...Cai?" was all I managed to say. And then a flood of different emotions hit me all at once, overwhelming me.

... But there was one that ended up prevailing above any other.

I moved so quickly that I almost didn't even realise I did it... and slapped him across the cheek. Immediately, I stared down at my own hand in astonishment, bewildered at myself as he covered his face. "...I probably deserved that," he said, and half laughed the whole thing off. "Wow, you really pack a punch these days, Aria." ...Did I actually just hit him?

I thought I was happy to see him? That I wanted his forgiveness?

But I realised something else, something that had triggered me in the way he spoke.

"You don't write to me, you don't visit, and you left making me think you hated me," I snapped. "You can't just show up here, talking like you're greeting an old friend! You made that fact painfully obvious when you left, Cai."

This whole time I thought he'd hated me. I thought he didn't want anything to do with me. And yet he had walked right up, asking me to dance with him, and blurting out some ridiculous old nickname. As if nothing had happened. As if the last two years I'd spent feeling guilty had been for nothing. What had been the point in agonising over what had happened between us when it apparently had meant nothing to him? I could see several people had stopped to stare but I ignored it. I felt too tense to care at that very second.

"I'm sorry, you're right... can we please go somewhere and talk?" he asked, his eyes pleading with me.

I wanted to tell him to get lost, that I didn't want to see him, but I knew that would be a lie. I couldn't deny that a part of me had missed him and that I had wanted to see him again so badly.

"...Fine," I agreed after a pause.

But, before I could move an inch, a cold voice then spoke behind me.

“Caius,” I heard Aleric greet.

“Aleric,” came the reply.

The sentiment seemed mutual as the two regarded each other warily. You could feel the tension in the air between them. *elementos*

Considering that one of the main reasons I’d pursued becoming a Beta, rather than just running away, was to ensure a war didn’t break out between the two of them, it seemed as though my interference was already setting up their political relations on a \*great\* note....

I turned to Aleric and found he was staring at Cal, his eyes *narrowed* ever so slightly. He only looked away to give me his attention after I spoke.

“I’m sure I’ll catch you later,” I said with a smile, trying to relax any uneasiness. “But if I’m not back before your shift, I really do hope it goes well. And make sure you try and relax. It’ll make it easier.”

I realised then that giving him advice on shifting would seem odd coming from me and had to quickly backpedal. “...Or, at least, that’s what Father told me.” He looked like he wanted to say something else but he didn’t, just giving me a nod instead. And so, I followed behind Cai as he led us out onto the balcony. There wasn’t anyone else around luckily, given the event had only just started. It was probably for the best that we had some privacy to talk “You’ve grown so much since I last saw you,” he said lightly. “Guess I’ll have to find a new nickname for you now.”

But I found even this irritating. It was like he was trying to avoid explaining himself.

“Why are you here, Cai?” I asked, ignoring his comment. He leaned against the balcony rail, the night sky and forest behind him. He looked taller, more toned, if that was even possible. “My father thought that it would be best for me to come back and reconnect given it’s been a while,” he said, crossing his arms over his chest. “I had my coming of age about six months ago, so I’m technically here on official ambassador business for a little while... but I knew I had other things to take care of whilst here.” It explained why he looked a bit different. He had his wolf now. His body would have developed more during the process.

“...What other things?” “Like apologising to you,” he said, his eyes staring into mine. “In person, face to face. Not via a dumb letter or just asking about you from Myra.” “...I thought you hated me.” I couldn’t hide the pain in my own voice as I spoke and I cursed myself for letting him hear it. “You made me think that you didn’t even consider us friends when you left. I spent years blaming myself for you

leaving the way you did.” He looked away from me, seeming guilty at what I was telling him. “So, was I wrong back then?” I asked when he didn’t answer me. I could feel the tears start to bubble at my eyes. “...Weren’t we friends, Cai?” My words must have gotten to him as he inhaled sharply and still couldn’t look at me. It took several moments before he was finally able to reply.

“We were friends... I’m sorry, Aria.”

“So, why..? Why did you do that to me? I deserve an explanation for what happened because I don’t understand at all, Cai.”

“...Because I was stupid and not good at handling things,” he admitted, his speech quick as if he was confessing something that had been weighing him down. “I reacted in a way that hurt you, that I knew would hurt you, and I still did it anyway.” I wiped at the tear on my cheek angrily. So, it had been on purpose the entire time? He thought that little of me? “The truth is,” he started, trying to calm himself, “I found out only that day I was going to be sent back home... and I was devastated. I was devastated because I didn’t know how to break the news to you, Aria. And so instead of just coming clean... I went and found literally anything else to do other than tell you.”

I almost wanted to laugh at how messed up that was. His idea of finding anything to do had been finding anyone to do.

“I was destructive in my procrastination and it hurt you,” he continued. “A part of me wanted it to hurt you because, if you hated me, then it would make saying goodbye easier... and I got my wish, Aria. To the point I’ve been feeling guilty all these years, unsure how to fix it.” “A fucking apology two years ago would have been a good start,” I said bitterly through gritted teeth. “...How could you do that to me after everything we went through?”

“I really am sorry, Aria,” he said, stepping towards me. “...You have no idea how badly I regret

*it.*”

He looked so miserable and sincere in what he was telling me. I wanted nothing more than to believe him, to forgive him, but I felt like I’d be giving in too easy after the hell I went through.

...But then his words hit a part of me I’d been walling off behind my anger.

“...I missed you, Aria,” he said quietly, looking at me with his sad eyes. And even though I promised myself not to readily give in to him, I found I was helpless to stop myself from completely crumbling inside at those words, at those eyes, and that miserable

face of his. I ran to cover the distance between us and threw my arms around him. "Screw you, Cai," I mumbled against him. "...I missed you, too." I could feel him wrap his arms around me in turn and inside I knew I'd made the right choice. Maybe Myra's assessment had been correct and I had been acting too stubborn.

It was strange but, even though I knew I had grown since I'd last seen him, I found I became very aware of the fact that Cai stood over a foot taller than me as we hugged. I felt so tiny against him. And his scent... it seemed stronger and had almost something a little sweeter to it underneath the more earthy tones. I wouldn't have been able to tell unshifted had I not been so close to him right now. Had he always smelt so nice?

Behind me, the music for the next song began to start up; something slower.

Cai pulled away to look down at me. "Dance with me."

## A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 44

### Chapter Forty-Four

"...What?" I dropped my hands instantly and moved backwards out of his arms. "Feelings for me? Like friendship? Because we had always been friends in my mind, Cai. It was you who denied it, remember?" My chest was beating so hard that I felt like I was about to faint. He walked towards me, immediately closing the space I'd just made between us, and cupped my face in his hand to make me look up at him. I felt frozen in place staring up into his eyes that appeared to be completely serious. "You know what I meant, Aria," was all he said to clarify.

I felt my mind go completely blank as he held my gaze, having been taken completely off guard by his sudden confession. But finally, after a few moments, reality kicked in.

I pushed my way backwards again, confusion slowly registering over everything he'd just said.

How could that even be possible? If that was true, then why would he have waited so long to tell me? Why keep it from me for two years? And then a sickening realisation came to me. A reason why he might have waited so long before making a move on me.

"...How many times have you used that line on girls before?" I finally asked. "...You think that now, because I'm older, that I'm fair game? That I'm just like the girls you would take to empty classrooms on your lunch breaks to screw?"

His face fell and he looked taken aback. "What? Aria, no—."

"I thought you would have grown up at least a little bit whilst you were gone," I said, my voice increasingly becoming more agitated the more I thought about it.

"Is that actually all you wanted? Did you even care about fixing things between us? Or was it just that you're in town for a party and you're looking for a quick lay before you go back home again?" "Aria, no, you've got it all —." "You've been back in my life for not even twenty minutes, Cai, and already you're trying to pick me up after ignoring me for two years?"

He'd gone from admitting he'd hurt me... to trying to hit on me. Which part of that did he think I would ever consider okay? I was willing to forgive him, to move on and mend something that had been weighing me down for so long... but this...? I could feel angry tears beginning to fall down my face again as I furiously swatted them away. "You know what? No. Fuck you, Cai. I'm not going to be some name on your playboy to-do list. Fucked a Saintess? Better tick that one off, aye? Bet you won't find another one of those in the country, right?" "Aria! Will you please just—."

"I never cared that you went around doing it. It was never my place to judge. It still isn't. But don't go dragging me into some sick game to tease me, Cai. I'm not the same vulnerable girl I used to be years ago. And I don't need you to pour fake pleasantries over me just to feel validated."

"What the fuck, Aria—."

"No! Enough. There are plenty of girls who will be interested inside... but not here." He looked hurt as he went to leave but I told myself it was just because I hadn't given in to his ridiculous attempt of getting into my pants. ... Because it was better than the alternative. The alternative where he was actually being sincere and had real genuine feelings for me, not just the typical Cai feelings about women. Because that was something I didn't want to consider, something I couldn't consider. The implications of being with someone like Cai were extremely messy for myself and my current position

Not to mention I had been reborn with the purpose of surviving to stop the future from happening again. There was no room for romantic feelings or more heartbreak. I'd already lived through that once... I'd already been killed for that. I turned around to hide my face so I wouldn't have to watch him walk out. It was already too difficult to deal with without having to see those goddamn sad eyes of his.

He knew just as well as I did that us being together would only cause problems, so why would he even try? Or why not just be honest and say he only wanted a one night stand? At least then I could have turned down the offer without him making me feel so emotionally confused.

All I had wanted was for us to be friends and mend what had gone wrong. It made him seem as if he had no respect for me or our friendship if he would even attempt this. As if I were going to just fall at his feet, grateful he was even talking to me again. Is that how all the other girls reacted?

