

# A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood

## Chapter 71 - 80

### Chapter Seventy-One

I awoke the next day sometime in the mid-afternoon. Not that it was very surprising given the events that had occurred the night before.

Confusion was my initial reaction, finding myself in a strange bed, before my mind finally caught up. It still all seemed so crazy that, had it not been for the aching in my body, perhaps I would have thought the entire thing was just a nightmare. Or maybe I could have at least pretended it was.

I changed into some clothes that were left for me and made my way into the living room, my movements all still incredibly stiff... only I found the quarters to be completely empty. I knew it was unreasonable to expect Aleric to be here but a part of me was still on edge from almost being kidnapped. Had he left to speak to Tytus in my stead?

A knocking then came from the front door, making me jump, and I approached it warily.

"Yes?" I called out.

Without any warning, the door then swung open to reveal Alexander behind it. He must have heard my footsteps from inside.

"Afternoon," he greeted. "Aleric had to go organise some things but I've been placed on watch duty. I'll be out here if you need me."

"Oh. Okay," was all that came out of my mouth. How was I meant to react to that? Didn't Alexander have better things to do? I felt like an inconvenience.

"Don't look so forlorn, things could have been worse," he added, mistaking my expression. "I took over the watch from Brayden about an hour ago so you could have had him sulking out here instead."

That sounded like Brayden. I could easily believe how annoyed he was at being put on babysitting duty; our relationship never having evolved past mutually putting up with one another. Not to mention that, for a Gamma, his ego was far too big.

"Thanks, Alexander," I said quietly.

He smiled with a nod before closing the door again between us.

I now stood alone once more in the empty room, unsure what to do with myself. Should I be out helping somehow? Organising some patrols? No, I hadn't done anything like that in months given I was no longer a Beta heir.

Useless. I felt useless. Like a damsel in distress, locked in a tower. And none of it made any sense.

What was Thea's plan with kidnapping me anyway? Had I triggered whatever the required event was without knowing, allowing for my demise now? But I couldn't recall impacting anything of importance recently. Was it the meeting with Alpha Frederick, stopping the deal for the casino? That didn't seem like such a momentous event though, and it was one I had no influence on in the previous timeline.

So what was the real motivation here?

I sat on the couch, mulling in frustration for some time, continuing to try and make sense of the night before. But every time I thought I might have a possible explanation, I would find some flaw in the reasoning.

"Aria?" a voice then said from the door, snapping me out of my head.

I looked up startled to see Aleric had returned, the windows now dark as night had fallen. I really had spaced out for some time.

Woah, it's just me," he clarified at my reaction. "Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. I thought you would have heard the door open."

I cleared my throat, my brow furrowing slightly. "No, no, it's all good. I was just lost in thought."

"How are you feeling?" he asked, walking across the room to peer out the window.

"Fine, I guess? Better than last night... Did you talk to Tytus today?"

Aleric then became distracted, as if concentrating on something else.

"Something like that. No further punishment for you but I'll be taking all the bad patrol shifts for the next few months. They'll be adding stricter patrols at the packhouse from now on too... not that it matters...."

It could have been worse. Much worse. I was grateful that Tytus hadn't decided to move my marking date up in response to the intruder scare or my unplanned adventure out of the pack; though not technically my fault for that last one.

The insane part was that this was really my life. I was walking on eggshells around Tytus and praying that I managed to change my fate before he took my choice away.

“Aria,” Aleric called, pulling my attention once more. “I know you’re still tired but I need you to follow me.”

I was a little taken aback by the abruptness of his request but assumed he must be wanting to show me to my new room for the night. The old quarters were now a security risk and had a broken door so it made sense to put me somewhere else.

Silently, I got up and trailed behind him, letting him lead me through the packhouse.

...Only we kept going down the floors without stopping.

Not just that, but the packhouse was also eerily quiet with no one in sight along the route we took. Didn’t Aleric say that they were going to be increasing patrols here?

I paused in my spot once we reached the ground level, now completely perplexed. “Aleric... What’s going on?”

n?”

“Don’t stop,” he instructed, pushing me gently forward. “I’ll answer your questions soon.”

I frowned but resumed following anyway, wanting to put my trust in him that he wasn’t about to lead me down another misadventure. Only that hope quickly dwindled further as he eventually led me outside, heading directly towards a car.

