

# A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood

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### Chapter Sixty-One

“...What did you just say?” I asked, my voice thick with disbelief.

“I said they’ve declared war,” Alexander repeated. “They’ve said that if we don’t release Caius before sunset tomorrow that they will officially announce their intent to bring him home by force.”

Less than twenty-four hours. I had less than twenty-four hours to free him or we would be initiating a war.

...And it would be my fault.

“It’s not enough time,” I whispered, the panic rising inside me once more. “...It’s not enough time... It’s not enough time.”

I took a step backwards as my mind continued to whirl. This was it. Everything had been leading to this moment and it was finally here.

“Is there anything else I need to know?” Aleric asked him.

Alexander frowned as if he’d expected him to have a different reaction. “... No? Just that we received a letter from the Silver Lake just now... —”

“You can go then,” Aleric interrupted. “Thank you for telling me as soon as possible.”

“What? ....Uh, yeah, okay...,” Alexander said, confused.

He took a few steps backwards, still unsure as to why he’d been dismissed so quickly, before finally turning around to leave.

As soon as Alexander was out of sight, Aleric immediately turned his attention to me.

Everything was spinning, making it hard to focus. What could I possibly do to stop this now? Maybe confronting Thea myself and trying to get her to confess again? But no... that energy inside me had become disconnected, like a flickering light whenever I tried to grasp it. I remembered how sick it made me last time and didn’t think I could force anyone to follow my orders right now even if I wanted to. A part of me knew that doing so would be reckless... potentially deadly.

“Aria,” Aleric said, his voice cutting through my thoughts. It was enough to make me look up to him, meeting his gaze directly. “Breathe. In and out.”

As he said the words, I realised my breathing had become shallow, my concentration on thinking taking priority. Slowly, I breathed in deeply and back out again.

“You’ve got that same expression that worries me,” he said. “The one where I leave you alone to calm down, only to find out you’re acting completely insane a few days later. We don’t have time for that anymore. I need smart Aria right now, not self-destructive Aria.”

He was right, I needed to slow down and think properly. Confronting Thea myself was far too risky and

almost certainly wouldn’t work out in my favour.

And so, I closed my eyes, my breathing still shaky, but I did my best to focus.

I went over it all in my head, thinking through the different possibilities, the different outcomes... but with the limited time we had left, there wasn’t much we could do.

Shaking my head, I frowned. “There’s no time, Aleric... our best hope is that Jonathan accidentally reveals himself tomorrow or Thea slips up.”

“... That’s cutting it pretty close,” he said.

“I know... which is why I have one more solution as a backup plan that is almost guaranteed to work.”

He crossed his arms, his brow furrowed. “If it’s guaranteed then why don’t we just implement that one first instead?”

I bit my lip, unsure if I should tell him. I already knew what his reaction would be.

“Well... because...,” I started hesitantly.

His frown deepened for a second before finally, he understood what I meant without me even needing to finish. I could see the recognition on his face when he realised what I was planning.

“No, no way,” he said, a tone of finality in his words. “You’re not doing that.”

“Aleric, I don’t have a choice.”

"You're throwing your life away," he argued. "Everything you've worked towards, everything you've fought for. You're going to give it up for him?"

"I'm not giving it up for him... I'm giving it up for the pack. Both packs. I'm giving it up to save innocent people."

He shook his head. "Aria, think this through clearly."

"I am thinking clearly!" I hissed. "I can't let thousands of people die for my mistake. If the worst-case scenario really does happen... I'm going to confess. There is no other way. The side effects of my punishment do not overrule the lives of innocents. You're the one who needs to think clearly here."

I wouldn't let it happen. Not again. I'd participated in too many wars already and knew too well the destruction they left behind. This time the cause wasn't even for power or territory... it was over releasing an innocent man. A man accused of my own crimes.

I took a breath, calming my voice back down to help him see reason. "Aleric, if you really cared about the Winter Mist, and I know you do... you'd let me do this. Please don't ask me to stand by and let people die for me. I don't need their names weighing on my soul any more than I already have."

"And what if Tytus sentences you to death? What then, huh? I can't save you from that, Aria. You know as well as I do what the punishment for treason is."

"He won't," I reassured. "He can't. He'd chain me to a pole for the rest of my life before killing me. He likes the status image I provide too much. The 'Winter Mist Saintess'. No, he won't kill me."

"Then we'll have every Goddess devout nutcase on our doorstep demanding their Saintess' freedom. You'll become a martyr within your own oppression. We're potentially trading one war for another."

"Don't worry about that," I said, desperately trying to help him see reason. "That's at least a more manageable problem. One thing at a time here. First, I'll call an emergency meeting scheduled for just after lunch tomorrow. In the morning before that, we'll see how Jonathan goes with Thea then... well... worst-case scenario, I'll be using the meeting to finally clear all this mess up."

"No," he said flatly.

His plain refusal bristled my temper once more. "Aleric, what the hell is going on with you? Is this really due to dealing with the devout follower backlash or is this about something

ng else? is it Cai? Do you really hate him that much? I know you guys don't get along but this seems a little extreme."

"What? No, Aria... You don't... whatever." He sighed in frustration, giving up on whatever he wanted to say and opting for silence instead.

"I don't... what? What were you going to say?" I pressed.

"Nothing. Forget it."

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I crossed my arms defensively. "You always do this," I said, not bothering to hide my irritation. "I say something or do something and you just go quiet instead of telling me whatever it is you're thinking about."

"It's called making smart decisions and knowing when some things are better left unsaid. Would you like me to teach you how that's done?"

I clenched my jaw at the direct insult. "At least I'm not fine with killing off innocent people for the sake of avoiding a smaller confrontation. Wars don't solve all your problems, Aleric. What are you really afraid of here? Is it that you're insecure over whether I'll usurp you one day? Gather followers of the Goddess around me and take over what you feel you're entitled to? Let me give you a quick tip for avoiding that future; don't piss me off. I never wanted the job anyway. Why do you think I've tried so hard to become a Beta instead?"

"Betas don't give Alpha commands," he retorted harshly. "You can't just pick and choose which title you want whenever it suits you."

I wanted to argue back but he was right, I had overstepped that line. Instead, a moment of icy silence hung between us, neither of us wanting to concede. Finally though, his eyes softened, sighing in release of tension.

"...I'm sorry, I shouldn't have snapped at you first," he said quietly in defeat, running a hand through his dark wavy hair. "Just... do what you think is right, Aria. We'll deal with whatever happens after when we get to that point, just as you said."

We were both in the wrong here, I knew that. We had burnt ourselves out with this investigation the last few months, spreading our free time too thin with all the additional work it brought us. It was no surprise really that we were both now in each other's faces the second that war was finally at our doorstep. It was a cocktail for short fuses and high tempers. Which was exactly why the best decision here was for us to walk away before saying something else we'd regret.

In truth though, I was sure neither choice presented was the best decision here. Both paths ahead had their own obstacles, their own pros and cons. And whilst it felt as though Aleric's opinion on this right now seemed off, I had to give him credit where it was due. If it hadn't been for his support over these last few months, I would have been worse off and probably done something far more drastic already by now. In a way, I owed him.

Which was why I wanted him on my side for this decision. After all the time and effort we'd put in, it was now just as much Aleric's choice as it was mine since it was technically his life on the line as well. He'd lied about my involvement and had been helping me during all of this mess. If he was found to have been withholding information, I was sure Tytus would not be pleased.

"...I'm sorry, too," I mumbled. "It's not like I want to do this, Aleric. Just... trust me. You'll have my support with whatever happens afterwards, I promise."

He sighed, rubbing tiredly at his eyes. "Aria... that's not... Yep. Okay, sure. Thank you."

"It's going to be okay," I said with a small smile. "Maybe we'll catch Jonathon tomorrow and be dragging his ass into that meeting instead."

"Hopefully."

We stood facing each other, neither of us moving. I could see on his face that he looked as though he wasn't exactly pleased with the outcome, but I was happy that he seemed to be on board at least for now.

"Alright, I should probably head off then," I said, motioning towards the car. "I'll drop you off at the packhouse on the way if you want."

"Where are you going?" he asked, starting to walk with me.

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There wasn't much time left but I knew exactly where I needed to go next. Only it wasn't somewhere I wanted to bring Aleric.

"...I'm off to go prepare for the worst-case scenario," I replied.

Not long after that, I found myself walking down a cold hallway, my feet leaving an echo as I went. I'd come here frequently enough that I was now familiar with these walls, but their contents had continued to be a source of pain for me these last few months.

Outside a door stood James, positioned on guard duty. He was the warrior who had escorted me from my cell to the trial grounds in my previous timeline. James barely knew me in this life when compared to the last but my respect for him had remained. Those last moments he'd gift

ed me with my father had been precious. Although it did feel almost surreal to see that he would be the warrior on duty today given the circumstances.

“Beta heir,” he greeted me, inclining his head slightly in respect.

I nodded back in acknowledgement. “James. How is the prisoner today?”

“Same as always.”

He didn’t say anything further and instead opened the door, accompanying me inside.

As soon as the room beyond came into sight, my eyes immediately darted around, searching until they fell on a pair of familiar gold ones staring right back at me. He was seated at a small table that had been set up to the side.

My first instinct was to run to him, nestle my head into his neck, and wish for the thousandth time that this wasn’t real... but I couldn’t. Not here, not today, and definitely not over the last few months, had I been able to do anything remotely close to that. We were forced to strict professionalism due to the ever present eyes of guards watching.

“Cai, how are you?” I asked stiffly.

It had taken me a moment to find my voice, my sense of guilt always hitting me hard whenever I got to see him. He hadn’t hinted at any complaints even once since coming here but I knew it had to be hard. I could see the circles forming under his eyes and how he’d lost a little bit of weight. It was all signs of him paying a price he hadn’t signed up for.

“I’m well, thanks,” he replied. “It’s good to see you.”

Hearing his voice almost made me lose my composure. I could see in his eyes what he was really telling me and it only made things so much harder.

I cleared my throat and tried to refocus. “You too.”

I’d come here with every intention of telling him the news of the war conditions proposed by the Silver Lake but, seeing him now, I couldn’t bring myself to do it. He would know what that meant, what two paths would potentially be waiting for me now. But, more importantly, he would know that this was goodbye. Regardless of how it went, tomorrow Cai would be free. I’d make sure of it.

“I umm... I just wanted to check in and make sure you’re still hanging in there,” I half lied, taking a seat at the table opposite him. “Are they treating you okay?”

He shrugged. “Can’t complain. Since being upgraded to the larger room it at least feels a little less... prison –

y. Kind of feels more like home arrest now... if my home was a white cell with uncomfortable furniture.”

My lip twitched slightly but I couldn't bring myself to give him a smile at his attempt at humor.

We were quiet for some time, neither of us knowing what to say. I couldn't speak freely with him and yet there was so much I wanted to speak about. It was torture. He was right there in front of me, within arm's length, and I couldn't even touch him.

...I'm sorry.” I mouthed to Cai silently. James was at the door within listening range but my back was facing him.

And though I knew Cai couldn't hear me, I hoped desperately that he saw just how sincerely I meant that. How much weight I really meant behind those words.

He looked at me with concern, as if he was sensing exactly what I was feeling, and inside I could feel that pit of guilt clench. Everything was becoming too much.

“Well... I'm glad you're doing okay,” I said, no longer having the strength for this anymore. I felt overwhelmed, like I couldn't breathe. “I should be going... I'll come by to check on you again... When I can.”

I turned my face and was about to stand up when his hand suddenly shot out, clasp my wrist to pause me.

“Wait,” he said. I stared down at his hand in disbelief that he'd just done that with James in the room.” Why does it feel like I'm never going to see you again?”

“Cai...,” I whispered, darting my eyes in James' direction so he'd get the hint.

He looked over at him in irritation, as if he were an obstacle more than a person, and immediately walked over to him before I could get another word out.

I watched as Cai then started to speak to James in a low voice, smiling and laughing the whole time, before something unimaginable happened.

“Yeah, all good, man,” James finally said loud enough for me to hear,

“Ah, you're the best,” Cai said, patting him on the shoulder like they were best friends. “I'll make sure to go easy on you next time.”

... Then James gave me a small nod... and left the room.



Cai strode back over towards me like nothing insane had just happened, and I just stared at him, too stunned to move. But he didn't notice, not even pausing in the slightest. Instead, Cai immediately leant over, grabbing my face gently in his hand, and brought his lips down to mine.

His taste, his scent, all of it instantly overwhelmed me. In a span of a few seconds I'd gone from accepting that I might never see him again, to kissing him in a cell with a guard on the other side of the door.

...On the other side of the door.

Reality kicked back in and I pulled away, breathless.

"Cai... what the fuck was that," I asked incredulously.

"What? James? He's a good guy. We play poker all the time when he's on duty. Not a lot to do when stuck in a cell twenty-four seven."

"...And so he just broke orders.... because you guys are pals?"

"Yeah! Well, I mean, he's not really breaking orders. Just hanging out on the other side."

"Cai..." I said cautiously. "Did you... did you order him?"

"What? No. Of course not. I couldn't even if I wanted to," he replied. "Aria, trust me. All I did was ask if we could have a moment to talk in private. He really is just a good guy."

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I paused for a moment, thinking it through, before finally nodding. Cai sounded completely sincere and I knew from personal experience that James was capable of bending rules slightly. He'd done the same thing for me. Not to mention that Cai really had a way with words. I'd seen him talk his way out of all sorts of situations before. This really shouldn't have been so surprising.

I sighed. All of this was too much to wrap my head around without the added stresses. After all, if things didn't fall in my favour, it might be me living here by this time tomorrow.

"What's going on, Aria?" he asked, bringing my attention back. "Every time you've come to visit me these last few months you've always had this look of determination about you. But today... you look shaken."

"...!, umm," I started, unsure what to say.



Was I really going to tell him? It wasn't that I wanted to hide it from him. It was just that telling him felt like acknowledging that this really was the last time I'd see him. And honestly, I didn't have any strength to spare in order to say goodbye one last time.

"It's nothing, just stress," I lied. "I found some information and might have a lead to get you out of here... but it's dangerous. I'm just worried I might not be successful."

"Hey," he said, lifting my chin up to look him in the eyes. "I believe in you. You'll pull it off and you'll be back here telling me the good news in no time."

"Cai... just in case I don't—"

He cut me off, silencing me with a kiss.

"Don't," he said after we'd broken apart again. "Don't talk about things you don't know yet. Focus on protecting yourself first, don't worry about me. When I see you next, you can tell me the good news."

... There wasn't going to be a next time. This was it. This was going to be the last time I saw him. The best case scenario was that I might see him again one day at a political meeting from afar... if I wasn't in prison and still a Beta.

I gently brought my hand up to his face, tracing his cheek with my thumb. Being here, next to him, I wanted nothing more than to lean in and relax against him. I wanted that infectious energy of his to help me forget everything that was going on, help me forget everything I was scared about. But I couldn't. Now, more than ever, I needed to show restraint. I needed to be strong enough to sacrifice my own freedom for his should it come down to that.

"No matter what happens to me, please look after yourself," I said. "Knowing you're safe and alive is enough to make me happy. Please remember that."

I saw him frown as he was about to open his mouth to speak, but a knocking suddenly came from the door, stopping him before he could.

"Everything is going to be okay," was all he ended up saying.

He leaned in, giving me a final quick peck on the forehead, before pulling away completely.

I wanted to reply, to say something, anything, but I couldn't. I knew that if I tried to speak that my voice would betray me. Tears were already threatening to spill from my eyes at any second.

And so I smiled. One last time. Because this was probably going to be the last image of me he ever had.

Tomorrow, a new fate would be decided. ...A fate where I couldn't follow him.

## **A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 62**

### **Chapter Sixty-Two**

I paced nervously around the communal waiting, located area just outside the meeting hall. Every step in unison with the seconds that ticked by on the clock on the wall, my breathing and heart racing so loud it was only increasing my anxiety.

The meeting was planned, everything was ready. All that was left was Aleric. Any minute now he would be walking through that door with the news that would decide my fate. How strange that once again I would be finding myself tempting death in the hands of Aleric; though now relying on him as my saviour, not my executioner. Though I had to admit, I would be lying if I didn't acknowledge that he had been doing that very thing anyway these last few months.

But no, I wouldn't be killed. I had to believe in Tytus' own thirst for power should the worst-case scenario come to play. I had to believe that my value outweighed my death... at least for now.

Around me were several other people. I could see a few Elders that arrived early were converging to the side, quietly chatting, however it was the faces of many unranked individuals that I noticed the most. They were the men and women who had heard the news that war was potentially before us, the very people who would be laying their lives on the line for us. And yet the administrative assistant was unable to tell them anything. They were unranked, their status not high enough to have input in the very thing that would potentially kill them... kill their family, their friends... their children.