I didn't know how long I stayed out on the balcony, but it felt like an eternity. I didn't want to go back in and accidentally have to make awkward eye contact with Cai. Nor did I want to see him taking me up on my advice for him to find another girl. I'd already seen enough of Cai hitting on women for one lifetime. And yet I felt conflicted inside. A lot of thoughts and feelings I wasn't sure how to process, or know whether or not I even wanted to process them. ....You did the right thing,' I heard her whisper inside; the old me. 'Either way, this is the best thing for us.' "I know that!" I hissed angrily to myself. "Fuck... give me a break, you cynical bitch." "Are you okay?" a voice then said behind me, making me jump in surprise. I quickly turned around and saw a girl. She was young, maybe not much older than myself, with black wavy hair and bright blue eyes. I didn't recognise her from the Winter Mist but, for the lack of a better word, she was actually very beautiful. She handed me a handkerchief and I wiped my eyes with it, clearing my throat. "Oh! I'm fine,

really. Just... the cold breeze caught my eyes. Thank you though." She smiled reassuringly, seeing through my obvious lie, but ultimately decided to keep walking. She must have been able to tell from my tone that I didn't want to talk about it or want company. But as she left, I couldn't help but notice her looking around.

"...Are you trying to find someone?" I asked.

"Oh... sort of," she said, turning back around to smile timidly at me. "Well... not really. It's complicated." Her cheeks blushed slightly. "Maybe I can help? I'm from this pack."

"Oh, could you? That would be amazing." Her eyes lit up instantly with my offer and she walked back over to me eagerly. "Their name is Alistair Carter, have you heard of them before?"

I frowned. Yes, I knew who they were. "Why are you looking for them?" "Oh... well..." she said. "I don't know... it's silly." She awkwardly shuffled on their feet and tucked her hair behind her ear, embarrassed. "They sort of... saved my life."

This only made me more confused, something she noticed and quickly continued. "I was in terrible danger about two years ago and their information ended up saving my life. I'd actually be dead right now if it weren't for them," she said, talking excitedly as if retelling a fairytale. "I managed to track the letter trail. It brought me to the name of someone in a pack around this region... but I'm starting to think that maybe my search has gone cold." Yes, I knew who Alistair Carter was.

I knew who they were because they were me. It was my alias name.

This meant that this girl was likely Iris Sullivan, Alpha Raymond Sullivan's daughter from the eastern Hidden Moon pack. The same Alpha I had amassed my original fortune from. Funds acquired by... less than noble means. "...So, you want to find

them to... thank them?" Her cheeks blushed even deeper. "Ah... It might sound crazy but... I thought that maybe they could be my mate."

I stared at the girl in front of me, completely taken aback. I definitely hadn't been expecting that.

"...Why?" I asked.

"Well... they knew information about me that should have been impossible. I've been wracking my mind on how they could have possibly known what they did in order to save me... and all I could come up with was that maybe we were connected and it was divine intervention." 'Or maybe they were working with the kidnappers.' The thought came to me but I didn't say it aloud.

But as she looked at me with her big, eager blue eyes, I couldn't help but do my best not to laugh. It was horrible, I knew that, but something about the whole situation occurring was insane. I also made a mental note to ensure Lucy did a better job of hiding her tracks in the future. I was genuinely happy to see her alive and well though. Through all the upsetting things that had occurred this night, it was nice to see a product of something good that could happen. I got that same fuzzy feeling inside looking at her, just like when I looked at Myra. She shouldn't be alive right now... and yet, here she was. Because of me.

The problem now was that I couldn't tell her Alistair was actually me because it would ruin my anonymity and start a line of questions I wouldn't be able to answer. So, should I tell her that I didn't know him? I considered it for a moment but the thought of this girl spending more time travelling the country in search of someone who didn't exist made me feel guilty. She was hopeful that the love of her life was some foreign man who saved her via their deep connection. Would anyone ever be able to live up to that standard? Hell, even I could see how that would be stupidly romantic. "...I knew Alistair," I said slowly. I could feel the excitement wash over her as I said it. "But he died of old age last year, I'm sorry to say." And just like that, I forced her journey to come to an end. By claiming he had passed, it left no room for hope that he might be her mate.

I could see the light in her eyes die at my words and I really did feel terrible. But it was for the best.

"Oh! ...Oh," she said, disappointment thick in her voice. It took a few moments before she was able to force a smile and try to laugh the whole thing off. "That's okay, I guess. It was just a stupid fantasy anyway." "Ahh... I'm sure they would be glad to see you doing well though if they helped save your life, right?"

I was trying to think of things to make her feel better but I honestly was at a bit of a loss for what to say. She smiled a little brighter. "Yes, I suppose so."

"I'm Aria Chrysalis, by the way," I said and held my hand out to her.

She shook it and I could see her relax with the topic change, a more genuine smile spreading on her face. "Iris Sullivan. You said 'Aria', right? I've heard so much about you."

I cringed internally. I hoped this wasn't going to turn into a conversation about my mark

"You're a bit of an inspiration for girls like me. What with being a Beta heir and all."

"Oh?" I said. I didn't realise that would be the reputation that would precede me.

"Well, I'm the only child of an Alpha... Growing up I was forced to accept that my fate would consist of being mated off so I didn't interfere with the ranked roles."

Oh... of course. She was a ranked daughter. Naturally, she would be denied any claim to the

—Fouraged married the

position. Though I knew it would be even worse for her. Beta was one thing... but an Alpha? It was basically the same boat I was in with my marking; she would potentially be starting political unrest within her own pack if she went for the top spot. "Not to say I'd actually pursue it but... any advice?" she asked. I frowned apologetically. "I wish I had any... but if I can be of any help, let me know." My situation unfortunately was different since she didn't have a mark. I had taken a huge gamble when I invoked that lie about the Goddess guiding me and it had luckily paid off, something she wouldn't be able to do. I hoped, at the very least, that once I became Beta it would show others that females were just as capable of doing the job. "Well, if I need a Saintess, I know where to look, right?" she said with a wink

With moves like that, I knew she wouldn't have any trouble finding a mate, that's for sure. For someone who was as attractive as her, I was surprised she wasn't seeing anyone already; whether that be a destined or a chosen mate.

"But, with that said, I should probably head inside. It was nice meeting you though." She looked up at me, starting to move towards the door. "And I hope you feel better soon...you know, with the breeze and stuff."

"Oh, yeah, of course." I smiled, half laughing at myself while I wiped my face again. "Believe it or not, I'm actually meeting someone else here... I suppose you could call them a hot date. Someone alive this time though, I swear," she laughed. "But I hope we can meet again one day." "I'd like that. Good luck with the hot date, Iris." She smiled at me one last time as I watched her walk back inside. When she finally rejoined the crowd of people, I turned back around in thought over everything that had happened. It felt like such a bittersweet night. I felt so... messy inside. Cai coming back just to play with

me... but then seeing Iris alive was something I could have never anticipated. After several moments had passed, I finally sighed in defeat and stared down at my hands... only to realise I still had Iris' handkerchief.

Internally cursing, I quickly ran inside following the direction I thought I saw her go. But when I finally saw her in the corner, I stopped dead in my tracks. Because Cai was there greeting her, a big smile on his face as he brought her into a close hug, his arms wrapping around her waist intimately. But it was when they parted that I got the real kicker. Because I saw Iris kiss his cheek as they pulled away. I instantly spun on my heels and walked straight back outside without interrupting. Yes. This was exactly why I had stayed on the balcony. What was the term Iris had used? 'Hot date'?

Well, that figured. I was angry at myself for even remotely thinking Cai had been serious. I really should have

known better than to think for a second it might have been true given his history.

I mulled in my own frustration for some time before, finally, the howl of a wolf carried out into the night, breaking me away from my thoughts. And I realised that it must have come time for Aleric's first shift.

But when I looked out, below the balcony, it wasn't Aleric by the forest that caught my eye. No, it was something much closer.

And I finally realised what I had been forgetting the last few months during my busy new schedule. I finally realised what had been nagging me inside my head so badly.

Because it was standing just below the balcony staring directly up at me. V Thea.

## **A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 45**

### **Chapter Forty-Five There she was.**

Two years I'd been looking for her and yet it was like she had just fallen out of the sky, having been completely untraceable this entire time.

And the nagging I'd been feeling inside my head? I should have met Thea months ago. Aleric first introduced us before his coming of age, so they should have already been dating at this point. I remembered that she hadn't been allowed to attend tonight's event however I couldn't recall why exactly.

But she hadn't shown herself even once this entire time I'd come back. And, as far as I knew, she hadn't even shown herself to Aleric yet. And yet, here she was... Staring right up at me. Like she knew who I was. My body immediately tensed up as I realised she must have found out I'd hired someone to track her down. That would explain how she had been able to avoid being found this entire time. Well, I'd already worked out

she had begun orchestrating my death from possibly years before it had happened. Her whole sweet, naive persona had been a charade from the beginning that I'd been too blinded by my jealousy to see. So, needless to say, I knew she had it in her to be smart enough and figure out I was trying to find her.

But why would that stop her from meeting Aleric? No one knew why I wanted to find her except me. Was it because Aleric and I were closer this time? Did she feel threatened?

I could feel my heart racing just looking at her. Neither of us moved, just standing frozen in place with eyes locked knowingly. The tension between us was thick.

Aleric may have been the one to swing the sword and break me emotionally beyond repair, but at the end of the day, my journey to death had started because of her. Because she had wanted Aleric for herself... because she had wanted to be Luna.

Suddenly, Thea was the first to break eye contact. She turned around and started walking towards the exit, blending in with the crowds of people below.

But if this was my only chance to catch her then I couldn't let it go to waste. I needed to follow her. Maybe find out where she was living.

I quickly kicked my heels off, cursing my choice in footwear, and ran through the mass amounts of people, down the stairs, until I stood just below the balcony where I'd first seen her.

I had scanned every face I ran past, scrutinising them for any similarity to Thea... But none of them were her.

...She was gone.

