

A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 56 - 60

Chapter Fifty-Six

I walked up and approached the stump slowly, unsure if I even wanted to proceed.

Just being here made me feel sick. Ever since coming back, I'd always purposely avoided this place, knowing it would dredge up memories that already haunted me more than enough.

And that's exactly what was happening.

I could see flashes of it all happening before me again as if it were real. An alternate reality where I was convicted of a wrongful death.

I saw the faces of the pack members as they stared at me with such malice, parting the crowd to let me walk up. I saw the Elders sitting in the chairs assembled in a semicircle... and, of course, Aleric and Thea. Thea who was seated in the Luna's seat.

In a daze, I continued to walk forwards, the large oak stump beckoning me on like an old friend. Hadi become delirious?

When was the last time I had even slept? The combination with my weakened state probably wasn't doing me any favours as it all felt so real.

But nevertheless, I kept walking forwards until I stood before that stump and, immediately, I sank to my knees, just as I had in the past. The ground felt just as cold as I remembered and that same shiver went down my spine.

This was it. This was the place it had all ended. I could hear as the voices around me recited the words of the trial as if I were there once more. Usually, I did everything I could to block out the memories, to repress it, but this time I sat and listened quietly, letting it all play out just as it had.

"I think the evidence here has weighed in an obvious result. Do you have anything to say in your defence, Ariadne?" | heard Aleric's voice ask.

It was my line next. I still remembered the words perfectly.

"I sincerely hope the Goddess smites you all for the murder of an innocent you are about to carry out," || said quietly to the panel of ghosts trialling me. My voice only held sadness now, not the bitterness I'd felt when I'd first spoken these words. "There is nothing I can do anymore to prove myself not guilty against the stacks of false evidence you have brought forward, but deep down... I hope you all suffer. When I am gone and you

are alone, I hope I haunt you. I hope my face is what you see when you finally meet your demise. My only mistake was in loving someone.”*

It was strangely true that I had come back to haunt them, just not in the way they would expect. I suppose they should consider themselves lucky I didn't make it my goal to kill them all as soon as I returned.

A small smile tugged at my lips humourlessly over that thought as I gently reached out, placing a hand on top of the stump that had held my last moments. So much pain I'd felt at that time, so much betrayal and hurt... so much emptiness.

And I realised it was similar to how I felt now. It was as if I'd gone full circle having become someone I was finally proud of... only to revert back. I'd reverted back and become someone so much worse.

But this didn't need to be me. Whoever this was now.. it was dark. It was someone... unpredictable, scared, and seeing enemies in even those I cared about. So terrified of the past reoccurring that I'd pushed everyone away and tried to kill Thea myself.

I was acting insane in my desperation to prevent the same future.

In a weird way, Thea had been right. I was meant to be smarter than this, a logical thinker, and yet I'd done several stupid things tonight without a second thought. I'd always felt my strengths were aligned in

my ability to think out a strategy but it was clear I was still weak when it came to my own emotions and other people.

Sighing, I calmed myself in my mind, letting go of the things I'd been holding onto. This wasn't the past anymore and I needed to focus on the future.

...Including learning to accept Myra was dead... and move past it.

“*“Therefore,”*“ I heard Aleric's voice once more, the trial having continued the duration I was in thought, “*” with the power he held within me, I, Aleric Dumont, Alpha of the Winter Mist Pack, sentence you, Ariadne Chrysalis, former Luna of the Winter Mist Pack, to death. Your sentence is to be carried out immediately. “*“

I didn't feel scared though. This trial wasn't real and it didn't need to hold power over me anymore.

Instead, I turned around and rested my head on the stump as I stared up into the sky. It was a cathartic experience, one that left me feeling... peaceful.

I knew this darkness was something I'd need to be careful about from now on. It was clear just how quickly I could negatively impact everything around me and lose my ability to think logically.

...And it was clear just how quickly I could become dangerous. To both myself and others.

At some point, I must have fallen asleep as I laid on the ground by the stump. Because the next thing I remembered was a voice calling out to me.

"Aria?"

I stirred but didn't wake up. I still felt so exhausted from the night before, my body feeling too heavy to move.

"Aria, are you okay?" they called again.

I begrudgingly opened my groggy eyes finally and saw Cai standing near me.

He sighed in relief when he saw I was okay.

"Do you have any idea how worried I've been?" he stressed. "I went to your house a few hours after you left and the attendants told me you still hadn't made it home yet. With how you were acting, I freaked out thinking the worst. I've been searching all night for you, tracking your scent, terrified something had happened to you."

I could see that behind me the sunrise was starting to dimly light the area around us. It lit up his features enough that I could see how angry he looked but I knew it was just out of fear for me. I couldn't help but find my breath catching slightly at the sight of him though. The warm orange tones of the light made him look almost otherworldly.

I smiled at him a little, something that only deepened his frown, but I couldn't help it. His concern only heightened how I was feeling.

I sat up and reached my hand out towards him silently, indicating for him to come closer and take it. He hesitated for a second, regarding me warily, before finally giving in.

Immediately, I could feel how warm his hand felt in mine as I pulled him towards me, drawing him in until he was next to me on the ground.

"What the hell, Aria, you're freezing," he said and quickly wrapped me up in his arms, rubbing them down to warm me up. "Were you here all night?"

I sighed contently and nestled my head into the crook of his neck sleepily, gently grabbing onto his shoulder. I could feel him begin to relax at my touch, just the same as how his presence made me feel calmer too.

“Yes,” I answered quietly.

“...Why?”

I shrugged my shoulder slightly. “I did some stupid shit and fell asleep here.”

He pulled away slightly in surprise, trying to look down at me to see if I was being serious. A part of me whined inside as he moved away and I grabbed onto him a little tighter.

“Are you in danger? Do you need help?” he asked.

I shook my head and smiled. “I’m fine. Genuinely, this time. Believe it or not, my camping adventure was very therapeutic. Maybe it can be a new hobby. I’ve never really had one of those.”

He looked at me incredulously as he gauged my seriousness and I could see how it might be hard for him to trust anything I was saying based on our last conversation. But to my relief, he finally cracked, his lip twitching at the side into a small smile at my joke.

“I’ll have to give it a try sometime,” he said. “Though, if I’m being honest, the trail grounds in my opinion would be like camping in a haunted house. Why would you come here of all places?”

A quiet half-hearted laugh escaped me and I reluctantly pulled away to rest my head back on the stump. The stars above were starting to fade as the sun rose higher and I gently entwined my fingers with his, hoping some of his strength would pass to me.