They weren't deemed important enough.

"This is insane! We have a right to know!" a man shouted.

"Yeah!" a few yelled around him.

The tensions had been rising in the room for several minutes now but I could see the nervousness in the administrative assistant's face. The group of individuals were slowly becoming a crowd as many more gathered around from outside to find answers.

They were scared. Who could blame them? I would be too if it was my life being used as fodder on the front line because of decisions made higher up; because of decisions I'd have no say in. But fear makes people do dumb, insane things... things like launching yourself at the admin assistant who genuinely didn't know anything. Who was probably just as scared as the group gathering around them.

The man grabbed the assistant's shirt, bringing their face up to eye level.

"Tell us what is really happening!" he yelled again.

"I-I don't have that i-information. I just work at the f-front desk," they stammered out.

The crowd wasn't pleased with this reply. Grumbles and jeering were voiced throughout the people as they were now at a loss of where to look next.

How had Aleric dealt with this in the past? Was it because they feared him more when he became Alpha than they feared the enemy waiting for them? Or did they respect him, knowing that his ability to lead and his prowess in battle were enough to inspire? I couldn't recall a single situation like this ever having happened in the past under his command.

But immediately, the discrepancy in the timelines was explained, answering the question in my mind.

"For a year now you have controlled us, forced us into strict safety protocols with the fear of being killed by rogues. For Goddess' sake, some girl was killed in the park just down the road from town. Now you expect us to go to war! We haven't even been allowed to freely live our lives again yet and now you expect us to hand them over to you."

"H-  
I can't help you. The orders for those protocols came from the Elders. They are the ones who create the template and present it for implementation. I just relay information based on those templates provided."

Silence hung in the air as the crowd took that information in slowly. Not because it was difficult to understand, but because there were Elders present. Elders who were now increasingly becoming painfully aware of what was happening around them. I saw as their faces transitioned to ones of people worried for their own safety. They were very clearly outnumbered; their positions always having been safe out of respect, rather than them holding any true authority to command others in the way that ranked members do.

"You!" the man yelled out to them.

He seemed to be the one leading this charge. So much anger inside him and yet so incredibly stupid what he was doing. He'd already laid a hand on the admin assistant. It shouldn't have been that difficult to realise that he was going to be punished severely for this, not to mention the repercussions if he didn't stop now. Attacking the Elders would be a death sentence.

And then I saw it. That glimpse in his eye of no longer caring, darkening as his wolf came forward. He was really going to attack.

He took two steps forward, his body poised and then

"Enough!" I yelled out to him, layering my voice thick with what Beta heir authority I had.

It wasn't dangerous for me to use this tone as it was my own natural one, not derived from my marking. It was enough to command the unranked in this circumstance,

The man stopped, frozen in place from my order, and turned his face to look at me. His eyes were dark and wild, his wolf on the verge of emerging. He really was about to give up his life for this, I could see clearly how serious he was.

Around us the room had gone silent, my voice having brought utter quiet to everyone in the area. They were too scared to move, too worried I would punish them for stepping out of line.

"...Enough," I repeated, more gently as I walked towards the man. "I know you are tired, I know you are scared. We all are. None of us want to lose the people we love."

"You sit back, privileged in your birth rank, and yet have the audacity to say that," he spat back.

The crowd shuffled uncomfortably. I could feel they all agreed but didn't want to voice their approval.

"You're right, I am privileged," I said. "But I am also like you. I have people I love, people I fight for. And when it comes to war, even the ranked members are there fighting with you. Hell, it might very well be my father who doesn't return next time. I, too, would grieve just as you would your family."

"You know nothing of death, child," he sneered. "Your family is all alive and well. I had to watch my father go to war when I was barely old enough to remember him. He never returned."

The small irony of his statement wasn't lost on me but, in this life, I knew where he was coming from. From his perspective, I could see how it might seem that way. Normal people weren't reincarnated

after all.

"...I know death," I finally said calmly. "That girl you so tastefully mentioned before during your outburst was my best friend. An unranked girl, a seemingly unimportant one in the grand scheme of this hierarchy. And she was murdered, her body left for me to find. But she is not 'some girl' as you so nicely phrased... and you have no right to use her death for your complaints. She has a name and she deserves to be remembered as such."

I could see a flash of guilt cross his face as he calmed down, slowly getting control of his emotions finally

"...Her name was Myra," I continued, "She loved books and shopping... and she genuinely cared for every person she met. But, most importantly, she was loved... loved by me, loved by her parents, and loved by every other person who had the privilege of meeting her. She is more important than just some girl," !

I stepped back and turned my attention to the entire crowd, raising my voice for them all to hear.

"But it isn't just Myra. All of you are important. All of you are worthy and deserve to know what the higher ups choose to do with your lives. Because when it comes to war, there is no rank. There is only life... and death. Every single one of us will become the same when we die on that field, our blood nourishment for the ground, our souls with the Goddess. So I can only hope that, should the day come that you're asked to lay down your lives for this pack, that the reason will be to protect the people you love. That we love. We are one pack, one family. We will grieve as such no matter which family they belong to."

I could see the confusion spread on their faces as they tried to interpret what I was saying. What I was confirming...

"There will be no war with the Silver Lake pack announced today," I declared. "...I give you my word."

No one spoke and no one moved. They all looked at me with mixed expressions, unsure which were appropriate.

But finally, a voice spoke out from the back, a woman pushing her way to the front of the crowd.

"Saintess," she said; kneeling before me.

Panic gripped me. This wasn't the response I had wanted or asked for. If anything this made things more awkward for my current predicament.

"What? No... Please, don't do th—"

My voice was cut off as another person came forward, addressing me also as Saintess before they, too, were kneeling beside the woman. And then another... and another... and another. And soon the entire crowd of unranked were kneeling before me.

"Please stand up," I begged desperately. "There's no need for this."

The few Elders present were watching me with wary expressions that I knew would be accompanied by thoughts that were not in my favour. I couldn't think of a worse situation to find myself in given the events that would soon be taking place.

"You are blessed by the Goddess' hand. May she keep you safe," the first woman said. "For it is within your presence, guided by our Great Mother, that we must ask of you to keep us safe. Praise be our Saintess."

"No, plea—"

"Praise be our Saintess," the crowd began to echo around her.

I was about to ask them once more to stand but suddenly I could feel the sensation of eyes burning into me, different from the people already here. And, instinctively, I looked up to the door.

To the door where Aleric stood, watching as the people knelt before me.

He held my gaze only a moment though, walking across the room towards where the meeting hall was instead, without glancing back.

Shit.

"Uhh.. rise and be blessed. Return to your families in peace," I awkwardly said to the crowd, hoping it sounded devout enough for them to be finally satisfied and leave already.

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However, I didn't wait to check. Quickly, I spun on my heel without another word and walked off in the direction I saw Aleric go. I had bigger issues now.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck," I frantically kept whispering to myself while I walked as fast as I could.

I'd thought things couldn't have been worse with the Elders present, but I'd obviously been wrong. Aleric showing up at that exact moment was a thousand times worse, only second to if Tytus himself had seen. I couldn't do anything though, the people didn't listen to me when I'd asked them to stand. I didn't want or ask for that.

I walked down a hallway in the direction of the main meeting hall and finally found Aleric standing at the end, his face completely unreadable. Somehow that was infinitely more disconcerting than if he was showing anger, irritation... anything. Literally showing any emotion right then would have been nice.

He pointed towards a room on the side, indicating for me to enter, and I did so without complaint. It was a room usually used for dignitaries of foreign territories to allow them a private place to wait before a meeting. –

"I don't... I didn't..." I fumbled. "I just tried to get them to calm down. I didn't ask–,"

He held a hand up to indicate I should stop and I immediately shut my mouth.

"We don't have time for that," he said, his tone not betraying how he felt on the topic in the slightest. "... Jonathan is missing."

All the air I'd been clutching onto inside my chest instantly escaped me as it felt as though a blow had been struck.

"...He didn't show up at the packhouse today," he continued. "I was waiting there for over an hour. When he didn't turn up on time, I went by his house but no one had seen him since he left to go on duty this morning."

"...Has anyone been by to check on Thea yet?" I asked.

"... Yes." He turned his face, averting his eyes from me. "She's gone, Aria. I'm sorry. We found her scent trail travelling over the border."

My hand shot out towards the table next to me as I used it to support myself from falling over.

This was it. My last lifeline was gone. And yet I couldn't help the bubble of laughter that left my lips. First just a slow chuckle, breathy and barely audible, before finally increasing to an eruption of full laughter.

"...Aria?" Aleric asked concerned, watching me like I was insane.

He was probably right. I was about to lose my entire freedom... and yet it was the small victory that pushed me on.



"Aria, we'll try and find Jonathan," he said, trying to reassure me. "We can postpone the meeting for a little longer and have everyone working on the search. Maybe we can prove he was involved still."

"Don't bother looking for him," I said, smiling. "He was working with Thea. She just confirmed it."

"What? How do you know?"

"Thea likes to boast, she likes to do things to prove that she's one step ahead of me. Like how she left Myra's body with a note. If he really were an innocent in all of this, she would have taken the added risk to leave his body somewhere I would find it so I'd know it was my fault."

Her frantic response of running over the border meant only one thing; she was unprepared for what I'd done.

*Me trovined, trying to understand where I was coming from you think tesdead? How do yo2018 didn't just run with her? That he's just hiding out some here until its safe to 0:00 tetorte?*

"Because he's 100 muchola liability to be left alive. *If we got our hands on him* then there's no way de would trust him enough to remain silent. She knows better than to leare correo eletate

especially if he knows the names of others involved with all of this

"...So why are you happy? We've lost. We're out of time That was your last chance of freedom oreron,

I met his gaze and held it as tears formed in my ges. "Well, ito bittersweet, isn't t?fira figures something out that Thea underestimated me on i presented one of heroes to be in a publicorers mate and she got spooed. She killed a pack member and ran. Once they finally find his body in a fer days, she won't ever be able to show her face here again. She's gone..she's rea gore Shes here coming back to the Winter Mist."

I was sure that if I hadn't already lived a prior life, it would have been almost impossible to con Jonathan was a spy. They would have covered his tracks well. Thea knen what I was trying to te her by sending him; that I knew about his secret. She probably ran in complete confusion vierhontigured it out. There was no investigation, no warning, it would look as though I plucked his name out of thinat. And not knowing how I did would be eating at her.

"...But there will still be rogues... still be maybe others infiltrated inside the pack

A tear fell down my face. "Oh, I know... but it's the small victories, I suppose. Need something to be optimistic about when you're about to confess treason to your Alpha And Thea publicly recognised as an enemy to the pack? Well... that's the best darnn thing I've heard in months

I swatted the tear off my *face* quickly before *raising* my head up with confidence. The meeting would be starting soon and Goddess knew I needed *every* ounce of strength inside of me to get through these neri few hours... possibly next few years. If I was lucky.

Though I suppose... Such is life.

I pushed myself upright, squaring my shoulders and walked to the door. But, as I reached out to the handle, I felt Aleric's hand touch mine, pausing me.

"Aria," he whispered, his face closer to mine than I realised.....Don't do this. Please."

I stared into his green eyes. So different to the ones I once knew, but still hiding things I'd probably never know. Did seeing me with the unranked earlier spark thoughts of possible insurrection again? Did he mistrust me now? From his perspective, it looked as though I was gathering followers. Any convincingid managed to do earlier was probably completely down the drain now.

I pulled my hand away, clearing my throat before I spoke.

"There will be no war with the Silver Lake pack announced today," I said, repeating the words from earlier.

It was the vow I'd made to the innocent pack members, the silent promise I'd made to Cai years ago when I'd discovered who he really was.

There will be no war with the Silver Lake pack.

Not today. Not ever.

And so, when I finally found myself looking into the eyes of Alpha Tytus himself, surrounded by every Elder and ranked member of our pack, I knew there was only one way out.

"Alpha," I greeted, bowing my head in respect. "I've requested your presence here today so that i may help prevent a needless war. What I bring to you is evidence that Caius K night is innocent."

I took a shaky breath in, meeting his eyes that were full of cold curiosity. *The eyes that always made me want to squirm away.* "Alpha... I am here today to confess my crimes of treason."

## A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 63

### Chapter Sixty-Three

"Alpha... I am here today to confess my crimes of treason."

The room around me became icy cold, a deafening silence hanging as no one even dared to breathe too loudly. All of them too shocked over my words.

And, among them, seeming the most shocked and hurt... my father. I hadn't told him what I'd done. In fact, we'd barely spoken the last few months since we'd had that argument about Thea. Not because I was still angry at him, Goddess knew I was in the wrong there, but because I was ashamed. I'd tried to force him into doing something that jeopardised not only his safety, but my mother's also. Even in grieving, it was stupid.

Tytus looked me up and down, the only person who hadn't been affected by my sudden announcement. Knowing him, his mind was already thinking of ways to turn whatever I was about to say into something that could benefit him.

"...Elaborate," was all he said.

Strong. I needed to be strong.

"....," I started, my voice choking up from nerves before I could get the words out.

Focus.

"I... I am responsible for the attack upon Ray, the warrior working evidence that night," I finally said. "I went to acquire the knife for my own personal vendetta. In doing so, Ray and I got into a semi-physical altercation whereby he tried to restrain me."

I could feel Aleric's eyes on me, almost silently willing me to stop; stop before I said more than I needed to. I'd left him in that room without any room for discussion, knowing without any doubt that this was what I needed to do.

"Regretfully, in my grief and rage," I continued, "I ordered that he let me go so I could continue what I'd set out to do. Ray then lost his footing in surprise, falling and inflicting injury upon himself. It was not my intention for him to get hurt... I was only determined for justice and it was an unfortunate result."

"...Justice?" Tytus prompted, his face unreadable as he listened. Like father, like son. They did that so infuriatingly well.

"I believe wholeheartedly that the one responsible for Myra's death was the girl, Thea. I felt... guilty... wronged... angry that no one else could see it. So I made the mistake of trying to deliver what I thought would be

justice; I wanted to kill her with the knife she used to take Myra's life... and I wanted to do it slowly, poisoning her insides with the silver. Only I wasn't strong enough to finish the job."

"Okay..." he said, taking a second to let everything sink in. After a few moments, he finally adjusted in his chair, frowning. "So how did the knife end up at the Knight boy's housing then?"

My chest clenched. I hadn't thought through what to say for that. Of course, he'd want to know that information. In trying to avoid a war though, I couldn't just defuse one problem only to replace it with another.

I looked to Aleric. Just a quick glance, my eyes flicking for only a second, but it was enough to see him ever so slightly shake his head. That secret would hurt everyone involved and only serve to create more conflict

"...Cai and I are old high school friends," I finally said. "A good man. He found me after I'd fallen asleep in the woods and graciously allowed me to sleep on his couch. My father and I had fought terribly only

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hours earlier and I didn't feel ready to go home yet. I must have dropped the dagger accidentally during my fatigue. I am thankful for his kindness."

"Well, you see..." Tytus said, taking a deep breath after having heard my story. "Therein lies part of the issue here. You have been coming to me almost every week since Caius' incarceration, advocating for his release. Some might say... almost a bit too passionately. Now you've come to tell me a story, on the cusp of war, where you claim to hold strong enough authority to override top tier orders. Only someone of Alpha blood could attempt something of that magnitude... so I'm inclined not to believe you, Aria. Whatever this... motivation is, I feel that perhaps it might not be entirely without... emotional influence, shall we say?"

I felt my legs go weak. He didn't believe me? And not just that, but he hinted suspicion over Cai and I's relationship.

But, no, the only people who knew for certain about that were Cai, Aleric and myself. Anything he believed, in that respect, would have to be speculation at best. So long as I didn't provide that confirmation myself, he wouldn't be able to prove it.

"Alpha," I said between clenched teeth. "With all due respect, I would remind you that I am also a Saintess, not just a mere Beta heir. Whilst I vehemently regret my actions that ultimately undermined your authority, I am fully capable of the events I spoke of today."

“Very well then...,” he said before raising an eyebrow questioningly, almost daring me to argue back. “... Prove it.”

Prove... it?

“Alpha? I don’t think I understand your meaning.”

“You claim to hold the authority to override even commands from an Alpha. So, prove it ... or I will be forced to not believe your claims.”

I felt sick, the pressure of his demand being almost too much to bear. The last time I’d used that tone of authority, it had almost killed me. I still vividly remembered the increasingly worse effects it had on me, building up until I almost passed out on top of Thea in the hospital. A crucial moment I had needed it... and I’d failed.

... Yet now I needed it once more. Not just that, but to demonstrate it in front of Tytus and the entire council so they could all stand witness.

Would it kill me this time?

“Bring a warrior in, please,” Tytus ordered.

There was a momentary pause as the doors to the hall were opened and a warrior stepped inside, approaching to bow his head to Tytus.