I couldn't see her anywhere and, without any decent sense of smell, I wasn't going to be able to track her either. She had completely managed to avoid passing me and maybe had even left

the party already by the time I'd gotten downstairs. Too many people had slowed me down as I had tried to catch up to her quickly. "Fuck!" I screamed, punching the tree next to me out of frustration. I'd been so close. She had really been here. Should I have just let her go, watching where she went before I ran downstairs? Should I have yelled out to her? What would I have even said? 'Hey, I think you killed me in my past life, stay there while I ask you some questions in case you're going to try that again'? I ended up waiting below that balcony for an hour, scanning the crowds for any sign of Thea, but she never returned. And the more time that passed, the angrier I became at myself. Everything that had happened this night had been a disaster and I had allowed myself to become invested in the wrong things.

When I finally conceded she wasn't coming back, I headed straight home. I was completely shaken by the entire encounter and knew there was nothing good waiting for me if I went back inside. It seemed like an obvious choice that I should give the rest of the event a miss.

However, even once I returned home, I could still feel myself shaking.

But I didn't feel scared like when I had seen Aleric for the first time. I didn't feel like breaking down and crying, or even wanting to run away.

No... this time?

I felt pissed.

The next day I went to the gym before work to get my mind off everything that had happened. It was a public gym that had private rooms on the second floor, of which ranked members could use. I usually had the room booked permanently out every day in the event I needed it; which normally was exactly the case whenever I had free time.

I was grateful for the space as usually the public area was overly occupied. Not that it was a major issue, just that having constant stares and whispers from other people always made a workout less pleasant. "Knock, knock," a voice suddenly came from the door. I had been hitting a punching bag for the last thirty minutes, imagining in my head that it was alternating between one of two people; one of those two being the very person now standing at the door.

"Cai," I greeted, hitting the bag again but this time with excessive force. Just in case he didn't get the hint from my tone.

I continued to train but his lack of a response was unnerving.

"What do you want?" I finally asked after he hadn't said anything. I straightened up to face him and wiped at the sweat on my forehead, completely out of breath. "Uhh...", was all he said when I turned to him. He shook his head as if trying to remember why he was here himself. "Right. I was hoping we could talk about last night."

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"Why the fuck...", I said between breaths, "...do you think I'd want to talk to you?"

"Because I brought you a gift," he said with that stupid charismatic smile, holding up a plastic bag with something inside.

I warily regarded it. "Come on, Aria. Just give me some time, please?" I exhaled, annoyed. "Fine." I'd left my clothes and towel over by the door, and so I walked over to begin throwing it on over my work out skins.

“But for the record...,” I said, grabbing the plastic bag from his hand after I’d changed, “this is the shittiest gift wrapping I’ve ever received.”

He laughed. “Apologies, it was a last minute gift.”

I threw my backpack and towel over my shoulder, brushing past him to leave the gym, and walked across the road to where a small park was; all without even looking back once. There was a large tree that was further in and mostly private. I sat myself down there under its shade and waited for Cai to take a seat on the grass next to me.

“So... what could you have possibly gotten me to make up for that bullshit move you pulled last night?” “Well... I asked Myra what you like these days and she suggested this.” I pulled out a small foam box from inside the bag that felt warm to touch. So, of course, inside contained the one thing Myra knew I was weak for; nuggets and fries. “You brought me fried food to the gym?” I asked. “Are you telling me you don’t want it?” He tilted his head slightly as he looked at me, almost as if he knew what my answer was already. I sighed.

Just because I was angry at him, it didn’t mean I had to take it out on the food. And so, I started eating it, noticing the taste was even similar to the one from the cottage cafe. He either found a place just like it or went the extra mile to get it from the usual spot.

“Is that the necklace Myra gave you?” he asked, after watching me eat for a while.

I looked down, seeing that I’d thrown it on with the rest of my clothes like normal. It was more of a habit than anything to wear it these days and typically I didn’t even notice it.

“...Yes,” I answered. Was this his attempt at trying to get me to remember the ‘good ol’ days’?

“So, are you going to apologise to me then?” I asked, pushing past the small talk before he managed to make me forget why I was upset. “I assume that’s why you’re here since you’ve come all this way, seeking me out with a peace offering.” “Depends,” he said, lying down flat on the grass behind him, using his arms to support his head.

The sun was shining through the trees and creating a shadow pattern across his face. Somehow the little bits of sunshine made his eyes burn brighter. But I was more mesmerised by the way the shadows moved every time the wind picked up ever so slightly.

“On...?” I prompted, trying to refocus back on the issue at hand. He closed his eyes, his expression becoming completely relaxed. “On whether or not you’re going to actually listen to me today.”

I felt a pang of guilt for a split second when I realised it was true that I had continuously cut him off last night. Maybe he really did have a good explanation? But it was a short lived sensation once I reminded myself about why I was angry in the first place. If anything, it was another reminder that Cai had that way about him; that presence that always made me want to give in and forgive him, even if I didn't want to. He was so stupidly charismatic with an energy that made me want to be around him. "How about you apologise first, and I'll decide if I want to listen to you?" I asked, increasingly becoming warier at my own resolve the more we spoke. He smirked at my compromise before deciding to accept.

"Okay, sure... I am sorry, Aria," he started. "I'm sorry that I told you I had feelings for you."

It wasn't the exact wording I'd been looking for but I suppose it was the same point.

I opened my mouth and was about to accept his apology, but he kept talking before I could speak

"...I'm sorry that I told you I had feelings for you when I thought you felt the same way." He suddenly opened his eyes again and met mine directly, making me freeze. "I'm sorry that I didn't just keep it to myself, or at least wait to tell you, so I didn't upset you."

I felt my chest going fast. Was he just playing more cruel jokes on me?

"What are you...", I started, unable to find any words to aptly describe what I wanted to say. "Why are you doing this? Is sleeping with me really that important to you?" He pushed himself up onto his side, using his arm to prop himself up. "Do you honestly think that's what I'm trying to do?"

"I don't see why not? What you're proposing is insane. It just feels like you haven't changed at

*all.*"

"How would you even know, Aria?" he asked, getting annoyed. "I stopped all that crap as soon as I realised how I felt about you. When I left the Winter Mist, it didn't take long for me to figure out nothing felt the same anymore. I still went around with girls, sure, but it was just... sex. And then eventually that wasn't enough either and I just stopped completely." "So why wait so long to tell me?"

"Because I've spent the last six months trying to find my mate," he said, still sounding annoyed. "I figured if I found her then I wouldn't need to worry about my feelings for you anymore. But I didn't find her, Aria, and instead, the first glimpse of you I had in two years

was watching you dance with another man. And I realised in that moment that it wouldn't even matter if I found her... because I just wanted you."

I stared at him, caught up in what felt like real sincerity, and a part of me even almost believed him for a second. But it didn't last long.

...And I couldn't stop myself from snorting in my failed attempt to contain my laughter.

"Aria! Seriously?" he asked, sounding hurt. I stood up and grabbed my bag, rifling through it for something. "I've got to get to work now... but here," I said, handing him a handkerchief. "I borrowed this from a girl I met last night. I believe, in her words, you were her 'hot date' for the evening? You two sure seemed close."

He looked surprised yet confused, but he grabbed it from my hand to look at it anyway. "Try harder next time, Cai," I said, still smiling. "Oh and... return that to Iris for me." I started walking to my car, thankful that I'd managed to get my license so I wasn't stuck waiting around for a cab or driver anymore. "Aria, wait!" Cai said, yelling after me. But I didn't stop.

I didn't stop when my forced smile faltered immediately.

I didn't stop when I threw my bag into the back seat and turned the car ignition. And I didn't stop when I felt my eyes begin to tear up as I drove off.

## **A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 46**

### **Chapter Forty-Six**

Ever since Aleric and I had been attacked by rogues at the Golden Blade pack, we had been assisting with the investigation into what had actually happened.

The whole thing had seemed so weirdly targeted. Why did they decide to come out of hiding? Was it a purposeful attack on Aleric and I? And, most importantly, had someone leaked information since they knew we would be there? Needless to say, the entire Winter Mist was furious about the whole thing and had demanded answers that the Golden Blade didn't have. They were just as confused by the entire ordeal as we were. Because of that, they were forced to cooperate with us during our investigation; much to their displeasure, I was sure. It had been months since we'd had any leads though. There also hadn't been any trace of a camp on their territory, making us believe they probably had no intention of staying in the area for long when they attacked. This was news that only made the whole thing even more worrisome.

The incident had severely shaken me as well. Not just because of Aleric, but because it made me realise just how quickly I could feel unprepared in battle. My advantage in a fight had always been defence tactics, but the rogues gave me a shocking awakening to

how sometimes survival meant being able to complete a finishing blow... something my current strength seemed to be

lacking, as evident from the rogue who didn't stay down during our fight.

Because of this, I had started carrying one of their silver daggers on me to give myself the upper hand if I was ever in that situation again. Specifically... the knife they'd pulled out of Aleric. The other one had already been locked up in evidence before I could get my hands on it and they were pretty hard to come by without prior approval. But more importantly, I found the whole thing weirdly symbolic to look at whenever I strapped the sheath around my leg. It was something that could kill our kind so easily... yet it had been a moment in my life I'd chosen a path to save a life instead.

However, the fact that rogues had two of these in their possession was crazy in itself. The silver that was used to easily poison, restrain and kill our kind was no ordinary thing and was referred to as silver 'kissed by moonlight'. Its properties included being able to stop the inflicted from being able to use their abilities; whether that be silver handcuffs to stop shifting and strength, or a knife to stop healing. The way the ore was handled before being crafted was a closely guarded secret and I'd heard was also very difficult to execute; knowledge reserved strictly to Elders and a select few only.