“Because I’m connected to this place. A piece of me lives here, reliving the same memories. I guess you could say that I’m one of the ghosts haunting this place,” I said softly, feeling too exhausted for more excuses. “... This is where I died, Cai.”

I didn’t turn to look at him but I felt him tense up, his fingers pressing harder against my own.

It was time. Even if he thought I was insane, even if he never wanted to see me again, telling Cai was well overdue. If he knew then at least he could understand what was actually happening and what I was currently going through. Or maybe he’d just call me crazy and that would be that.

“What...?”

"I died here," I repeated. "Eight years from now I get wrongfully convicted of poisoning Aleric's mistress and causing a miscarriage. The pack condemns me and in my final moments, I die here alone, scared and in pain... and at the hands of my own mate."

"Who...?"

I knew what he was asking.

I turned to look at him, meeting his gaze so he could feel how genuine I was being about this. But it wasn't an unpleasant moment. It was the first time I'd been able to talk, or even think of the past, without immediately bawling my eyes out.

Seems as though last night really had allowed me to make peace with it.

"Aleric," I answered. "Just as the Elders predicted."

I could see a flash of pain in his eyes momentarily at the confirmation of who my mate was and I quickly squeezed his hand in mine for comfort. His reaction made it seem as though a part of him had still been hanging on to hope that maybe I was his. My heart ached for him.

He cleared his throat, pausing before saying anything else. I knew how difficult this was to believe but I was relieved he was at least not completely dismissing me yet.

"And the mistress...?" he finally asked.

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...Thea. The girl who killed Myra. The one they're allowing to be treated as a patient in the hospital right now. She manipulated those around me for years until it eventually ended in my death sentence."

He understandably looked incredibly confused as he frowned, trying to comprehend exactly what I was telling him.

"Aleric... didn't love me," I finally explained after he hadn't spoken for a while. "The different person he was in the past is someone I hope you'll never have to meet, or anyone else meet for that matter.

I dedicated my life as a Luna to him, thinking that because he was my mate, that one day he would finally love me. Instead, he used and hurt me for years only for his pursuit of becoming the country's most powerful pack. Something that, once we had accomplished that feat, I was discarded."

"... That's why you were so scared of him."

I nodded. "That day we bumped into Aleric after the Jade Moon attack was the first time I'd seen him since being executed. It had barely even been a week at that point since I'd been brought back."

There was a pause in conversation as I turned my eyes away. What was he thinking? He'd told me he would be there for me even as a friend and it was something I'd been willing to accept as a risk once I opened my mouth. But even friendship was more than I had a right to ask for right now after pushing everyone away in my life.

He tugged at my arm gently until I finally met his eyes, and slowly, I moved towards him as he pulled me closer.

"Come here," he said and propped me into his lap facing him. "You should have told me sooner, little wolf."

Tears stung at my eyes over hearing him say that. He believed me. He actually believed what I was telling him. "I know," I whispered.

There was another moment of silence, both of us having too much to say and not knowing where to start, before he finally spoke again.

"...Should I be worried you're taking advantage of me?" he eventually said lightly. He leaned away and used his arms to support himself as he regarded me.

I frowned, unsure what he meant, and worried whether he felt used by me keeping my secret for so long.

"I don't..." I started, tilting my head.

"Well, you're... what? Twenty... six now?" he said, his lip curling in one corner as he failed to hide his smile. "Aren't I a bit young for you?"

I stared at him in complete disbelief for a second before bursting out into laughter. Of all the things he could have been freaked out by, he was making jokes about my goddamn mental age.

"Yeah, you're an immature pest, that's for sure," I said, still laughing. "Especially when you talk down to me. I conquered an entire country, was a renowned and feared strategist, and yet you kept petting my head like a damn ten year old."

"You're right," he said, chuckling. "I really should respect my elders more, my mistake."

lightly hit his shoulder only causing him to laugh harder. His entire body was shaking under me as I sat against his legs and I could feel my body warming up even without his arms around me. 1

When

the laughing had died a little he sat upright, his face suddenly inches from mine, and stared at me with all seriousness. "I guess it would be really inappropriate if I wanted to kiss you then."

His eyes burned into me and I felt my cheeks redden. Everything around me felt unreal as my heart started pounding quickly in my chest.

"Would you still want to...? Even after everything I've told you...?" I whispered, unable to stop myself from staring at his lips. His face was so close I couldn't help but feel a buzz of energy drawing me near.

"It's fine," he quietly replied as he leaned in. "I'm not opposed to dating older ladies."

I couldn't help but laugh at

his joke, breaking the trance as I looked away. "I swear I'm going to actually hit you in a second for a real." 1

He wasn't deterred though and quickly grabbed my chin to make me look back at him again. The sudden movement forced a small sharp breath to escape me out of surprise.

"Kinky," he was all he whispered before finally bringing his lips to meet mine.

Instantly, flames ignited inside me, overwhelming me to the point of stopping any other thoughts or laughing at his

last remark. It was stronger than any of the previous times, something that I couldn't help but wonder whether it was because I'd finally opened myself up to him.

I felt as though I would melt away at that very second if it weren't for his strong grip on me

still. With one hand on my waist, his other hand had weaved itself through my hair and was preventing me from even thinking of pushing away, not that I could have convinced myself in a thousand years to do so in that moment anyway.

"Cai," I breathed against his lips as I pressed myself against him more, my hands already greedily grabbing at his body to feel him closer.

His lips suddenly broke into a smile and he pulled away laughing lightly.

"I said a kiss, Aria," he joked. "You realise that we're sitting two feet away from where people get executed, right?...Unless you're into that sort of thing... little freak."

I sighed in mild annoyance, a small embarrassed smile spreading across my face, and felt my cheeks burn deeper. "I'm already regretting every thing and it's only been five minutes."

He mustn't have liked that answer as he grabbed at my thighs and dragged my body flush up against him, his lips suddenly right at my ear. My mind went blank and any grievances from me were quickly wiped away with just his touch.

"No, you're not," he quietly growled as he nipped softly at my sensitive skin there. A noise somewhere between a gasp and a sigh escaped me before I could stop it, instantly making me forget where we were again.

I would have been happy to resume where we'd left off but he chuckled again and gently tapped my legs to say we should get up.

"Come on," he said, gently helping me back to my feet. "This place is fucking dismal and cold. I don't wanna hang around here any longer."

I wasn't even sure I was ready for walking yet after feeling like a melted puddle only a minute prior, but somehow I managed. He had a point though. I needed real rest and this place really was horrible.

After finding my balance and retrieving my dagger, we started walking back in the direction of civilisation. Immediately, he grabbed my hand in his, something I couldn't help but smile over. I wouldn't tell him how happy it made me though; I had a feeling it would only go to his head right now.