“Alpha,” they greeted.

“Ah, Anthony, perfect. Good to see you. Pardon me whilst I do this, but,” Tytus’ tone then instantly changed to one of an Alpha, “I hereby order you to stand there until further notice. All further orders, regardless of who they are from, are to be disregarded until I personally excuse you.”

“Yes, Alpha.”

I looked around nervously at the faces surrounding me, all expecting me to perform for them. It wasn’t as though I didn’t want to prove it... more so that I hadn’t been able to grasp ahold of the energy required to accomplish it recently; nor had I particularly wanted to do after seeing how it ended last time.

“Alpha...,” I said carefully. “The situation back then was under extenuating circumstances and I paid a price. This... authority... came at a cost that was almost my life. It was the reason I never successfully

killed Thea as I’d planned to do. When I used the command out of desperation, it was almost my undoing.

Tytus scrutinised me, observing my every move as though I was an opponent in chess rather than just a girl trying to accomplish something for the greater good.

“Well, I suppose it all depends on how determined you are now to save the Knight boy’s life then, *wouldn’t* you say, Aria?”

There was no way out of this. Tytus was clearly set on either having me prove myself or allow for the wart to break out. Or was it perhaps that he wanted my claims to be true? That there was some outcome he sought to gain from my confession being confirmed absolutely legitimate with witnesses?

I turned to look at Anthony, steadying my breathing as much as possible, and reached towards where I remembered that energy inside me was. It was lurking, just out of reach, but if I could just... stretch... just a little bit more...

“Anthony, to order...,” my words came out flatly. There was no more authority to my tone than that of my Beta status,

I couldn’t do it.

“Alpha, I can’t...,” I said, anxiety beginning to build itself up inside me. “I can’t control it. Last time it just... happened.”

Tytus sharply exhaled, a mild hint of irritation as he did so. “So, what I’m hearing is that you’re lacking the appropriate level of motivation, is that right?”

“I just—”

“Very well then,” he said, cutting me off. He then turned his attention to an attendant nearby. “Bring Caius in.”

“Right away, Alpha,” they replied, leaving to carry out his request.

“No. No, that’s not necessary,” I interjected. “I—I’ll try again. I’m sure I can manage.”

“Nonsense. Everything you’ve told me today has indicated that this authority is only achievable during a more serious circumstance. So be it.”

The doors then opened behind me and I sharply spun my head towards where Cai was being brought in.

His eyes immediately fell to where I stood, disregarding everyone else present. He looked confused, worried... all things to be expected since I’d kept this plan of mine from him. Most likely he wasn’t even aware that his father had threatened war. But more so than that, he looked as though

he wanted to say something to me, to question why I was here, but he knew better than to speak here among this council.

“Right,” Tytus said, forcing my attention back to him. “So, Aria, you’re either telling the truth, in which case Caius here would therefore be innocent, or you’re lying, in which case we’ll be at war with the Silver Lake pack come sundown. The way I see it, if you are unable to accomplish this feat and Caius were to be killed right now, it would only benefit us in the battles of war if we removed the Alpha heir early on. We may as well take advantage of such a thing.”

I felt my breathing constrict in my throat, my body numbing. This was sick even for Tytus.

They were going to kill him.

“Alpha, please don’t—”

“Anthony, your orders are to kill Caius Knight,” Tytus commanded. “Same as before; all further orders, regardless of who they are from, are to be disregarded until I personally excuse you. There will be no shifting, no messy death. I want this to be clean given our current location. Use a dagger, I suppose.”

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“Yes, Alpha. Anthony drew a knife from his side and began carrying out his orders. “Alpha Tytus, are you sure you want to do this?” Cai yelled out as he paced backwards slowly.

I wasn’t sure how much of the situation he had figured out but I was sure that there was no mistaking Tytus’ order to have him killed.

His words fell on deaf ears though; Tytus didn’t even seem to register that he’d spoken.

Anthony’s hand lunged out as he went in for the attack however Cai expertly moved to avoid it. Even in silver handcuffs, he was still more skilled in defence than an average warrior, we all knew it. But the cuffs significantly prevented the wearer from using any of their abilities; essentially making them human. Whilst he was skilled to avoid the attacks, he wouldn’t have the endurance to keep going for long.

“Stop it!” I yelled. “Please! Don’t do this!” It came out more like a frantic plea than any kind of command.

Anthony continued to advance on Cai in a deadly dance for some time, every time getting closer and closer until, finally, his blade slit across his chest.



“No!”

I watched as Cai fell to his knees before Anthony, his chest heaving from exhaustion and blood beginning to seep into his shirt. Any second now...

Anthony grabbed Cai's shoulder with one hand to steady him and, with the other, he positioned himself to strike...

And then...

“Enough! Don't touch him!” I ordered, a burst of energy coming forward to give myself the authority

required.

Anthony's hand that had been going to make the final strike was suddenly halted, his body frozen.

“I said don't touch him!”

Instantly Anthony's hand dropped away from Cai's shoulder and he stepped back, confused why his body wasn't responding anymore.

Relief and dizziness swept through me as I fell to my knees completely drained. I'd done it. Cai would be freed and I'd proven myself by legitimising my claims. There wouldn't be any doubt now that I was fully capable of overriding even orders given by an Alpha.

A deep cough choked itself out of me and my mouth became full of the familiar metallic taste of my own blood. Interestingly enough though, I found that physically I felt not as bad as when I'd failed to order Thea. Was it because I'd had time to replenish over these months, or was it something else? Maybe because I was getting closer to my first shift? My brain wanted to wander and explore the different possibilities more but Tytus dragged my attention back to reality.

“How fascinating,” Tytus said, observing me closely before addressing the attendant once more. “Please escort Caius out now and get one of the doctors to examine his injury. I'll have someone deliver the verdict to him soon.”

Cai was then dragged back out of the room, his body barely even able to stand anymore. I had to believe he'd be okay though, that all of this wasn't going to be for nothing.

“Aria... what are we going to do with you?” Tytus mused to himself before turning to where the Elders sat. “Elder Luke, you'd consider yourself a curator of knowledge when it comes to lore and religion, would you not?”

Chaule Sixty Thea

Elder Luke leaned forward in his chair abruptly, probably surprised he was being called upon,

He cleared his throat before speaking. "Well, I suppose you could look at it that way, Alpha. I have *been* known to collect information regarding the more... fantastical side of our species. Though I'd be lying if I said Aria hadn't challenged my beliefs as to how much of that is actually fiction. After all, her mark is absolute proof of our deity's existence."

Tytus nodded his head thoughtfully. "That would be a fair assessment. I do wonder though, in your years of research, have you come across anything to do with Saints? I see the girl used her authority once and looks about ready to pass out."

Elder Luke met my gaze, a look of sympathy in his eyes as he stared down at me,

"There has only been a very limited amount of Saints known to exist, Alpha. Only one has been vaguely recorded in history but I believe there were perhaps two others prior to that. There is, unfortunately, no information regarding their abilities however it is publicly known that their authority is higher than that of an Alpha; this is not new information. As for her condition... that, I'm afraid, I cannot answer with certainty. Perhaps it is to do with her age?"

The room was silent as they listened carefully to every word Elder Luke had said. The respect from his peers, and everyone else in this room, was clearly evident.

"... Though," he continued, "I could also speculate that perhaps it is just a matter of her trying to run before learning to walk. She's overriding Alpha orders that no other person alive should be able to. I imagine that the amount of energy required to do such a thing would be significant, especially if one were not used to doing it. None of us have our first shift and miraculously know how to move in our wolf form perfectly; it is something we learn. Instinctively, it would be the same as the ranked children who grow up learning to command others utilising their birth authority. If Aria only recently discovered this ability stemming from her mark, I would imagine it is plausible that perhaps she just isn't ready for invoking the full authority of a Goddess without practice."

"Your insight is valuable as always," Tytus praised, to which Elder Luke bowed his head respectfully. "But it doesn't exactly reassure me of your future, Aria."

Everyone's attention immediately fell back onto me and I wanted to shrink away. But I'd come too far for that now. There was no going back.

I picked myself up, raising my head, and looked Tytus in the eye as he delivered his verdict.

“Aria, your actions have proven that you are a potential threat to this pack, a threat to myself and a threat to my son’s future. You purposely looked to act alone in your own form of justice rather than to correctly present your case to your Alpha and abide by our pack laws. You’ve admitted to attacking not only one of our own pack members but also someone who was under our protection. Were this an ordinary circumstance, I would have you sentenced to death immediately.”

My father looked as though he were about to protest however Tytus kept speaking, ignoring his movement.

“...However, this is not an ordinary circumstance, is it? So, I think we should stop playing this game, Aria, and finally be realistic. Obviously, you’ve forfeited any future of becoming Beta and you will be stripped of that title accordingly. This shouldn’t be a surprise.”

Even though I knew that would be the case, it still hurt to hear it. I’d worked so hard for that, broken traditions and trained every day. It felt as though a piece of me was being taken away.

“However,” Tytus continued, “our pack’s prophecy does state that your union with Aleric will bring success to the Winter Mist, something that even I cannot disregard with our pack’s best interest in mind... So I believe it’s time we acknowledge that you’re old enough now to discuss matters such as potential,

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partners... It’s time for you to prepare yourself to become Luna one day and accept your fate with Aleric.”

No.

I thought they were going to throw me in a cell and occasionally show me off to other packs from time to time. But making me Luna one day was illogical, not to mention risky. What was to stop me from running away?

“That being said, it’s clear that you can’t be trusted and your alliance is easily broken when it suits you,” Tytus said. “You’re too much of a liability with this authority of yours. So the punishment for your crimes will be in the form of insurance. Insurance that this pack will not need to be concerned about where your loyalties lie.”

Tytus leaned forward. I knew whatever he was about to say couldn’t be anything good.

“Aria, to ensure the prosperity of this pack now, and in the future, I hereby order that you will become tied to Aleric under the eyes of our Goddess, forever joining your fates together.”

My breath hitched in my throat, forgetting how to momentarily function as the realisation of his words dawned on me.

“Aria... you will willingly offer yourself up to be marked by Aleric. This has gone on long enough and there will be no further arguments.”

## **A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 64**

### **Chapter Sixty-Four**

In the past timeline, I was sixteen when I first realised I had feelings for Aleric, eighteen when I knew I was in love with him.

All my life I'd grown up believing that he would be mine one day, hoping I would make him proud. I was groomed, controlled, and moulded to become the perfect Luna from the moment I was born.

I remembered my first shift, how it felt once I saw him with the mate bond connecting us. It was like the air around him shimmered, beckoning me forward, demanding that I gravitate around him. If I focused enough, I could even still recall how his skin felt on mine; like tiny sparks of pleasure wherever it touched. So strong, an incredible leader, and capable of feats in battle no one else had accomplished. Those were the good memories of Aleric I'd buried.

So why was my mind surfacing this now? Maybe I was trying to justify to myself that at one point in my life I'd wanted this. That the old Aria would have revelled in this moment. To wear an Alpha's mark was regarded as the highest point of honour any female could achieve in a pack. So what did I want now? 1

... Did my wants even matter anymore? What choice was there if it was this or war?

Though, if there was anyone else in the room whose desires should have been taken into consideration, they were standing by Tytus's side... looking furious.

Aleric's eyes held that same glint in them that I'd seen right before he'd killed people in the past. The look of cold fury you didn't want to find yourself the subject of.

“No,” was all he said to Tytus, his voice like ice.

Several people around me flinched and I couldn't blame them for feeling that way. If you weren't used to seeing Aleric like this, it could be a scary sight to behold the first time. And from what I'd seen of him in this life, it was rare to see him like this now.

But rather than flinch, a combination of mixed feelings swelled inside me instead. I didn't want him to mark me, sure, but a small remnant inside me stung at hearing the same rejection from him again that I'd repeatedly heard in the past.

"No, I'm not doing that," Aleric continued.

"Alec, I'm not asking you," Tytus replied flatly.

"I should have a choice—."

"You did have a choice," Tytus interrupted. "You chose to help Aria cover this up for the last few months. You didn't think I realised that already?"

The two stared at each other with such silent hostility that the lower ranks in the room shifted uncomfortably under the pressure. It was like a tangible air of enmity filled the room around us.

Finally, Aleric broke first, turning his face to the side in frustration, his teeth gritted.

It was submission.

Without further argument, I watched as he then walked towards me, eyes cast down, every step making uncertainty churn inside me the closer he came.

What was he feeling right now? Anger? Frustration? No... this felt like something else.

He finally met my eyes when he stood only a few feet away and I saw something unexpected as I searched for my answers. His face softened immediately from the ice that had been there only moments earlier... and instead he looked ashamed, embarrassed... guilty even.

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And as he halted in place, I looked back as stoically as I could, I wasn't going to make it easier for either of us if I betrayed how I felt at that moment. How terrified I was of lying myself to the future of uncertainty I'd tried so hard to avoid. But, without a word, I silently gathered my loose hair up in my hand and brushed it to the side, giving him clear access to the area he'd need,

If this was the price of saving thousands of lives, of saving Cai, then so be it,

I'd always imagined growing up that this moment would be special, more intimate, like as all of that could have been disregarded and I would have just sold for someone who actually wanted to mark me. Maybe I should have found someone from the Winter Mist to do it months ago. After all, it wasn't like Tytus could un-mark me and a person from this pack wouldn't cause a war like Coi would have.

But, deep down, I had to believe that Aleric had changed, that we had changed. Perhaps he still didn't want me in that way this time around, but maybe the friendship we'd forged over the last few years would prevail enough to ensure it wasn't a repeat of tragedy.

"I'm sorry," I whispered when he finally stood next to me,

He rubbed at his face uncomfortably before sighing. I wished the Goddess had given me an ability to read minds rather than the cursed vision atrocity she'd bestowed instead. How I so badly wanted to know what he was thinking.

Aleric shifted before hesitantly placing one hand on my shoulder, the other supporting the side of my head, and slowly, he moved in. I could feel his warm breath along my neck and my body reacted, tensing up in anticipation of what was about to happen next.

"Breathe," he reminded me softly and I nodded my head ever so slightly. He must have realised I'd been holding my breath since before he leaned in.

Could he feel my body trembling? Hear my heart racing? Surely he'd have to since he was so close, courtesy of his enhanced senses. Or maybe he was too preoccupied with the task at hand, focusing on bringing his wolf forward enough to complete the job.

His grip suddenly tightened on me and I squeezed my eyes shut, knowing what was about to happen next.

...But nothing came.

"Do you trust me?" he whispered, barely audible even to myself,

My eyes immediately flew open in surprise but I didn't know how to reply. It was already a loaded question even without the many eyes of the ranked council watching, expecting this marking to be happening. Where would I even begin to start answering that?

But before I could reply, I felt him exhale.

"I suppose it doesn't matter," he whispered. "You're probably going to resent me either way."

He then pulled away from me and I caught sight of how dark his eyes were, proof of how close he'd been to marking me. Nervously, I swallowed, unsure what he was planning next

"I'm not marking her," Aleric declared "She's not even of age yet You're asking me to mark someone who can't even shift."

Tytus narrowed his eyes. "Alec, this—"

"No," Aleric said coldly, interrupting Tytus this time. "I'm not doing it."

With how close his wolf was to the surface, mixed in with his absolute determination to disobey our Alpha's orders, it was a dangerous sight. If I didn't know any better, I would have thought Aleric was planning to take this as far as challenging him. Was this his alternative? To create civil war instead?

The sound of someone clearing their throat then sounded out; what felt almost like an intrusion to the display occurring in front of us. Immediately, everyone's eyes turned to the direction it came from.

It was Elder Luke.

"Alpha... with all due respect," he started, "I'm inclined to agree with the young Alpha heir here. Putting aside the more morally questionable arguments to be made about marking someone underage by force, I would also like to point out that we don't hold much information in regards to the ramifications that biologically it would hold. By nature, the marking process is laying claim to the other's wolf, an instinct derived from our beast side. I feel as though we would be ignoring the obvious here if we went ahead with this, noting that Aria having no wolf yet is a possible risk. I don't intend to tell you the best course of action here, of course, but it would be wise to keep in mind that this would be unknown territory, even potentially fatal. Because... well... I'm not a doctor, but I imagine the girl's healing ability isn't yet equivalent to someone of age... and we're planning to rip into her neck."

I'd never been so relieved in my life to hear that I might have just died moments earlier. It was enough to almost make my legs give out from under me. I knew this man was far too good for this pack. How many times had Elder Luke tried to rescue me now?

The room was quiet, everyone realising that there was truth to his words. And this was probably what worried them as they held their breath, waiting for our Alpha to speak.

Tytus didn't seem pleased with this reasoning, his mind probably focused on ensuring I was contained. In his head, it was probably



still worth the risk or he'd kill me anyway to guarantee no one else got their hands on me.