And so, whilst handcuffs were a staple within most packs, a knife was far harder to come by since many refused to forge them; this being due to their incredibly deadly potential. Of course, I took advantage of the situation to acquire one for myself because of that. But it did raise several questions about how the rogues managed to get their hands on them to begin with.

"You alright?" a voice yelled out. I felt that I could have died of a heart attack, almost falling over from shock

I'd been stuck in my own thoughts so deeply that I hadn't even realised Aleric had arrived at work before me.

I couldn't deny that seeing him after I saw Thea last night felt kind of strange. Like I knew things were wrong. I'd now changed the timeline so much to something new and unpredictable that I was blind in many areas to what would happen next. Something I wasn't used to feeling after having a literal ability to see the future sometimes. But it did tell me one thing; that Thea knew I was after her. I could only imagine she showed herself last night to send me a message that she was aware I had been looking for her. I wondered why she might have thought I was doing that. Did she maybe have the plan to take over as Luna already when she discovered I was tracking her? Did she even realise that I didn't want the Luna position? That I'm not even a threat other than the fact I'm technically Aleric's fated mate? Not that she could prove that either.

This posed an interesting line of questions to go through my head though. If she hadn't discovered I was looking for her, would she have even come after me this time around?

or could she have become Luna, and I a Beta, without all the drama? Had there been a chance that Thea could have changed for the better, just like Aleric seemed to have? ...Or, more troubling, a part of me wondered if it was irrelevant who she was this time. That maybe it was actually revenge I was after... not self-preservation. I looked at Aleric and he seemed... the same. He looked tired. Most likely from the big event the night before. But he didn't look like someone who had just met a girl he was romantically interested in and he wasn't treating me any differently. The latter being something I had to remind myself. Especially since that old instinct to stay away from him was building itself up inside my chest again. Thea was a painful reminder of the past, something I'd been doing so well to overcome lately.

I took a deep breath and forced a smile on my face.

"Hey, yeah! I'm fine!" I said, probably a little too cheerily. I knew I needed to quickly change the topic away from me. "You look like you had a long night."

To be honest, I was surprised he even made it in today. I remembered my first shift; I was exhausted to the point of not wanting to leave my bed.

...Or maybe that was because I'd been depressed, not wanting to see Aleric again after the disaster that was my shifting ceremony. "Yeah. But it was good," he said with a yawn. He was leaning over some files on the table and looked about ready for a nap. "I'm sure it was. How are the new claws?" He just raised an eyebrow at me. "I'm itching to try them out properly." I laughed and walked past him to put my bag down in the little office area we had. "We might have a lead by the way." "Oh, yeah?" I asked. senast ARANYA TETAP

ENUETTE DE VITE V PRESTO I went to Aleric's side to look at whatever he was examining and found a few field reports from border patrol.

But next to me, I noticed him then sniff at the air.

"Ah, sorry. I came straight from the gym and didn't have time for a shower," I apologised, laughing as I quickly stepped away. "That's probably an assault on your new senses." Only he looked confused. "It's not that."

I smiled and went to retrieve my bag again. "It's all good. I was going to take a shower when I got here anyway but I didn't expect you to be in so early. Let me go do that real quick and I'll meet you outside in ten?"

"Hey, Aria... did you see Cai today?" he asked, making me stop dead in my tracks at the doorway. I was startled that he could tell. I was pretty sure I'd only lightly brushed past Cai to leave the gym and otherwise hadn't touched him. "Briefly... why?" "...No reason, just surprised. Last I saw of you two, you were slapping him in the face." I felt my cheeks burn. "Oh. Right." What could I say? We didn't exactly make up but it felt weird to be discussing what happened with Cai to

Aleric. "He stopped by the gym and tried to apologise again for being an ass. I took the free food and left it at that."

He looked like he wanted to ask something else but decided to remain silent, just nodding instead.

Very quickly, the room was then filled with a weird awkward air as neither of us knew how to navigate this conversation topic further. We just stared at one another uncomfortably. "...Okay," I started, breaking the silence. "Wel... I'm going to go have a shower. I'll meet you outside?" "Yep," he replied instantly and quickly turned back to the papers on the table, grateful for the topic change. "Yep." I repeated the word to myself and left immediately. Ten minutes later, we were in Aleric's car on our way to the southside of the Winter Mist's territory. Apparently, there had been a rogue sighting on our very own land and we were going to aid in the search to see if we could find anything.

"Do we know anything else about the sighting?" I asked as we pulled up on the side of the road.

The journey had only taken about twenty minutes to arrive but we would need to go on foot from here. The rogue was spotted by a patrolling wolf in the woods nearby. "Not really. They said it was probably just one... but they couldn't tell for sure how many." Side

I frowned as I grabbed my backpack from the car. "Seems sort of strange given how dishevelled the ones we saw looked. You'd think they would stink and be easy to track."

Aleric just shrugged. "They managed to get into the Golden Blade just fine. We'll go have a look anyway. Most of the patrols have already combed through here but we're just going to give it a quick once over." Though 'quick' turned out to be an inaccurate statement in the end.

We ended up being in the woods for over two hours searching but hadn't managed to find anything. Not a single track or scent.

I was thankful that at least one of us was able to shift now though. Aleric remained in his human form since mastering a wolf in a day was almost impossible, but the stronger senses were definitely coming in handy for the job at hand. I was pretty sure I would have gone in a circle by now had he not been keeping track of where we'd been.

"I'm not seeing anything, Aleric," I finally sighed in defeat. He frowned. "I just don't see how that's possible. We have to be missing something." I went and sat down by a stream that was running by us, splashing some of the cold water against my face. It felt nice after all the walking we'd been doing. "I don't know... maybe they have a way of sneaking in or masking their scent?" But just as I spoke the words aloud, something then caught my eye.

“Like what?” he asked. “Like...,” I said slowly, moving to inspect the rock closer. “Symbols carved along the water to tell them where to go?”

The stream here was a part of a much larger network of multiple rivers that connected our territory to the neighbouring ones. It was incredibly vast and veined out in all sorts of directions.

Aleric moved to my side and crouched down to see what I was looking at. “You wouldn’t be able to trace their scent easily... and it would be like a maze trying to follow anyone without knowing the way... that’s fucking brilliant, Aria.” I smiled in excitement and turned to look up at Aleric... only to find him much closer than I had expected, him already looking directly at me. He appeared to be just as genuinely excited as me... and, for a split second, I almost forgot how those green eyes used to terrify me so much.

...But the eye contact proceeded to last a little \*too\* long. “...Follow the stones?” I asked, breaking the weird air again.

“Yep,” he replied quickly and stood up. “...Yep,” I whispered to myself, following after him.

We walked downstream for some time, following the trail of symbols carved into the rocks. It was pretty smart of them to have figured this out. They must have ended up being seen by patrol as they went out to hunt for food. Because of that, it was impossible to know how long Mason

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they’d actually been hanging out around here. We ended up walking for another ten minutes or so before we could finally see what looked to be a small cave nestled just out of the way. If we hadn’t been following the symbols, it was likely we would have completely missed it. “Can you tell if anyone might be inside?” I asked as we peered cautiously into the entrance, Aleric sniffed at the air, trying to focus. “It’s still too hard with all the water.” I nodded in thought. This meant that we were going to need to go in blind and alone. If we left now to get help, then we’d be taking the risk of them discovering our scents and moving before we returned. This was our only chance at getting real answers. I looked around, searching for anything odd, but nothing seemed out of place, at least. I suppose that was all part of the point in throwing people off though. Aleric looked to me and we both silently acknowledged it was time to enter. Inside was deceptively larger than it had appeared outside... and it was damp. But surprisingly, it wasn’t the smell of mould or moisture that was the most off-putting. There was definitely something far more pungent in the air that I didn’t need a stronger sense of smell for. I almost felt bad for Aleric as he was probably already overwhelmed enough for one day without this.

We continued to walk for some time in the dimly lit system. Only bits of natural light and the dying flames of a few torches further in were lighting the way. "Up ahead," Aleric then suddenly warned quietly. I could only just make out something bright ahead where the cave opened up to a larger space.

"What is it?"

"Looks like... a camp," he whispered, squinting his eyes. "Don't let your guard down." I nodded and we kept walking. When we got to the large area it definitely looked like multiple people had been living there. Maybe even for months. It was a full-on settlement for lack of a better word, equipped with basic beds and furniture. Articles of clothing and even a few books were scattered around too.

"No wonder I can't smell anything," Aleric said after a few minutes, kicking over a bin full of putrid meat. There looked to be several others scattered around too which I could only imagine held the same contents. "Fucking disgusting."

I wrinkled my nose as I continued to look around the room. It was obviously the source of the overbearing smell we'd been experiencing the entire time we'd been in here. How desperate were the rogues that they were having to rely on spoiled meat at times to survive? ...But why would they even bother when they were in a forest with a river so close? Surely, they had other options to try first if they were that hungry? And then I realised exactly why one might keep rancid spoiled meat around.

...To hide a scent.

"Aleric!" I screamed. He looked up surprised at my abrupt outburst... but it was too late.

Because suddenly a wolf came flying out of nowhere and tackled Aleric to the ground. It was an ambush.

## **A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 47**

### **Chapter Forty-Seven**

An intense fight ensued as we were quickly engaged by a group of wolves.

To my surprise, Aleric had already taken two down and was on to his third before even a few minutes had passed

But there were so many more to go.

The bottom line was that we weren't going to win this, and we both knew it.

I had two wolves on me and I had so far been holding my own against them well. Neither of them had expected me to be able to fight so well underage and it showed. They moved as if assuming I wouldn't be able to keep up, but they were wrong.

"Aria!" Aleric yelled. "I can hear there's more coming. We need to go."

I knew he was right. We'd vastly underestimated how large this cave system was. With the number of wolves here, it seemed plausible that it expanded out more than what we could see here. Most likely, there were hidden tunnels somewhere which would explain how th appeared to be coming out of nowhere. Our best option was to run. Suddenly, Aleric screamed out in pain. I wanted to turn and check what had happened but the two on me weren't letting me take my eyes off them for even a second. They were determined t o finally get a hit on me as their frustration had only been growing the entire time I'd been dodging them.

