

A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood

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Chapter Fifty-One

Three days.

It had been three days since Myra had died... and I felt suspended in time, unsure over what to do next.

After that night, I had arrived home and walked straight into the shower. The process had taken a while since I had needed to peel off all the clothes that had stuck to me; their condition no longer salvageable and would need to be thrown out.

I'd stood under the showerhead and watched as the hot water turned red all around me, washing away all the evidence of what I'd done. But it wasn't enough. Even when the water had begun to turn clear, I started to scrub at my body. I scrubbed... and scrubbed... and scrubbed... until my flesh was almost as red as the water had been.

But even then, I could still see it. I could still feel it.

It hadn't been enough.

I hadn't been enough.

For three days, I'd done nothing but lay in bed, barely eating or moving. It was all I could do.

My parents had tried to talk to me, but I didn't know what to say. I didn't even have it in me to lie and make them feel reassured like I might have done normally. Inside, I had now lost all sense of motivation to keep going.

Since coming back, I'd been working so hard to keep myself alive, to stop whatever impending doom was yet to unfold, but I'd been so focused on saving myself that I'd now sacrificed someone else for that cause.

And Thea? Well, if this was a game of chess, then I felt I'd just lost one of my most important pieces. This whole time I'd thought Thea was playing as a king, ruling from behind the scenes and keeping safe. But I was wrong. Just like her ambitions in life, it seemed Thea was actually playing as a queen; able to adjust and change depending on the situation... and able to go the extra mile to strike or kill if necessary herself.

I shook the thoughts off instantly, feeling sick at myself. There I had been going again... thinking of others as pieces in my game of survival. This was exactly

how I'd gotten Myra killed. She'd even pointed out to me how I'd been acting so selfish and yet, not even ten minutes later, I'd sent her out to die for me. And she did so with a smile on her face, happy to be helping me.

Around my neck, I could distinctly feel the weight of Myra's necklace, now heavy with the guilt I carried. At times I felt like it stopped me from breathing as if it would slowly crush me, but it was always just in my head. I was sometimes disappointed once I realised that fact.

And so, for the thousandth time that day, I traced my fingers along the stone embedded on the chain, consumed in my own thoughts, just as I had been every single day that had passed since her death.

So focused in my head that I almost didn't even notice the sound of knocking coming from the bedroom door.

But I didn't turn to see who it was. There was no point. It was either my parents or Lucy since everyone else had been told I wasn't taking visitors.

"Miss?"

Lucy.

I stayed still, staring up at the ceiling, and waited for her to tell me whatever it was she had come to say.

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"Miss, you had another visitor today."

That wasn't unusual. Apparently, Aleric had shown up yesterday to check in but my mother had explained that I still wasn't well. Several other people had also come by over the last few days, either out of concern or to ask more questions, but all of them were asked to kindly give me some space.

I wasn't sure why Lucy was still bothering to tell me.

"It was a boy," she continued. "His name was... Caius? That Alpha heir from the Silver Lake pack."

I froze up at the sound of his name.

Cai.

I'd been deliberately avoiding him this entire time because I didn't know how to face him .

Did he know what I'd done? Had he heard about Myra's death?

"...What did he say?" I asked quietly.

"Oh... um," Lucy started, probably taken aback that I was actually sounding interested for once. "He said he wanted to check in on you. Apologies, there was no real message other than that."

We'd worked so hard to save Myra, almost dying ourselves in that process, and yet I'd somehow managed to get her killed anyway. Did he hate me now?

But no, I knew that probably wasn't the case. I highly doubted anyone had told him that it was my fault yet since everyone was still under the impression that this was the rogues . There was no concrete evidence to suggest that Thea was involved... and no one knew that Thea and I were connected.

I forced myself into a sitting position, my head pounding with the sudden movement.

"Miss...?" Lucy asked, surprised. "Are you getting up? Did you want anything?"

But I ignored her, throwing my legs over the side of the bed, and pinched at the bridge of my nose. I was needing to take a second to concentrate on calming the disarray inside my mind.

"Please get me something to wear, Lucy... I'm going out."

She hesitated for a moment in shock before quickly rushing to the wardrobe to do what I'd asked.

I knew someone needed to tell Cai the truth. He was her friend too, after all. If it were me, I'd want to know.

After only an hour later, I found myself outside the door of where Cai was staying. I'd enquired about which house he was currently occupying from the managing office that oversaw the guest residences. Given my rank, they thankfully gave the information over quickly.

However, I'd been staring at his front door now for five minutes and still hadn't worked up the courage to knock. Was I making a mistake? Should I just leave and pretend I was never there?

No, he'd be able to smell that I'd been here. I'd been standing outside for so long now that I was sure that he'd know I'd come to see him, regardless of what I decided to do next.

I took a deep breath and went to knock... but the door then opened before I could make contact.

Cai stood on the other side, looking stunned to see me. I could see his eyes had faint traces of dark circles under them and could only assume this was due to the news of Myra's death.

"I thought that was you," he said. "It was that or I'd gone insane being able to smell your scent for the last few minutes. Have you actually been standing there the whole time?"

Always trying to make light of a situation. Even at a time like this.

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But as I met his eyes, I could only feel that I'd made a mistake in coming here.

I felt I wasn't ready to face him yet and my body began to shake, tears starting to water at my eyes.

"I'm sorry, Cai," I whispered, turning my face away when I couldn't look at him anymore. "I'm sorry. It was my fault."

"Aria?"

He instantly realised that I wasn't okay and rushed forwards, trying to comfort me. It took a few moments before he finally spoke again.

"Come on. Come inside and sit down," he said, gently grabbing my hand to lead me through the door." Then we can talk about whatever it is you're on about."

I walked into the little house that consisted of a bedroom, living room, bathroom and small kitchen area. The guest houses were purposely self-contained since we had the means and budget to offer that within the Winter Mist.

He walked down the hallway and sat me down on the couch, throwing a blanket around my shoulders as he misinterpreted my shaking.

"Alright, talk to me," he said, sitting down next to me.

It took a while before I could trust my voice enough to not completely waver.

"I'm sorry... I'm sorry about Myra," I said, tears falling down my face. "I couldn't save her this time. I couldn't... I sent her to do something and she was killed because of that. Because of me. Because I'd stupidly let her go near her."

He was silent for a few seconds, trying to process what I'd just said, before finally speaking.

"...You're saying Myra wasn't killed by the rogues?"

I shook my head. "No... maybe... I don't know. It was a girl named Thea. Probably working with the rogues, for all I know. But no one believes me. No one believes me that it was definitely her. And I knew Thea was shady and I still let Myra go talk to her. It's all my fault, Cai... I'm so sorry."

He paused again, clearly still very confused. "... Did you know she was that dangerous? That she might physically harm Myra?"

I hesitated. "No... but I—,"

"Then it's not your fault," he said plainly. As if that was enough to make it all better.

"But, Cai, I was—,"

"Aria," he said in a now serious tone, interrupting me once more. He rested his hand on my cheek to make me meet his eyes. "It's. Not. Your. Fault."