"This is the way it must be to ensure the prosperity of this pack," Tytus concluded. "If we need to call for a doctor then so be it, but I don't see any other way apart from completely chaining her up... and we all know her status will make that difficult to maintain."

He was referring to those who would see my obvious imprisonment within a jail cell as a direct insult to the Goddess. I wasn't sure if hearing his concern about it made me hopeful or scared.

"Then we think of something else," Aleric said. "Even if it means keeping her in silver handcuffs, I'm sure there is a compromise to be made here."

His words had been said in over-exaggeration, not to be taken literally, but some hadn't picked up on the undertone.

"...What if we did something similar..." a different Elder spoke up. I recognised them as Elder Nathaniel who typically was a voice of opposition for me. "What if we applied the same principle as silver cuffs, but adapted it to a more mobile and practical form? Say... a collar, for instance? Something to ensure that area of the neck remains untouched."

"... That could work," Tytus replied in thought.

I took a step forward. "Wait... hold on a second--"

Aleric's hand grabbed mine to get me to stop speaking and I looked up at him in outrage.

"They want to collar me like a pet dog," I hissed.

He leaned over, his body towering over me as he moved towards my ear. "Do you prefer the alternative, Aria?" he asked in a low voice.

... Was this really worse than being marked?

Instantly, I bit my tongue and turned away, pulling my hand out of his grip forcefully.

In front, I could feel Tytus' eyes watching me but I refused to look at him. Was he gloating inside knowing

I hated this idea?

"Alpha, prolonged exposure to silver may also have unknown results," Alpha Luke chimed in.

"I'd hardly see the mild sensation that silver causes to the surface of our skin as anything of dire consequence," Elder Nathaniel argued back. "So long as she doesn't keep any open wounds near it, I would think the whole thing is harmless enough. No one here can deny that it would be the most effective way of containing all her abilities, all the while allowing her to still move freely. Within reason, of course."

The continued silence in the room was only more proof that everyone was actually considering this, that they were all in agreement that this would be the best way to proceed.

I turned to Elder Luke, desperately hoping he had some other argument to counter Elder Nathaniel, but he looked as though he was holding his tongue. Perhaps he did know of how best to argue back but considered this to actually be the only viable alternative to the marking. Was this mercy or a slow torture in his mind?

"Fine, then it's settled," Tytus said. "Elder Nathaniel please work on having a collar fashioned for Aria immediately." His eyes then narrowed towards me. "Not too loose though. I don't want there to be room for any... stray Alpha heir teeth to get in."

He was referring to Cai. It looked as though he was refusing to let his hunch about us go.

"Oh... and one more thing," he added. "I've shown leniency today, noting the advice from the council, but that will not be the case in the future. Upon Aria's eighteenth birthday, she will be marked by Aleric. That is not up for discussion. The collar is merely a means to ensure we get to that point without issue."

Less than a year. I had less than a year before my real punishment would be carried out. What could I possibly do in such a short amount of time and with all my freedoms stripped from me?

But there were still more important matters yet to be taken care of.

"Does this ensure the release of Cai safely back to The Silver Lake pack?" I asked. "That we won't be participating in a war with them?"

Tytus sighed in annoyance, as if already tired of my existence in his presence.

"Yes, yes, fine," he conceded, waving me off. "War is far too expensive anyway."

He then gave the order for Cai to be let go and escorted to the border immediately, giving me at least some comfort that all of this sacrifice had merit.

Texhaled, the fatigue finally hitting me as the weight of all those lives came off my shoulders. Things could be set right now, even if it still left many more challenges ahead.

The hours that came after consisted mostly of sitting around in handcuffs, surrounded by several guards whilst they forged the silver collar for me. Since I had no idea what the silver process involved, the hours seemed to drag excruciatingly slow as I had no indication of how long it would take.

At some point during the wait, I realised Cai would have made it over the border and would be on his way home already. Was he thinking of me? His last memory of us was going to be in that meeting hall, fighting for his life as he was almost killed by my pack under false charges.

A part of me hoped he did hate me. At least it would make things easier to think that. I hoped that he would return home and continue on with his life... I hoped that he would be happy. Because if all of this had taught me anything, it was that the best thing I could do for the safety of myself, as well as others, was to try and forget about Cai... even if it broke me a little to even consider that.

The Goddess had said that she couldn't change my mate, that the destiny of Aleric and I was set in stone. It was starting to feel as though the more I tried to stray from that path, the more damage it was leaving in its wake. How in depth was the radius around that fate? Did it mean I was meant to return and play the

role of Luna as well? Be the docile, quiet girl I'd been in the past? Don't ask questions, be obedient, act only in the interest of the pack and your Alpha, never yourself. Serve your mate to the best of your ability. What exactly was I meant to be changing if not the entire circumstances that lead to my original demise?

I suddenly felt exhausted, now tired of fighting for the future. Couldn't someone else take over? The sea would be banned from the pack within the next few days and I couldn't see Aleric falling for her any time soon. Maybe that would be enough... enough to stop whatever it was Selene wanted me to prevent.

The Elders finally arrived then, the collar in hand, and they began the process of fastening it around my neck. I could feel the very mild burn sensation it caused to my skin but it was no worse than the cuffs that had been on my wrists only moments earlier. I was sure that soon I wouldn't even notice it at all once it became the new norm.

"I wouldn't recommend trying to remove it," Elder Nathaniel said, eyeing me off as I gently felt around the contraption. "It's been enforced with the strongest metal we could find so you'll only hurt yourself if you try anything. The only way to remove it is with the key and I believe Alpha Tytus said he will be keeping that on his person at all times."

'Brilliant,' I thought miserably to myself.

The only thing I wanted to do now was go home and sleep. Maybe never go outside again. This abomination around my neck was an eyesore and not exactly discreet. The thought of the pack seeing me contained like this was degrading and humiliating enough.

In a daze, I followed as they escorted me out of the meeting hall and into a car. Several warriors followed and I assumed that was always going to be the case from now on. They might have stripped me of all my abilities but they hadn't technically tied me down here yet. A mark would have caused me pain had strayed too far from Aleric for an extended period of time, thereby tethering me here. But a collar wouldn't do that. They would need to keep an eye on me still.

"Time to get out," a voice said from the driver's seat, cutting through my thoughts.

I looked up and exited the car without paying too much attention... only to realise we weren't at my home.

"W-why did you bring me here?" I asked nervously. "I thought you were taking me home?"

"We did," one of the warriors replied. "Our instructions were to take you to where you'll be residing from now on. The Alpha has advised that you're to be moved to the packhouse immediately in order to ensure, not only your own safety, but also to allow an easier transition for when you'll become Luna one day."

Lies. They just wanted to keep an eye on me, confine me to an area that would be harder for me to escape from. I knew from previous experience in the past just how difficult it was to run away under the eyes of the packhouse... and that was before I had a collar on me.

"Come along," a different warrior said, guiding me with a hand to my elbow.

Without hesitating, I quickly snatched my arm away from their grip. "I can walk by myself, thank you."

I followed behind as they led me forward, all the while wondering which of the spare rooms they'd be having me stay in until Aleric became Alpha. I vaguely remembered someone once telling me about a smaller room on the second floor that had nice sun in the morning. Maybe I'd be lucky enough to have somewhere like that to wait out the time until my eighteenth birthday.

But as they led me through the familiar hallways and stairs, a pit of uneasiness began to grow in my stomach.

...Because they weren't taking me to a spare room.

They were taking me to my old room. The Luna quarters. The very place I'd suffered abuse for years.

## A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 65

### Sixty-Five

'Three hundred and one... three hundred and two... three hundred and three... three hundred and four....'

I crept my fingers like legs along the wooden panel as I sat curled up on the seat of the windowsill nook. In my head, I would count the steps I made until my hand couldn't reach any further... then I'd repeat. How many steps could I count until I was eighteen?

Everything felt like it blended together, almost as if two timelines were now indistinguishable. It must have been at least a month or two since they dragged me in here kicking and screaming. I had tried to run the minute I saw where they were taking me, a reaction that surprised even myself. But this place held worse memories for me than even the trial grounds where I'd died.

'\*No, not here, '+ I had said adamantly as they tried to force me to go inside. '\*Anywhere but here."

'\*This is where you've been instructed to live, Ma'am. It's not up for discussion. "\*"

I was addressed as 'Ma'am' or 'Miss' now. No longer a Beta heir, not yet a Luna, but everyone too nervous to call me Saintess in light of the events of that day.

'\*Tell Tytus that if he wants something of me marked so badly, then he can mark my words, '\* I'd spat back at them when things had escalated to a point beyond reason. Their hands had grabbed at me around my waist as I had tried to wriggle free. '\*Tell him that as soon as I'm free, I'm coming for him. Tell him that he can go fuck-,"

I shook off the memory, focusing back on my counting instead. They ended up having to lock me inside for the first few days until I stopped pounding at the door. Then, once the first week had gone by, time started to blend together. Now they couldn't get me to leave.

Some days I wondered if I was even brought back to life or whether the events up until now were all a fever dream I'd concocted after failing to escape with Sophie. Everything

looked the same, felt the same, smelt the same... the only difference was within the people who visited... and this collar around my neck.

“Ariadne,” a familiar voice echoed, like a distant memory.

In the past, I used to go into the garden; it was somewhere I’d go when I needed a break from it all. I would go running in the woods and let my wolf explore before we’d inevitably have to drag ourselves back to reality. I didn’t have a wolf yet though and it wasn’t like this collar would have made that of any benefit anyway. But more so than that, I just didn’t like the idea of people seeing me like this. The less that knew, the better.

“Ariadne.”

Even the books here were ones I’d already read repeatedly. There were only so many times I could read about the ‘100 Greatest Battles of Wolf Kind’ or ‘The Twenty Steps of a Successful Luna’ before beginning to hate even the thought of picking a book up. But even if I asked someone to go to the library for me, it was unlikely there would be many books in there that I hadn’t already read at least once.

‘Three hundred and eighty-four... three hundred and eighty-five... three hundred and eighty-six...’

“Aria!” the voice cut through, forcing me to realise it wasn’t just in my head.

I looked up startled, blinking several times as I refocused.

It was Aleric. How long had he been here?

“Oh... hello,” I said, my voice sounding distant. “I didn’t hear you arrive. Have you been here long?”

I rigidly stood up, inclining my head in a bow of respect per standard protocol for higher ranks. After all, I

wasn’t a Beta heir anymore.

“...About five minutes,” he said slowly, frowning at the formality. I had the feeling that perhaps it *made* him uncomfortable but I continued to do it regardless.

“Apologies for not realising... I was just lost in thought.”

He stared as if studying my movements. Most likely, he could tell my behaviour was *more forced* than genuine. “...It’s fine.”

“Did Sophie offer you any tea yet?” I asked, walking past him towards the kitchen.

I could recall that there were at least two sections in ‘The Twenty Steps of a Successful Luna’ that specified that, not only should I be presentable at all times, but that I should also ensure an Alpha was made to feel comfortable and at ease. I was pretty confident that the author of that book and my old Luna studies teacher, Mrs Stewart, would have a fit if they saw me like this now. Though I wondered what they would say given my circumstances. Surely my situation negated several areas of required etiquette.

“...Sophie?”

I stopped in my tracks and cursed internally. “Ah... I mean... I mean Lucy. Apologies.”

I rubbed at my head. Timelines.

Aleric followed closely behind as I walked us into the other room to start making some tea.

“Aria... are you okay?” he said, as if he’d been holding off from asking for a while. “Every time I visit, it feels like you’re slipping into a different world sometimes.”

More like a different time, if we were being completely accurate,

“I’m fine,” I replied flatly, handing him a cup. “You saw me only yesterday. It’s not like anything has changed.”

“...I’ve been gone for a week, remember?” he prompted. “I had that meeting out of town and I said I wouldn’t be back for a while? I just got home this morning.”

“Right... I remember,” I lied, brushing it off.

“How did the meeting go? Was it... pleasant?”

“It was boring. Just like all the meetings. They can’t agree on how best to handle an influx of refugees stemming from a defeated pack up north. No one wants to waste resources screening for rogues.”

“I see. I’m sorry to hear that.”

He raised a brow at me. “I don’t suppose you have any suggestions?”

I could feel as my back stiffened, my eyes narrowing ever so slightly. So it was beginning already? Trapped in this place, oppressed by the very hierarchy I was told to serve. This position demanded that I be used as a tool, yet stripped me of every freedom I had.



“...No.”

In actuality, I had several suggestions. None of which I felt like sharing.

“That’s a shame,” he said, sipping at his tea. “Then there is the issue of petty disputes. There’s a pack fighting over a boundary line since the original territory documents that were drawn up have been misplaced. They’ve requested our involvement to mediate the process.”

“Sounds like you’re going to be busy.”

“Okay, then... two pack members are requesting permission to build a new business in t own but it conflicts with a similar business’ interests.”

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Now I knew he was grasping at straws. Anyone with half a brain could assist with that o ne. Each issue he’d listed was easier than the last to resolve.

“... What are you doing?”

“What are you doing?” he asked sharply, his tone annoyed.

I stared back stoically. “I’m not sure what you’re referring to.”

“This. Whatever this\* is,” he said, waving a hand towards me.

“I apologise that I’m not able to assist you with these issues,” I frowned. “I guess that’s why they leave all pack leadership to the men around here.”

There was no mistaking the undertone of distaste behind my words. He would pick up i mmediately on what I was implying.

“That’s not... What? That’s not what I meant,” he said, his jaw clenched. “I’m talking ab out how it feels as though I’m talking to a wall, like you’re a shell not really here.”

I stared at him and could feel the emotion behind what he was saying. But I felt... empty

“...I don’t know what you want from me,” I finally whispered, looking back down at the c up in my hands.

“I want you to care about something again, anything.” He sighed and walked around the room, pacing in thought.

"Is it because of the collar? Because we both know there is nothing I can do about that," he said, inspecting the bookshelf by the couch that was only collecting dust. "...Or maybe it's because Cai left—?"

"Don't say his name," I hissed without missing a beat.

His words had triggered a reflex inside and I could feel the sting that accompanied hearing the name after all this time.

Aleric looked up quickly to where I stood, just as surprised as I was over my blatant reaction.

But just as quickly as I looked up, I turned away again, instead deciding to focus my attention on a lamp in the corner.

"...I apologise for my outburst," I said quietly, resuming my composure.

He exhaled in defeat and ran a hand through his hair. "...No need to apologise. It's nice to know at least something gets a real reaction."

We stood in silence for a few moments, the tension in the air needing time to release, before Aleric finally broke it.

"I've got that big annual meeting tomorrow," he said. "The one where all the small packs in the vicinity get together. Tylus asked me to go this year to oversee it since he finds them too bothersome. It's being held at the Diamond Claw pack."

'Tylus'. My ears hadn't failed to pick up how Aleric said his name with a tone of irritation rather than referring to him respectfully as 'Father'. When had that started? Probably when Tylus decided to force us together. I could see how the unwanted outcome would put a strain on their relationship.

"That sounds..." I started but my voice trailed off. I knew if I said 'nice' he'd probably be triggered by my attitude once more.

"Boring as hell," he provided, finishing the sentence for me. "...Which is why you're coming with me."

I looked up shocked, unsure if I'd heard him correctly. "Pardon?"

"I said you're coming with me. To the meeting. We're leaving tomorrow morning and we'll be staying there overnight so get Lucy to pack a small bag for you."

My hand reached up and touched at the collar. "Tylus knows about this? About letting me leave the Winter Mist to attend a pack meeting?"

"He knows," he confirmed.

I didn't want to go. I'd been hiding myself away from my own pack these past few months and was sure that rumours had spread already about my new... jewellery. The last thing I wanted was to be at the mercy of other pack leaders and suffer their mockery.

"I'm not a Luna yet," I objected weakly.

"I'm not an Alpha yet," he retorted.

"I'm too tired to go."

"You do nothing except sit around all day."

I bit the inside of my cheek. It looked as though there was no getting out of this. But he was grossly mistaken if he thought I'd help out with the meeting in any way. After everything I was being put through, I didn't owe this pack anything.

"Okay...", I mumbled, finally yielding.

"Okay," he repeated, sounding slightly relieved.

Nothing really became of the conversation from there. I reverted to autopilot responses as I withdrew inside my head, thinking about all the pack leaders I'd need to face tomorrow.

At some point Aleric said he had to go and would see me tomorrow. So, with nothing else to do, I headed back towards my bedroom in a daze, wondering what to do first to prepare.

Before I could get there though, an image suddenly flashed next to me on the wall that immediately caught my attention. It was a mirror. A mirror that caused me to flinch at the sight.

And slowly, I brought a hand up to touch my face.

My eyes looked dull, ringed within dark circles, my cheeks more hollow. Around my body, I could see that I'd lost some of the muscle mass I'd accumulated over the last few years of Beta training. I looked weak.