But I didn't need to wait long in order to find out if Aleric was okay.

Because I soon heard the sound of someone shifting, followed by an encore of whimpers, howls, growls... and flesh tearing. A lot of flesh tearing. I quickly unsheathed my knife, waiting for the moment I knew would be coming, and was pleased he didn't keep me waiting long.

The largest black wolf I ever saw then came bounding out of nowhere and tackled one of the two away from me, snapping towards his throat for a final blow. I'd only ever seen Aleric's wolf a handful of times but it was always an impressive sight, as with any other Alpha wolf.

The second rogue naturally tried to turn his attention to Aleric in order to help his comrade, but that was a mistake. I moved lightning fast to kick him to the ground, pinning him in place with my legs... and instantly embedded the silver knife into his chest.

Finally exhausted, I leaned back and looked around me. It seemed like Aleric had killed off the entire room as the corpses around us began to shift back into their human bodies.

But it had been a complete massacre. I heard Aleric then whimper, drawing my attention back, and I knew what he was trying to say. He'd mentioned there were more coming and it was a reminder that we didn't have long to leave. I nodded that I understood and looked down to retrieve my knife... only to find the wolf had reverted back to his human self underneath me.

Instantly, I felt my entire body freeze up at the sight of who laid there. But it was impossible, wasn't it? Surely it was someone who just looked similar...

Because under me laid the body of someone I could have sworn was Doctor Andrews, the future head pack doctor that would replace my mother one day. Aleric barked out loudly next to me but I was barely able to register him with what I was seeing. It literally didn't make any sense. He couldn't be a rogue because in two years he would be a doctor in our pack. It had to be someone else. Maybe his brother or another relative. Or maybe not anyone related at all and I just couldn't see clearly in the dim light or with the dirt

on his face.

Aleric suddenly grabbed my shirt in his mouth and started to drag me away from the body before I even had a chance to retrieve my dagger. "Okay, okay!" I finally said as I started to get a hold of myself.

He had managed to drag me a couple of feet before the hard, stony ground cutting into my legs had been enough to snap me out of it.

I stood up as quickly as I could, still shaken, but managed to make the rest of the way outside and sprint back into the woods.

It was unlikely that they would waste time chasing us but we continued to run regardless. I followed Aleric the entire time, trusting him to know the way back even though it all looked the same to me.

It was amazing to see him in so much control though... or maybe it was just that Aleric and his wolf were both on the same page anyway in that moment. Nevertheless, it was still impressive given most people took at least a month to begin moving so fluidly in that form. But as I inspected him, I couldn't help but notice he was limping ever so slightly on one of his back legs. I assumed this was why he'd cried out earlier. It didn't take us long to get back to the car and I immediately doubled over panting, now out of breath from having ran the entire way. I looked up towards Aleric, only to find him staring at me by the car, almost expectantly.

"What?" I asked between breaths. He just pointed his nose towards the car boot and back to me. Oh. He must have had a spare change of clothes in there. ...And he didn't want to shift in front of me because it would mean I'd see him naked. Out of all the crazy shit I had just seen... Aleric's naked body was by far the least of concerns... and it wasn't even a new thing for me. It wasn't like I hadn't seen his entire body unclothed before in my past life. But I suppose he didn't know that. I exhaled quickly one last time in mild frustration before going to open the boot for him. He just continued to stare at me until I walked around to the front of the car to give him the privacy he wanted.

It only took a few moments to shift back but I could see his mood had turned just as dark as

his wolf's fur coat. Probably directed at me because of what had happened in the cave.

"We need to hurry," he said, jumping back into the driver's seat. "They will be clearing the entire place out before we get back." Well, we could both agree on that at least. Aleric sped the entire way until we made it to the closest patrol tower, but he had been right. By the time they did manage to get back to the cave, all the rogues had left and managed to take most of their belongings with them. Even all the bodies Aleric amassed had incredibly been

removed already. Only the larger furniture items remained.

It was an impressive effort given only the hour they probably had to pull it off. But this only told us that they must have had another shelter nearby. There was no other possible way they could have moved that many people and dead bodies over an extended distance, without leaving a single trace or track. The search continued for the rest of the day and ended up expanding out to the entire woods nearby

But they didn't end up finding anyone. For now, the trail had gone.

"It was incredibly stupid to go in there alone," my mother scolded as she examined me.

Per protocol, I had been sent to the hospital for a check-up as soon as Aleric and I had finished giving our report to the patrol team. This was regardless of whether or not I'd actually been hurt and was more of a paperwork formality.

I turned my head away defiantly. "You can't keep saying that forever, you know? I have a job and a responsibility to the pack now. If Aleric and I hadn't gone in, we might have missed our

ce at getting answers. Besides, the report only said one rogue was sighted, not thirty. I didn't even know rogues could band together in numbers like that."

She grabbed at my chin and forced me to look at her. "Being responsible for the pack due to a job, doesn't mean dying for them." Her words hit hard considering I'd literally done that once already. Did she know? Had my father ended up disclosing my past? I'd personally been avoiding telling her to not upset her; after all, she had been killed in that prior timeline.

I didn't mind if she knew the truth but her expression seemed to be one of only a concerned mother, not of someone who knew my history.

Her worry did make me realise though that things could have been different in the past. Would I have tried to run away sooner if my mother had still been alive? Would she have tried to rescue me?

I sighed, pulling my face away. "I'm sorry." But as her words made me recount the past, it also reminded me of what I'd seen in the cave. "By the way..." I said, thinking. "Do you know where I can find Doctor Andrews?" She frowned. "Doctor Andrews...? I don't think we have a doctor by that name." anderen en

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My chest tightened as I heard the words I hadn't wanted to hear.

So, it was true then. He wasn't employed here. And yet, to become the head doctor, he would have already needed to be well into his career at the Winter Mist. It would be impossible to achieve that position within the next two years without that experience.

Something was definitely wrong and I needed more answers.

That night, I went to Lucy and asked her to touch base with the private investigator. I needed to know how Thea had shown up within our own territory without him realising, how she had managed to find me... and now I also needed any information he could find out about a Doctor Clive Andrews.

I needed to know if he was alive and living in another territory right now... and, if not, then maybe it would help me come to terms with what I thought I saw in that cave; that maybe him being a rogue was possibly true. Had I changed something so drastically in this life that he'd become a rogue...? Or was it that he had always been a rogue, even in the past, and no one knew? By that logic, it probably wasn't even his real name.

This would probably be the PI's last chance though since, given their abysmal results, I considered it was time to find a different investigator. This one had let Thea stroll right across the border and hadn't even realised. What had I been paying him the last two years for?

And though I tried not to think about it, I did wonder if maybe Thea had somehow managed to manipulate him into betraying me. Had he actually been playing me as a double agent this entire time? Perhaps it was time to meet with him in person and get the answers from him myself.

In the meantime though, as I waited the few days it would take for Lucy to report back to me, I decided to just do my best to push it all out of my head. Well... everything except one thing. "He said what to you?!" Myra said, her mouth completely ajar. I could hear the sound of her fork dropping onto her plate in surprise.

I had decided to meet with Myra a couple of days after the cave incident to hopefully clear at least some of my more... conflicted thoughts. I needed someone else to agree with me that Cai was acting immature and that what he was saying was

actually ridiculous. And so, I told her everything that had happened over the first two days Cai had come back.

“He said that he had stopped messing around and tried to tell me again that he... had feelings for me. Like real ones. Allegedly.” I looked back down at my food, not wanting to look her in the eyes during the embarrassing conversation topic.

“... And what did you say?!” she almost yelled.

I looked around and saw several people were now gawking our way.

1 “Shhh, Myra, people are staring,” I pointed out. She blinked a few times and tried to calm herself. “Sorry... I’m just completely surprised. Aren’t you happy though?”

“Happy...?” I looked at her confused, but it didn’t compare to the absolute shock at what she said next.

“Well... I mean, you obviously had feelings for Cai back when we used to all hang out together. I figured you’d be happy he confessed finally.”

## **A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 48**

### **Chapter Forty-Eight**

Now it was my turn to drop my cutlery, almost choking on my food. “I’m sorry? No. I did not have feelings for Cai,” I said, still coughing a little. I took a sip of water to clear my throat. “It was you who had feelings for Cai, remember? And Cai doesn’t have feelings for me either... unless you’re talking about the kind of feelings that find him inside a girl’s skirt for a day.”

“Bullshit, Aria!”

I quickly looked up to meet Myra’s fiery eyes. It was the first time I’d ever heard her swear or even sound so angry. I was completely taken aback. “Myra...?” She closed her eyes and composed herself for a second. “Sorry, sometimes I think you’ve rubbed off on me a little too much.”

My lip twitched in a smile. It was nice to see Myra standing up for herself so confidently for once... even if she was passionate about the wrong thing in this case.

“Look, I didn’t have feelings for Cai,” she stressed. “You need to realise our lives aren’t the same, Aria. I’m not anyone special. I don’t have a rank, my parents aren’t famous, and I don’t have any cool marks or prophecies about my future mate... I’m just an average pack member, trying to contribute where I can.”

“Myra-.”

I went to disagree with her about not being anyone special, but she just held up her hand to indicate she wanted me to let her finish.

“I’m not anyone special, Aria,” she insisted. “Without intervention, I most likely would have lived and died without ever having met a ranked member my entire life. I would have become of age, become mated to an average joe just like myself, had a few children, and then died. But then one day I saw you in the library at school, just like I had every other day prior, except this time you seemed different. You had stood up to Braydon that day, something so o character for your reputation back then... but it was more than that. Truthfully, when I saw you that day, you looked almost... sad. And so, despite all my better judgment, I still went and spoke to you for the first time.” It was hard to hear her say these things about herself, especially since I cared for her so deeply. But I didn’t dare to interrupt her. It felt like something that had been weighing on her for a while and she needed to speak.