"I obviously have a million questions," he said as we walked. "But there's one that's sort of burning in my mind more than the others right now."

I nodded. "That seems fair."

He stopped and turned to look at me, his expression becoming serious.

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"Did we know each other in that previous life? *Were we* at least friends?"

And all the blood that had been blushing my cheeks immediately drained from my face, feeling myself freeze. It was insane how quickly a moment of feeling on cloud nine could easily be dragged down, kicking and screaming, back to reality.

Because I'd neglected to divulge one of the most crucial details of all. ... That I'd killed him.

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Chapter Fifty–Seven

'I killed you,' I whispered in my head. 'You did nothing wrong and I killed you.'

"Ahh..." was the only sound that left me.

I was fairly certain that telling him that information didn't exactly scream that he could trust me; a vital part of any possible relationship to start. Would it be wrong of me to keep it a secret? It seemed like such an unnecessary gamble to ruin something that didn't need to be tarnished so quickly.

"...Aria?" he prompted.

"I'm trying to remember," I lied.

I could see it now... his eyes changing to become wary, unsure of who I was. His death was just the start of a list of names whose lives I had ended up claiming. Would he see me as a murderer?

I swallowed back my hesitation and cleared my throat. If I was willing to finally put the past behind me then there was no reason to ruin my future because of it.

"No," I eventually answered. "I... can't recall ever having met you. I was never running late in the library that day since there was no reason for me to be so distracted. And because I wasn't running late, I never accidentally collided with you in the hallway... therefore we never met to my knowledge." 1

It wasn't necessarily a lie. We technically had never met, it's just that I'd managed to orchestrate his entire demise from the comfort of my own home.

"Ah, I see..." he said in thought before smiling. "Man, your life really was tragic, aye?"

I exhaled in relief disguised as a laugh. "I'm sure your ego kept you company adequately enough."

We continued to chat whilst we walked and I did my best to explain everything as best I could; though purposely remained vague in regards to any of my less pleasant actions or his death. I told him about my life from where it diverted; about the Goddess, Myra, my visions, and about Thea... or what I thought knew about Thea at least. 1

"It all weirdly explains a lot of the things that used to confuse me about you..." he said as we walked across the threshold of where he was staying.

Both of us had instinctively walked back to his place without needing to confirm where we wanted to go. I certainly didn't feel up to facing my parents right now.

"...And why you were blaming yourself about Myra," he continued, closing the door behind us.

A pit of guilt churned in my stomach. "I couldn't save her the second time. I don't know why I didn't see it in a vision like before."

"Hey, it's not your fault," he said as he stepped closer, "You can't blame yourself for not knowing... and you especially can't blame yourself for some random power thing you've don't have control over."

I sighed, closing my eyes a little in relief. It felt nice to hear those words from someone who knew the full picture. It made me feel like I wasn't alone. Here was someone who wasn't required by my birth to care for me, and they were telling me I wasn't to blame. And I loved my father, don't get me wrong, but nothing he could've said would have made me feel quite the same since Cai had no real obligation to me.

After a few moments passed though, I became painfully aware that both of us were standing silently at his door, neither of us moving.

"Okay," I finally said, breaking the silence. "I should probably get some sleep since it's been a rough night. I sit okay if I crash on your couch—"

I didn't get to finish my request though because his lips were then suddenly on mine, hungrily drinking me in.

...And miraculously, I wasn't so tired anymore.

I instantly dropped the dagger from my hand, letting it fall to the ground with a clunk, and reached up to grab his shoulders, pulling him towards me.

A low growl in approval sounded from his throat that did all kinds of inexplicable things to my insides, and he quickly hoisted me up against the wall, my legs wrapping around his waist as if they'd *always* belonged there. His hands were gripped firmly around my thighs as he'd positioned himself perfectly between them and I could feel his desire as he pressed himself against me.

"Fuck, Aria," he groaned as he kissed me along my neck. "Do you have any idea how crazy you make me? How long I've wanted to do this?"

That every mind to reply but honestly, at that point, I wanted nothing more than for him to just continue touching me *everywhere*, to continue making me feel more of him against me.

The only reply I managed in the end was more of a whimpering of his name as my back arched inwards to meet his body. Something that was met with only more kissing and a grunt of his own.

I felt his hand travel under the hem of my dress and try to work its way up but my clothes were too tight around the chest area, restricting any more access.

“Too many clothes,” he grumbled, feeling around my back until he touched the zipper.

He didn’t pull it down though, his hand pausing for a moment as if in thought, and instead he threw me over his shoulder in a fireman’s carry, making it seem as though I weighed absolutely nothing

Cai!” | Squealed in surprise, unable to stop my giggling. “Put me down! I can walk!”

“No,” he replied as he began walking towards what was probably the bedroom. “You have a habit of storming away whenever I finally get to kiss you. This is just insurance.”

I kept laughing even though I did feel a little bad. But I couldn’t help it. Something about being carried like this was too exciting to mull in guilt.

He kicked the door wider so we could enter and immediately he placed me down on the bed. Everything around me in the room smelt like him and it was intoxicating, only driving my want for him higher. A part of *me* even wondered what it would be like once I was shifted and became open to senses far more sensitive. *We weren’t* destined mates, and I knew that there was nothing I could do about that, but even without a mate bond he always managed to have an effect on me.

The best— case scenario with Cai would be to become chosen mates, something that wouldn’t give me the artificial yet intense feelings of a destined mate, but it would be nice nonetheless. If it was between purely a fake emotional attachment induced by the Goddess’ choice, and someone who genuinely cared about me but wouldn’t give me destined mate sparks, I knew which I would choose.

And then realised all this talk of mates was me getting a little ahead of myself. I hadn’t even spoken to Cal yet about us.. about how it would even be possible for us to be together long— term... and worse, I hadn’t even spoken to him about his questionable exclusivity.

But there wasn't enough time to go into all of that yet.. for now, I would be happy with just one answer.

Cai was on me, continuing to kiss me as his hand already started to unzip the back of my dress. His touch was a fire that made me want to forget all my worries, but I managed to clear my head enough to speak.

"Cai," I whispered.

I cursed internally at myself though when I realised that it didn't even sound remotely like I was trying to

get him to stop what he was doing.

I cleared my throat. "Cai," I repeated, trying again. "Hang on a second. I need to ask you something first before we do this."

He pulled back to look at me and it was almost like I'd wrenched him out of a daze. My heart swelled a little at seeing him like that, seeing the effect I had on him, knowing that it was me that had done that. It was identical to how my mind became lost in the moment because of him.