I looked almost as bad as my past self.

"...I see you," I whispered to my reflection. "You used to be a ghost living in the furthest part of my mind, barely visible within my eyes. But look at you now. It's almost like you never left."

I felt the absence of her voice, her normal whispering not coming forward to torment me. In fact, when I thought hard about it, I hadn't heard her speak in forever.

"What? Nothing to say now? I remember you had plenty to express back when you were urging me on to try and kill Thea. Look at how great that turned out."

However, once more, I was met with only silence.

I scoffed, "Have I fallen too low for even you now? What a joke."

I turned my back on the mirror, no longer wanting to see the reminder, and resumed on my way to start packing. I knew Lucy would be returning soon and could do it but I felt the need to be doing something to distract myself.

Though now I thought on it, I had no idea what was happening outside in the world anymore; something

## Chapter Sixty-five

that only fed my anxiety. There could have been an apocalypse unfolding and I'd probably be sleeping through it. I struggled to find the energy required to focus on it anymore and, deep down, a small part of me had even begun to hope this place would burn to the ground.

So was Aleric right? I really hadn't shown interest in anything since arriving. When was the last time I'd even thought about Thea? About any of the pending doom Selene had cursed me with knowing about, yet had refused to elaborate on? Everything seemed like such a blur after the first week I came here. Had I been justified or neglectful in my refusal to try anymore?

The image of myself in the mirror flashed inside my mind once more, reminding me of my current state. Perhaps I had let things go too far but it had become so easy to forget given the circumstances. Especially since I hadn't seen Thea around.

She had been declared long gone within the days that followed her disappearance. Just as I had originally suspected, Jonathan's body was found. It was messy, rushed; evidence clear that it had been done on impulse rather than premeditated. But further surprising was the disappearance of several other warriors in the days that followed. I could speculate that either they were assassinated as a precaution or just got

spooked, running away before Thea could get her hands on them.

She would be back, it would be naive to think otherwise, but things wouldn't be able to transpire anywhere near the same as it had in the past. From talking to her, I knew Aleric wasn't her goal. At least not romantically. I could only surmise then that it was somethin

g bigger. Something I was a part of. But if she had really intended to kill me, as she had so tastefully mentioned in the hospital, why didn't she just... do it?

She was clearly physically stronger than most were giving her credit for. After all, she had thrown me across the room with ease. And whilst she had denied behind a rogue herself, she obviously had some sort of sway or influence over them if she was managing their movements.

Thinking about it in detail, it seemed almost strange that I had survived this long not only now, but in the past also. Couldn't she have just killed me herself before I dug up any information on her? I wasn't even shifted yet. So what was stopping her?

And then a thought came to me.

...She needed me alive.

Her hospital stunt must have been a bluff to scare me off that day. She never even tried to chase me after I had attacked her. So for some reason, whatever it may be, she needed me. Breathing. At least for now.

Based on that, I could guess that maybe I trigger something in the future for her. Something I could only assume had something to do with the end of werewolves per Selene's warning. But I couldn't recall anything special I'd done in the past. Perhaps it was related to the wars Aleric waged in which I'd acted as a complacent enabler in? I'd only been killed after we'd succeeded in that venture. Was that the missing link? Did we kill someone during that time that we weren't supposed to?

None of this sat right with me but it did give me a small peace of mind. I knew now that Thea wouldn't come for me directly. Not for a while anyway. My death was after I'd gained influence as a Luna so as long as I kept Aleric under control, we would probably be okay in the meantime.

'Under control'.

When had I ever been able to stop Aleric from doing what he wanted in the past? Even in this life, he showed a lot of determination in doing whatever he believed was the right thing to do. And whilst things had become rocky between us the last few months since the collar, he was still actively seeking me out and trying to give me company.

And I didn't resent him, even though I assumed he believed that was the case. How could I possibly hate\* this\* Aleric after everything he'd tried to do for me the last few years? He chose me over Tytus when we

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### Chapter Sixty-Six

A loud knocking sounded at my door the following morning, instantly waking me up.

It was dark, maybe dim morning light, but definitely earlier than I had expected to be disturbed that day. It was so early that I knew even Lucy wouldn't have arrived yet.

Despite my best efforts, my brain had refused to quieten down after I'd gone to sleep the night before. Figuring out a possible theory to do with Thea had awakened a new spark within me, one which had prevented me from settling my mind down. As a result, I felt exhausted from the little rest I had managed to get.

I pulled myself out of bed sluggishly and made my way to the door, opening it to see a dishevelled looking Aleric on my doorstep. It appeared that early mornings still disagreed with him even after all this time.

"...Aleric? Why are you here so early?" | yawned, too tired to conduct the required formalities.

"So you just open the door for anyone without checking first?" he asked, ignoring my question. "What if I were someone here to kill you? I get that we're in the packhouse but it's not like we haven't had spies here before."

I stared back at him completely unfazed, my eyelids heavy. "If it meant that I didn't need to be awake right now or go to this meeting, maybe I would welcome the hostile intrusion," Treplied. "Besides, what kind of murderer knocks on the door to announce their presence first? Not very subtle."

He stood frozen for a few seconds, confusion showing on his face momentarily, before finally, his lip twitched in a small smile. What was he confused about?

Oh. It was the first attempt at humour I'd made to him in months.

Maybe I had been letting this place affect me too much. I could definitely feel that having something different finally happening today did help to dissociate myself from the less pleasant memories in this room. It made me more... aware.

"Come inside and wait," I offered, opening the door wider for him to enter. "I need to get changed and grab the last of my things."

"Don't take too long. We need to get going."

I frowned. He'd shown up almost two hours earlier than he needed to. Why was he in such a rush?

After

getting changed and attempting to cover up the unpleasant new features of my face with makeup, I grabbed my bag and took one last look in the mirror

Once dressed up and nicely presented, it was easy to miss the signs of my own inner struggles the last few months. That is, of course, if you were also blind and completely ignored the collar sported around my neck

I sighed. There was no getting out of this now.

Refocusing on the task at hand, I headed back to where Aleric was waiting for me.

Surprisingly, in the time it took for me to get ready, he had somehow managed to tame his wavy hair a bit better and looked more presentable for the meeting ahead.

"Ready to go," I announced, walking towards the front door.

"Wait, I've got something for you," he said, making me pause.

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I watched as he then pulled out a length of quality violet fabric from a bag and showed it to me. It was a scarf.

"I figured you'd feel more comfortable with something like this to hide the ah..." His gaze lowered to my collar.

I eyed the gift sceptically. "...We don't have very cold weather right now."

He shrugged. "The fabric is a bit thinner so it could be more of a fashion thing? I don't know. I'm not good with that stuff. Just... here."

He took a step closer and helped wrap it around my neck. A nice sentiment if not for his finger accidentally grazing the flesh by the collar, causing me to wince.

"Does it hurt badly?" he asked softly, lifting the metal up in curiosity to try and see the skin under it. "It looks really red."

I grabbed his hand to move it away, adjusting the collar and scarf back in place behind it. "You get used to it. Mostly it's just a mild burn that you tune out just like the handcuffs. The problem is that, since it's on all day long, the skin gets irritated so it's far more sensitive. I have a cream that helps a little with that though."



He nodded hesitantly, not looking very reassured by my response. But as he looked into my eyes, I could tell he felt guilty. .

“Aria... you know I’m so—.”

“I know. It’s not your fault,” I said, cutting him off.

I took a step back towards the door in an attempt to break the serious air surrounding us . “Anyway, you said we were in a rush?”

He frowned, as if remembering why we were here again, and cleared his throat. “Yeah ... let’s go. The house is still sleeping so stay quiet,” he said, leading me out the door.

I followed closely behind through the familiar halls, the eerie silence of those sleeping around us evident, until we finally made it to his car parked out front.

The fresh air was what hit me first. It was a crisp smell of nature, maybe even some freshly cut grass. Whatever it was , I took a second to breathe it in, greedily indulging in something I’d deprived myself of. Already I could feel myself wake up and feel a little more stable. Maybe this trip was what I had needed.

Aleric quickly got into the car and I followed after, throwing my bag in the back. He didn’t waste much time afterwards in starting the engine.

The trip was going well and we were driving for a while before I finally spoke. It was something that had been bothering me since his arrival this morning, a nagging in my mind that wasn’t allowing me to let it go.

“... Tytus doesn’t actually know that I’m going to this meeting... does he?” I asked dubiously.

There were no warriors accompanying me even though there should have been, not to mention it was far too early in the morning; way earlier than we should have needed to make it to the meeting on time. With all of this in consideration, there was only one conclusion I could come to.

...He was sneaking me out.

Aleric was quiet for a minute before replying. “...Sort of.”

I sighed. “You told me yesterday that he knew about this.”

“Oh, he will know... I left him a note.”

My disapproval was evident in my silence to which he laughed. “What’s he going to do? Drag you home in

front of all those pack officials? I’m sure that’ll look great on our already wavering reputation.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Did something happen?”

I hadn’t kept up to date with current affairs outside the packhouse so naturally, I hadn’t inquired as to the aftermath of my punishment. But I would be lying if I said that reputational damage didn’t surprise me.

Aleric’s mouth flattened in a tight line as if he wasn’t sure whether to explain.

“...Aleric?” | pressed.

“Well... I mean, it’s not like we didn’t anticipate a backlash from this whole thing,” he started. “There’s been a bit of stirring, a few accusations... After all, you just went missing one day, holing yourself up in those quarters. Tytus made an announcement to say *you were* taking some personal time off to recover following the death of Myra. Of course, that didn’t make much sense given the timeline of events. A few people weren’t happy so it’s just been a matter of putting out fires.”

“What do they think actually happened?” I asked.

“A few theories. The biggest one being imprisonment which is problematic. There was also a lot of petitioning for your release happening. Not just from within the Winter Mist either.”

“...And the collar?”

“Just rumours... but unfortunately, that one has spread around pretty far.”

I nodded, already having assumed as much. It was to be expected that people were curious regarding the collar since this sort of thing was completely unheard of

But inside, a small part of me felt satisfied that Tytus was having a hard time explaining my absence. One of the main purposes of the collar was to allow me to still make public appearances, yet I’d kept myself indoors anyway. I knew it was petty of me to take pleasure, since causing more civil unrest was the last thing I should be advocating for, but my hatred for Tytus had been steadily growing every day that passed living with this humiliation

We drove quietly the rest of the way, my mind filling with anxiety the closer we got, until finally, I saw the border in sight. Several warriors from the Diamond Claw pack were standing guard, screening everyone as they came across. I wondered whether the added security measures were introduced from hearing about all the rogue attacks and deaths the Winter Mist suffered.

The warriors peered down into Aleric's car window to identify him, though he didn't need much introduction. All the packs within our neighbouring territories would know who he was. I could see their nervousness, the way they carefully showed Aleric respect, but their attention wasn't just directed at him.

The frequent and unmistakable eye shifting to where I was seated was... less than subtle. In fact, their staring was almost borderline rude. But I knew why they were doing it... after all, their eyes were directed towards my neck, where I was sure they were wondering if the rumours were true, hiding away just behind the scarf.

I squirmed uncomfortably in my seat, turning my face to look out the window to distract myself instead. Coming here was a bad idea. If the lower ranks were this blatantly obvious, who knew how the ranked members would conduct themselves with less social constrictions.

As if sensing my discomfort, a low warning growl rumbled out next to me, and I looked up in surprise to see Aleric's attention pointed towards the warrior.

"Understand how being brought up in a small pack like this would be educationally difficult," he quipped with an undertone of threat that was impossible to miss, but your lack of social etiquette should not be an excuse to stare at her like a museum attraction. Or would you prefer I bring it up as a formal complaint?

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during the meeting today? Recommend that your pack looks to invest more into its training if this type of insult is tolerated by even an unranked guard dog?"

The warrior's face went white, eyes wide with fear. Aleric could rip his throat out if he wanted and this pack wouldn't be able to do much about it. After all, they were under the Winter Mist's protection because of their own lack of resources.

But as much as I wasn't a fan of the warrior's behaviour, it was something I knew I should probably intervene with before it got out of hand.

Slowly, I reached a hand out and gently touched Aleric's arm.

"It's okay," I said, trying to reassure him. "Let it go. I'm sure you've scared him enough for a lifetime. If can't cope under the gaze of someone like him, then there is no chance for me in that meeting room."

Aleric slowly exhaled, tension releasing from his shoulders.

"Anything else required for the checkpoint?" I asked, leaning forward to address the warrior directly; a warrior who was still looking far too terrified to move.

Mutedly, he just shook his head.

"Very well then. Have a \*great\* rest of the day," I said in a forcefully polite manner. "Come on, Aleric, let's just get this over with."

Aleric grumbled but still drove on, never once turning back to look at the petrified warrior.

"You can't attack someone for just looking at me impolitely," I said carefully after a few moments of silent driving. "Otherwise we're about to walk into a massacre."

"I wasn't going to."

I turned to stare at him, my face showing that I didn't believe him in the slightest.

"Well, they can at least show some respect," he finally mumbled, amending his initial stance.

I sighed. If he didn't want to deal with people like this then he shouldn't have brought me. At best, it felt like I would be a distraction to the discussions taking place. His temper wasn't anywhere near as bad as I once remembered it, but I was sure that this was still an unnecessary and avoidable test of that.

A few more minutes down the road and we finally made it to the main hall area. Several cars were already parked nearby despite our arrival being almost two hours early. I assumed that some of the packs residing further out came early in case of any issues along the journey. Today would be important for them so I knew they wouldn't want to take any chances.

We got out and walked towards the meeting hall. In my chest, I could feel my heart beating loudly from nerves and I began to fidget restlessly with the scarf; double... triple... quadruple checking to make sure every part of it was covered.

"It's fine," Aleric said, having noticed my agitation. "You're fine. It's just a meeting with a bunch of small, barely on the map packs."

I nodded. I knew I shouldn't even care what anyone in the room thought of me, but it was through these men that more rumours could be spread. Within a week, it was possible for word to have spread all the way to the other side of the country.

We reached the main door and I could hear the chatting of several groups of people on the other side. *Maybe* four or five packs worth of representatives. I wasn't sure how many were attending today but there probably wouldn't be many more left to arrive.

Without much further ado, I then watched as Aleric reached out to push the door open...

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"—Wait," I said quickly, making him pause.

I needed to slow my heart rate. It was making my body feel faint.

'Calm down,' I told myself. 'In... and out.'

However, between taking deep breaths to focus, I suddenly felt a hand tilting my chin up, forcing me to raise my head and meet Aleric's serious gaze

"Head up," he instructed. "Don't allow them the chance to look down on you. You're a Saintess and the daughter of the Winter Mist's Beta."

I picked up immediately on how he didn't refer to me as future Luna. He must have realized that wouldn't have made me feel any better. In fact, neither of us mentioned my future position as Luna, almost as if both of us knew it was too uncomfortable of a topic to bring up. But 'Saintess?' It'd been so long since someone had called me that. These days, I certainly didn't feel like one. I felt no better than a human inside a cage; weak, powerless and unable to defend myself.

However, he was right. Even with just my birth status alone being that of the daughter of our pack's Beta, I still commanded more respect than the majority of these men from small territories. Whether they cared if I was a Saintess or not, we still held the most power in that room.

"Ready?" he asked, resuming his hand on the door.

"I'm ready."

And with that Aleric opened the door.

Just as I had thought, there were several groups of people scattered around the foyer. All of them mingling with others who I presumed were from different packs, their demeanors ranging from friendly to more reserved.

However, for all the conversations that were avidly taking place, it felt almost surreal to then see a whole room die to absolute silence as quickly as this one did.

Because all their faces instantly turned towards me, all filled with mixed expressions. And, internally, I sighed.

## **A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 67**

### **Chapter Sixty–Seven**

“If we can request a forty per cent decrease to our alliance tax for just the next five years, I believe that this amount alone would allow us to grow exponentially,” the Alpha from the Red Star pack said. “You’d easily see the missed returns back in full from the tax break, though I think easily more than full, once our annual revenue grew further. Currently, we have several plans in place for expanding our business interests, but we’re just short of the funds required to implement.”

Aleric took a moment to consider before finally replying.

“I’m happy to allow that,” he said, “but I would expect an increase of trade goods to come through the Winter Mist during that period of discount, something that would assist with both of our economies. In addition to that, I will also add the condition where, should you fail to increase your total gross income after ten years, the Winter Mist will reserve the right to claim the amount in missed taxes during the initial five year break period.”

It had been going on like this the entire meeting.

I was here, present and listening, but not overly attentive. Mostly I just sat and tried to tune out the occasional stares in my direction, focusing on literally anything else other than wondering what they were thinking internally about me.

