

A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 5

Chapter Five

The cells were cold, damp and dingy, with little amenities. Only a bed, toilet and basin were given to me, a single blanket being the only thing to warm myself. There was minimal space, each cell having three stone walls and bars along the wall where the door was.

Seven days had now passed and so today, finally, I was set to stand trial before the pack for my alleged murder. I knew the evidence was stacked against me. In fact, it would be almost impossible for me to win this. The only hope I had left was that Sophie was still alive. If she could testify saying she had witnessed firsthand how I'd been inside my chambers all week, therefore making it impossible to have poisoned Thea, then they would be forced to open the floor to the possibility I was not the culprit.

"Get up," a guard gruffly ordered from outside my cell.

I recognised him. His name was James and I had visited his family on multiple occasions on behalf of the ranked members over the years.

Shakily, I stood up per his request, having not eaten properly the whole week from stress, and made my way to the side.

James came in and pushed me up against the stone wall, forcing me to wince from the pain. But I knew the bruises would just blend in with the others I'd received already. Due to anxiety and lack of food, my injuries were not healing as quickly as a werewolf normally would.

"Will Sophie be at the trial?" I asked once he had shoved me out of the cell.

He didn't reply, instead choosing to remain completely silent as he continued to push me towards the exit. I couldn't tell if he had been instructed not to talk to me, or if he just genuinely hated me now.

We were walking past the other cells and, as we did so, my eyes checked each one through the bars, desperately searching for Sophie. I needed her to be there. I needed her to prove me innocent.

However, once we passed the fifth cell, my eyes glanced across a man with familiar silver hair.

"Father!" I cried out, struggling to move towards him against the strength of James.

"Aria?!" he gasped. "What are you doing down here?"

I struggled some more against James, but his grip was far stronger than mine. He kept trying to shove me towards the door and I realised that I was not going to be able to win this by strength alone.

“James! Please!” I begged, turning as best I could to face him. “If I die today then please let me talk to my father one last time. I know you may not believe me but I truly didn’t hurt anyone and I would especially never hurt a baby. If I am wrongly executed today then please don’t deprive me of my last chance to say goodbye.”

James’ face was stern, trying to be unreadable, but I could see the uneasiness in his eyes. His jaw clenched as he stared down at me.

“Please... James. I was there at your wedding... I was with your mate when she gave birth to your child! Please just grant me five minutes to say goodbye. Please.” Tears began to well up in my eyes. “Please... Please... Please just give me this one thing. I promise to cooperate fully on the way to the trial grounds after.”

James still looked conflicted but he finally gave me a stiff nod in agreement. I sighed in relief, eternally grateful for his compassion. “Thank you, James, thank you so much.”

I rushed to my father’s cell who was already waiting for me at the bars, his expression holding a mixture of horror and disbelief.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t get you out,” I cried to him. “I wanted to, really I did, but I knew it would be impossible with the security measures in place.”

“Shhh, don’t be ridiculous. I knew that there wasn’t anything you could do,” he soothed. “I’m grateful you didn’t try to rescue me. I accepted the consequences and knew what I was doing. But why are you down here anyway? Did you say that you’re on the way to the trial grounds? What’s happened?”

I grimaced at the thought.

“It was Thea’s baby,” I said. “They all think I poisoned her with some sort of herb to induce a miscarriage.”

“What?! Thea lost the child? But that’s insane! Why would they accuse you?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” I smiled bitterly. “Of course everyone is going to point fingers to the scorned mate of the Alpha. They searched my room too. They apparently found the herb in question under my bed, even though I’d never seen it before in my life. I have no idea how it was planted there.”

“Oh, Aria... my baby girl... I’m so sorry.” His eyes were watering at the sight of my tears. I’d never seen him show so much emotion before, so much sadness. Even when

mother had died, he had confined himself away for a while to hide his emotion from others.

“I’m sorry I was such a disappointment to you, to our family,” I cried, looking up to the ceiling to try and stop my tears.

I couldn’t look at him. Everything I’d done had brought shame to our family. I’d seen it on his face all these years.

“Aria, no, never. You’ve never disappointed me, nor could you ever.” His voice was so gentle, so quiet, yet filled with so much sorrow.

I stared at him in shock. “But you’ve always looked at me as such. When my infertility was announced, I saw how you were. You looked as though I’d brought shame to our house.”