"Right now?" he asked, his breath heavy.

...It can wait, I heard myself say in my head as I gazed at his perfect features.

"... Yes," I said reluctantly. "I need to know... I need to know what your relationship with Iris is. Iris Sullivan from the Hidden Moon pack."

He stared at me in disbelief almost as if he couldn't believe I was asking this now of all times.

"... Did you ever sleep with Iris?"

Iris was incredibly beautiful, even I could tell. If there was someone who would be a good match for Cai, I could see how someone like Iris would be a perfect fit. She was of Alpha blood too, attractive, smart, funny... kind even to strangers. Clearly, she was into Cai since she'd called him her 'hot date'. If they were or had been together though, then it meant that the words Cai had told me the night of Aleric's coming of age might not have been completely genuine.

"No, Aria..." he said slowly, almost mildly annoyed. "I did not sleep with Iris or have any sort of intimate relationship with her."

Relief flooded through me and instantly I felt so much better, more assured. But I still needed more answers.

“So when she called you her ‘hot date’... what was going on?” I pressed further.

He sighed, sitting up and rubbed at his face.

“Nothing. Nothing was going on,” he said. “Tris and I are friends, she was probably joking. I stayed with her pack briefly whilst I was travelling and got to know her. Things were good, we got along great, we still do, but I ended up leaving after only a month or so. Her father propositioned me to take Iris as a chosen mate in the event neither of us found our destined ones. Given our families lineage and the affiliation it could create, it seemed like a good deal for both our packs. Iris even came to me and confessed she was attracted to me.”

Oh. That didn’t sound like nothing but I could see how the proposal would have been extremely beneficial to both parties. They really would be a good pair from what I could tell.

“...And what did you say?” I asked hesitantly, now unsure if I even wanted to know about this anymore.

“No!” he said as if it was obvious. “Of course I said no, you dork. I’d much rather be with this one very stubborn, very annoying old lady who always makes me constantly question my sanity... I want to be with you, Aria, and I meant that.”

I felt a warm happiness rush inside me and I wanted to give in to it immediately... but I knew that, as nice as being with Cai was, the reality was that it was most likely temporary.

I realised that in an ideal world, being his chosen mate would be the best-case scenario...however, this wasn’t an ideal world. Our relationship would possibly ignite a war, something that I’d been trying to push out of my mind to just enjoy the euphoric moment of being with him the last hour or so.

And then, of course, there was whether he’d meet his destined mate. Something I would be helpless to stand in the way of once he experienced it. I knew how good it felt to feel the mate bond of someone destined for you, how easy it would be to forget everything else; anyone else.

As someone who had already experienced it once, I was far better prepared to deal with it and see it for what it truly was; an unwilling decision decreed by a deity that, according to Selene herself, wasn’t able to be changed. However, I couldn’t say the same for how Cai would react. The first time would be... intense.

A thought came to me then... something whispering a reminder I'd forgotten. Cai didn't have a mate, Luna, or child prior to his death. A death at the age of twenty-one... three years from now.

This meant I had at least three years to confidently be with Cai before the risk of him finding his destined mate became higher. A risk I'd have to be willing to accept and step back from, no matter how much it might hurt me. Was he worth that gamble?

Chapter Filly–Seven–Pt# 2

Chapter Fifty–Seven – Pt#2 “Aria?” Cai asked, pulling me from my thoughts.

He gently reached out and poked a finger between my brows, making me realise I was frowning.

“You’ve got that look on your face,” he said. “The one that usually tells me you’re overthinking something... Should I be locking the bedroom door to prevent your escape?”

Instantly I relaxed, smiling a bit at his joke. I hadn't realised he'd learnt my expressions so well.

“I’m sorry,” I said, as I stared into his pure golden eyes that had always made me want to melt. “...I’m not going anywhere, I promise. I... I want to be with you too, Cai.”

‘Even if it’s just temporary,’ I finished in my head.

Cai had been there at the beginning of my return, witnessing my worst moments and helping me even when my plans were insane or not his concern. He'd been there for me when I'd cried and broken down, unsure of who I was or who I could lean on. And it was true he'd ended up hurting me, but I'd hurt him too. Yet somehow, he'd realised sooner than me that we were undeniably drawn to each other. It was just me who refused to acknowledge it.

Being with him was probably still a terrible idea, I knew that, but even if it was temporary, wasn't it better than nothing? Being around him made me feel safe, comfortable, and... wanted. Things I'd never felt in my past. Was it so wrong of me to desire that for myself, even if it could end disastrously?

He didn't waste any more time though as his lips were then on me again, and goddamn did he know how to kiss. I felt like I was going to burn everywhere he touched me; along my thighs, around my waist, up my back. He'd managed to unzip my dress already and so it was then just a matter of sliding my arms out as he pulled it up over my head. And suddenly I was before him in only my underwear... that I couldn't help but look away, embarrassed.

He must have guessed my thoughts exactly though as he grabbed at my arms before I could completely cover my torso with them.

“Hey, don’t do that,” he said gently. “You’re so beautiful.”

Had anyone ever called me that before? I couldn’t ever recall. I knew I wasn’t unattractive but I’d never seen myself as anything overly special. How could I given my history? I’d tried to make myself prettier in the past to impress Aleric and it had only made me look unhealthy with a sickly thin figure and dark circles under my eyes.

He planted a small kiss on my wrist and delicately made his way up along my arm, making a trail of pecks as he went. And when he finally reached my shoulder, I shivered under his touch. Everything he did was driving me crazy, especially as he then began lightly tracing the outlines of my body; starting with my chest, around my bra, and moving lower to around my stomach, dangerously close to the hem of my underwear. All the while leaving a path of goosebumps wherever his fingers touched.

He stared down at me while he teased me, looking just about ready to devour me at any second, but instead he restrained himself, wanting to make the moment last as long as he could. I could barely take it any longer though as a little whimper escaped me involuntarily.

I sat up impatiently so our eyes were level and kissed him deeply, grabbing the hem of his shirt in one hand. However, instead of letting me lift it off, he clasped my wrist gently and kissed it, leading me to lie back down again. I would have found it odd but my mind became quickly occupied again.

“Have you ever done this before?” he suddenly asked,

“Not in this life,” I answered before I paused in thought, considering his question further. “...And never with someone who cared about me.”

He kissed me passionately, as if he knew exactly what I was saying and was trying to make up for my past. Already I had felt more in these last few minutes than any prior experience and I didn’t want to stop.

He gripped my arm above my head whilst his other hand started to venture lower... and lower.. and lower... until I gasped out, squirming under him.