So much of this wasn’t making any sense. Was there a different building that they were going to move me to for safety? Was the packhouse considered too compromised?

Per his request though, I didn’t stop or question it further, following him into the car after him. A car I hadn’t seen him drive before.

We drove for some time in silence and I could feel the tension coming off Aleric. And the further we went, the harder it became not to press him for information, especially since we were still heading in the direction I had been silently hoping he would deviate from.

“Can you please tell me now?” I asked, knowing that in a second it would be too late. “We’re clearly heading towards the border, Aleric. What are you doing?”

Up ahead, a warrior then came into view as they walked into the middle of the road, waiting to screen the car at the border exit. There was no way they weren’t going to alert Tytus this time given recent events.

"Don't worry about it," he replied, driving ahead without hesitation.

The car then slowed down as we approached and I anxiously anticipated some sort of argument or fight

apparently the

to ensue as the warrior peered in through the window.

...Only it never came.

Aleric and the warrior simply nodded at each other, a silent acknowledgement between the two, before he accelerated once more, driving past the exit and over the borderline.

"Aleric... seriously, what's going on?" I stressed, now deeply concerned.

It was then, as I turned to face him, that my eyes finally caught sight of a bag on the back seat. It was my bag. The one I would take when travelling.

"...What have you done?" I whispered, horrified.

"Nothing. I'm getting you out to safety. If you don't get killed by some other means then I'm sure Tytus will drive you to that point. I can't silently sit back and watch it happen any more."

I stared at him as though he'd gone completely insane. His explanation didn't warrant the consequences he would face. Did he even stop to think about what the fallout of doing this would be?

Ignoring my gaze, he then pulled off to the side of the road where it dipped out of sight. A small nook mostly obscured by trees. It was maybe five minutes down the road so it was unlikely anyone would see us here.

Once he was satisfied the area around us was quiet, I watched as he reached down and handed me something wrapped in cloth.

"Here, take this. You'll need all the help you can get until you can get the collar off."

I took the item from him and quickly uncovered it, revealing that it was a silver dagger. Possibly even the same one. My stomach felt sick just looking at it.

"This is your dumbest idea yet," I chided, trying my best to put aside my grievances towards the object in my hand. "You realise Tytus is going to know it was you, right? It's going

ng to be very easy to work that out even if he doesn't just order the other warriors involv  
ed to confess."

"I know that," he said, his hands tightening back on the steering wheel, refusing to meet  
my eyes.

"And the punishment for helping me escape isn't going to just be just bad patrol shifts. H  
e's going to make you seriously pay. Alpha heir or not, it won't help you this time."

"I know that."

"And you know he can just order you to tell him where I am, right? That tomorrow morni  
ng they'll realise I'm gone and the manhunt for me will instantly begin, starting from whe  
re you tell them I am."

"I know that, Aria," he hissed.

"Well, do you?" I snapped back. "Because I'm struggling to understand why you're jeopa  
rdising your entire future for this, Aleric. It doesn't make sense that you're going to poten  
tially risk everything on the small hope that I successfully esc—"

"Because |—  
," Aleric interrupted angrily, but cut himself off. "No... It doesn't matter. I've already give  
n you my reason."

"No, not this again," I argued, just as irritated. "I'm sick of you not telling me what you're  
actually thinking about. I'm sick of the silent treatments or snippets of info. Just, tell me  
Aleric. Tell me why the hell you're actually—"

"Because I'm in love with you, Aria, okay? Is that what you want me to admit?" His eyes  
finally flicked over to mine, full of frustration and pain. "You want me to sit here and tell  
you that when we both know it's not a mutually reciprocated feeling? To make me feel  
like a fucking idiot for having to confess to something so goddamn pointless?"

... This wasn't real,

It couldn't be. I was having some sort of weird dream or vision or nightmare. But this wa  
sn't real. No way. No way in hell.

I sat frozen in place, momentarily forgetting how to breathe. How long had I suffered to  
hear those words from Aleric in the past? How long had it taken before I accepted it was  
futile to keep faith I ever would?

What he was saying wasn't real. I was probably still in bed. Maybe I had actually died la  
st night. Because there was absolutely no chance that I'd gone through everything I had  
, spanning over two lives together at this point, for him to tell me this now.

I slowly opened my mouth in an attempt to speak, to say something, anything, to him... but no words came out. Where would I even begin?