It was bad enough to be a woman in these meetings but now I was also suddenly unranked, unmated, underage and riddled with a multitude of rumours surrounding my whereabouts the last few months. Their minds would be swimming with a million questions, I was sure.

Aleric had been handling the meeting fine; some would even say far better than what you’d expect from others his age. But I hadn’t said a word yet. I’d told myself I wasn’t going to get involved with participating since, at the end of the day, everything I did would

be benefitting Tytus' reputation. Though I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel a little bad since Aleric was the one here, not Tytus. Fortunately, there hadn't been anything worth involving myself in yet and there were barely any changes I'd make to the plans he'd proposed so far.

"Anything else?" Aleric asked the group once dealings with the Red Star pack had concluded.

A man spoke up then, seated to our right of the hall. He was an Alpha, I could feel that much, but he didn't speak with much authority.

"Alpha heir Aleric, I'd like to discuss a possible innovative business proposition for you to invest in," he said, his eyes glancing at me for a split second in a way that made me uncomfortable.

"Situated within the Silent Forest pack."

The mention of his pack brought recognition; this was Alpha Fredrick Jacobs. It made sense now why he'd given off the little authority he did; his pack was bordered with where the human territory started. As such, their resources and room for expansion were minimal to prevent accidentally revealing our species' existence.

But it was Alpha Fredrick's future reputation that bothered me most. I'd heard a little about him in my past life... and it wasn't overly positive.

"Speak," Aleric said, gesturing a hand for him to proceed.

"As you know," he started, "our territory borders with a human town about five hours from here. We've been forced to maintain the illusion of being a human district ever since our pack's origin, something which has hindered us in several areas; mainly our ability to protect ourselves and run our pack in a way some normally would. But, since taking over for my father some years ago, I've begun to wonder whether we could use this to our advantage. Say... opening our land up for the humans. I'm proposing we build something close to the border in order to bring in their business, thereby boosting our own economy to trade in resources better."

...So this was where his rumours must have started.

"What business did you have in mind?" Aleric asked, not immediately shutting his suggestion down.

I was curious, sure, but beginning trade with humans was dangerous. If one of them wandered onto a pack territory at the wrong time, like for example, during an attack, they could easily end up dead. The pack would immediately go under human investigation and navigating the aftermath could prove messy and risky.



But then death was one thing, Goddess forbid they ever saw someone shift accidentally

Our species had deliberately alienated ourselves from them, even rejecting the majority of their more advanced technologies

where possible, to ensure our continued secrecy. Their innovations were great and could prove beneficial for us in many areas, but the risk of exposure was far too high. Not to mention I'd heard stories

that most of their gadgets contained location tracking systems these days. To introduce a new advanced human technology to our world, it had to be both thoroughly screened and approved by a council of elder representatives made up from packs all over the country. These days, approval was very **rare**.

To be fair though, I was sure the humans knew some of our towns existed to an extent, but we were probably considered gated off, old fashioned mountain folk in their eyes; estranged from many things the modern world had to offer. Or at least a lot of our territories were restricted to keep up that illusion. Places like the Winter Mist were luckier since we were far away enough from human civilisation, surrounded by packs on all sides, that we had the luxury to expand as large as we wanted without worrying whether humans would randomly stumble in. But somewhere like the Silent Forest pack would need to be constantly wary, trying to keep contact with humans to a minimum where possible.

Which was one reason why I was so unsure about this deal.

It wasn't as though I was completely opposed to reaching out to humans, especially since it wasn't unheard of for some of our kind to mate individuals of theirs, but I knew opening the gate for humans to freely enter a werewolf territory would have irreversible effects. Once open, it would make it almost impossible to close again without human curiosity getting involved. And all it would take is one overly curious person to dig a little too deep.

Off the top of my head, I could not recall in the past whether any pack had done this successfully. Not to say no one had begun business with them, but rather I had no recollection of it personally. In the previous timeline, I was mostly involved with war and new political alliance tactics. The small packs that were already under the Winter Mist from the start were not my concern. Typically, Lunas had no direct involvement outside of their own packs at all, so it had been a struggle enough to be allowed access to the things I had in past.

"I would like to build a small business district, starting with a casino," Alpha Fredrick said. "It would encourage visitors from all over to come and participate. The profits would be high and basically guaranteed, something that we would then reinvest in other businesses in the area. New businesses mean more money, which means higher gross income, meaning higher return for you via

your alliance tax. And that's without taking into account the equity investment returns for the business itself."

He wanted to introduce avenues of addiction to, not only his own pack, but to the humans on the other side of his border. Of all the things to risk centuries of secrecy on, a casino would be at the bottom of the list of things worth pursuing. Not to mention that, if there was one thing Alpha Fredrick seemed to know well, it was unnecessary addictions. Goddess knew what else he wanted to do behind the scenes of that establishment.

"How much did you require and at what percentage?" Aleric asked, sounding as if he was unphased by

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the ramifications this could have.

"Looking for a one hundred thousand investment for a ten per cent equity stake."

“So how much do you currently—”

“Aleric,” I interrupted quietly, touching his arm to stop him for a moment. “Have you thought this through? Like fully?”

I’d

broken my promise to not get involved but this just wasn’t sitting right with me. Not for a casino and definitely not for Fredrick Jacobs, lest the rumours about him were true.

“It’s just business and a good opportunity,” he whispered back. “If this pays off, we’d be involved with one of the first territories to attempt something like this and, as he said, it is basically guaranteed profit. Humans travel miles for certain attractions. I can see this working out easily.”

“No, not for a casino,” I argued, my voice still too low for others to hear. “This isn’t a good idea to involve ourselves with. Putting aside the humans, we’re still talking addiction and possible property value reductions as a result. What happens when some of their warriors stop being so productive or financially ruin themselves? That’s going to cause chain reactions to their other avenues of resources. If they want to do it, then let them, but don’t pour our money into helping them be their own possible destruction.”

It was overdramatic in some ways but I had my own reasoning. Bottom line was that Aleric should not be getting involved with this pack or its Alpha unless it was for taking their quarterly tax.

“Aria... —”

“Trust me,” I urged. “This is not a good investment. If you want to become indirectly involved within humans for business, there are better avenues.”

He searched my face for a few moments before finally exhaling, nodding his head in agreement.

“Unfortunately, we won’t be investing in the casino at this time,” Aleric said, directing his attention back to Alpha Fredrick. “But I encourage you to come to us with other business interests in the future.”

You could see the irritation flash on Alpha Fredrick’s face from Aleric’s rejection. This was probably something he’d been working on for quite a while and was counting on the Winter Mist’s support in order to get it off the ground.

His eyes then flicked to me coldly, filled with nothing but accusation.

"I knew that going into business with humans would be a difficult feat," he said, his words like ice, "but I didn't anticipate that one would be causing an issue to our new development so soon."

Aleric immediately tensed up, leaning forward as if getting ready to make him regret his words. The insult to myself was clear and unmistakable. He was referring to my collar's effect of removing my ability.

"Don't," I said, pleading for Aleric to stand down. "He's not worth it."

"What? Can't speak for yourself?" Alpha Fredrick stupidly continued.

"Does the collar make you mentally weak as well?"

I

turned my attention to him calmly, now addressing someone in the meeting for the first time that day. You could tell how visibly uncomfortable everyone was from the interaction taking place.

"Alpha Fredrick, I understand your frustration over the rejection suffered here today. I appreciate that you have put a lot of time and energy into this proposition and this outcome is an unfortunate blow for you," I said. "However, I would like to remind you that you are not in a position to be hurling insults at the people currently preventing your small pack's complete annihilation from your neighbouring territories. This alliance protects you, \*We\* protect you."

"\*You\* protect me from nothing, Saintess," he said, spitting the title distastefully. "You are as fragile as a

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human now and apparently have the wits of one too."

The only reason Aleric hadn't attacked him already was out of respect for me; knowing that I'd asked him to not get involved. Hopefully, he realised I could handle this myself.

Which was exactly what I intended to do.

I hadn't planned to outwardly mention this but it seemed the small Alpha wasn't going to be able to realise when it was time to stop. Even his fellow pack member looked horrified by his actions, discreetly trying to tug on his shirt to get him to stop.

"You know... I find it funny, Alpha Fredrick, that you would use rumours you heard about me to make such bold insults," I calmly replied, resting my chin on my hand as if I were relaxed. "Would you say then, in your personal opinion, that there is some truth in the rumours one hears?"

“O—of course,” he said, taken a little aback by my unflustered demeanour.

I knew even if he didn’t agree with me, he was forced to take that stance in order to justify what he’d said to me already. It was something I could use to my advantage,

“Interesting... you see, I’ve heard rumours about you as well, Alpha Fredrick. And they allow me to see why you’d want to go into business with humans so badly... but it does puzzle me as to why you’d use their species as a form of insult.”

A small smile then twitched at my lips, a giddiness bubbling inside me as I knew what was about to

“Interestingly enough, I’ve heard that you \*really\* love humans. Some might say... a little too \* much. And by humans, I am, in fact, implying plural. An obsessively large plural.”

Immediately, his face went bright red as he looked around in a fluster at those around him; embarrassment clear on his features from my insinuation.

“I don’t... I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he huffed out, a little too defensively.

A light laugh escaped my lips. “Then I suppose we should take the things we hear at nothing more than face value.”

In the future, Fredrick Jacobs, Alpha of the Silent Forest pack, was involved in scandalous rumours to do with fraternising with human girls intimately. There was nothing wrong with being mated to a human officially, though this was a very rare occurrence. The issue was that it was considered taboo when engaging with them like that under any other circumstances. Especially in the quantity that Fredrick Jacobs was accused of, and especially when it was questionable what his intentions actually were. Having a rumour like that cling to someone would significantly damage their reputation and future business prospects; something made more awkward if those plans revolved around humans also.

“So, to avoid further embarrassment to yourself,” I continued, smiling from my own guilty pleasure inside. “I’m happy to accept a written apology mailed—.”

But then I felt it. Cutting off all other trains of thought as I frowned.

...A spark.

I’d felt it. I’d definitely felt it. I was positive it was there just now, right?

It was that same familiar energy I felt within me that originated from my Goddess mark. The same energy that came from when I used my true authority, higher than that of an Alpha.

But that should be impossible... right?

The collar should have stopped all attempts at even trying to harness it. It should have prevented anything and everything to do with my werewolf abilities.

And though it was fleeting for only a split second, its sudden tangible appearance made many questions

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form inside my mind all at once. But the most important one?

...What did this mean if it had somehow managed to break through my current shackles?

“Aria...?” Aleric prompted, noticing my sudden silence.

I quickly shook everything off and resumed my composure, directing my attention back to Alpha Fredrick once more. “Ah... as I was saying, I’m happy to accept a written apology once you’ve had time to calm down and collect yourself in a proper manner befitting a member of this alliance. I will be expecting your prompt response with a gift and or compensation attached. Thank you.”

Alpha Fredrick gritted his teeth, turning his head away in a sign of submission. He would be unable to refuse my request thanks to having witnesses from all his neighbouring territories here. If anything, my mercy towards him was probably more than most expected given our status, but it was my hope that it would be enough to scare the others here from spreading further rumours.

And so I leaned back in my chair, a smile of satisfaction on my face for the remainder of the meeting.

Because, whilst winning a petty argument and publicly humiliating someone who tried to dishonour me was nice, I was far more focused on something else; something far more valuable, that Alpha Fredrick had inadvertently given me... ...Hope.

## **A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 68**

**Chapter Sixty-Eight**



The rest of the meeting went without further incident and soon everyone disbanded from the meeting hall to congregate outside. It was sunset by this point and I could feel everyone's exhaustion around me as they waited for their sleeping arrangements to be made available for the night.

Aleric and I stood to the side, avoiding further interaction after the events that had occurred. Not that I imagined anyone would be upset by that. If anything, they would be grateful for our distance, not wanting to find themselves as the next subject of our focus for too long.

But there was one individual I had a feeling wouldn't pick up on that obvious social cue. An individual who had just left the building, their eyes beginning to scan the area around them.

Without hesitating, I quickly pushed Aleric around the corner of the meeting hall building to hide ourselves from none other than Alpha Fredrick.

Only he would be brazen enough to not let sleeping dogs lie. Or in this case, wolves.

I peeked around, watching as he frantically searched the crowds of people conversing outside. Searching for something or \*someone\* in particular.

"Why are we hiding?" Aleric asked quietly behind me.

He was close, his body right next to mine so he could whisper and not draw further attention to our location. I was grateful given the keener senses of our peers around us.

"Because Alpha Fredrick is going to try to speak to me privately," I explained. "And he's going to demand to know where I heard those rumours about him from; something he couldn't ask me in that meeting without looking further guilty in front of the other pack representatives."

"...And are they true? The rumours?"

I spun my head around and smiled wickedly up at him. "Who knows? They're just rumours after all."

"Aria, what the hell," he laughed. "It's a pretty serious thing to infer about someone."

I shrugged, turning back to see if Alpha Fredrick was still looking for me. "He deserves it even if they are false. And besides, I'm pretty sure that fighting a rumour with another rumour is far better than attacking him, like what you wanted to do."

"I'm sure that he is wishing right now that I actually had hurt him in order to save him from that social execution you just served him—."

Alpha Fredrick's eyes then started searching towards the general area we were hiding, perhaps catching our scent in the wind change.

"Crap, time to go," I said, grabbing onto Aleric's hand, and I ran towards the back of the building, all the while dragging him behind me.

"Aria, wait," he called out, intending to sound disapproving over my immature reaction but his laughter betrayed him.

Behind the large hall was a grassy slope that led all the way down to a small pond at the bottom. Perfect for resting while I caught my breath for a minute; the lack of my own strength and endurance painfully obvious, courtesy of the collar.

I doubled over, both hands on my knees as I breathed in deeply. All the while, Aleric simply watched over me. I could see the amusement in his eyes at my state, something that was probably bad for even human

standards.

"Give me a break," I whined. "I haven't trained, nor done anything even close to that in months."

"I'm aware," he said, walking past me to seat himself by the water's edge.

I followed only a moment later once my breathing was back under control, plopping myself down on the grass beside him.

It was so peaceful here. The sunset, the fresh air... how the water glistened orange in the dying light. I felt I could stay here for hours, relaxing as I continued to neglect all the problems mercilessly waiting for me ahead.

"I think I know why you brought me here," I said after a few minutes of silence, now staring intensely at the lily pads.

"Is that so?"

"This is some sort of attempt to try and make me feel better," I said, pulling my legs up to my chest and hugging them. "But which was your train of reasoning... fresh air and a change of scenery? ... Or taking me to a meeting so I could pretend I'm still a Beta heir?"

“Neither,” he said, a half-smile on his lips. “You enjoy puzzles and problem solving, Aria. During your Beta training days, I saw how you would get thrills from thinking of things in meetings that no one else had. I thought if I brought you here with me, it might help ignite that passion inside you again.”

A small crease formed between my brows. It seemed he knew me much better than I realised.

“...So that’s why you were trying to get my input on those pack matters yesterday, including even those petty issues that anyone could solve.”

He nodded. “And whilst you didn’t feel like participating in the actual discussions today, I still got to see you in there. It was like you came alive again, Aria. Something I was beginning to think I’d never see again.”

I turned to meet his eyes finally and found them full of only genuine concern. The orange-toned light around us had made the green in them appear as if they were more saturated. How crazy that those eyes were so innocent in comparison to the ones I’d known.

... Which was why, physically the same or not, it was becoming impossible to pretend that this Aleric didn’t care about me. In fact, it would be naive of me to think otherwise,

This Aleric listened to me, taking note at least of what I was trying to tell him, before making his own mind up. He might not be ‘under control’, but perhaps I didn’t need that after all. The fact he at least considered what I had to say was still far better than anything else I could have hoped for in the past.

But it’s not as though Aleric from the previous timeline was incapable of kindness. It’s just that his kindness had never been directed towards myself. He had loved Thea, loved the pack, loved his work... it was just me that he hadn’t loved. As if he was incapable of seeing me for who I was, or even willing to give me a chance.

So where was the line between fear and friendship now? It had become so blurred that I felt my uncertainty shift on any given day. Did I enjoy his company now? Yes... but at the same time, it was impossible to push aside my concerns. For all I knew, he could be a volcano waiting to erupt at any second; its final trigger still unknown to me.

“I’m sorry for worrying you,” I said, pulling my attention back to the pond. “It’s just a hard adjustment, everything considered... and I don’t like the room. The quarters. They... they make it hard to focus.”

... Make it hard to distinguish between two lives, I elaborated in my head. The absence of having anything to do or focus on, mixed in with those quarters... it was

like living inside my nightmares. Slowly, day by day, losing a piece of myself and becoming *her*.

He frowned in confusion but laughed a little. "Given how much time you've spent in there, I would never have guessed."