I hadn’t realised how sensitive I was there until now, nor had I realised just how amazing this could feel. He kissed me gently around my neck... my chest.. my stomach, all the while his fingers continued to build a

sure up inside me, unlike anything I'd felt before. It was making me dizzy, exhilarated, and I wanted more of it.

Suddenly his lips brushed against my bra, biting softly against the thin fabric there, and it sent an electric shock through me that completely made me come undone, arching my back upwards into the sensation that rode through me.

I laid under him afterwards, completely out of breath as I let the intense waves of pleasure continue to wash over me.

"...Your face was so cute," he said. His words were light but his voice sounded thick. "I wish I could have taken a picture."

I opened my eyes to meet Cai's, a mixture of lust and entertainment in his as he watched me, and my lips twitched at the side into a smile.

"...Only if you have a death wish," I answered.

He smirked playfully as if I were actually challenging him, "That might be worth it."

I sighed jokingly, rolling my eyes, and slowly picked myself up until I was kneeling in front of him at almost eye level. He was stunning to look at, by far one of the most attractive people I had ever met, and yet somehow he was interested in me. That fact wasn't lost on me and my desire to see him, all of him, was steadily increasing.

I went to grab his shirt hem again however, just like before, he stopped me, trying to distract me instead with more kisses.

"...Show me," I said softly, giving him pause. "I know you're not shy of your body since I've seen your bare back in that classroom years ago. So this is something you're not wanting me to see. Me, personally."

He looked unsure, hesitating for several moments before finally closing his eyes in acceptance. And, slowly, he lifted his shirt off.

As I caught the first glimpse of his body, there was a moment where I felt I forgot how to breathe. He was gorgeous, perfectly muscled in all the right ways, and I gently reached a hand out to feel his warm skin under my fingertips. But as my eyes trailed down, I finally saw what he was hiding and froze.

There, on his lower abdomen, were the scars of ragged claw marks. Scars I knew he'd acquired from when we'd saved Myra's life.

"I didn't want you to be reminded of that right now," he said quietly. "You looked... happy. Something I was starting to worry about."

I swallowed at the lump in my throat which had formed, my mind beginning to race over the memories of her. I missed her so much.

...But she was gone and I'd already made my peace. Myra wouldn't want me to shy away on her account.

I lightly traced over the scars with my fingertip, following the jagged lines carefully, before slowly bringing

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my face in closer to kiss it. Underneath my touch, I felt him shiver.

"It's okay," I said, straightening back up to meet his gaze. "It's a permanent reminder of her as it should be. She's a part of you now. She's a part of both of us."

I reached up and brought his lips down to meet mine, pressing my body against him. His skin on mine felt amazing, a warmth encircling my whole body as his arms wrapped around me.

Impatiently,

I quickly removed my remaining *underwear*, no longer wanting anything else *between* us, and hungrily, I watched over him as he did the same. There was a moment once it was done that *we paused* to stare at each other, both of us needing a second to take in the other person during *silent appreciation*.

After several

seconds had passed though, he finally laid me down, hovering himself *over me*, and I *softly* bit my lower lip.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" he asked, giving me one last chance to back out.

I knew there was more meaning to his question than just seeing if I was still comfortable. There was a werewolf stigma around destined mates and the virginity of the woman involved; an archaic *view* that should have been abolished a long time ago. By giving myself to Cai, it was *basically going* against that ridiculous ideology since we both knew I had a mate. But I wasn't one for old traditions or values anymore. If someone didn't want me due to a reason like that, then they *weren't worth my time*.

I swallowed nervously and nodded my head.

He kissed my forehead as he proceeded to press himself in, and I cried out in a mixture of pain and pleasure. I heard him groan in unison with me, sending more excited tingles throughout as I clung *to his shoulders*.

Given this was my body's first time, I knew that this mild pain was to be expected but the sensations were overwhelming nonetheless,

He waited patiently for me though, allowing me a chance to adapt and relax against him, before finally proceeding. Whatever pain had been there luckily diminished quickly and it was immediately overtaken by something far better.

I felt full and completely absorbed against his body as he *moved*, each thrust stealing a moan *from my* lips. I wasn't alone though as Cai's own grunts were close behind, filling my ears and narrating *my* thoughts. My mind was devoted, there was only him now, only the way he was able to consume *my* entire being.

That same pressure from before was beginning to build itself inside me again, rapidly increasing in line with his quickening movements. I desperately wanted to feel those waves of pleasure once *more*, that intense relief I knew was waiting for me on the other side.

Everything then suddenly became fervid as my moans became cries. It was a crescendo of heated *energy* that was close to boiling. Harder and faster, his hands touching and grabbing me at *every* sensitive area, it was an extremity of sensations I didn't know possible.

"Aria," he groaned out one final time.

It was enough to send me completely over the edge as I came undone against him, that same electricity sparking throughout my body to leave me buzzing. He wasn't far behind though as he shared in his *own* release, the two of us left panting and completely exhausted.

I laid in his arms when it was over, nestled up against his body as neither of us wanted to move. There was nowhere else I'd rather be than right there.

And it became abundantly clear to me

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Chapter Fifty-Eight

'So handsome,' I thought to myself as I watched Cai sleeping next to me.

I wasn't sure how long I'd slept for but I'd woken up to find him by my side. He looked so peaceful; his hair had tousled into a mess as his chest softly rose and fell. I could have watched him for hours.

I lost track of time as I recounted the events that had transpired the evening prior but soon Cai stirred next to me. In his slumber, a strand of hair fell across his face and I couldn't help but reach out and gently brush it away back into place. It was so silky to touch.

As my eyes drifted back to his face though I froze, realising he was now awake and watching me.

"Morning," he mumbled sleepily, reaching out to pull me close to him.

I had fallen asleep in one of his t-shirts but could still feel his warmth through the fabric. If not for the confusion of his words, I would have melted myself into his touch willingly. But the nagging in my mind prevented me, forcing me to pick up on the oddity. How could it still be morning when I knew I'd slept for at least a few hours?

"...Morning?" I asked slowly. "How long have I been asleep?"

"Just over a day. You were dead to the world, completely comatose."

I tensed up immediately realising that, if that were true, then I'd disappeared without notice for over an entire day. Were my parents freaked out? I knew I was exhausted from using that newfound authority but I hadn't realised I'd be out cold for so long. The tax it took on my body must have been far more severe than I thought.

I sat up and knew I needed to leave as soon as possible. If they already had people out looking for me then this was the last place they should find me.

"Why didn't you wake me?!"

I tried to squirm off the bed but he held me back, his arm around my waist.

"Relax! I already handled it all. I told your attendant you were safe but had a rough night and were staying with a friend."