I could feel as a part of me broke down at his words, sobs overcoming me as I gave in to my grief. He pulled me into his side and held me as I cried against his chest. I could feel as his comforting presence tried to soothe me inside while allowing me to get it out of my system.

I wasn't sure how long we stayed like that, but soon I could feel myself begin to calm down inside once more; the numbness starting to freeze itself back over as the seconds ticked by. It was a now familiar feeling I was becoming accustomed to. Something that felt better than the pain at least.

But, as my mind began to clear, I became painfully aware of the fact Cai and I were still touching.

He felt warm...warmer than anything I'd felt in the last three days. Three days where inside I'd been devoid of anything that felt living. And so, as I looked up into his incredible golden eyes that always burned like

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molten ore, a part of me started to wonder if there was an alternative to this torpid state.

Because he was close. So close. Close enough that I could see every line and detail on his face... his eyes... his cheek... his lips.

Close enough that I was able to feel his breath as my own body gravitated up towards him, being lured in with the promise of feeling something other than this frozen internal nightmare. That if I just reached out and grabbed it, I would be filled with something impossible to breathe life back into me.

I paused

right as our faces were just an inch apart, right on the cusp of being able to stop right there without consequence... and right before I decidedly went against my better judgment... and hesitantly brought my lips up to softly meet his anyway.

Inside, I could feel the immediate relief of tingles upon contact, rushing through my stomach towards my core. It was something different. Something new. Something I'd never experienced before yet was something I could feel myself beginning to crave.

I knew he could feel my uncertainty as let me lead; my own unsteady conflict within me having to take a moment to drink in the new sensation, of learning how he felt against me. How his lips were just as warm as his hands were... hands that were beginning to press ever so gently into my back and waist as he brought me closer.

I responded in kind, deepening the kiss, now needing more. I needed those sparks... that flame... that raging fire that could maybe make me feel alive again.

And as I gently reached out towards him, I could feel how I could get addicted to this so easily. How, when I moved my hand slowly up against his chest, I could eventually feel his heart racing under my palm. A reaction that made me realise my own was reciprocating the same way.

He immediately felt the change in my body, taking my more confident movement as confirmation that I wanted this too, and cupped my face in one of his hands, bringing his warmth closer to my body as he drew me near.

It was so different to everything else I'd experienced before. In the past with Aleric, his touch had never been loving and our alone time had always been extremely clinical. There had been no need for real intimacy since, after all, he was just performing a duty to produce an heir. My needs had never come into it.

But back then, my only pleasure during those moments with Aleric had been the artificial sparks forced by a mate bond. And yet this was something completely different. It didn't feel involuntary or pressured... it felt real.

With shaky hands, I then weaved my fingers through his dark brown hair, needing more of whatever this was. Needing more of him. And, as I did so, I wondered... if I gave myself over to him completely right then, would he devour me in that heat of his... or save me instead?

'Neither,' the old me whispered quietly inside. 'You are poison to him. We are poison.'

The shock of the sudden words in my head forced me to pull away, leaving me to stare wide-eyed at Cai in front of me.

'Every time that we've given our love to someone, it has only left suffering in its wake,' she continued.

"...Aria?" Cai asked quietly, sensing my abrupt change.

'We made a vow,' she said. 'When our head was about to lay on that stump before the sword, we declared that the only mistake we'd ever made was loving anyone. Myra's death was a result of making that same mistake once more.'

I instantly felt sick and realised that I was now endangering Cai next for my own needs.

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"I can't...", I started to say aloud but wasn't sure how to form the words.

"...Are you okay? What's wrong?"

Cai's expression had changed. He looked over me with distress but it barely registered in my mind.

I shook my head, shakily trying to stand back up. He tried to reach out to me but I flinched away and moved my hands up in a defensive gesture to say he should keep his distance,

"I shouldn't be here. I can't be here," I said, "I need to go."

"Aria, wait, talk to me. Is it something I did?"

"No... no... I just. This... this isn't right. I made a mistake," I managed to say disjointedly.

I started walking towards the front door, not really seeing anything in front of me, but his words stopped me as I reached out to the handle.

"...Is this because of Myra? Because you're still blaming yourself for her death? Because you don't feel like you deserve to be okay?"

I felt my heart jolt inside my chest.

“...Because that wasn't your fault, Aria,” he continued. “You need to stop thinking that it was. Myra's death is not on your hands.”

I wanted to turn back and look at him, but I knew if I did, that I would find it too difficult to leave. And so I spoke lowly to the door instead, almost as if I was just saying it to myself

“... You don't know anything about me, Cai.” And I left without waiting for even a second longer.

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It was another two days before Myra's funeral was held.

The event was held outdoors and, though I tried my best to hide my more distinguishable features to not stand out, I still took precautions by keeping a distance from those attending anyway. I didn't want to face anyone, let alone speak to anyone on this day.

Something easier said than done with the large turnout.

So many people here had cared for and loved Myra; so many people that she had touched with her gentle nature. It ranged from family, teachers and even some of the older children who lived at the orphanage. And whilst I couldn't see them from where I stood at the back, I knew Aleric and Cai were in attendance somewhere too.

So many people were grieving now just as I was... It was a difficult thing to come to terms with given I felt so responsible for taking her away from them. Was this how the families cried when I had killed innocents in my past life too?

As the sun began to set, the funeral began.

Werewolf ceremonies took place at night or as close to that as possible. This being so that the Goddess, Selene, could witness. Not that she really cared or did anything to intervene anyway.

In terms of funerals though, the time of day usually was set for when the final light would soon die. This was both for symbolic reasons, but also for the practical side that would allow us to bury our dead. without the need for torches.

I went and took a seat in the back corner. However, in doing so, I made one mistake. As I spared a glance out towards the people around me, my eyes fell on a pair of golden ones staring right back. Eyes that I hadn't wanted to see. It had been just for a second, but that had been all that was needed. In just that one moment, I felt overwhelmed over how such a small, insignificant glance could say so much between two people.

I quickly averted my eyes away in the hopes that it would be enough. Enough that he wouldn't want to come over and talk to me. Because I couldn't deal with that today. I couldn't handle anything else. Whatever had happened with Cai had been a mistake and I definitely wouldn't be addressing that now.

Thankfully, it seemed as though Cai got the message as he didn't approach me.

I kept my head down after that, trying to listen to the nominated Elder conducting the funeral. It was hard to hear what they were saying though. I knew I needed to be here but it was increasingly becoming more difficult. Every breath was feeling harder to take than the last as the anxiety and pain inside me festered.

Finally, once everything was over, I couldn't help but exhale sharply from relief. I stayed until almost everyone had left before I took the opportunity I needed, walking up to approach the coffin.

I was grateful it was a closed casket since I didn't know what I would do had I'd been forced to look upon her face once more, reliving the memories of when I'd found her in the park.

I placed a hand gently on the lid and closed my eyes.

"I'm so sorry, Myra," I said quietly.

Suddenly, I could feel the hand of someone touch my shoulder and I looked up quickly to see Myra's parents there.