"I know... but it's actually the lesser of two evils," I said with a small reciprocating smile, my chin resting on my knees

He then leaned forward, trying to catch my attention once more, and I flicked my eyes back to meet his now completely serious gaze

"You could have just told me earlier, Ana," he said with disappointment "A room is at least something negotiable. I can talk to Tytus about switching your room to another one and I doubt it would be that big of an issue. The only problem is you might need to sleep here for a few more nights until I can organise it. Is that alright?"

I nodded my head. At least that was one thing I wouldn't need to worry about soon

One tiny thing in the hundreds of issues I'd been neglecting

The sun was then almost completely down and a cool breeze came through, sending a small shiver through me. It looked as though the scarf came in handy for more than initially intended Funny as we weren't anticipating colder weather for another month or two.

"They're probably looking for us," Aleric said, standing back up to say we were at the top of the list for being shown where our guest lodgings were and we ran off

"Probably." I agreed, stretching my legs back out in front of me. They were almost asleep from hugging them to my chest for so long

Aleric then held his hand out for me and I happily took it grateful for the gesture

"You're going to need to start training squats again at this rate," he joked "Can't even get up by yourself now."

I grumbled lightheartedly, now less grateful for the gesture, and we started our ascent back up the slope towards where we'd left everyone.

"Hey, Aria," he said slowly. I've been meaning to talk to you about something

I stopped to look at him as we were almost at the top of the hill, "Yeah?"

“Well, it’s about when”

But his words were drowned out as something then suddenly caught my eye behind his shoulder, immediately taking precedence over anything else. A figure standing by the meeting hall, staring at me.

A figure I recognised immediately

“Aleric, I’m sorry,” I said, interrupting him. “Surprisingly, I’ve just seen someone I know.”

He turned around confused to look at who I was referring to. Who is that? They have Alpha blood.”

“I know. They’re a friend of a friend. But I should quickly say hi. Is it okay if we talk about your thing later?” I asked but I was already walking to where the person was waiting. “I’ll see you tomorrow morning for the trip back!”

“Aria, wait...”

But it was too late. I’d already ran off without wasting any more time.

I felt bad for leaving so suddenly but my focus was elsewhere. Or, more accurately, it was on the person who I never expected to see here.

“Ana,” they greeted, almost as if in a sigh of relief

To my surprise, she immediately engulfed me in her arms, her dark curls falling onto my face as she hugged me

“Ins..?” I asked, uncertainty thick in my voice. “Why are you here? This meeting was for small packs within the Winter Mist alliance. The Hidden Moon pack is by far one of the largest in the whole country.”

She laughed, pulling away, “I know that I came looking for you.”

“For me?”

“I heard from some sources that you were added last minute to the registry of guests staying here,” she explained. “I came as quickly as I could to ensure I didn’t miss you.”

“But why?” I repeated, folding my arms over my chest. “You could have just sent a letter. Seems like a long way to travel.”

“Why? Because I’ve been worried sick, Aria. We’ve\* been worried sick. The one living Saintess goes missing one day and

the only public updates provided were coming from the same sketchy Alpha some weird rumours were involved with. Do you realise how worried we were?"

Iris Sullivan, the only child of Alpha Sullivan, was the girl I'd helped save three years ago, back when I'd used her whereabouts during a kidnapping for my own financial benefit. Back when I thought running away was still a viable option. How times had changed.

But she was also the girl who was apparently close friends with Cai, the same girl I'd come to learn later had even confessed her attraction for him at one point. So my curiosity at seeing her here, mixed in with the unmistakable way she kept referring to 'we', was making my heart clench at the potential possibilities.

...Did she mean Cai?

"Who do you mean by 'we', Iris?" I asked carefully, making sure to not let my voice betray any sway of emotion.

"It's a group of us who have a shared interest in ensuring your safety," she explained. "Mostly those who wish to follow in the divine path provided by you, the guide of our Goddess. Then there are a few of us who have a personal interest in you as a person. Like myself. You were a beacon for hope and change in this country... then you suddenly vanished. I've been so worried about you, wondering what the hell they did to you."

My shoulders slumped a little from disappointment. Of course, she wasn't a messenger from Cai, I knew that ship had sailed. And, to be perfectly honest, after being away all these months, I wasn't even sure myself how I felt anymore. I missed him, ridiculously so, but I knew that he was probably better off far

away from me. Not just for his own sake, but for my own too. After all, around my neck was the very reminder of everything that had gone wrong.

So then this was probably the group Aleric had expressed concern about, all the way back from before I'd confessed my crimes to Tytus. Those who would fight in opposition if I were held captive. I never thought to see Iris here though. Was she still hoping to take over her father and become the first female Alpha one day?

"Did they hurt you?" she asked, her big blue eyes full of worry.

I shifted uncomfortably. "No, no, I'm fine...."

...Physically, I added in my head

She signed in relief. "Good, I'm glad to hear that. You're going to need all the strength you can get to

thought that there *was no way they would actually so that fas*"

"Well they did," I muttered, *tuning away Chamefully*

She grabbed the *sides of my face gently and turned me so I was looking back at her front* There was *so much anger and determination in her eyes now, something that was almost scarily prominent*

"This is *wity we need you, Aria,*" she stressed, "This is *why we need change. No man or woman, ranked or unranked, should have the authority to chain you.*"

But the magnitude of what she *was really asking for was impossible. Not in my current state at least ! knew she was right, things delinitely needed to change. Equality and proper recognition were far overdue ..and that was putting aside the inhumane treatment an Alpha was tegally allowed to subject someone to. No, things needed to change, painfully so. but i couldn't be the one to do it Not right now. If anything, i / would actually be going against my current goai.*

## Chapter Sixty-Eight

Because one of the main things I'd concluded was that staying on Aleric's good side was paramount to preventing the future I knew. In our current standing, it seemed easy enough to maintain given our friendship but, should I take Iris up on her offer to lead, then I would be stripping him of his title; of which, he had already previously expressed apprehension over. If I did this, I needed to accept that doing so would be creating an unnecessary rift between us...

...And that was something more dangerous than my oppression.

No, my first step now was to see if it was even possible for me to free myself. Work with what little advantages I had and strengthen myself in other areas where I could. I needed to prepare myself for when Thea inevitably showed up again and work on delaying, if not completely freeing myself, before my upcoming forced union with Aleric. 1

"Iris... I appreciate that you're so passionate about this and I agree things desperately need to change," I started, choosing my words carefully, "but I really can't help you. Not right now at least... I'm sorry."

She searched my face for a few seconds, looking deep into my eyes, before finally nodding. Whatever she had been looking for, perhaps she didn't find it.

"Fine then," she said, taking a step away. "Not right now, but maybe soon. Just send for me and I will come help you. Whatever you need, whenever you need it. You have many more friends than I think you realise."



I did my best to muster up a small smile for her. "I appreciate that, Iris. Really, I do. I promise that you will be the first person I call on when I need help."

Iris engulfed me into another hug, somehow squeezing me even tighter than the first time. She was a lovely girl, something that made me feel a little guilty from the mild distaste I'd briefly held for her once over Cai. However, deep down, I couldn't deny that I also felt a sense of responsibility and trust having saved her life; as was the way I had felt about Myra once.

"This won't be the last time," she smiled brightly.

And I was sure she was probably right.

But for now, I had something far more pressing weighing on my mind. Something that had been lurking within my mind, patiently waiting for when I was alone again.

Because whilst I wasn't ready to take over an entire country, I had still been given a small blessing. Something to focus on in the interim of my looming punishment.

Now was the time to find that spark of energy waiting inside me and practice. Practice until I was free again once more. And the best part? No one was going to see it coming.

## **A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 69**

### **Chapter Sixty-Nine**

'Reach for it...

'Stretch...

I dug deep within myself, searching where I had felt that familiar energy first stem from. Before it used to always feel like it was just out of arm's length, as if only the tip of my fingernail could graze it, but now it felt as though I needed several more appendages just to get anywhere near it.

But it was there. I had to believe that it hadn't just been my imagination.

Stretch just a little further...'

But then I exhaled quickly in release, panting from the strain it had caused to my body.

I'd been sitting on my bed practising ever since arriving back at my guest lodgings. However, since starting over an hour ago, there had been little to show in progress.

I knew there had to be a trick to this, some sort of internal cue to summon it. Elder Luke had mentioned that this energy was something that could be trained but I was now trying to accomplish it with a severe handicap. So naturally, a part of me was kicking myself for not learning this prior to the collar.

I threw myself backwards on the bed, laying down in defeat. This was becoming infuriating, not to mention exhausting. How was I meant to practice something if I couldn't even begin to grasp it? This

stupid energy that was a byproduct of my curse.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I tried again once more, digging as deep as physically possible.

Grab it already. It's there. It's literally right there.'

Just grab it!

... And then I felt it.

My eyes immediately flew open as I felt the energy weakly pulse inside me.

Just a dim flickering. Not much, but just enough to know it was there.

'HOLD IT.

I gritted my teeth, fighting against all the different forces working against me... the collar, my now weaker body, the pure effort required to just utilise the energy itself... but it wasn't enough.

I exhaled once more in release, heaving at the air around me.

It was gone. Gone just as quickly as it had shown itself.

But I couldn't discredit the noticeable differences and how they were definitely better when compared to my past experiences. There was no dizziness... no nosebleeds... no nausea. Not yet at least. It was mostly just aching and exhaustion from the attempts.

What had been the trigger? My frustration? ...Emotion? I supposed that made sense. All the times it had come to me in the past were under circumstances of higher emotional investment. But would knowing that actually make it any easier?

For now, I just needed to repeat this over and over again until I trained my body to grasp it on will, each time trying to hold it for a few seconds longer.

And so, even though I knew how much it was probably going to hurt, I smiled at the excruciatingly slow grind ahead of me.

How naive of me to think that at one point I'd thought squats were bad

"What the hell happened to you?" Aleric asked the next morning, eyeing off my appearance

I yawned but managed to bow my head in greeting per protocol

"Good morning," I said sleepily. "I didn't get much rest. Sorry for all of the fuss."

"I thought you were dead," he said with all seriousness

I'd ended up staying up all night practising, pushing myself to my limit, before finally passing out sometime in the early morning. My exhaustion had been so bad though that an attendant had to enter my guest lodgings with a master key after I'd failed to answer the door. Apparently, Aleric had nearly smashed it down from knocking and had thought something had happened to me

In actuality, I was just dead to the world sleeping.

"I'm sorry," I repeated, though this time trying to make it sound more genuine.

He sighed but his shoulders didn't relax. "It's fine. Grab your stuff and let's get going."

I wondered whether this had scared him off from ever bringing me with him again but I went back inside to pack without questioning it. Truthfully, I wasn't even sure if I ever wanted to go to another meeting like this again but knew it was best not to push my luck whilst he was like this. I could tell that what I'd done had really struck a nerve with him.

The drive back was mostly quiet with small talk in between. He seemed to have settled down a little since the morning but my sleepless night was quickly catching up to me. Every inch of my body was aching for my bed

..And so, without much energy left to resist, I eventually drifted off to sleep in the car.

"Aria," a voice called out to me.

I stirred but didn't want to move, my eyelids heavy with exhaustion.

"Aria, get up," it repeated. "We're here."

I grumbled but slowly forced myself awake to see Aleric in the car beside me.

“Come on. You can sleep inside,” he said, unbuckling his seatbelt and getting out.

Begrudgingly, I followed behind him, my moves sluggish. Though part of my reluctance stemmed from weighing up whether it would be better to stay in the car as opposed to returning to my room.

Several warriors and pack members stared as we entered but I did my best to ignore them. All of them probably had a plethora of questions that I didn't care to answer. Instead, I followed silently behind Aleric all the way until we made it to the main floor, our quarters opposite ends.

This was it. What would happen when I went back in there? Would I never want to leave again?

I stared at the threshold of my room, eyeing the door off sceptically. I felt sick inside just thinking about this place.

Aleric then came up behind me and placed a hand on my shoulder.

“Tomorrow morning,” he reassured. “I promise I'll talk to Tytus first thing in the morning. Hopefully, he won't care whether you remain in the Luna quarters and we can get you moved out quickly.”

## Chapter Sixty Nine

I mutely

nodded but still remained uneasy. And whilst it wasn't this\* Aleric's fault, his presence probably wasn't making the situation any better given the circumstances of why I hated this place.

Here was this seemingly insignificant room, these walls of no importance. And yet they held more weight over me than I'd ever dare to admit aloud. Why was it that this place continued to drain me more than anything else these days? Ironically, it felt as though the quarters were living rent free inside my head rather than the reverse.

'Screw it,' I finally decided. 'I am not her and I will not cower.'

I pushed the door

open then and took a second to take it all in. The overly familiar scenery, scents, sensations...

And I pushed it as far back as I could.

If I could summon the literal authority of a goddamn Goddess, then there was no way I was going to let a room destroy me.

Stronger. My goal was to get stronger. And it had already started.

First a room, then Thea, then maybe a revolution. Hopefully, within all of that, I could also prevent an apocalypse in the process. It was just baby steps. Should be easy enough, right?

“Thanks,” I said to Aleric, my tone dismissing him. “I’ll be okay from here.”

He looked at me hesitantly, as if weighing up whether he should insist on staying or not, but he finally nodded, accepting my request.

“Alright,” he said, his hand on the door. “Have a good rest and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“You keep coming around so often and I’ll start thinking you have no friends,” I joked.

He smiled. “Unfortunately, just one very annoying one.”

I missed our conversations like this. Our real ones. It honestly felt like we hadn’t spoken naturally to one another since back when I was still a Beta heir. This trip had been a nice reminder of what it felt like to speak freely again. Though not entirely free. Not as freely as I had spoken to Cai...

‘Nope. I’m not going there.’

I shook off the thoughts quickly and threw my bag down by the door, walking towards my room.

If there was one thing that she\*, my past self, had been right about, it was that getting involved with someone romantically had ended up being a mistake. I’d been broken already once and had stupidly dragged myself back into that pit of pain willingly. Just for a touch, a glance, a glimpse into what it would feel like to be happy.

“I’m talking about you,” I whispered to the mirror on the wall, my eyes narrowing. “I’m telling you that you were right. At least about one thing. Are you not even going to gloat a little?”

However, there was still no reply and only silence greeted me. It was nice not having her fogging up my head anymore but I wasn’t under any false pretence. Even though my make-

up covered up the worst of my exhaustion, I knew she would still be there somewhere. She was always there.

Speaking of exhaustion, I knew it was time to train. No good wasting time with my looming birthday only months away

I knew I'd have to speak to Aleric soon about possibly resuming my physical training, even though I was fully aware that I would still remain weak no matter how much I worked out. But even a strong human was still better than a weak one. Surely it wouldn't be that hard to pick up again?

## Chapter Sixty Nine

But as for right now, I had to continue with the harder of the two. The one that drained me more than just physically

Settling into my bed, I continued the training I had started the night before, slowly holding the energy inside me for longer periods of time. And whilst it may have only been a few seconds, I was happy with my improvement

However, for all the motivation I felt to keep going, the exhaustion finally became too much sometime after dark. I'd had two nights of minimal sleep and my body was already overworked thanks to the new discovery I'd found within myself.

And so, with barely any strength left inside... I passed out.

... That is until I was suddenly awoken by the sound of my front door clicking open, a creak groaning out as it swung open.

My eyes flew open and instantly went to check the time via the clock on my bedside table.

It was after two o'clock in the morning. Why would anyone be here this late?

I jumped out of bed and threw a robe over my nightgown. If this was an attendant then they were about to have hell to pay for waking me without good reason.

"...Lucy?" I called out.

Silence.

"...Aleric...?"

Only the sound of someone's footsteps greeted me.

This was bad. This was really bad.

Immediately, I crouched down and held my breath, trying desperately to listen to the darkness around me. But I knew the unfortunate reality was that they would be able to see me easily with their better vision. Hell, maybe they could even hear the sound of my heart pumping hard in my chest from adrenaline.

Options. What were my options?

Run? No, there was no way I'd be fast enough. Hide? Nope, they probably could see me right now anyway. Order them to stand down? No, that option was way too risky and would probably not work given how much I'd exhausted my body earlier,

Scream then. I had to scream. If Aleric was in his room, he would be able to hear me and get here faster than anyone else.

I opened my mouth and quickly inhaled as much as I could within my lungs.

"ALE—"

But then a hand suddenly came from out of the darkness and clamped my mouth quickly shut, a wall of muscle encircling around my body. He'd appeared from thin air; my senses having failed entirely to alert me to his location.

I squirmed and wriggled in his grip, hopelessly fighting against him, but I knew it was pointless. By even werewolf standards, this guy was built impossibly large. Maybe even larger than some of our pack's best warriors. And right now I didn't even qualify for standard strength.

Who the hell was this guy?

A cloth gag and tape quickly replaced his hand, binding my mouth from making any further attempts to call for help. There was nothing I could do, nowhere I could move, and so he was able to throw me over

Chapter Sixty-Nine

his shoulder without any issue whatsoever.