But in the end, I never got the chance to reply anyway. Suddenly, the noise of a motorbike approaching broke the silence, forcing my attention elsewhere.

Aleric looked up towards the sound, able to see better into the darkness than me, and tsked in annoyance.

"Such a tosser," he whispered, disapprovingly.

My head was still spinning, working overtime to try and comprehend everything that was going on, but

there was no mistaking the situation.

"Is that... is that who I think it is?" I asked, my voice barely audible.

Without warning, something then hit my lap and the sound of metal clinking against the dagger broke me out of my trance. I looked down shakily to see the car keys.

"You're going to need those," Aleric said, unbuckling his seat belt. "The bike will be too conspicuous. Can't believe he brought that."

I watched mutely as he then opened the car door and got out, immediately walking back in the direction of the Winter Mist. I followed unsteadily out of the car after him, however, I only managed a few steps towards him before I paused.

"Wait, Aleric... umm..." I yelled out to him, rubbing my forehead to try and focus. "How are you getting home?"

He didn't turn around though, instead yelling back over his shoulder as he walked towards a thicket of trees ahead. "Going to run."

I took another few steps as only more uncertainty filled me. I didn't want to leave things how we had. Regardless of what he'd said, I didn't want this to be our last conversation.

"Aleric, wait a s—."

"Bye, Aria," he cut off, waving without turning back to me. "Have a great rest of your life. I hope for your sake that we don't meet again too soon."

And then he was gone. Into the trees and probably shifted already.

...And I didn't even get the chance to thank him... though I wasn't even sure whether that was the correct response given the circumstances. With just a few words, he had managed to create such a mixture of emotions within me; emotions that I didn't know how to properly process.

"Aria," a familiar husky voice then called out from behind me.

...And with everything that had happened just now and with everything that had happened the night

before, this was the final trigger. His voice was enough to instantly destroy the last bit of strength I had inside to keep composure.

I quickly spun around and saw him standing there, my breathing heavy as it slowly turned into sobs...

"...Cai," I choked out.

My Cai.

The dagger and keys slipped from my fingers and I felt my legs give out from under me, falling to the ground. My body was faint, overwhelmed to my limit.

"Aria," Cai repeated, though now worried.

He quickly rushed to me and grabbed me into his arms, But I was completely helpless to stop the tears from streaming down. I instantly buried my face into the nook of his shoulder, wrapping my arms around his neck.

I missed him. Goddess, I missed him. It'd been months since I'd seen him, months that had gone by thinking that he hated me. But he was here. He came to get me. He still wanted me.

His energy was just as infectious as I remembered it, pulling me in and making me want to forget about everything else that had happened. I just wanted to be here, now, with him.

"You came for me," I cried.

"Of course," he said, stroking the back of my head. "Aleric got in contact with me this morning about a plan to get you out and I dropped everything to make sure I was here. And I heard about the collar, Aria... what they've done to you is sick."

If Cai was here then he was probably working with Iris to get me to safety. Once they moved me to a safe location, I would need to lay low for a while... maybe forever.

But I couldn't help but feel something seemed off.

I pulled back to look upon his face. It was dark but I could just make out how he still appeared worn out and tired, almost as if he were still in the cells within the Winter Mist. I would have thought by now he would have recovered. Was this because of me? Because he'd missed me too?

"You look exhausted," I pointed out, tracing my finger along his face. "What's wrong?"

"Me?" he laughed. "Aria, you should be worrying about yourself. You look about ready to pass out and I don't blame you after what apparently happened last night. We'll get you back to the Silver Lake as soon as possible and let you rest up for a while."

I frowned. That didn't really seem like the wisest of decisions. I thought the plan would be to move me somewhere else to hide. Unless he meant until tomorrow when they would move me elsewhere?

He kissed my forehead between my brows, just the same as he used to.

"Stop overthinking."

...But something still felt wrong. Normally I would have melted when he did things like that but now it seemed almost like there was something I was missing.

And, with another moment of thinking, I quickly realised what it was.

Every time he went to touch me, there would be a moment of pause accompanying it. As if he wasn't sure whether or not to do it.

"Cai... What's happened? Honestly, I need you to tell me."

"Nothing is wrong, Aria. I'm going to get everything sorted, don't worry."

...There it was again. Like something nagging at me, telling me it wasn't right.