I turned back to look at him. "...No one can know I'm here, Cai."

With a sleepy sigh and completely unphased by my stress, he shifted into a sitting position to tighten his grip on me. "I already figured you'd say that so I told her to be discreet with the information."

It took a few seconds to fully process his words but finally, I exhaled in relief knowing that at Lucy would make up an adequate excuse to appease my parents. At least there was no search party out looking for me.

"Come on," he said, guiding me to lie back down again.

He pulled me up against his chest once more so we were face-to-face and softly kissed my forehead between my knitted brows. I could already guess what he was thinking.

"You worry too much," he grumbled, confirming my suspicion.

"You need to take this seriously, Cai," I said quietly. "Do you realise what would happen if word got out?"

"I'm aware," he replied, much to my surprise.

"...If you know then why did you pursue me in the first place? ...Why come back to the Winter Mist?"

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His eyes were serious, a sharpness to them I rarely saw. He was like a different person when he was this focused, so contrasted to his normally playful manner.

"Because it's avoidable," he said. "The issues are surrounding our positions and Aleric, right? There are ways around it."

I looked at him incredulously. If he knew the ramifications of this so well then he was just as insane as me for trying to pull this off.

"...Is being with me really worth starting a war, Cai?"

He avoided my eyes as he remained deep in thought. "...Maybe," he said distantly.

His gaze then softened, his normal demeanour returning. "Maybe... Well, since one of the issues is because of my future status, then maybe I'll just... let it go. Personally, I think I've missed my calling in life to become a trophy husband. You can be the breadwinner Beta if you really want."

Even if he was joking, I still stared at him in disbelief. He really was mental.

"Cai, you can't just abandon your pack like that."

"Being an Alpha seems overrated but okay, sure," he said, not even trying to hide his smirk anymore. "But who said I'd want you as my Luna anyway? You'd probably be terrible at it. Only those with *seven years of Luna experience need apply for the future entry-level job offered at the Silver Lake pack. Unfortunately, you're one year short of the minimum application requirement, ma'am."

I hit his shoulder and started to play fight him much to his amusement. He quickly restrained me within his arms though, laughing the entire time.

“But in all seriousness,” he said, finally continuing, “it doesn’t bother me. If it means being with you then I’m happy to do whatever, Aria.”

“Then you’re just as crazy as me,” I replied. “This is literally the worst decision I’ve ever made and I’ve done a lot of dumb shit recently.”

He shrugged. “Possibly, possibly.”

“... really don’t see a way where we can ever be public–.”

“Shhh,” he said, silencing my lips with a kiss. “Let’s just enjoy the moment for a second. We have plenty of time to argue about whether we go public or not. And besides, it’s not really much of an argument when I could just....” He started kissing his way up from my chest, along my shoulder... up until I could feel his warm breath on my neck. “...Do this.”

He licked the side of my neck, the exact spot where a mate mark would go, and a shiver of pleasure spread throughout my whole body. I could picture it so clearly and knew how amazing it would feel to wear that mark. It would bring us together in ways no one else would ever be able to compare again.

That mark was how mates completed their bond, a requirement for showing full commitment and becoming one. But a mark had its own complicated downsides; one of which was that if we were to go through a mate rejection post-marking, the process would potentially kill us. Our wolves were unlikely to survive the intense heartache associated with rejection from a mate already fully bonded; a rejection considered more painful than the death itself.

However, aside from rejection, a mark meant that there could be no other mate until one of the bonded died. It was unquestionable, final. And whilst the normal death of a mate was painful, it did not mean the surviving party would die also like during the rejection process.

It meant that my life would be fully tied to Cai and, by extension, his pack; something that Tytus would want to prevent at all costs... And yet a part of me wanted him to do it. To quell any doubts in my mind

over whether being with Cai was okay because by that point it would be too late. By taking the choice away, it would free me in a way.

“...Cai,” I moaned out, the internal battle inside me raging as he continued to kiss me along that area of my neck. “... Stop that.” It was a weak request.

"Make me," he replied.

I knew he wouldn't actually do it, not here and definitely not today, but the excitement it caused was involuntary. That feeling of knowing it was so wrong that it made it feel even better; as if tempting fate.

I

felt his hand creep up under the fabric of his shirt I wore, working its way along my waist and upwards towards my chest. These feelings he gave me, this... intense... desire to be close to him, as if he were a force of nature pulling me in via gravity... It was intoxicating. The more he was near me, the more he touched me, the more I felt my addiction to him increasing.

And so, when he proceeded to take me just as he had the morning prior, forcing my body to feel unimaginable highs, I knew I was only falling down a rabbit hole I should have walked away from.

...And yet, when we were completely exhausted once more, wrapped in each other's arms, I couldn't help but want more.

"If you could be anywhere..." Cai asked softly afterwards, holding me against him, "doing anything at all right now in a perfect world, where would you be? What would you be doing?"

It was such a strange question. There was no such thing as a perfect world, just one where death was lurking around every corner.

"...I've never thought about it..." I said slowly.

"Isn't there anything you've always wished you could do but couldn't? You've lived two lives but it feels like you've barely lived for yourself from what you've told me."

I paused to think. What would I want to be doing...?

And, after another few moments, I knew.

"... Nothing," I finally answered. "I would be doing absolutely nothing and have nothing I needed to do. I would be living as far away as possible from the pack and all associated responsibilities. I would be living a quiet life where no one knew me or was looking for me... and where I wouldn't need to worry about abandoning the people I care for because there would be no impending doom or warrant over my head for treason."

He nodded his head thoughtfully as he took it all in. "Living in a house? Whereabouts?"

I could picture it clearly now, a small smile forming on my lips as I envisioned it. "In the woods. A small house just big enough for me that no one would find. I'd be sure to spread rumours of a witch living there to scare off any wandering strays who might think to come looking."

"Just big enough for you? No partner?" he asked, hinting at the fact I hadn't included him.

I laughed. "You want to join me in my little cottage? I thought you'd be too busy in this alternate reality, living up a more exciting life. Why bother entertaining a forest witch?"

"I could maybe get behind the idea if it meant I got you to myself. In this world maybe no one will come looking for me too. I don't exactly enjoy the responsibilities involved with this life either."

"...I should probably tell the house planner to build some extra rooms then. I'll definitely need the extra space if it means putting up with you twenty-four seven."

"If we ever ended up having kids then the extra space is probably a good idea."

Instantly I felt sick, the unwelcome reminder assaulting me over something I'd become uncertain about.

"Cai..." I started hesitantly, unable to meet his eyes. "I need to tell you... I'm not sure..."