"Thank you for coming," her mother told me. "We know our daughter loved you very much. It would mean a lot to her knowing that you came today."

I gulped, clenching my jaw for a second, and could feel a wave of nausea hit my stomach as I listened to them naively praise me.

"I'm sorry..." I said weakly.

They both smiled at me, clearly misunderstanding and thinking I was apologising for their loss in a general way.

“Thank you, dear,” her mother said, gently grabbing my hands in hers tenderly.

She hesitated for a second before looking to Myra’s father and nodding; both silently agreeing on something

“We were wondering, if it’s okay with you...,” she started slowly, unsure of herself. “Ah ... Well, it would really mean a lot if you could bless her on behalf of the Goddess.”

They both looked at me with large, hopeful eyes, full of such sadness and belief that I could maybe give their daughter one last final gift to be at peace. It was a childish notion in believing the Goddess actually cared about any of us.

But this was what they thought to be true, what they had been raised to think, just as I had once stupidly believed myself in the past life. And I knew I had already robbed them of their only daughter, so was! about to rob them of their faith too?

I pushed down the queasiness that told me not to do this and gently placed my hand back on Myra’s coffin. It was all bullshit, I knew that... but if the show made them think that maybe Myra was in a better place, then so be it.

I cleared my throat before proceeding.

“O’ Great Mother, Selene, our Goddess who gave us life and strength. We ask you today to please guide your child, Myra, to eternal peace. Her pure soul has been... Wrongfully taken...”

This was wrong. I shouldn’t be doing this.

“Ariadne?” I heard her mother say.

I shook my head, frowning. “Ah... Um, whose soul was wrongfully... –.”

Her hand reached to my shoulder once more in comfort but I couldn’t take it anymore.

“I’m sorry, I—I can’t,” I whispered. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

I shakily stepped back from the coffin and started to walk quickly away from everyone remaining at the funeral, feeling a sensation overwhelming me that I knew I’d be helpless to stop soon.

I spotted somewhere private in the distance, a place obscured by some trees and bushes. It was perfect for what I was looking for. Without stopping, I immediately beelined towards it, throwing myself over the public trash bin as I purged the little contents from my stomach into it.

But as I did so, I could feel I wasn't alone. The familiar presence of someone else was nearby as they leaned against a tree, spectating the scene occurring before them quietly. They must have followed me here from the proceedings.

"You look like shit, Aria," they finally said bluntly, after I had appeared to calm down.

"Good to see you too, Aleric," I replied feebly, turning my face towards him.

He walked over until he was standing next to me but I could tell he was leaving a distance between us

Perhaps he'd noticed how his sudden show of affection the other day had only made me feel worse, not comforted.

You know what I mean," he said. "You look like you haven't slept in days. And, to be honest, if I hadn't just seen you throw up for myself, I would have been severely doubting your eating habits too."

I wiped at my mouth with the back of my hand before straightening up.

"I'm fine."

"Aria," he said with a tone of disapproval. "I was there that night, don't lie. I heard what you said. It's obvious what's going on when you put two and two together."

"If you understand that much then you should be focusing the search to find the girl, Thea, not a bunch of rogues."

"I'm not talking about that," he argued. "I'm talking about you blaming yourself for something you didn't do."

"You don't know what I did!" I yelled.

He took a step towards me, our conversation becoming more heated. "I know enough. I know that you're feeling responsible for leaving her alone with someone you're convinced killed her. But we don't have any evidence yet, Aria, so I don't know why you're acting like this."

"Because I am responsible, Aleric!" I hissed.

We stared at each other, both of us with an intensity in our eyes from the argument.

Something that was only broken by the sound of someone clearing their throat, alerting us to another's presence.

“Ah, excuse me, Alpha heir, Beta heir,” they said awkwardly, probably having caught the last part of our argument. “I’m sorry to bother you but I have come to report an urgent matter that is requiring your attention.”

We both turned our attention to the young warrior who stood before us. He looked terrified at having to be the one to interrupt us mid-argument.

“What is it?” Aleric asked, taking a deep breath to calm himself.

“Ahh, we’ve found someone. A girl. She matches the description the Beta heir gave us. The girl Myra was last seen with.”

I felt my breath catch in my throat. “Thea? You’ve found Thea?”

He turned to look at me. “I believe so. A patrol team spotted her at the edge of the woods.”

I walked right up to him and grabbed his jacket in my hands, my body moving on its own from disbelief. “Where? Where is she?!”

He became nervous, uncomfortable by my sudden grasp on him. “Oh.. um... South. She’s south of town. Not far from the patrol tower there.”

I immediately let go of the warrior and started walking towards the car park without waiting.

She was here. We had her within our reach and I wouldn’t let her get away this time.

The audacity she had to show up today of all days was making the blood pulse through my veins quickly. She had either royally messed up or perhaps just had a new death wish. Both of which were fine by me so long as she would pay for what she did.

I got into my car and was turning the ignition when Aleric got into the passenger side next to me. I barely

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paid him any mind though as I started to leave.

“I don’t think you should go,” he finally said after a few minutes of driving. “Not today at least. There’ll be plenty of time to question her over the next few days.”

But I just ignored him. He would have to tie me to a tree to stop me from being there. And even then, I wasn't sure that would be enough to keep me away for long with how driven I was at that moment.

It didn't take much longer to arrive and I instantly caught sight of the small group of warriors, crowding in a large circle around something. Or rather, around someone.

I pushed my way through the group, into the centre... and there she was.

Sitting on the ground, nursing what looked to be a badly injured foot... Was Thea. 1

To be completely honest, she looked to be in pretty bad shape all over. Several cuts and bruises covered her body from head to toe and she was even wearing the same clothes I'd seen her in last time.

But it didn't matter though. I didn't care. I knew what I needed to do.

It was like the numbing ice inside of me was finally melting, being replaced with a fire all on my own. Because there was only one person I blamed for Myra's death more than me, and it was staring right up at me pathetically with her big caramel brown eyes.

'Kill her,' my old self whispered in my head. 'Kill her now. Strangle her until the light dies from her eyes.'

For once we were in perfect agreement and I didn't need to be told twice.

I strode right up to her without hesitation and was about to launch myself at her when Aleric then suddenly grabbed at me around my waist, hoisting me away from the crowd and back towards the car. He must have realised immediately what I'd planned to do.

"Aleric! Let me go!" I screamed, thrashing in his arms. "I'm going to fucking kill her! I'm going to kill her!"

"Stop!" he yelled, setting me down to grab my face in his hands. It was all he could do so I'd finally tear my eyes off of Thea long enough to look at him. "Get a hold of yourself! You're a Beta heir, for fucks sake. You can't just attack her like that. You don't have any evidence she's maliciously involved yet and she could have vital information."

"No... no, no, no," I said, pushing him away. "No, I'm going to kill her. Fuck you. Fuck her. I should have done this a long, long time ago."

I went to storm back over but he grabbed at my arm, pulling me towards him again. And he moved until he was speaking directly into my ear in a low, quiet voice.

"If you can't control yourself then I'll have no choice but to completely remove you, Aria. You'll be banned from seeing her again until after the investigation is finalised."