“Honestly, talking to you that day in the library was the most nerve–wracking thing I’d ever done. And then, by some miracle, you, the Beta’s only child, and Cai, an alpha heir, saved me... and suddenly I’m in a new world where, not only are two incredibly important people talking to me, but they want to be my friend?! I didn’t understand why. Like... why me...?”

She looked up to me finally and I could see her eyes had gone watery. And it hurt me to see her like that. She didn’t understand how important she was to me. How much I had needed her

over these years. It was because of her I had started to trust others again. “So, no, Aria,” she said, “I don’t have feelings for Cai in the way you may think. I don’t have feelings stronger than any of the other non-ranked girls in this entire pack... or any other pack for that matter. An Alpha heir speaks to me, is kind to me, and you think I’m in love with him? Hell yes, I am! I would probably act the same if it were Aleric, too. You’re all goddamn celebrities in our eyes! But I know my place, and that’s not with an Alpha. I’m not meant to become a Luna or any other ranked member’s mate.”

I felt guilty for bringing it up now, for flaunting something without realising. It was easy for me to forget my privilege having lived two incredibly important lives around influential people. And yet I’d done nothing to deserve it. I knew someone like Myra would be far more suited to a Luna position with her ability to identify the struggles of others easily and help them. She cared about everyone around her, regardless of who they were. “Myra, you’re completely wrong,” I said sadly. “You have no idea how important you are.” She shook her head but still gave me a small smile. “Cai is a really good guy at heart...,” she said, bringing the conversation back. She was trying to take the attention off herself. “But I think you already know that. I also saw how you used to look at him, how you were around him, and I know you don’t have the same excuse as me as to why you acted that way. So, I think we both know he’s not the

issue here. No, I think your real problem is with yourself, Aria ... not Cai." I frowned. "No... but I told you, remember? He was with that girl, Iris, the other night. And it's so much more complicated than that, Myra. My position complicates it." "...But did you see them actually go home together? Or even properly kiss?" No... I hadn't. I hadn't technically seen anything other than them hugging and Iris pecking his cheek. Technically, both of those things could be considered normal actions between two people who were close.

"I'm not stupid," she said, resting her head on an arm she'd propped up on the table. "I realise there's a lot about yourself you've never told me and that's fine. It's not for me to pry into your private life and I've always just been grateful to spend time with you. But if there is one thing that I've come to realise over these last few years, it's that, whatever it is you've kept hidden, it hurt you bad. Badly enough that you've completely rejected the idea of becoming Luna, of becoming Aleric's mate, or of even getting close to anyone. And it's not healthy."

"That's not true! I'm close with you, Myra," I argued.

"More than others? Sure, I can see that. But even I don't know much about you, Aria. Not on a deeper level. From what I can tell, it looks to me as if you've rejected the idea of being with Cai for the same reason you were so sad in the library that day. Because of whatever this pain is you're trying so hard to hide."

I felt sick. I had never expected our conversation to turn out like this. I'd thought I had been keeping that part of myself hidden from her well since she had never mentioned it, but this entire time it was actually just because she didn't think she was worthy enough to know? And if that were true, then did Myra think all these years that I didn't trust her? Am I part of the reason for why she thinks so low of herself? I wondered if I'd just been upfront and honest

with her from the beginning, whether or not she would have realised just how important she was. That there wasn't actually any reason to feel so distant from me. "I'm sorry I've let it get to this point," I said finally after some time. I could hear the waver in my voice as I struggled to not become too overwhelmed by my own emotions. "I should have told you the truth sooner."

She smiled a little. "I didn't say all of this to guilt you into telling me. I'm just trying to give you my perspective on this whole situation. I know you care about me, even if you've had to hide things."

"No, I get what you're saying... but you don't fully understand and that's entirely my fault," I said and stood up, digging around in my wallet for some money to leave on the cafe table. "You need to hear this from my point of view, and you need to know why I haven't told you. But not here... there are too many people."

Maybe then she would stop putting herself down because of me.

I held my hand out to her and she grabbed it, her face still looking a little sad. And together we walked outside, making our way up the street to where I'd parked my car. I needed to tell her. It was time. Myra had been the one thing in my life I could depend on and yet I had failed to do the same for her. How long had she been hurting because of me? I had been so selfish in my own world, relying on her whenever it suited me, and hadn't even realised the damage I'd been doing to someone I cared about.

...But what was she going to think once I told her? I knew I didn't need to worry about whether she would believe me, but the issue was how she would react. Would she become afraid of Aleric just as I had been? Would she finally understand why a future with Cai wouldn't lead to anything better?

Because right now it must have seemed like everything was so black and white for her. That any feelings I may have would actually be of consideration when it came to being romantically involved with someone like Cai.

Because at the end of the day, being with a different Alpha heir was actually just the same. Maybe worse. Aleric or Cai, it didn't matter. Both of them would mean I'd be forced to become Luna one day and face different but similar difficulties. And that was only if I managed to live long enough to get that far. I'd worked so hard to become a Beta heir and was planning to use it as my reason for rejecting Aleric; even if that meant invoking the Elders to enforce it. No one was going to be able to question it since it was so I could become Beta.

But if I then went on to reject my pack's future Alpha, forsaking the prophecy that said our union would bring success to the Winter Mist, before ultimately running off with a different Alpha? I had no doubt that I'd be marked as a traitor and would ignite a war in the process. A war that would maybe end with Cai dead on that battlefield again. Or maybe even Aleric this time too. It was possible that they would just both end up killing each other if I refused to intervene like in the past.

My mind pictured the two of them dead in that field and I shivered. No feelings I may or may not have was worth that. Not to mention the countless lives that would be lost due to war. Hadn't I just seen with my own eyes how my selfish actions could complete your eyes more hurt innocent people around me? Thousands of people out there, just like Myra, who would be caught up in the whims of people who were considered more important. "Aria, you're digging into my hand," Myra said quietly, breaking me from my thoughts. I looked down to see my nails clawing into her skin and quickly let go. It had been completely unintentional and now made me feel so much worse. "I'm so sorry, Myra. Are you okay?" She nodded, smiling a little, but still rubbed at her hand.

I realised then that I'd been so lost in my thoughts that I'd completely forgotten where I'd parked. I had to scan the area around me to get my bearings.

And it was then that I saw it. Or, more accurately, I saw her. Immediately, I moved fast to hide behind a large tree we had stopped next to. Large enough to stop anyone from seeing us.

...Because Thea was here.

Out in the open, across the street and... appearing to be doing shopping, of all things. "Aria?" Myra asked confused.

"Shhh," I said, peeking around the side to see if Thea had noticed me before I hid.

Thankfully, it seemed she hadn't. She was standing by a store that had racks of clothing in a garden area outside. It looked like she had been too focused on sifting through the garments hanging up to realise I was even there.

...I knew this could be a good opportunity for me... but I just needed to think of a plan.

"Who are you hiding from?" Myra asked as she came to lean against the tree too, trying to help obscure me. She must have sensed my urgency and realised that this was important to me.

I bit my lip. I had no issue explaining who she was to Myra since I had already planned to tell her, but I didn't have time to explain everything in detail here right now in public. Not when Thea was so close by and could disappear again at any second. "She's someone I used to know," I said finally. "Someone I've been trying to find for the last two years. But it's all... wrong. It's like she suddenly appeared out of thin air and I don't know why."

Myra frowned. "If you've been trying to find her then why aren't you going to talk to her?"

"...It's complicated," I said, scrunching my face up. Inside, I continued to quickly try and think about what to do. "Basically, when I saw her again for the first time, she knew I had been looking for her. She shouldn't have known I was looking. And yet she saw me and ran before I could talk to her."

"Wait... so you know her, and you were trying to find her... but she shouldn't know you were trying to find her... but she does? And it's so important that you're now hiding behind a tree...?"

I could tell my words were only making Myra more confused and I cursed internally over the entire situation I was now in.

"Yes..." was all I could say, even though I knew that didn't help her. "But I need answers and I'm afraid that I won't be able to get them if I approach her directly."

“Okay... so, I’ll just go and talk to her instead?” Myra offered. “I can just casually pretend to bump into her and introduce myself.”

I stared at her in surprise. She was right. If Myra spoke with her instead of me then Thea wouldn’t suspect anything. Though, as much as I’d like to know Thea’s future plans, I knew with this idea came the downside that the questions asked would need to be kept very basic; such as where she was from, what pack she belonged to, and why she was in town, etc.

But any information was better than no information. And the best part? Myra wasn’t even ranked so it was unlikely that Thea had ever seen her face before. She was also the type of person who was just genuinely friendly to everyone so it wouldn’t be that odd for her to approach a stranger. “Myra... you’re so smart,” I whispered as I stared at her with adoration. She giggled at the compliment. “I try!” And so, with that, Myra and I quickly devised a plan. A plan to find out where the hell Thea had been for the last two years.

## A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 49

**Chapter Forty-Nine** With everything set and being put into action, I went home to wait. It was now up to Myra to pull off the next part.

The idea was that she would pretend to notice Thea was new in town and politely ask about her, even try to befriend her. With the two of them getting closer, I was hopeful that Thea would divulge a little about herself; information I’d literally been paying a private investigator to obtain for years now.

In order for this to work though, I couldn’t be anywhere in sight or else I’d risk Thea catching on.

We agreed to meet again in an hour at a park down the street. It was rarely used at this time of the day and bordered on the forest. This meant we didn’t need to worry about being seen together. If everything went perfect then Myra would get the information I needed before I came to pick her up, and Thea would be none the wiser to the entire plot.