Was this really it? The best I could do?

I

could feel he wasn't taking me to the front door and that made sense. He wasn't about to just waltz out with me over his shoulder. Even at this time of night, there would be people still awake in the packhouse on patrol. He might have managed to get in here without suspicion, but there was no way he was going to be able to get me out that way.

So he must be hoping to use the window then. From his direction, I could only assume he was aiming for the one in the living room, the one that would land us within shrubs by the side of the house. But that drop was crazy far. He'd have to calculate his movements precisely and utilise the piping system all the way down; something already considerably difficult enough without factoring in how he'll also be carrying me the entire



time. I supposed that was why the largest, most muscled block of a man was chosen for whatever this task was.

He finally arrived at the window and my eyes adjusted to the small light provided by the moon outside. Any second now, I knew he would be angling to open the window... but there was one last thing I could try.

Mustering every ounce of strength inside me, I managed to kick one of my legs free from out of his grasp and, without hesitating for even a second, I brought it straight back down... and out through the window.

The deafening sound of glass shattering came first, slicing through the silence that had been there only moments earlier. It would be enough for most of the house to hear, I knew that. However, chasing only seconds behind this, was the pain accompanying the many tiny gashes now scattered all along my bare foot and shin.

...And, fuck, did it hurt.

“You bitch,” the man hissed, struggling to grab my leg back in his grasp once more.

He was in a hurry now, his leisure of secrecy now robbed of him. Aleric or warriors would be here within seconds and he knew it well. He would need to jump from the window right now or end up facing them head-on.

The man tried to move fast but every time he attempted to go for the window, I would kick my leg out against the wall to make doing so ridiculously difficult for him to accomplish. How much longer could I keep this up?

Seconds ticked by but I kept continuing to elude his grip on my second leg, something only intended to stall for as much time as possible. However, his movements quickly became more forceful, more panicked as a result.

“Come on!” he growled, getting completely fed up with me.

Abruptly, he then paused, his body going completely still for just a second, and I could tell he was listening to something in the distance.

My heart lurched with hope. Someone was coming.

“Fine then,” he said, and grabbed at my waist to pull me off his shoulder.

Was he going to just throw me out the window? ...Would I even survive that?

No, I couldn't take that chance.

With one last final attempt to stall for time, I wriggled within his grip as much as I physically could, as much as was humanly possible for me to do... only it worked a little too well.

The man unexpectedly lost his grip on me entirely and I quickly fell backwards...

...I fell backwards onto the jagged piece of glass that remained within the broken window frame.

The shard immediately sliced through my back and into my chest without much resistance, and my muffled cries carried out into the room; suppressed from the bindings still covering *my* mouth,

The pain was unimaginable, worse than anything else I'd *ever* experienced. When I had been executed the first time, it had at least been quick, allowing me to pass within seconds. But this...? This was like hell.

This was a literal slow death,

"ARIA?!" a voice then shouted from somewhere.

Aleric's voice. It sounded very far away... very muted,

'See, Aleric? I told you murderers don't knock first,' I thought inside, remembering how we'd spoken about this only two days before.

Meanwhile, the man next to me was trying to apply pressure to *my* wound without much success. Seemed almost funny since, not only had he failed to capture me, but I was now also blocking his only viable exit out. I guess it could be considered a small victory, all things considered.

"Shit, shit, shit, shit," he kept repeating over and over again, fear in his voice,

Silent tears then started to stream down my face as breathing became harder and harder to do. I was getting cold... my throat burning with the overwhelming desire to cough and clear it... as if doing so might help me breathe. But the bindings on my mouth prevented me from doing so, causing me to convulse slightly instead.

'My lungs... It's pierced my lungs,' I thought internally, realising the horrific truth. 'They're slowly filling with blood.'

"Aria," Aleric's voice then said, his face suddenly right next to mine. "Aria, please!"

Did he finish fighting the intruder already? I was struggling with consciousness, unsure how much time had actually passed due to my lapses. Was the man's a quick death... or slow like mine was shaping out to be?

"Aria!"

'I can't breathe...'

So cold. I was so cold... maybe Aleric could get me a blanket.

'I can't breathe...'

And I'd tried so goddamn hard... yet somehow, in the end, it still wasn't good enough.

...I'm sorry. I'm so sorry I couldn't fix everything. Maybe it will still be enough for everyone to live... Maybe ... just maybe ... I'd done at least one thing right to avoid that future...'

Slowly, I then closed my eyes, the darkness around me no longer being sourced from the time of day... And everything turned black,

## **A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 70**

### **Chapter Seventy**

.... With a sudden lurch inside my chest, my eyes flew open. I was gasping heavily, trying to compensate for the suffocation that had afflicted me only moments earlier.

... Except I wasn't mounted on the glass shard anymore....

I was in my bed.

My hands frantically grabbed at my body, inspecting for any sign of damage... but there wasn't any.

So it wasn't real? But I had felt it. It couldn't be a dream. I know it wasn't a dream.

But it ended up easier than expected to figure out exactly what had happened.

The nausea hit me first, forcing me to throw myself over the side of the bed and empty out the contents of my stomach. Then the ringing in my ears followed... then, finally, the bloody nose.

...It was a vision. Easily the longest one I'd ever had; the realest one I'd ever had. Somehow it had been strong enough to show itself even with my collar, now punishing me with the worst side effects I'd ever had to date.

My head still struggling to clear from the trauma of what I'd just experienced, I tried my best to focus on what I'd seen. But the shock of the situation was hard to overcome.

...Because the reality was.... I had died.

I'd died because I'd tried to stall for time and fallen as a result of an accident. A goddam accident. The idiot had fucking butterfingers and killed me.

Somehow it had felt seamless though, as if I really had just woken up before it all played out. So when was all of this meant to happen? A day? A week? A month from now?

But I didn't need to wait long before I got my answer.

... Because suddenly I could hear the sound of my front door clicking open, and a familiar creak groan out into the silence.

They were here. Right now.

Okay, it was time to think fast. I knew what went wrong and what I could avoid, I also knew what their intentions were. There was no need to call out or make my presence known, and I already knew now that I was helpless to defend myself given their size and strength.

But my body ached as though I really had just been thrown out of a window, my head pounding with a migraine worse than any other. Whilst I had more options available to me this time, there was no way! I would be physically able to accomplish much. Hell, I doubted I'd even be able to wriggle free this time.

No, there was no way I could defeat him... but I knew someone else who could.

I had been only seconds away last time from being able to achieve the best strategy available to me, seconds that had been wasted trying to confirm who was there the first time. But I didn't have that problem now.

Inhaling as much as I could, I screamed out into the night. Screamed for the one person who I knew could save me.

"ALERIC! ALERIC, HELP! PLEASE!"

The pounding of feet quickly rushing towards my room was the first thing I heard and I knew it was the intruder. I was sure he was probably wondering how his cover had been blown so quickly.

Chapter Sevenly

Without waiting, I dropped to the ground and crawled under my bed; though a much tighter squeeze than I expected. He would be able to find me here, I knew, but literally all I needed was a few extra seconds. Just a couple of seconds for Aleric to find me.

My bedroom door then flew open and the man appeared at the threshold. I couldn't see his face but I could tell he was searching for me, probably attempting to use his heightened senses to help locate my position in the room. Silently, I held my breath, but I knew even the tiniest of sounds, the smallest of movements, would be easily picked up on by him.

In the end, though, it wasn't enough as he soon appeared in front of the bed and reached down to grab me from under it.

"Let me go!" I screamed, weakly pushing away from him to no success.

With no time to bind my mouth this time, he proceeded to just quickly throw me over his shoulder and run for the window. I struggled, wriggling as much as I could, but my movements were completely ineffectual against him. Like I had thought, my body really was far weaker than it had been in the vision.

However, just as we made it to the window, the front door then suddenly burst open, and the dim outline of Aleric appeared across the room. My heart immediately jumped at the sight.

"ARIA?!"

"Aleric! Aleric, please!" I screamed back.

'I don't want to die again, please...'

'Please...'

Aleric moved faster than I could keep up with in the darkness, only reappearing once his hand was on the man's arm. He was just about to open the window before Aleric appeared. Just a moment later and I was sure he would have thrown me out, taking the chance that I would hopefully survive the fall.

A sickening snapping noise then sounded out and I managed to only just catch sight of how Aleric had broken the man's arm like a toothpick, as if it wasn't attached to one of the

largest, most muscled werewolves I'd ever seen. But it worked. The intruder doubled over, cradling his arm to his chest as he

cried out in pain.

Aleric didn't wait though. Immediately, he grabbed at me under my arms and hauled me off the guy's shoulder, my body still shaking from the adrenaline pumping through me. I wanted to cling to him for safety but I knew I would only be getting in the way. Which was exactly what the man must have realised too as he threw out a punch towards Aleric's face with his good arm.

I dropped to the ground the second Aleric released me, the top of my head only narrowly missing Aleric's hand that came up to defend himself.

"Aria, get back!" he ordered, grabbing the guy's arm and throwing him to the ground away from me.

How he managed to toss him with such ease, I had no idea. But it was effortless for him, as if he were tossing a bag of sand rather than a man twice the size of him.

I quickly scooted away from them as far as I could and looked on mutely as the scene unfolded before me. The man was still struggling with the pain in his arm but had managed to get to his feet... and then there was Aleric, moving towards him with all intent to kill and do so quickly.

...But perhaps that wasn't the best idea. If he killed him then...

Aleric grabbed him by the throat and pushed him up against the wall. The man was growling, snapping, maybe even trying to shift... but, really, everyone here knew it was over. The difference in power between the two was as clear as night and day.

With a tug free from Aleno pulled it back his hands chatting to protrude out and

"Aferd, wat dort

Hetliced frim through the throat, instantly making humbled out

With the situation now dealt with I sacrumpled on the floor still in shock I was alive. I was alive. It felt like an eternity since my life hadn't been in danger, having just experienced this scenario won in the succession of a few minutes. Minutes that I felt like hours.

Aleric's attention turned back towards me once he was assured the man was dead. Without wasting my more time, he ran over to engulf me into his arms, the man's blood covering him and all. Maybe I would have recoiled from his state normally, but now I clung to him for life, my body still staking. I don't tatter that he'd just killed the guy and was getting me coated in blood too, I just needed to feel the contact only because he could provide in that moment.

"Are you okay?" he asked, his breathing still heard from everything that had transpired "YOU DO BLEEDING"

I nodded stiffly, knowing that my blood was from the vision not the intruder "I'm okay are you okay?"

"I'm okay"

We continued to hold each other for another suite bath of us needing the time to calm down and feel reassured the other was okay But before too long Alene finally went to pull away only it tightened my grip in response

"Please don't go yet," I whispered

I could feel myself shivering, trembling struggling to process the different sensations just gone though it once To be honest, I was surprised I hadn't passed out yet My adrenaline was slowly meaning of the aching in my body only getting worse and my mind was still stumbling to cope with anger slowly dying only minutes earlier

"Okay, I won't," he said before gently pushing himself to sit against the wall

Pulling me into his lap he then held me, letting me have my moment of feeling safe even though it was just a few minutes

Which was exactly how we were positioned when the warriors finally came upstairs and found us, huddled together and now both covered in blood

"Alpha hello Miss Chrysalis," one of the

greeted, Alan in the voice

Aleric simply pointed towards the window where the man's body lay "Over there"

They nodded and started inspecting the scene beginning the investigation of the corpse

Perhaps this room was more soundproof than I realized given their slow response. Considering how long it had taken them, they must not have heard anything until Aleric broke the deadlocks and made me more grateful that Alene had shown up when he had

for questioning and



"You shouldn't have killed him" i quietly mumbled in "We should have taken him gotten answers about why he was trying to kidnap me

don't care He chose death the minute he touched you. He could have asked you.

Aleric shook his head Alla"

He did kill me, I added in my head, a shiver going down my spine How long was going to take this link

before I could finally bury this memory along with the rest of my traumas? A memory that wasn't even real but just an overly realistic vision.

"Are you cold?" he asked, mistaking my reaction.

"A little," I admitted. And it wasn't a lie. Maybe between the shock and the blood-soaked clothes, my body was definitely feeling a little chilly.

"Can you walk?"

I nodded, though I wasn't sure if that was even true.

Slowly, Aleric helped me

to my feet and followed suit, not letting go until he felt assured I could stand by myself. To my relief, someone also quickly provided me with a blanket. There was a short conversation with the warriors about what had happened and a few orders to scout the area for anyone else, but soon enough I found myself trailing behind Aleric in a trance, completely out of it, as he moved around.

At some point, he left the quarters and started walking through some hallways, I didn't snap back to reality though until I realised where he'd taken me.

It was his quarters.

"You can take a shower and sleep in here tonight. Tomorrow I'll work something else out."

Stay... in his room?

And as he opened the door, I caught my first ever glimpse of inside his living area. A place I'd never been allowed in the past.

"Are you coming in?" he asked after I just stood there, unmoving

I nodded slowly and entered, trying to focus despite the accumulating crazy things that were happening in one night

Inside looked mostly the same as my own quarters, maybe a little bigger with an extra room or two. The most notable difference from where I stood was in the furnishings though, his being more suited to an Alpha as opposed to a Luna,

He saw me eyeing off the extra doors and answered accordingly. "Gym and study," he explained, pointing them out.

That made sense. Lunas weren't supposed to need either of those,

"Shower is down there," he then added. "An attendant went ahead and grabbed you some of your spare clothes. It should be in the bathroom already."

"Okay... thank you," I replied quietly, my voice still sounding distant,

Robotically, I followed his instructions and found the bathroom without any issue. It became a process of steps to complete one by one; brushing my hair, getting undressed, and turning on the shower I was on complete autopilot as I moved.

So once the hot water hit me, I finally felt myself begin to break down. The steam was trying to relax my muscles but it was a futile attempt, a sob already beginning to shake itself through my chest. I sat down slowly, allowing the hot water to wash over me and, as quietly as I could, I allowed myself a moment to release what had been building up inside. With any luck, the shower would muffle the sound of my silent crying from Aleric.

This had been too much even for the Moon Goddess' standards. The vision could have broken the moment I fell onto the window shard and I would have understood what happened next. Why did I need to live through my own slow death? What benefit would that possibly serve if not just to mentally destroy me?

## Chapter Seventy

"I hate you," I whispered to Selene, tears falling down my face. "Just let me die and be done with this already. Once was already bad enough."

"Aria?" Aleric's voice then called out from the other side of the door, causing me to jump. Had he heard what I said?

I rubbed at my face and quickly washed it under the shower stream before replying. "Yes?"

"...You still okay?"

No.

"I'm fine," I replied. "Coming out in a minute."

"...Alright."

He didn't sound reassured. Fair enough.

As fast as I could, I washed myself down and got out of the shower to get changed, though taking longer than anticipated as my fatigue was hitting hard. The side effects I was experiencing this time were savage to the point I would be grateful to never have a vision ever again.

Aleric was waiting for me on the other side of the door, somehow also freshened up now. Perhaps he had a second bathroom? I couldn't help but notice though that he was looking down at me as if I were made of porcelain; something I couldn't fault him for thinking. Wasn't it just yesterday morning he had a scare thinking something had happened to me in the Diamond Claw pack? Now I'd literally been seconds away from death right in front of him. I was weak and this was just another painful reminder of that fact.—

"Come on," Aleric said, gently guiding me with a hand to my shoulder.

I allowed him to lead me to where he wanted to, all the while not saying a word, before realising he'd walked me straight to his room and intended for me to take his bed for the remainder of the night.

"Aleric... no, I can sleep on the couch," I declined.

"Don't be stupid," he argued. "Take the bed and sleep. You'll be safest in there whilst I keep an eye on the front door from the living room."

He was trying to protect me. His idea must have been that if anyone else was stupid enough to attempt this a second time, he would be waiting for them. Not that anyone would be that crazy. Not even Thea, who I assumed the delightful visitor earlier was from; or at least that was my best guess so far.

"Okay," I finally conceded, too tired to argue, and I slowly dragged myself over into his bed,

It smelt like him which was a bit of a surreal experience, all things considered, but it wasn't like this arrangement was under normal circumstances. He was correct in saying that this was the safest place for me in the house, if not the entire pack, right now.

He moved to then leave but I spoke up before he could go.

"...Aleric?" I called softly.

He quickly looked back up, meeting my gaze. "Yeah?"

I bit at the inside of my cheek, unsure how to properly express what I needed to say.

"Thank you... I wouldn't be here right now if you hadn't come for me."

"...Always," he said simply and left before I could reply.

Now left in the dark to my own thoughts, I wondered what tomorrow would look like. From sneaking out to attend a meeting, to now being attacked within my own bedroom, I was sure Tytus would have several