I stared up at him incredulously with wide eyes. "You can't do that. You can't."

"Yes, I fucking can," he growled back.

It was a stare off as neither of us wanted to budge... but, finally, I exhaled in defeat, pulling my arm away from him aggressively.

I knew that being able to talk to her was at least better than nothing, even if it pained me to hold back.

"Fuck! Fine, okay. Whatever. We'll listen to what she has to say. But as soon as she starts lying, I'm killing her." ...And so the interrogation began.

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Aleric didn't look reassured by the answer I'd given but he let me go anyway, the two of us walking back over to where Thea was laughably pretending to act scared.

I scoffed at her appearance, much to the curiosity of the warriors standing around.

Aleric ignored me and walked up to her, crouching so they were eye level. And even though I felt the urge to murder Thea more than anything in that moment, I couldn't help but feel a pang of distress echo inside me seeing the two of them so close together again. I knew it wasn't remotely the same as in the past and I shouldn't care anymore, but the reaction was involuntary. It was just more fuel for the pain I was nurturing inside. "Your name is Thea, correct?" Aleric asked.

She just nodded, her eyes wide with fear as she looked around at everyone surrounding her.

"We've been trying to locate you for almost a week now. Where have you been?"

Her voice was exactly the same as how I remembered it. I couldn't help but wonder just how good it would feel once I stopped her from being able to speak ever again. "I was attacked. Me and another girl," she started, sounding nervous. "I think her name was Myra? She introduced herself at the shops and offered to show me around town. But that's when we were attacked... It was at a park down the street... a group of men came out of nowhere and... and killed the girl in front of me."

"Why did they spare you then?"

Her eyes watered up as she began to cry. "I don't know... but they took me to a camp somewhere. A cave. Tied me up and beat me. But I didn't want to die there in the dark. I waited until they went out for food and twisted my way out of the ropes by shifting. I—

I think I've dislocated my ankle. It was so dark though... I didn't know where I was... I've been walking aimlessly in the woods for days now, trying to find help."

I snorted. It was all so rehearsed, even the tears. As if the numerous patrols wouldn't have found her in that time she was allegedly alone in the woods. The entire pack was on high alert scouring the area for rogues and didn't see her? And what was that about shifting? I swore Thea had only been a year older than me. Was she lying about that too?

"I was so scared," she sobbed. "I thought I was going to die. I was only meant to be here a few days and should have been home by now. Please... help me." "And where might 'home' be, Thea? Which pack?" I asked smugly, unphased by her charade unlike the others around me. This was the Thea I remembered; the manipulator. I could see how her words were making the warriors look mildly sympathetic to her situation. It was infuriating.

But I knew she would have to come clean though. There were only two answers to my question; she was either a rogue or she would be caught in a lie when no pack would be able to verify her identity.

"I don't belong to any pack..." she said, turning her eyes to me. "I was mistakenly adopted and raised by humans. I've been trying to navigate how this all works and have only just stumbled into this world recently. I'm sorry, I still don't really understand much. Did I do something wrong? Was I not meant to come here? I was only trying to find my birth family."

I clenched my jaw, livid at everything that sugary-sweet sounding voice was saying.

"Lies! Tell them the truth!" If that were true, then there was no way she could have avoided the private investigator for as long as she did.

Thea's eyes widened more as she flinched away from me. "I-I'm sorry?"

"You think I'm going to let you get away with killing Myra and waltz into this pack? I know what you are. You can't use those tricks on me."

The story she was suggesting wasn't necessarily an impossible occurrence, but it was incredibly rare and almost unheard of. And she knew it. She purposely chose that background because it meant we wouldn't be able to verify with complete certainty who she was... and it meant I couldn't pin her for being a rogue in the criminal sense.

It was all so bullshit. It sounded more like the plot to one of Myra's old fantasy books than anything real. As if she were a poor, average girl who just woke up one day to discover she wasn't like all the other humans. Was this the same storyline she had fed Aleric in the previous timeline? Did he take pity on her initially? "Aria!" Aleric yelled at me. "Enough!"

"Oh, you're taking her side?" I laughed, turning my glower to him. "What a surprise there."

"I'm not taking anyone's side! I'm just trying to do my job and understand what's happened. Something that you're making incredibly difficult to do!" He got up and the two of us stood in each other's faces once more, a furious silence between us creating tension.

"...Fuck you, Aleric," I finally spat out slowly, glaring up at him dead in the eye.

But that was the final straw for him.

"Leave! Now!" he roared. "You're off this case. Go home and cool your head." I wanted to dispute it, to scream back at him, but I could feel this wasn't an ordinary demand. He'd actually had the audacity to Alpha order me away. I could feel the wave of authority wash over me as it tried to command my movements. I didn't try to fight it though... I knew well enough that I would need to obey or it would only cause pain until I conformed. "Oh, and Aria?" he called just as I'd turned my back. I didn't turn around, choosing to remain still until he spoke. "Don't think for a second I'm letting you anywhere near her while you're like this. You're banned from seeing Thea until advised otherwise from upper ranks."

I didn't acknowledge his order and immediately walked off instead.

"Asshole," I angrily whispered to myself as I left. "Sympathising with the murderous bitch... I guess some things haven't changed."

But with every step I took, the anxiety of leaving her behind started to make it harder to keep going; the prospect of her escaping once more terrifying me. I needed to find a way around the Alpha order to get my hands on her. There had to be a way.

I didn't manage to make it to my car though before my father caught my attention. I was extremely relieved to see him. He was the only other person who could possibly understand how messed up this situation all was and I knew I could trust him.

"Father!" I yelled out, running to him.

"Aria?" he greeted, confused. "What's wrong? What's happened?" "It's Thea. They've found her," I said, grasping onto his arm desperately. "But Aleric has banned me from seeing her. You can't let her get away. Please. Please... She's too dangerous."

His eyes regarded me warily as he was silent in thought. He knew who she was and I'd briefly already explained to him in private my conclusion about her hand in Myra's death a day or so earlier. Surely, he would realise just how important this was? Not just for

avenging Myra's death, but to possibly save me in the future too. Possibly to save countless others.

"Please!" I said louder when he still hadn't replied.

He clenched his jaw before finally giving me a small nod. "I'll do everything I can. Don't worry.

I exhaled in relief. At least one person would help. I felt like I was going insane being the only person who understood just how dire our situation was. Especially if she was working with the rogues. Who knew what she was actually capable o

I shakily nodded my head and let go of his arm reluctantly. "You look tired, Aria. Go home and rest for a bit," he said. "I'll let you know what happens once I'm done here."

"Right. Yeah. Okay..." I mumbled.

There was nothing else I could do here and I was still under orders to return home. Maybe it would be okay to rest for just a little bit?

But when I returned home, I found I was only more restless; unable to stay still as I waited for my father to inform me of what had happened. I paced by the stairs, looking out towards the front door constantly. It was almost as if by some miracle my stares would somehow speed up time until he'd come home. I felt I should be doing something. Anything. Not just standing around waiting. Not just standing around until Thea made her next move. Was it going to be the Aleric play next? Was this the part where she finally tries and wins him over to ultimately turn him against me?