His arms tightened around me and he quickly kissed my forehead to interrupt me. "It's okay, you don't need to explain. I already had a feeling based on the things you told me about Thea. There are other options though if we really wanted... or maybe I'll decide not to share you with a bunch of ungrateful pups."

I swallowed back at the tears stinging in my eyes before nodding my head, grateful he was so understanding. But I didn't have the heart to tell him yet about my suspicions. Suspicions I'd been thinking for a while now regarding a certain dead rogue doctor in a cave. However, if it turned out to be irrelevant then I didn't want to give him false hope prematurely... and besides, it was way too soon to be thinking of anything like that. We shouldn't even be together right now, let alone thinking of possibly having a family one day.

"What about you...?" I finally asked after a few moments of silence. "If you could be doing anything right now in a perfect world, what would you be doing?"

"What would I be doing...?" he repeated as he thought. "...You. I'd be doing you in your little forest cottage."

I sighed, tscking at his response. "Not allowed. I want to hear your own answer."

He laughed for a bit before finally replying. "Hmmm... maybe lounging around on the couch at home without constantly being interrupted for work. My mum would be cooking one of her amazing meals whilst my father talked to me about something mundane."

"Your mum cooks?" I asked, surprised that a Luna would be doing something like that.

"Yes," he said, chuckling at my reaction. "She enjoys it as a hobby when she's not too busy."

It was smart of her to find an outlet like that given how busy a Luna's life could be. My time had always been spent reading strategies, working, or doing something for Aleric.

"...Sounds like you're all really close."

He nodded. "Extremely. Not just me though, but the entire Silver Lake. We're all family here."

It gave me more understanding as to why Cai retaliated so relentlessly after Aleric killed his father in the past. He loved him more than just out of respect for being his Alpha. I highly doubted Aleric would have cared as much if Tytus was killed; their relationship had always come across as very... formal.

But it was information that helped give a good holistic view of the war between Cai and Aleric. Aleric's strength and power had always been his edge in the war, capable of incredible feats that still impressed me to this day. And then there was Cai, still pretty strong, but his edge had been in his numbers with the unwavering support of his pack. The Silver Lake moved as one lethal unit with complete loyalty. With Cai's explanation, it sounded as though Tobias, Cai's father, was greatly beloved, aligning that idea of unquestionable support.

It was Cai's greatest weakness in the end though. I had researched their previous battles with the Winter

and found that most of the stalemates occurred when the Silver Lake had enough time to prepare and organise warriors. It was then just a matter of making a plan to separate the bulk of the pack from Cai, allowing for Aleric to finish the job.

I worked out their communication route quickly enough and had their encrypted messages intercepted and decoded within the week. So when they finally had their full attention on a battle we'd set up as a diversion, I created a fake letter informing them of an ambush to the west and made sure to give key information regarding Aleric's absence. It forced him to head

out with minimal supporting warriors and a sense of false security... only to be met face-to-face with Aleric waiting for him there, thirsty for victory.

“What are you thinking about?” Cai suddenly asked, snapping me out of my deep thoughts with a jump.

Chapter Fifty-Eight

I stared up with wide eyes to meet his, willing my heart to stop racing from the small scare. ‘Nothing! just uhh... was just thinking about how easily things change.’”

“Are you sure? You look like

He didn’t finish his sentence though as he abruptly froze up instead, turning his head to the side as if listening to something.

“What is it—”

“Shhh,” he hushed, continuing to focus. He sat up as he intently listened, poised as if ready to more

It was silent for the longest few seconds of my life before he finally reacted.

“...Fuck,” he hissed as he started looking around the room frantically, searching for something ‘Fuck fuck, fuck... Aria....’”

He turned as if to tell me something but when his eyes finally rested back to meet mine they just softened instead.

It wasn’t out of relaxation though. No, it felt more like defeat

“...I’m so sorry, Aria,” was all he said quietly.

“‘Sorry’ –

? But I didn’t get to ask him what was happening as the bedroom door then suddenly burst open and Aleric stood at the doorway.

In the background, I could hear as several other footsteps busily occupied the wooden floorboards within the rest of the house, but it was Aleric who I was most concerned with

He stared at me in complete shock as none of us moved. It was as if time itself was frozen

All until Aleric’s voice finally spoke out, breaking us all from the spell.

“...Aria?” he asked softly, confused. His words were so quiet it was almost a whisper. And instantly, a waking nightmare ensued.

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Chapter Fifty–Nine

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Aleric frantically whispered. “Do you have any idea how much shit you’ll get into for this?”

In an involuntary reaction, I quickly pulled the blanket up over my chest to hide myself even though I wasn’t naked. And yet at the same time, I’d never felt more exposed.

There had been no time to react, no time to hide. I knew what Cai had been desperately looking for now; a nescape. But it would have been futile. There wasn’t enough time to cover my scent and the window had outside privacy panels preventing me from squeezing through. Cai must have realised the same thing. All he could do was apologise for the fact that we were now in this situation.

“We’ve found it!” I heard a voice yell from somewhere in the house.

Aleric’s eyes suddenly showed signs of worry as he looked at me. Already he looked pale, confused, both of which I’d never seen on him before, but it was his worry that unnerved me the most. Aleric was confident in everything he did, never showing weakness, and yet he looked now as if he was about to be sick.

He stuck his head back out the door as he tried to compose himself, replying to what I assumed were warriors inside the house. “Bag it and take it back to evidence,” he ordered. “I’ve got Caius here detained and will handle the bedroom search. Everyone is to await further instructions back at the packhouse. Anthony, stay behind and wait for me in the car.”

“Detained?” I asked, finally finding my voice again. “Aleric, what the hell is going on? Why are you here?”

“Caius is being detained for questioning,” he said quietly. Neither of us were raising our voices too loud for fear we’d be overheard. “I’ve got orders to take him in immediately.”

“On what grounds!?” I hissed back. “What has he done?”

“The warrior in charge of watching the evidence locker was attacked two nights ago and something was stolen,” he answered. “He can’t recall much but remembers being given an Alpha order to stand down. Only neither I nor my father set that command. Since there is curren

tly no record of any other Alpha bloods staying with us right now, naturally Caius is under suspicion.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! That’s not enough evidence to bring him in! How could an allied pack’s Alpha heir possibly overrule an order given to one of our warriors? That’s impossible.”

“Aria,” he said sternly. “We just found the missing item inside this house... a silver dagger by the front door. It doesn’t matter if it doesn’t make sense, we just acquired the proof. He’s technically under arrest now.”

The silver dagger ** stole. The dagger *I* dropped. I’d just left breadcrumbs of clues leading back to here, back to Cai.