## Chapter Seventy One

Wanting to test the theory, I moved in close, my hand on his chest, and, slowly, I brought my lips in to meet his. 1

...Hesitation. I felt it again. As if he was having to think twice about it. He returned my kiss but pulled away again just as quickly.

And my stomach dropped with the heartbreaking realisation.

“...Your feelings for me have changed,” I said, stating it as a fact.

It was stupid of me to presume that he would feel the same. Hell, even I had questioned it at one point, having thought I was never going to see him again. Yet, somehow, I'd managed to convince myself he still wanted me that way after seeing he'd come to save me.

“What? Aria, no, of course I still have feelings for you,” he said. He proceeded to then grab my head in his hands and plant small kisses all over my face. “There will never be a moment I don't want you.”

But I pushed myself away from him a little, still unconvinced this was a good idea.

“Cai... please. Tell me.”

He then sighed and looked off into the trees. “It's just... it's complicated.”

He was avoiding my eyes, hesitating... They were signs of guilt. He was hiding something.

“Complicated' how, Cai? Because of what happened in the Winter Mist? Because I failed to get you out of the cell sooner? You know, I tried my hardest to free you, right?”

“No, no, I know that. Of course, I do. That's not the issue.”

“... Then what is it? What's wrong?”

“The thing is...,” he started but his voice trailed off as he wasn't sure how to proceed. He then inhaled and rubbed at his face in defeat.

“Aria... I found my mate.”

A/N: Thanks for reading! If you're enjoying the story, please consider voting, sharing or commenting! It all helps!

## **A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 72**

### **Chapter Seventy-Two**

“...What's her name?” I found myself asking politely, though I didn't really feel present.

Truthfully, I didn't feel much of anything. My body had gone completely numb, falling into autopilot responses as I struggled to come to terms with what Cai had just told me.

He found his mate.

But he was only nineteen. He shouldn't have found her so soon.

'Caius knight dies at the age of twenty—  
one with no Luna, mate or child'. That was the future for Cai had known. Yet somehow t  
his timeline had changed enough that he had met her earlier. It was a cruel slap in the f  
ace as reality reminded me, once more, that it would refuse to ever let me be happy. Ev  
en for just the few years I thought I might have had with him.

"Caitlyn," he replied awkwardly. "She seems... nice. Sweet."

'Nice? Really? That was the best he could say about the woman who was supposedly hi  
s other half? His soul mate?

I wanted

to ask him how they met but a part of me couldn't bear to hear any more details. Knowin  
g her name would be enough.

"Aria," he said, tilting my chin up to look at him, to meet his golden eyes. "It doesn't chan  
ge anything for m e... I still want to be with you."

Instantly, my body tensed, the gears in my head finally starting to kick back into  
reality. His words managed to trigger a pain inside me that I was all too familiar with, so  
mething I had tried so hard to push t o the furthest part of my mind. It was almost exactl  
y like it was in the past.

...Except I wasn't the girl being abandoned by her mate anymore.

No, now I was being set up to become Thea. 1

"No," I said flatly, grabbing the keys and dagger by my side to leave. "No, I'm not doing t  
his."

"Aria, wait. Talk to me."

I stood up and started to walk towards the car  
but Cai quickly rushed to stand in my way.

"Aria, please. Can we just talk about this for a second?"

"No, this was dumb from the beginning," I said. "And I'm not just referring to us. I mean t  
his whole plan for my escape too. It's rushed and clumsy."

"We've got everything sorted. We'll get you back to the Silver Lake and  
take care of you."

There it was again. No insinuation of moving me, no mention of Iris or the rebellion. As if he thought everyone wasn't going to just assume that the Silver Lake was the first place I'd go.

"Tell me, Cai, what exactly was the plan? Do you even have one?" I asked, folding my arms over my chest. "I was under the impression you were working with Iris for this but I'm quickly realising that maybe that's not the case."

He frowned. "Why would I be in contact with Iris for this? I haven't seen her since last year."

A cynical laugh escaped my lips. "This is actually ridiculous. The first place Tytus is going to look is the Silver Lake, especially once Aleric is forced to confess that info. Then we're back to square one; avoiding a war between two territories because of me."

Lilapler Seventy Two

"Then we'll move you," he argued. "We can go somewhere else until it's safe."

"Just the three of us, yeah?" I snapped back snarkily. "You, me, and Caitlyn?"