...But would Aleric really do that again in this timeline? We'd come so far that I'd thought things could be different this time. That we could be equals in our contribution to the pack, not enemies. He'd shown so much respect to me since I'd become Beta heir that I was now finding it difficult to believe he wouldn't trust me when I said Thea was dangerous.

However, if the worst -case scenario came to fruition, I knew that if he tried to revert back to the Aleric of the past, I wouldn't stand by and accept it this time. All the training, all the hard work, it hadn't been for nothing. I wasn't afraid of standing up to him anymore. I wasn't afraid to fight back

"Aria," a voice suddenly came from the door.

I'd somehow been concentrating so hard that I hadn't heard the front door open. My father stood there, a serious expression on his face that I couldn't decipher.

“How did it go?” I asked without even a greeting. I could feel my heart beating fast in my chest over whatever it was he had to say.

“Ah...,” he started, clearing his throat. “Well, she is being taken to the hospital for her injuries to be looked over.” I laughed. “Why would a prisoner be allowed access to the pack hospital? Couldn’t they just treat her sore foot from inside her cell?”

But he didn’t reciprocate my humour, averting his eyes.

“Father?” I pressed. I could feel something was wrong here. “It’s just until they take her to the cells, right? For further interrogation?” He sighed. “Aria... —.”

I recognised that tone. It was the tone he used when he was about to say something difficult. “No,” I cut him off, almost in disbelief. I took a step away from him. “No, do not tell me they’re treating her as a victim of the rogues.” “Aria, there was no evidence—.” “No!” I yelled. “No, she killed Myra. Hell, she killed me, and you couldn’t even get her in handcuffs? Do you really not give a shit?”

“Enough!” he snapped at my attitude. “There is no evidence she’s involved, Aria, and you know it! Unless you want to come forward and tell the entire council your past, then we’ll need to figure something else out.” “You know I can’t do that! They’ll think I’m insane and lock me up!” “Then this is the best you’re going to get!” he concluded, rubbing his face out of frustration. “So, that’s it? We’re just going to let her wander into the pack and do what she wants?” “No, no, of course not,” he said, his voice almost scolding me. “Don’t be stupid. She’ll be under the watch of a warrior whilst she undergoes treatment.” “Stupid? You’re calling *me* stupid?” I scoffed. “I’m not the one who let a murderer get first class medical treatment in our own pack. At least take some ownership that you messed up

here!”

“What did you want me to do, Aria?” he snapped back, taking several steps towards me. “Huh? If you think they’ll lock you up for saying you were brought back to life, what do you think they’ll do to me when I start going against the logical line of thinking here? What do you think they’ll do to me when I imprison the girl whose public image is currently that of a victim? And not just to me, but to your mother?”

“What...

”

“From what I can tell, you’re not in any immediate danger so long as she is under watch. But we, your family, do not have that luxury if I act out, Aria.”

"I can't believe you actually think I'm not in danger so long as she draws breath, regardless of wherever she is. It's like you didn't even listen when I told you what happened in the past. She's a goddamn murderer. Her influence stretches further than doing the deed herself. She didn't need the sword in her hand last time to kill me with her words."

"Did you even hear what I just said? My behaviour and actions affect more than just you, Aria. Do you not care what happens to your mother and I? We can figure this out but you need to cool down first. Stop thinking about yourself and look at this problem constructively." "...So, you're calling me selfish?" I summed up slowly, a sarcastic tone to my voice. "Fine. Sure. *I'm* being selfish. I'm *so* sorry. I'm sorry for acting out passionately... so the rest of u s don't die!"

"I'm not doing this now," he finally said, defeated. "You've had a traumatic day and had to bury someone you loved; something I really am sorry you had to experience. I'm going to ignore all the hurtful things you've said to me and pass off your irrational behaviour right now as dealing with your grief."

I opened my mouth to speak but he held his hand up to stop me.

"I have to go meet with Tytus now. He's expecting me and I'm already late. Just... pull yourself together, Aria. You're smarter than this."

He left me angrily glaring at the closed door where he had just stood, staring daggers at it as if my father could somehow feel it on the other side.

I completely understood how sometimes I'd done things in my own best interest. I could even understand how those wrong decisions had led to fatal mistakes; like in Myra's case. But pushing for Thea's death wasn't one of the things I'd consider myself selfish for. I was doing it not only for me, but for all of us. I didn't know for sure what would cause the complete annihilation of our kind, but I knew that if it occurs only once I die, then it's logical to believe that stopping Thea is imperative to that plan. And I knew that if I was being truly selfish, I wouldn't have stayed with Aleric for as long as I did in the past, just to help the pack. 1

I knew that if I was being truly selfish, I wouldn't have chosen to come back to life, putting myself at risk of reliving that nightmare, just to save everyone.

I knew that if I was being truly selfish, I wouldn't have worked tirelessly every day since being brought back, changing the people around me and their old traditions wherever possible, just to prevent the future.

I knew that if I was being truly selfish, I wouldn't have... I wouldn't have...

And then a thought came to me. If I was going to be labelled as selfish anyway, then why did it really matter? And I walked out the door, knowing exactly what I wanted to do.

A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 54

Chapter Fifty-Four

“Kiss me,” I said.

“...What...?”

After leaving home, I'd headed straight to where I knew they would be. Somewhere I knew that I definitely shouldn't be.

But there was no hesitation as I'd confidently walked up and knocked on their door. And when Cai had answered, I'd ignored his confusion and demanded the one thing I knew could make me feel better.

Because if it felt anywhere near as good as the first time, then maybe it would be enough to make me forget for a moment that everything was falling to pieces around me.

“Kiss me,” I repeated.

His eyes were wide, stunned at my request, but he wasn't moving. I could see he was still in the same attire he'd been in earlier; the formal clothes making his body somehow look even more fitted.

I quietly sighed impatiently whilst his head tried to comprehend exactly what was happening.

“Aria—.”

However, I didn't wait for him to finish his sentence. It wasn't words I wanted right now ... it was him.

I walked up and pulled on the collar of his shirt until his face was within reach of my own.

“Please, Cai...,” I whispered, as I looked up slowly from his lips to his eyes.

He was so close now that it caused a shiver of anticipation to run through my body. I needed this, I needed him, and I could see in his eyes that he wanted me too. The tension between us was becoming so intense that it felt tangible. 1

The cold night breeze swept around us and it only made the warmth coming from him even more inviting. I loosened

the hand I had hooked onto his shirt and ran it all the way along his chest, feeling him under my touch, until it rested on his broad shoulder. I wanted him closer, his body still feeling too far away.

My heart jumped a little when I saw him finally lean in closer and place his hand on the side of my head, his thumb resting against my cheek tenderly. And instinctively, I closed my eyes as I moved towards him, preparing myself for what would happen next.

But instead of feeling him against my lips, I felt him shift away... and kiss my cheek instead.

"No," he said quietly. "Not like this."

I snapped my eyes open to look at him.