The time passed quickly and, with every second that passed, I could feel my own anxiety building. I’d waited so long for this and needed Myra to be successful so badly. I knew even the tiniest bit of information was going to help me stop Thea... and possibly even help me stop my own death.

And so, before I knew it, it was finally about that time.

I headed downstairs, moving towards the car but spotted Lucy along the way down. “Lucy,” I called out. She looked up sharply at my voice, surprised to see me.

But then her face turned into a frown almost immediately.

“Miss, I didn’t know you were home,” she said. I walked over to her, taking the small detour since I knew I still had a little bit of time before I needed to leave.

“I’m just heading out now. Any luck with the private investigator?”

“Not really...,” she said, her brow only creasing further. “To be honest, I was going to wait a little longer before I spoke to you, but I think something might be amiss. He normally doesn’t take this long to get back to me.” I hesitated. “You think he might have run off with the money as I thought?” She nodded. “I do. It would confirm your theory too. However, I’m still waiting to hear back from a few different leads so I can’t be certain yet.”

“Fuck,” I hissed, and gently hit my fist against the wall next to me. I had known this was a possibility and it was a risk I’d been willing to take when I first hired him. Some people’s loyalty cost more than what could be bought with money. It looked as if his greed had gotten the better of him.

Though there was one other possibility.... .. That they’d been working together from the beginning.

“Find him,” I said. “I don’t care what resources you need, I’ll pay whatever the price. If he’s run off then he at least knows something about Thea. Even if that’s only because he made a deal with her.”

Lucy bowed her head. “Of course, Miss.”

It was just like it was in the past; Thea had her hand in manipulating the people around me. Some things really didn’t change.

But as I continued to mull on it, another thought hit me. One where I realised I’d just introduced my best friend... to my worst enemy.

But Myra wouldn’t... would she? That echo of pain from whenever I thought of my old attendant, Sophie, came to me. I had loved her like a mother and yet she had resorted to taking a deal from Thea in the end, sending me to my death regardless. It proved that sometimes a person wasn’t who you thought they were. I had to quickly push those thoughts from my head. I could trust Myra, I knew that. And besides, there were more important things to worry about right now. Like meeting up with her and discussing what she’d learnt about Thea. Without any further delay, I got into my car and drove back into town, heading straight to the park

The trip didn’t take very long to arrive and I immediately scanned the area without getting out. The entire space seemed completely clear of any people though; Myra included.

I didn't want to rush anything, making me decide to wait another half an hour. I wanted to give her all the time she needed. But once that period came and went, I found Myra still hadn't shown up. It was then that I couldn't help but start to feel a little worried. It was a very large area and so, naturally, I figured she probably hadn't realised I'd arrived yet, possibly waiting for me somewhere that I couldn't see. I quickly slipped out of the driver's seat, having already made sure that the coast was clear, and made my way into the park.

It seemed quiet. There was no play equipment for children here as this area was mostly just a collection of trees and nature. Not that I was complaining. It made for some great privacy when needed.

I continued to search for a few minutes until, finally, I found Myra in the distance by a tree. As I expected, she was facing the opposite direction to where I'd parked so she must not have seen me.

"Myra!" I called out and started walking over to see her. She didn't hear me and so I quickened my pace to reach her. "Hey! Myra! I've been waiting for you on the other side. How did it go?"

But she didn't reply. I couldn't have been more than a few meters away from her now. She should have heard me.

"Myra..?" I walked over slowly until I stood in front of her, as if a part of me knew something wasn't quite right

...But it was fine.

I could see she was completely fine. I had been worried about nothing.

And yet her blue eyes continued to stare out towards the forest, refusing to look at me. "Myra, I'm here."

...She was acting so immature by not replying. I didn't know why she would do that, it wasn't even funny. I reached out and touched her hand gently. She felt a little cold but that was just the weather moving into winter soon. I knew she should have brought a jacket. When I had come to pick her up earlier I had even told her that she was going to regret not bringing one.

'I can't look'

"Come on. We need to go," I said. "We have so much to talk about."

I could feel tears start to fall down my cheeks and I blinked them away. Couldn't she see how her behaviour was so incredibly frustrating right now? She was wasting time.

“Myra, stop this. Please.”

‘I don’t want to look’

I tugged at her hand to get her to follow me, but instead, her upper body only lurched sideways in the direction I’d pulled her. It was as if her centre was stuck in one place, completely unable to be moved.

“...Please.” ‘Don’t make me look’

I pulled again and shook my head as the tears began to increase.

“Myra... please....”

‘I’m not going to look.’ “It’s time to go home, Myra. Your parents are waiting for you.”

‘Please don’t make me look.’

“The kids at the orphanage need you. You can’t stay here.”

...Please.’

Scanned with CamScanner

“...I need you, Myra.” I fell to my knees before her and instantly felt as the moisture hidden within the grass started to seep into my clothes, completely covering my hands and legs.

That damn rain we had a few weeks ago had made the ground completely soggy.

It couldn’t be helped though. That was just the season it was. That damn red rain will get you.

Red rain

...Goddess, please, don’t make me look.’ Red like the colour parts of my clothes were. I stared at it oddly, my head starting to spin. I didn’t realise I’d worn such a strange pattern today. It’d been so long since I’d picked such a vibrant colour for myself.

...Please, no.’

And then I snapped... ...The veil of deniability inside me breaking...

...And I did the one thing I’d been refusing to do since arriving. I looked up

I looked up to where my best friend stood.

I looked up to where a familiar silver dagger was pierced completely through her chest.

I looked up to the note that was forcefully pushed onto the hilt, intended for me to find it.

I looked up at the words.

The three words.

The three simple words. Words I wish I could forget.

...“You forgot this.”

I immediately threw my body to the side and purged up all the contents of my stomach.

I could see it all so clearly now. My clothes... my hands... my legs... it was all blood. It was all blood.

It was all *Myra's* blood. What was I doing? Why was I wasting time? I moved quickly and put my hand to the stab wound, trying to close off where the blood had come from. Blood that had already stopped flowing long ago. I could see the knife had been twisted, skewed enough to make the entrance larger.

It would be okay though. I just needed to apply pressure. Pressure helps stop the flow and aids in sealing it. I'd learnt that from my mother.

“Someone! Please! Help!” I yelled out over and over again. “Anyone! Please!”

I needed someone to get a doctor while I applied pressure.

I had to stay and apply pressure. If I let go, she was going to bleed out.

...I had to apply pressure. ...I had to apply pressure. ... I had to apply pressure. ...I had to apply pressure.

...But then my cries for help eventually turned into screams.

I screamed for what felt like hours. I screamed until my voice was completely hoarse. I screamed until I physically couldn't anymore. And when I was done and could go on no more, I slumped back to the ground in defeat, staring at my hands. Because a part of me had known the reality of the situation the very second I'd seen her in the distance.

...Myra was dead. And there was no bringing her back. Inside, I could also feel a part of me had just died too. The part of me that Myra held. *\*Had\** held. The part that had allowed me to see the good in others when I'd felt the world against me. The only pure and good thing that had never hurt me.

It took a long time before I was able to move again... but eventually, I could feel myself stand up calmly.

I wasn't really there though. Not really. I was just staring out, feeling like a passenger within my own body, as I started to walk back to the car. It didn't take long; just a few minutes walk. It had only taken a few minutes to find her and so it made sense that it would only take a few minutes to walk back.

A few minutes seemed to be such a short amount of time for something to happen. I opened the door and slid into the driver's seat, immediately starting the five minute drive in the opposite direction to town. I drove until I finally came to a house I hadn't seen in a very long time.

I came to the Alpha's packhouse. My old home. Was it intentional? Had it been pure muscle memory? ...Or had it been because I knew Aleric would probably be there? The only other person I felt

could not judge me for my sins... because my memories of their sins were no better. But it didn't matter. I didn't care about any of that right now. I stood at the front door and knocked politely, stepping back to wait patiently for someone to answer. I could see the bright red spots my hand left on the pristine white door as I touched it.

How easily things were ruined by things I touched.

Surprisingly, it wasn't an attendant that opened the door to greet me. It was Aleric himself. He looked as if he was about to go out somewhere.

"...Aria?" he asked, startled to see me show up at the packhouse of all places. "What are you doing here...? What's that smell...? It smells like... -."

It only took a moment before his eyes finally registered what he was actually seeing before him; my dishevelled appearance being a sight he probably wasn't expecting with the copious amounts of red blood quickly drying all over me. "Aria?! What the fuck? Are you hurt?!"

He rushed towards me and started inspecting me for the wounds I knew he wouldn't be able to find.

After all, it wasn't my blood.

I just stood there, shaking my head, and felt the familiar moisture of tears start to fall down my face once more. I didn't know I'd had any more left in my body.

"She's dead, Aleric."

His eyes only became wider in utter confusion over the whole situation. "What? Dead? Who's dead? Come inside, I can alert the patrols. Do you know who did it?" He pulled at my hand, trying to get me to follow him into the house, but I ripped it away. "Me, Aleric," I said between my clenched jaw, my

body beginning to shake again. I could feel the pain coming back now; the numb calm I'd experienced only having lasted long enough to make it here. But now I could feel it begin to rot at me inside once more, building its way to the surface. I stared at him with wild, desperate eyes, unable to physically do anything else. "..... I killed her."

Aleric stepped back in shock, only further confusion being added by my words. "...What?" "I killed her, Aleric," I repeated, my breath now becoming laboured. "It's my fault... I killed Myra."

But I couldn't take it anymore. I couldn't breathe.

..And I felt myself fainting to the ground, giving myself over to the darkness that had been threatening to overcome me. And I knew that, deep down, even this temporary peace was a luxury I hadn't deserved.