His face flashed with pain but I didn't feel bad. He should have never touched me tonight knowing he had someone bonded to him. I was too familiar with the anguish of seeing your mate with another.

"I'll figure it out myself. Go home, Cai," I said, stepping past him to continue walking to the car.

Either out of stupidity or desperation, I felt as Cai then grabbed my wrist and tried to pull me to face him once more.

But I was angry. No, I was pissed. Not because he had a mate; that was always going to be a possibility and I had already accepted that. No, I was pissed because he still had the audacity to look at me and tell me that he wanted me, knowing someone was waiting for him, knowing my history and how I'd lived

through this exact situation already once.

And so when he reached out to grab me, my instincts got the better of me.

Though much slower than my Beta heir days, I still managed to quickly bring the dagger up and hold it up to his throat.

"Don't touch me," I growled.

His eyes went wide in surprise but I didn't waver. In truth, we both knew he could very easily swat my hand away without any issue whatsoever, but the sentiment was now there. The intention was clear. This was my message to him.

"You wouldn't," he said, his eyes flicking back and forth from my face to the knife.

A challenge. Maybe

his words had meant to come off as appealing to the side of me that still cared for him, but now they only came off as though he wanted to test that loyalty.

...And instantly, my hand tightened on the blade.

"You think I wouldn't do it?" I asked him, my eyes narrowing with the threat. "You're so sure, Cai?"

In truth, I knew he was right. There was no way I would actually do it and he was trying to call that bluff. But in that moment, I sure as hell didn't feel like being underestimated.

Because to serve that torture upon another young girl, to repeat that cycle... the very fact he could even ask that of me made me feel sick. It made me regret so many of my actions and question why I had let things even get this far to begin with.

And it was a reminder of who I really was, what I was actually capable of, something he was apparently still blissfully unaware of.

'Never forget where I came from. Never forget why I'm here.'

He frowned in confusion but I didn't wait. With my spare hand, I grabbed at his shirt and pulled his torso down so I could speak directly into his ear.

"You know... I've done it before," I whispered. "You shouldn't test someone who has killed more people than you have."

"What? ...What are you talking about?"

"Lied to you, Cai," I confessed. "I lied so I didn't scare you away. But do you want to know the truth? The real truth? You see, I knew you in the past, Caius Knight, Alpha of the Silver Lake. Our packs were at war for months, neither one gaining the upper hand... and then you died. At the age of twenty-one, you died alone. No mate. No children. And do you know why?"

I pulled my face away just enough so I could look him in the eye. "Because of me," I said. "I was your dooth. I killed you. I did it for my own political advantage..."

My breathing then became heavier, my heart pounding loudly in my chest as I confessed the words! never wanted him to hear. "... I did it for my family's honour... I did it to make up for my own failures as a

mate would

give me even a fraction of the attention he had so brutally deprived me of! That was what your life was worth, Cai. That is why I killed you. For me."

We remained

still as neither of us spoke, just my words hanging in the open as he slowly took it all in.

But I needed him to hear this. To realise the full gravity of who I really was. I needed him to understand that he didn't really have feelings for me, just a version of me I'd let him see. Not some young, tormented girl he met in high school... but a killer. Someone who had wiped more territories off the map just from within her own quarters, than he had ever visited from his entire time travelling the country.

Truthfully, I should have done this a long time ago. But had been too weak to go through with it; to sever that tie that had become a lifeline for me. Cai had become a symbol in my head of what I had always hoped my life would become. The dream of a perfect future with someone I could love.

However, it was just that; a dream. An illusion. And it was time to wake up and acknowledge that this wasn't a fantasy, that being with him was always something that was never going to end well. Because now look at where we are.

It was time for us to let go of that delusion and prevent a cycle from repeating.

"Aria...", he said, gently trying to move the dagger away.

It was so typical of him to not just force it out of my hand and push me away already. He could have overpowered me within seconds without any effort on his part... but he was trying not to hurt me, Somehow after everything I said, he was still acting as if he cared.

And so I pressed the knife in further, trying to prove my point. Because, even though I didn't want to, needed him to at least believe I would, to take me seriously, and it seemed this was the only way he was going to realise that.

"Do you want to make it two for two?" I asked darkly.

Immediately, he let his hand fall back to his side, acknowledging that there was nothing he could do to change the situation.

And yet searching his face, I couldn't help but wonder how incredibly naive it was of him to still look at me with those eyes. A

s if I hadn't just confessed to murdering him. As if a part of him actually still wanted to be with me.