"No... no, please, I need this," I said and grabbed onto him tighter. "Please, Cai... I want you."

He closed his eyes and looked pained, almost as if he was internally having a battle with himself.

"Aria—"

"No, you said you wanted me," I said, my voice becoming more frantic. "Why are you doing this now?"

"Because I honestly don't know if it's me you want right now, or if it's just you finding an outlet for your grief."

I could feel as my cheeks began to burn in humiliation, my eyes tearing up, and instantly I dropped my

side as if he'd just stung me. His words left me embarrassed and hurt over his rejection, and... angry. Angry that everyone was choosing to disappoint me today of all days.

Chapter 10

"Don't give me that crap... I'm sick of hearing people saying that to me today. I'm fine! This isn't about Muta."

"Aria," he said sternly. "You couldn't even stand to look at me today and yet somehow you're now on my doorstep begging for me. Excuse me if I'm a little sceptical of the sincerity here."

"Why do you even care? This is what you wanted, right? You just wanted to sleep with me?" I argued. "Well, here I am, Cai!"

I tried to grab at his hands but he took a step away, creating a small distance between us. I couldn't help but flinch at his movement to get away from me.

"I said I wanted you, Aria. You as a whole. Not... whoever the hell this is right now. And I honestly think that maybe, deep down, you do actually want me too... but the way you're acting right now just tells me that you're in too much pain to think clearly."

I gritted my teeth. "There's nothing wrong with me...," I whispered.

"The fact you can't even see it is part of the issue here."

He sighed, calming himself down.

"Look," he said. "I promise I'll be there for you, even if that's just as a friend. But I have more self-respect than to sit back and let you use me because of the feelings I have for you. Because I do want you... and I honestly want nothing more than for you to tell me right now that I'm wrong about all of this. But from what I can see, you need help, Aria, and I'm happy to oblige... but not like that. Not if it's just temporary to help you deal with what's happened."

I was silent. I wanted to speak, to tell him he was wrong, but I couldn't find the words.

"Aria?" he pressed. "Tell me that I'm wrong and it's me you actually want. Or tell me that you want my help, and I'll help you."

I could feel my heart racing as I tried to think... but ultimately shook my head. This wasn't the sort of on the spot decision I had expected to deal with when coming here. I wasn't ready for that sort of pressure right now.

"...I thought so," he said quietly.

"I can't deal with this right now. I... I need to go."

I took several steps away but Cai called out to me. His expression changed to one of worry and I could feel he was about to chase after me, but I held up a hand to warn him to stay away.

"Aria, wait, where are you going?"

I didn't reply and instead spun around, walking off into the night away from him. There was no point in staying any longer. I was already at the point of feeling humiliated and confused enough.

"Aria, promise me you're going home?"

But I didn't stop. I kept walking. I kept walking not really knowing where I was going but I knew I needed to keep moving.

However, after several minutes, I couldn't help it anymore, unable to hold it in. I screamed out into the sky; my frustration finally getting the better of me.

Aleric, my father, Cai... everyone that I had hoped would act one way, had ended up doing the opposite when I'd needed them most. I had needed Aleric to believe me, to take my side. I'd needed my father to push for Thea's arrest, or at least confinement until it was safe to find more evidence. And I'd needed Cai... I'd needed... 1

I shook the thoughts out of my head.

No, this was all Thea's fault. Everything had been fine before she'd shown up. Myra would still be alive and I wouldn't be fighting with Aleric and my father. I wouldn't have to feel so messed up inside.

Everything was beginning to crumble around me, signs of the past starting to repeat.

And I realised then that if Aleric and my father weren't willing to do what needed to be done, then maybe I would just do it myself. 1

Fuck it.

I started moving again, walking with purpose towards the one place I could get my hands on something to inflict as much pain to someone as I was currently in.

Because I was going to make Thea pay... and I would do it slowly, piece by piece, with the silver blade she used to kill Myra. I would make it agonising for her and ensure that she'd suffer an even worse death poor Myra.

But I felt it the very second I thought of my plan to go see Thea; the Alpha command Aleric had placed on me. It wasn't happy with my intention to defy the order given to me. I winced, crying out in pain as it constricted itself around me, forcing my movements to stop. 1

The ground then suddenly came rushing towards me as I fell, and I began to crawl even as the pain got worse; I was determined to keep going no matter the cost. It was as if a car was thrown on top of my body, crushing me slowly the more I fought against it

But it was too late to stop me.

In my head, I repeated the words I needed to tell myself; that I was marked by the Goddess, chosen, a Saintess, and no order should be able to contain me. If I wanted to go kill Thea, then goddammit, I would go kill her.

And so, I violently shoved at the restraints in my head, screaming against the unbearable pain it caused, until they finally broke off me like chains... and, instantly, I gasped with relief when the weight was lifted. It was as if an immediate sense of liberation filled me and I felt like I could suddenly do anything.

...I was free.

Without wasting any time, I picked myself back up and continued on my journey, my new freedom only coercing me onwards faster. I kept going until, finally, I came to the building where the evidence was kept locked up. The silver knife would be in there I knew, guarded by at least one warrior, but I wasn't concerned. Given how little time had passed since Aleric's decision, I was fairly sure that, as far as they probably knew, I was still a part of the ongoing investigation.

Upon entering the building, I looked around. I'd been here many times before during my Beta heir rounds but it felt like I was seeing it in a completely new light given how dark it already was outside. The entire place felt too empty and quiet but I knew there would be someone around.

I weaved through the hallways, remembering the way easily until I saw the room up ahead. A room guarded by only one warrior named Ray. Unfortunately, I didn't know him that well.

"Evening, Ray." I greeted cautiously in a flat voice, approaching him slowly to gauge his response.

He looked confused as he saw me enter. "Beta heir? Why are you here so late?"

"Aleric asked me to pick something up. It's for the ongoing investigation."

This wasn't necessarily a lie. It was definitely going to help with solving the issue of Myra's murderer on the loose.

Chesterbrity Fou!

He hesitated, looking uncomfortable, and probably realised that something wasn't right here.

"He most likely meant in the morning, Ma'am. The evidence locker is kept shut until daylight hours. The warriors are Alpha ordered to stand guard for the duration of the night duty so I can't bypass that."

“Oh, I understand, but this order comes from Aleric himself. I need to get in at his request, you see... which would be considered the same level of authority as your orders. It really is important, so if I can just

I tried to sidestep him to get closer to the door but he took a step in front of me, blocking my path.

“You should know as well as I do that I can’t just let you in, Ma’am. You’ll need to leave and come back with the Alpha heir if the matter can’t wait until the morning.”

“Ray,” I said, gritting my teeth. “I need to get in there. Just... move aside, please. Don’t make me hurt you.”

His eyes narrowed. “Is that a threat?”

“It doesn’t need to be.”

The words escaped my lips quickly before I could stop them and I knew right away it was a mistake. He could act out in defence if verbally threatened and a physical altercation with him would only make the situation worse. But the anger of being stopped for something so ridiculous was only fuelling my frustration more. Frustration caused by everything that had happened recently.