“Aleric, please, it’s not him,” I pleaded.

“Come on,” he said to Cai, ignoring my words. “Get up. We’ve got to go before they decide to come back here and check why I’m taking so long. I hope I don’t need to remind you to not make this difficult or cause a scene here, do I? We both know what will happen if anyone finds her here with you.”

Cai had been silently regarding the exchange the entire time, knowing that his hands were tied being in foreign territory, but he nodded his head in compliance. Anything he said, or did, could be used against him in a trial from the moment Aleric had confirmed he was being taken in.

True to Aleric’s words, he didn’t put up a fight or argue. Instead, he just tugged on some clothes over his

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boxers before walking over to Aleric without fuss.

I ran to Cai though as soon as I saw the handcuffs he was restrained in, no longer caring if Aleric was there, and grabbed on to him.

*Please, don’t do this, please...,” I cried.

“Wait here,” Aleric instructed. “I’ll come to get you when the area is clear.”

But I refused to let go of Cai, my grip only tightening. “No...please.”

“Aria!” Aleric hissed. “Seriously, you need to let him go. Do you want others to see you right now? If my father finds out that you

were here with him, this whole thing will get so much worse. Are you intentionally being naive right now?"

"Aria...", Cai said calmly to me, cutting through the panic. "It's okay. Let me go."

I could barely see through the tears blurring my vision. "No, I don't want to..."

"Aria. Let me go," he repeated.

I knew he was right. There was nothing I could do. Not here and not now anyway.

"I'm going to get your name cleared, I promise," I said. "You'll be out in no time."

He gave me a half-smile in an attempt to reassure me but it only made me feel worse. It should have been me comforting him right now, not the reverse.

Aleric shoved Cai towards the door but abruptly stopped walking, sniffing towards him. And though my senses weren't strong enough, Aleric must have picked up on my obvious scent all over Cai.

"Do I have time for a shower?" Cai asked, almost amused.

Aleric's response was to shove him forward again so they resumed towards the exit once more.

"You'll be lucky if I don't drown you in a lake on our way to the cells," Aleric replied, his voice getting further away until I couldn't hear them anymore. "Fucking idiot..."

I was then left completely alone in the room, shaking and in disbelief this had actually happened. Of all the things that could have occurred, Cai was being pinned for my own crimes and it was Aleric who came to find us in bed together. I wanted to throw up.

I looked down and saw I was only dressed in the baggy t-shirt Cai had given me, my bare legs showing from the mid-thigh down, and my cheeks burned red. The Aleric from the past would have killed me, I had no doubt in my mind. There wouldn't have been any explanation needed, only my throat ripped out before I'd even had a chance to open my mouth. But he'd done the complete opposite. Not only did he not hurt me, but he also didn't even hand me over to the warriors for sentencing. It was difficult to wrap my head around, but... Aleric had just saved me.

I stiffly got changed into the dress from the other night before sitting in a daze on the side of the bed... waiting for when Aleric would return. My mind was thinking of everything and nothing all at once, unable to pinpoint just one thing to focus on.

After not too long, I could finally hear footsteps coming back. I poised myself for battle in the event it was anyone other than Aleric, but thankfully it was him.

His green eyes were sharpened like daggers as they met mine, ready for an argument. “Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t—”

I didn’t let him finish though as I launched myself at him, grabbing onto his clothes, my tears resuming.

“Please, Aleric, listen to me,” I cried. “He’s not involved. Please.”

“How could you possibly know that, Aria? We literally found the dagger here,” he argued, backing up against a wall in his attempt to free himself from my grip. “Why are you being so blind to all of this?”

“Because it was me!” I yelled, “I was the one who stole the dagger from the evidence locker and attacked the warrior, not Cai. I—

I wanted it to kill Thea. I wanted revenge for what she did to Myra. And you and my father acted like you didn’t even believe me... So I took matters into my *own* hands.”

He was avoiding my gaze as he tried to gently pry *my* hands off without much success.

“Stop making shit up just to spare him. And I never said that I didn’t believe you. I stopped you *from* committing murder without evidence in front of an entire crowd of warriors. You’d be on trial right now if you’d actually gone through with it. You should be thanking me.”

“I’m not making this up!” I insisted, a tone of frustration in my words. “It was me. I attacked Ray and ordered him to stand down so I could steal the dagger. How else would I know *who* it was when *you* never said the warrior’s name?”

“You’re not even remotely high enough in rank for that,” he argued,

“You’re a Beta heir, a half one at that.”

“I’m a goddamn Saintess first and foremost, Aleric, or have you forgotten?” I spat back, his eyes finally meeting mine. “My authority is whatever the fuck I want it to be, including higher than yours if I was ever so inclined one day.”

We stared at each other in silence for a few seconds before finally, the tension between us started to ease. I could see as Aleric was trying to process everything I was saying.

“So Cai is... —”

“He’s innocent,” I finished. “It’s my fault. All of it.”

I sighed, bowing my head towards him in complete defeat as I clung to him, "Please, you have to help him. I'll confess to the whole thing if need be Just... don't let anything happen to him."

I felt him shift uncomfortably as he thought, rubbing at his face in irritation. "If you confess that it was you, my father will have you stripped of all your titles and you'll probably be imprisoned, you know that, right? Maybe worse... And then coupled with if he ever found out that you were here in bed with Cai? Fuck, Aria, are you trying to start a war?"

My heart was racing as he pointed out just how messed up things had become due to putting myself above duty. He was right. I'd known he was right and yet I thought I was going to get away with it.

"I know," I said, "I messed up. I messed up bad. But I've just lost Myra, I can't lose Caito. Please... help me Aleric."

I looked up at him through my eyes full of tears, begging him for this one thing. Just this one thing that maybe I could make better and fix. Whatever it took, so long as Cai would be okay.

He stared down at me, his face full of conflict and... pain? It was yet more new expressions I'd never seen him ever show before, expressions I was unfamiliar with. It was making it impossible to know what he was actually thinking with this sudden unpredictability

"...Fine, I'll help," he finally said with a long exhale. "But you should know that I'll be trying to get this mess fixed without bringing your name into it first."

"Wait, Aleric—"

"No, I'm serious," he said sternly, cutting me off. "I personally don't care what happens to Cai but I do care is the only living Saintess gets charged with treason. There would be a religious riot on our doorstep protesting whatever punishment my father issued. I don't want to be put in that awkward position if we can help it."

And with that, he quickly released my hands from his chest without waiting for me to reply and started walking back outside.

"Get your shit together, Ana!" he yelled out casually over his shoulder, not even bothering to turn back around to look at me

But as it turned out, that was a lot easier said than done