But the damage was done, I knew that. He would be at least smart enough to realise that he should let me go. Or at least take this as my confirmation that I didn't want to be involved with him anymore; even though a part of my mind was still screaming at me to take it all back, to find a way to still be with him... to not let go of my dream.

I quickly pulled away from him, taking a few steps backwards to create some distance.

"...Go home, Cai," I said, my voice finally betraying my exhaustion. "Go home and be an honourable man to your mate." 4

And then I left.

Into the car, the key in the ignition, and I left.

I didn't know where to go, yet I realised that all paths ahead were likely the wrong choice. And so I just drove. Without a destination, into the dark, and with my eyes threatening to overflow with tears at any

second.

But there was no time to relax or give in to the pain just yet... because I needed to think.

And so, doing my best to compartmentalise the aching inside, I tried to focus on what to do now.

To go home meant risking my life once more to the mercy of assassins and Tytus, yet to run away meant risking my life to the mercy of the world... and Tytus. There was no safety for me. Not really. Maybe if I could get in contact with Iris I could try and find a way into the network she had spoken about.

The issue was that I knew of only one person, outside of the Winter Mist, who was in contact with Iris, one person who I could trust my life and whereabouts with... and it was the same person I had just threatened with a knife.

...Fuck.

But the more I drove away, the more I started to think about the whole situation I was in. The vision, the kidnapping... and the response that was caused in retaliation to those things... and suddenly I saw it all from Thea's perspective. The missing link I had been mulling over for the entire afternoon, working desperately to try and figure out why she might have done this.

And the answer was... for this.

For this exact response.

She didn't want me dead; that much was clear from how the intruder had behaved in the vision. No, she just wanted me to further separate myself from the pack or leave the Winter Mist entirely. She was creating an atmosphere of fear that would scare me, forcing an emotional reaction to the situation. It was something that wouldn't have been difficult for her to work out. Even if I had been successfully kidnapped, it wouldn't have taken long for the pack to find me again; after all, there was barely anywhere in the country where I wouldn't be recognised. Naturally, one could then assume that I would be shaken by

the whole ordeal or someone would try to move me elsewhere.

I brought the car slowly to a stop in the middle of the deserted road, my hands tightening on the wheel to the point my knuckles went white.

Because this meant only one thing.

Something I couldn't believe I was about to do.

Quickly, I slammed my hands against the steering wheel out of frustration and leaned back in my seat to glare up at the roof.

I didn't want to. I really didn't want to. I just wanted nothing more than to leave and never come back, to run as far away as possible. To finally be free. But this was why I was here. To change the fate of the future. And if Thea wanted me to stray from the pack? ...Well, then I had to do the opposite.

...And that meant going back to the Winter Mist.

Inhaling deeply, I took one last second to calm myself down and push everything aside once more. Composure. Survival. I would make it to my eighteenth, free myself and hopefully figure all this mess out before... before...

My mind recalled Aleric's words from earlier, his confession. What was meant to do with that? What did that mean for Tytus' order to have him mark me upon my birthday? ...What did I even feel towards him anymore? My captor, my mate, my executioner... my friend. If I had never died and only ever met this version of Aleric, where would we be right now?

But just as quickly as I thought on it, I pushed it to the back of my mind along with everything else. I was already at my limit and unable to process anything else for one night. I needed to sleep, to recharge. To come back with a fresh outlook to work on these other problems later.

For the time being, the only thing I actually needed to do was return before *anyone* noticed my absence.

...And so I turned the car around... heading straight back to my imprisonment. Willingly handing myself back over as a hostage within their hierarchy, a prisoner awaiting their punishment. A collar around *my* neck as evidence of their shackles.

Thankfully, the trip back was short since I hadn't managed to get far. The *same warrior* was working the border and they allowed me to pass without issue, albeit a little confused to see *me*. It was a similar situation at the packhouse too. Whatever scheduling changes Aleric had made to the patrols at the house *were* still in effect as not a single soul was around upon my *return*. Perhaps it was the luckiest thing to happen to me all day.

Before too long, I finally found myself back on the floor where *my quarters were*, staring at the two hallways before me.

To turn left would be to head towards Aleric's room where he probably *was* right now, something I *knew* was a can of worms | physically couldn't deal with right now. And then there was *my room* to the right, a place that, despite how much I loathed it, was still somewhere *I* would prefer to be compared to the alternative.