I needed to act quick before he could do anything and so I lunged towards the keys on his waist. He was faster than I expected though as his hand shot out, quickly encircling my wrist to stop me.

“Ray! Let go of me! Now!” I demanded, trying to pull my hand out of his grasp.

“I’m keeping you detained here until I can call for assistance or get ahold of the Alpha heir himself. Threatening a member of the pack without just cause is punishable.”

I tried to pull my wrist away again but he held on tighter, his body now shuffling to compensate for the increasingly more aggressive attempts I was trying to do in order to escape.

But no, I wouldn’t be taken down like this.

I hadn’t just broken out of excruciating Alpha orders to be stopped like this. I’d come too far already to back out now.

...And then it was like something overcame me.

My whole body went still and completely silent; an energy bursting itself inside me as if the pressure had finally snapped. It was like nothing I'd ever experienced before as my body moved on its own.

I quickly wrenched back the arm he was holding with enough strength that his face was suddenly right in front of my own... and I spoke...

...However, the voice didn't feel like mine.

"I said... Let me go. NOW."

Instantly, his hand slackened and I watched as his eyes glazed over. The authority level in the command I'd just thrown at him had hit him hard. Harder than anything I thought was physically possible.

...And yet it had come from me.

I stood frozen for a few seconds until the shock of what I'd just done finally hit me and was enough for reality to kick in. But it wasn't without consequence. With it came intense vertigo; one that required me to brace myself against the wall stop myself from falling. The whole room spun as I tried to gain control, my heart racing quickly.

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Was this the 'ultimate authority' I'd read about when someone marked by the Goddess had higher power than an Alpha? This entire time I'd thought it was a ranked title honored out of respect for a deity, not something actually enforceable with real ability. But then why did it make me feel so sick? Was it because I wasn't shifted yet? Perhaps my younger body couldn't compensate for the level of power required to control it.

Ray was naturally bewildered by my command that prevented him from doing his duty. He started to take several shaky steps backwards away from me... but I realised too late to help him when his foot suddenly caught under him. With a sickening thud on impact, I watched in mute horror as his body fell backwards against the door behind him... and stop moving.

My head had luckily cleared enough to be able to run and check on him. He was alive, thankfully, but he'd taken a pretty bad hit to the head.

Being as strong as he was, I knew he would be okay in a few hours after healing and so I proceeded to drag him out of the way to gain access to the door.

After acquiring the keys from his waist, I quickly ran into the evidence room, not wanting to waste any more time. I searched everywhere until, finally, I found my old silver dagger glaring at me from a shelving unit to the left.

Seeing it again made me feel queasy, but I'd already made up my mind to kill Thea with it. When the light was about to fade from her eyes, I'd make sure it the last thing she'd see. Right next to me, smiling down at her. It'd be poetic in a way.

I stomached any remaining uneasiness I had as I quickly grabbed the dagger, leaving before anyone else showed up to check on the evidence lock-up or find Ray.

A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 55

Chapter Fifty-Five

On my way to the hospital, I had time to process some of what had just happened.

I could still feel it; that hum of energy deep inside me I'd never known was there. It was as if it was suddenly awakened, brought forward by my desperation and pain. This was true authority, I knew. Something I'd never realised existed, nor did I think anyone else had either. If they'd known I had this control, I was sure they would have tried to lock me up sooner. There was a huge difference between following me by choice due to being chosen by the Goddess, and me being someone with an ultimate authority to control others by force. I was now an even larger threat to the traditional hierarchy.

Upon arriving, I could see the hospital was quiet. There would only be skeleton staff around at this time of night so it wouldn't be hard to navigate my way without being seen. This was particularly important since I didn't need further cause to jeopardise my current position.

It only took a couple of close calls of nearly being spotted, and going down one or two wrong wings, before I finally found the door Thea must have been behind.

I knew because it was guarded by a warrior.

I'd forgotten that my father had mentioned her being put under watch. And to make matters worse, I recognised his face as being one of the few that had been present when Thea was found. It was unlikely he would allow me to see her knowing that I was taken off the case and expressly asked not to see her.

This left me with only one option... I'd need to order him to stand down.

But I wasn't sure I could pull it off again. The first time had been a fluke and I still wasn't sure how dangerous it was for me to invoke that ability given my body's reaction the first time.

I nervously gulped, closing my eyes to try and calm myself.

I needed to do this. Once I was inside those doors, I would have access to Thea. I could end this once and for all and hopefully get the answers I needed in the process.

“I can do this,” I whispered to myself.

And with that, I strode down the hallway towards the warrior.

They saw me immediately and looked just as confused as Ray had been at the evidence locker.

But I didn't stop for chit-chat this time. I kept walking directly at him, trying to pull at that energy deep inside and bring it forward once more.

“Beta heir?” he asked confused. “I thought you weren't a part of this case anymore. Wait ... didn't Aleric Alpha order—”

I grabbed at his shirt so he was forced to stare directly at me.

“You're going to leave. Now,” I commanded in that same voice that didn't feel like my own. “Go to the bathroom. Stay there for thirty minutes. Do not talk to anyone. Do not be seen by anyone. After thirty minutes, you may resume your post but you will not remember I was ever here.”

Just like before, I watched as his eyes glazed over from the order, but this time the side effects hit me a lot quicker.

As he walked off to carry out my command, I felt the vertigo once more, my legs giving out from under me. It was so much worse than last time and I wondered if it was increasingly taxing my body given everything I'd already accomplished; first breaking Aleric's orders, then commanding Ray, and now the one guarding Thea too. There had barely been any breaks in between for me to recover.

That to give myself a moment to rest but, the second my head cleared enough, I didn't waste any more time.

This was it.

I threw open the door and strode quickly towards her bed.

Somehow I managed to move faster than I thought I'd be able to. So fast that she hadn't even opened her eyes yet.

Or, at least, I'd thought that was the case.

I jumped onto the bed, straddling her under me, and immediately drew the dagger to her throat.

“Any willing confessions before I begin?” I asked calmly in a low voice.

I'd expected her to be scared by the sudden pinch of the knife against her, but instead, she only slowly opened her eyes to meet mine, not an ounce of fear in them. Her sheer lack of any self-preservation was enough to make me flinch. Didn't she realise I was about to kill her?

She remained silent as she stared at me coldly, almost seeming unimpressed.

I shook it off though. If she wasn't afraid to die then at least she wouldn't fight back.

“Fine then. This is how the next few minutes are going to go,” I said slowly. “You're going to tell me what I want to know and, in doing so, maybe I'll let you die with all your appendages still attached. But, if you want to make things more difficult... —.”

I swiftly shifted my dagger down to her hand where her fingers were, nicking the skin at a joint so it bled. Her eyes narrowed slightly but she weirdly didn't even wince, something that only made me more unnerved.

She must have caught my slight hesitation at her reaction though as her lips tilted into a small smirk. That same look on her face that made me want to punch her. How the hell could she be smiling in a situation like this?

“What the fuck is *wrong* with you?” I asked, my anger starting to seep into my words. “Are you actually this much of a goddamn psycho?”