“No! Of course not,” he said, almost offended. “I was disappointed in how the Goddess had given you only more bad luck. I was disappointed in how a deity so great had chosen you for one of our highest ranks, only to let you suffer so much. I knew how Aleric treated you, and I didn’t do anything. I should be the one apologising, not you. I should have taken you away sooner. I’m so sorry, Aria.”

My father cried, tears falling down his face heavily. *My father*, the Beta of the country’s largest pack, so strong and powerful, was crying *to me*, apologising to me about how he didn’t commit treason sooner by helping me escape. It was overwhelming to hear, causing my body to begin shaking.

My arms were cuffed behind me but I pressed my forehead against the cold metal bars to be closer to him. As best as he could, though awkward given the bars between us, he then tried to wrap his arms around me and pressed his forehead against mine. It was a moment for us both to cry together.

After another minute passed, James then cleared his throat behind us. “It’s time to go,” he said awkwardly.

I knew this must have been a strange or maybe even difficult sight for him to watch. Not too long ago, he had served under both of us, looked up to us. Yet here we were, sobbing together between cell bars, saying our good-byes.

I nodded my head and reluctantly moved away. This was one of the hardest things I’d ever had to do in my life. Did I feel better knowing my father didn’t hate me if I were to die today? Or would it have made it easier to leave this world knowing almost no one cared about me? It had been just Sophie but now there was my father. How could I ever let them go? They were almost definitely going to die because they had tried to help me. Loving me had brought them death.

"I love you, Aria," my father said one last time before James grabbed me. "I love you so much, I always have. Please don't forget that."

"I love you too, papa," I cried.

James moved me towards the door and I walked as best I could without him needing to push me this time. My eyes burned so much from the tears I had shed, my vision blurred, but I managed to walk somewhat steadily. I had agreed to not make it harder for James to take me to the trial grounds and I owed him as much for those short moments he had given me. I would walk the rest of the way in silence and without protest.

Once outside, it took only a few minutes to walk through the forest to where the trial grounds were located. They were considered a sacred spot within a clearing of the woods, surrounded by a huge circle of large mossy stones that had been placed by our ancestors. The trials were always held at night when the moon was high in the sky; this being so the Goddess could witness the trial herself personally.

When we arrived, it was immediately clear the entire pack was present. So many had attended that they had to crowd around even outside of the circle. Their eyes were all filled with malice as they parted to let us walk through the gathering, some spitting or cursing at me as we walked.

When we entered the inner circle, we began to walk up to the centre. The clearing was on a slight mound so the closer to the middle we got, the higher up it became until the ground levelled out at the top. This was so everyone around could easily see.

Inside, I could see a few key figures. Aleric stood behind a podium and was dressed smartly, exuding the presence you'd expect from our fearless leader. But looking at him now felt weird. I remembered how not too long ago butterflies would have filled my tummy and my heart would have raced just over seeing him. But now there was nothing except fear; fear that he would end up executing me today. Fear he would hurt me one final time. Even with the bond broken, this man held my life in his hands to torment.

Of course, Thea was present also, sitting in a chair to the right of Aleric; the place typically reserved for the Luna. I wanted to feel angry about seeing her sit there... but I couldn't. Truthfully, I couldn't care less about my former position anymore. I'd never asked for it anyway. Clearly, it would take the pack descending in power to nothing before they realised their mistake. Thea was no Luna at heart.

The Elders sat in a semi-circle around Aleric and Thea, and to their left I saw that Brayden and my cousin, Alexander, were also present. I wasn't surprised to see my cousin here since the pack required a Beta. With no direct children left to my father, they would have had to of turned to his younger brother's children.

Alexander had been training to take the Beta position for a while now, so it was only fitting that he would finally take the position. He looked similar to me but his hair was more blonde than silver and he sported blue eyes, not violet. We had never really been close, but then again, I had never really had the opportunity to get close to anyone growing up. From the moment I was born, the pack had determined my destiny for me already.

A large oak stump laid before the podium. I knew what this was, of course, and my stomach felt queasy. I had seen it used only a handful of times but it was enough to still bring nightmares. This was where the guilty would lay their heads to be executed, a large ceremonial broadsword doing the honours.

I sat just in front of this stump on the cold ground, my body already shivering from the cold. I wore only a thin white dress, my previous clothes having been taken off me not long after I'd been locked up.

"It looks like everyone is here now," Aleric said, projecting into the crowd. His eyes scanned over the faces of everyone around before finally landing on me. "We are gathered here today to bear witness to the trial of Ariadne Chrysalis, prior Luna to the Winter Mist pack."