## **A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 50**

### **Chapter Fifty She was dead. Myra was dead.**

The words kept repeating themselves in my head but I was struggling to come to terms with it being real

Unfortunately, I had only remained unconscious for a few minutes before Aleric had managed to wake me up. I found myself on the couch inside and answered all of his questions as best I could, though albeit very robotically. By the time I had finished describing where Myra was and her current state, Aleric had quickly left to go get the patrol team scouring the area for rogues. I told him about my dagger that was used, the one from the cave I'd left behind, and even about Thea. What she looked like, where the two of them had been, and that I'd told Myra to talk to her. No one really listened to me after I'd mentioned the rogue knife though. They all immediately went on to high alert mainly looking for them, not Thea. Everyone had thought since my missing dagger was used, that it was the rogues trying to retaliate for killing their comrades. And so, I sat on the couch, just watching the chaos ensue around me for hours.

People running in and out of the house, giving status reports and confirmations about Myra's body. People becoming frantic as they tried to find leads. An argument between officials over who was going to inform Myra's family. I felt sick just listening to it all.

But I couldn't move, let alone function enough to be of any help.

I just sat on that couch... and watched. Silently. The entire time just feeling dead inside. As dead as Myra now was because of me. And I knew it had been my fault. Everything. She'd said so herself; it was because of me that her life had become so abnormal. Maybe she might have lived long enough to have that average

life she'd mentioned. She might have had that ordinary mate... those children... and died of old age. Died naturally.

Not dead now because of me.

But I hadn't known. I hadn't known asking her to talk to Thea would lead to this. I hadn't known her life would be in danger.

"...Miss," a voice suddenly said in front of me. I realised then that I'd been staring at the torso of someone standing in front of me for Goddess knew how long.

I looked up slowly, blinking several times as my eyes came into focus, and saw Lucy there.

"...Miss, I'm here to take you home," she said gently.

She looked worried and I didn't need to guess why. It didn't make me feel any better though. "...I saw Thea," I answered quietly, ignoring whatever she'd said. My voice sounded far away and still very hoarse. She flinched in surprise, almost in disbelief at what I'd just told her. "What...? Thea?"

"...Yes."

She sighed. "That might explain a few things then." "... Like what?"

She paused, unsure if she should answer that, but she did eventually speak.

"I found out about an hour ago what happened to our private investigator," she said. "He was killed a couple of months back in a neighbouring territory. The pack there have been trying to contact us so they could ask about his last case, but we kept our identity so well hidden that they didn't know how to reach us."

I closed my eyes, feeling the wave of exhaustion this new development brought. "...So it actually was Thea's doing then." "Miss.. ?"

I had already suspected as much, but hearing this news now only made me more certain.

Thea had been the one to kill Myra.

"She must have realised someone was tracking her down and kept her distance until the investigator met up with you last time. It explains how she was able to find me. She just had to follow your trail all the way back here. The investigator's death was most likely just so he couldn't alert us when she crossed over into the Winter Mist's territory."

How much did she know about me then? She must have been watching me since even before the Golden Blade attack. If that was the case then she probably knew all about me... about Myra, and possibly even about Aleric and Cai too. And that silver knife? Was she working with the rogues as well then? Was Thea herself a rogue? It might explain why we never found any information about her belonging to a pack.

But I never would have taken her for someone who could do this though. A cunning, power hungry bitch? Sure. Physically murderous and violent? ...Not so much.

In my past life, she had been conniving, manipulative, and had brought about my death like a snake behind the scenes. As far as I knew, she'd never done the dirty work herself. In fact, I hadn't even realised she'd had an active role in my death until I saw her smirking right before my conviction. Her style had always been to act the innocent and win the hearts of the people. It made me wonder what her plan was now and whether she was still looking to become Luna. Didn't she realise I could pin part of the blame on her for Myra's death? That I could tie her into the whole mess and accuse her of working with the rogues? It seemed unlikely that anyone would let her into the pack one day with an accusation like that against her. But... then there was my silver dagger. I needed to realise that the entire thing could now be passed off as only a rogue attack. Maybe she had staged it intentionally like that. Coupled with

gelen the sightings we had not long ago in the woods, it seemed very likely that no one would believe me if I said it was Thea without proof. The only real evidence I could provide was that Myra had been with her last... and that the PI I'd hired to find her from two years ago was now dead.

Not that this option was any better though. Revealing to the pack I'd hired someone to find her would only lead to questions that I couldn't answer. It would mean telling the truth about my true past and future.

A future that I apparently couldn't see anymore. A future that I was suddenly so blind to. And it occurred to me that I'd been completely helpless this time to save Myra. I hadn't seen it in a vision like I had two years ago. So why hadn't I seen it? What had I done wrong this time that this stupid ability had let me down during a moment I needed it most?

... But then a thought came to me. Maybe instead of focusing on getting physically stronger to fight this whole time, I should have been spending some time learning about my mark and how it worked. I had always acted as if I never wanted any free handouts from the Goddess and had been trying to reach my goal without her wherever possible to prove a point.

...Was this Selene's way of making me regret that? To prove to me that she was all-powerful and that I needed her in some way to survive? "Aria?"

I looked up and saw Lucy had been watching me the whole time I'd been silently lost in my own thoughts.

"...You're not entirely at fault here," I said, realising I'd last left her last thinking she was to blame for not knowing about the PI. It was true that Thea most likely followed her to me, but I knew I was to blame just as much. "We should have been checking in more regularly to avoid this. Please ensure a year's worth of salary is sent to his family with my condolences. It won't make up for him losing his life, but at least maybe it will give them some comfort until they're able to move past this tragedy."

Lucy pursed her lips slightly. "And you?" I frowned a little, my face too puffy and sore to give any real expression. "Me..?" "Yes... how are you going to move past this?" she asked. I could tell she was genuinely concerned for me, but I didn't have an answer for her.

"I'm not," I finally replied after a small hesitation. "I don't deserve any solace for what I did."

"Aria—" "Enough," I said, cutting her off before she could disagree with me. I could hear my voice holding a mild tone of rank authority over her which she couldn't dispute. "That will be all, Lucy. I will drive myself home so your assistance won't be necessary tonight." She reluctantly bowed her head and I shakily got to my feet. It had been hours since I'd moved and my entire body was sore, stiff and itchy from the dried blood scratching against my skin. I didn't let it stop me though as I walked outside, now seeing how the sky had already darkened completely into the late night, and headed directly towards my car.

"Aria! Where are you going?" a voice called out to me suddenly.

It was Aleric's voice. I recognised it too well, of course.

I hadn't seen him since he left to contact the patrol teams and hadn't expected to speak to him again before leaving. He was helping to orchestrate the entire search party so I knew he was incredibly busy. "...Home," I said quietly as I kept walking. "Like that? At least stay and clean up first. You're still... ah." "You're still covered in Myra's blood," I said in my head, finishing his sentence. "It's fine. I'll clean up at home."

I went to turn away but he quickly covered the distance between us until he stood next to me. I couldn't meet his eyes though, choosing to focus on anything else around me. "I don't think you should be alone right now," he objected gently. "Please... just stay a bit longer. You can wash up and I'll organise some fresh clothes for you."

He was worried about me. Just like Lucy had been. Just like everyone else who had been staring at me over the last few hours, all while they walked through the lounge room I had sat comatose in

But no, I knew I needed to be alone. I thought it would be best if I stayed like that from now on. "Really, it's fine, Aleric," I said, shutting down his suggestion almost instantly. He paused for a moment, possibly thinking of what else he could say to convince me, but finally he sighed in defeat.

"..Okay," he said, an almost awkward tone to it. He shuffled in his place a bit as if he had something else to say, but instead, he did something I wasn't expecting

...He pulled me into his arms... and hugged me.

Into an actual embrace.

From Aleric.

"I'm sorry this happened," he said softly, talking close to my ear. "She didn't deserve that. And neither do you."

My entire body tensed up instantly at his contact, becoming completely unmoving and rigid. It was the first time I'd been so close to him that I could smell his familiar scent. And yet, even after all this time, I still found it odd to be able to smell his crisp forest smell without the mate bond. For six years this scent had been heaven to me. And then, upon his forced rejection, it had become my hell.

But the embrace was the last thing I'd expected him to do; the last thing I'd ever thought he was even capable of doing. And given that I'd just suffered the cruellest of reminders about Thea and my past on this day, it only made me feel more uncomfortable.

This was the man who had loved that disgusting woman. Who had chosen her. Who had given her his mark.

...And she had killed my best friend. She had killed someone who had held no threat to her at all.

She had killed Myra only because she was someone I cared about. Over these last few years, I'd adapted and learnt to be able to disassociate between the two Alerics; the one who had abused and tormented me, and the one who was younger and seemingly different, kinder even. The one I felt I could help change. But tonight, it was hard for me to do that in light of everything that had happened. Because tonight I was no longer the 'me' I had become accustomed to. I wasn't the brave, strong, willing to overcome any issues 'Aria'. No, given the state I was in, I felt closer to being the old Aria.

And I now felt scared. Alone. Worried.

I felt afraid that at any moment I could lose someone else I cared about.

And Aleric only stood as a reminder of those very emotions I was too familiar with. He finally let go of me after several seconds, but I still felt completely frozen in place, struggling to comprehend everything that was happening inside my head. "I'm sorry..." he said quietly after I hadn't said anything.

A part of me might have felt guilty on a normal day. Maybe I would have even been strong enough to finally hug him back. But I couldn't feel anything for him at that moment. There was physically no more room inside of me to be able to feel anything else. "... Thank you for all your help, Aleric," I finally said flatly. I could feel his eyes staring into me but I still refused to look at him. Instead, I chose to look down at the keys in my hand before walking the remainder of the way to my car.

And as I sat in the driver's seat, looking ahead, all I could focus on was the steering wheel in front of me. The steering wheel where bloody handprints had wrapped around it, reminding me once more that this was all real. That today had actually happened; that, unlike a car, there was no turning back

Not for Myra anyway; the girl who had considered herself to be completely average. ... The girl who had died without me being able to tell her just how important she was.