At least she wasn't bothering to put on her sad victim facade this time. But even though I could feel she was showing me her true colours, all of it still felt wrong. Even her voice didn't sound as sugary as normal.

“Bit rich coming from the girl who paid someone to stalk me for two years. Not to mention attempting to attack me in front of your future Alpha.”

“At least I'm not a murderous piece of shit like you,” I spat back.

She simply raised an eyebrow at me and looked down towards where my dagger was hovering over her hand, ready to cut her at any second.

“Don't start that crap,” I hissed, quickly moving the knife back to her throat; my patience beginning to dwindle. “We both know what you did to Myra. Admit it. Admit that you killed her and had some plot to overthrow the pack. Admit that you're a filthy rogue.”

...But instead of answering, she just started laughing at me instead. Loudly.

It was so sudden that it made me jump a little too aggressively. Her reaction felt as though she was mocking me.

“Stop it! What the hell is so funny?!”

She tried to quieten herself down but I could see her eyes had watered with tears from the sheer amount

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of laughing

“You don’t actually know anything, do you?” she said, still giggling. “Here I had been worried that you’d somehow figured it all out two years ago, but in reality, you just think I’m a rogue.”

She started laughing again, even harder this time, and I swore I could see red with how angry I was getting.

“Enough!”

I pressed the dagger to her throat slightly deeper but it did little to deter Thea from her moment of humour.

“Sorry, sorry,” she said, trying to stifle her laughter. “I’m just... you were meant to be the smart one. I can’t believe I was worried about nothing.”

I frowned, confused over what she’d said. ‘Smart one’? That implied that there were more people involved than just me. Who else was she referring to? Was she talking about Aleric?

I needed answers. Genuine ones. Not this crappy beating around the bush while she looked down at me. I was the one holding the knife and yet I didn’t feel like I had any of the control in this situation. She’d completely shaken my confidence in everything I was doing.

“Who else do you mean? Are you talking about your plans to seduce Aleric for the Luna position?”

Genuine confusion crossed her face a split second, as if she was trying to gauge if I was actually being serious, but it didn’t last long as she erupted into laughter again.

“Where the hell do you come up with this stuff? I swear I haven’t laughed this much in years. Why would I waste my time seducing your shitty Alpha heir?”

I froze. How could that be possible? Was this just a mind game so I'd let my guard down? That had been her whole scheme in my past life, her whole reason for killing me. If her goal wasn't becoming Luna or taking Aleric for herself, then what was she really after?

"ENOUGH!" I finally yelled with my marked authority, my patience now completely gone. "Tell me the truth. Now. Tell me what you're actually planning!"

The order effects hit me like a tonne of bricks as I held onto the bed rail to stop myself from falling on top of her. This time a coughing fit overcame me too, feeling as though pins of pain stabbed into my brain. If I didn't know better, it honestly felt as if I was dying. Had I even managed to use enough energy to pull off the command correctly? It hadn't felt right.

Thea's eyes glazed for a split second... but it wasn't like the other times. She snapped out of it instantly, almost as if it had done nothing at all. My order hadn't been strong enough to force her to comply.

"What was that?" she asked. "Did you just try to Alpha order me?"

"... Tell me," I said weakly, my vision becoming blurred.

Even with the intense pain, I could still see the smirk on Thea's face as she looked back at me.

"Oh... sweetie, no," she said condescendingly. "Oh, and you've also, uhh... you've got a little something... –

She pulled her arm out from under me easily and tapped her nose to indicate something was on my face

there.

I frowned, but gently touched with a finger to the place she'd shown me. Sure enough, my nose was bleeding as I pulled my hand away to inspect it.

"Seems as though you're just a puppy with a bark too big for your paws," she said, still mocking me. "You

know, I was planning to keep you alive for a little longer, but maybe if I just killed you now it would save me some time."

And with that, the heel of her palm suddenly shot out directly into my chest, throwing me across the room and sliding along the floor.

I could feel where she had hit me and it was a lot stronger than I'd expected. It probably didn't help that I was feeling so incredibly weak still at that moment either. In my current condition, I knew there was a good chance she'd actually be able to kill me here.

I gripped the dagger tighter in my hands and watched her get out of the bed. To my surprise though, she winced slightly when she started walking towards me. Was her injury actually legitimate? I couldn't believe she'd really gone the extra mile to dislocate her own ankle for the sake of infiltrating the pack.

I needed to think and focus though if I had any hope of escaping. Because that's what this was really coming down to now. Even with her foot injury, I knew I wasn't a match for Thea in my current state anymore; especially if she could just shift and rip my throat out as her wolf,

"It's been fun, Aria," she said casually.

She reached down to grab me but I somehow managed to dodge her hand at the last second, skewing my body around her. I knew too well that this would be one of my only openings and quickly grabbed onto her leg, impaling my dagger through her already injured ankle.

Thea screamed out in pain, something I was beginning to wonder if she was even physically capable of doing, and I retracted the knife back out immediately. With any luck, hopefully the injury would make her bleed out.

"You bitch!" she hissed as she tried to reach for me again.

I didn't allow her a chance to get a hold of me though as I quickly brought my leg up and kicked at her with as much force as I could muster.

Without a wolf and already weak, my attack certainly didn't throw her across the room as hers had me, but it did do enough. She fell backwards hitting the floor, her injury preventing her from keeping balance on her feet.

This was the best opportunity I was going to get, I knew. I picked myself up and left the room as fast as!

she was going to try and chase me but stopped as she saw me leave through the doorway, having thought better of it.

aw

I could only assume this meant she had the patience to wait before carrying out my death. Her pause told me that, whatever she was planning, it had to be something not

worth chasing me through the hospital for. Even her attack on me had felt half-hearted, as if she was more lazily playing with me than actually trying to kill me.

I wasn't sure if that made me feel better or worse.

The whole ordeal made me realise just how unprepared I'd been going in though. I'd thought I knew at least some of what Thea was planning, having lived through it already once. But from what she'd told me, had I been wrong? What else could there possibly be that I didn't know about? Her laughter from over assumptions were evidence enough that there had to be some big secret I was completely unaware of. Something that may or may not have to do with the rogues. Because even though she'd laughed at the accusation, she hadn't actually denied her affiliation with them. I

And Aleric... was she lying about that? I couldn't imagine a future where she wasn't trying to constantly steal him from me. Even in this life, where I'd made choices purposely to avoid that future again, I was pretty sure nothing I'd done could have dramatically changed Thea's plans that much. If anything, I'd made it even easier for her to take him this time.

Chapter Fifty-Five

All of this was way too confusing.

Confusing enough that, without realising, I'd walked into the forest and wound up somewhere I hadn't intended to go. I knew I hadn't been looking where I was going when I'd run into the night, but surely should have realised the direction I was going well enough to avoid this place.

...So why had I come here?

I stared at the mossy stone circle before me, at the hill... and at the stump.

The stump that my head had laid upon during the moment of my death; my blood having once seeped into the soil around it. Because, to my utter horror, somehow... I'd arrived at the trial grounds.