It seemed like an easy decision.

I walked towards my quarters, my mind made up, and entered through the broken door that now refused to properly latch close. It didn't matter though. For just one night, it would do the job.

But as I entered my room and laid down on my bed, I found that my mind refused to let me rest. I was drained, my body aching, my mind aflame with too much information and emotional stress churning... and yet it denied me even the smallest bit of relief by switching off to sleep.

Not that it mattered in the end.

Whether it was a few minutes or few hours that went by, I couldn't be sure, but soon enough I heard the sound of familiar footsteps entering into the quarters, walking towards me.

I didn't get up though. No, instead I continue to lay there, too exhausted to make any effort to move.

Because it was the last person I wanted to see right now, someone I had been praying wouldn't disturb me until I'd had time to recover.

But this life offered me no such luxuries.

The bedroom light then abruptly turned on and I slowly opened my eyes to stare up at the ceiling. "...Hi, Aleric," I greeted quietly.

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### Chapter Seventy-Three

"... What the fuck are you doing back here?" Aleric asked.

He stood in my doorway, arms crossed, staring at me like I was insane.

But I didn't care. My mind was made up. There was no way I was going to have this conversation tonight.

"No," I answered flatly.

"No'?"

"No, I'm not doing this now," I clarified. "I'm too tired. We can talk later."

I rolled onto my side, facing away from him, and pulled the blanket up over my shoulder. Maybe if I closed my eyes and pretended to sleep, he would just leave on his own accord.

"Aria, you need to tell me what's going on," he pressed. "Joseph told me you came back over the border and I thought he was joking until I caught your scent by the stairs. Did something happen? Were you caught?"

"No," I mumbled, repeating myself once more.

"Stop that. Regardless of how tired you are, this is more important. I need to know if something went wrong."

I groaned out in frustration but reluctantly sat up, my head immediately pulsing with a migraine.\*

"Nothing went wrong, Aleric. Just let it go."

"Obviously something went wrong or you wouldn't be here."

He was getting angry at me and it was only making me more irritated that we were actually having this conversation.

“Fine then,” I snapped back, turning to look at him. “You want to know what went wrong? The entire thing. The whole plan. How stupid do you think Tytus is that he wouldn’t find out that you were planning to hide me in the Silver Lake?”

His eyes widened a little in surprise. “You’re joking, right? Cai didn’t organise to move you somewhere else?”

‘More like didn’t want to move me somewhere else,’ I thought, recalling our earlier exchange. And that was only after finding out about Caitlyn.

“Evidently not,” I answered, not wanting to elaborate further on the other reasons I’d returned.

“So... what? You’re just going to come back here and pretend everything is normal? That you didn’t almost get killed here? After risking everything to get you out?”

“I don’t know, Aleric!” I yelled back. “I don’t know, okay? I don’t know what to do about me, or Tytus, or Cai ... and I \*especially don’t know what to do about you.”

He paused, frowning. “...About me?”

Ah, fuck. I’d said too much.

“Wait, are you angry at me because of what I told you in the car?” he asked, piecing together my silence.

I rubbed my eyes, hoping that this was just a bad dream. “...No.”

But I didn’t sound very convincing.

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“Seriously? How is that fair on me? You were the one who was angry at me for originally not telling you.”

... That did it.

His words struck a nerve, igniting me once more despite my exhaustion. Crumbling that final piece inside me that still cared about what he would think once he finally heard the truth.

“Fair’? I asked him, my eyes now ablaze. “You want to talk about ‘fair’, Aleric? What you said in that car was not fair– not fair to me. In

fact, it was the cruellest thing anyone has ever said to me throughout my lives. I would have preferred it if you had just told me you were trying to get rid of me because at least that would be something I could believe and know how to deal with.” 1

“Did you say ‘lives’?”

“I’m sick of whatever this is,” I said, waving a hand towards him. “This version of you who is so goddamn unpredictable that I feel as though everything I learnt the first time around is completely useless. That it was meaningless. That I went through years of hell, living with your abuse, for absolutely no benefit. How i

s that fair?”

“Aria, what the fuck are you talking about?”

“The truth!” I snapped, moving to the edge of the bed. “I’m telling you what you always wanted to know! The reason I was so scared of you, the reason I always looked at you as if you were a monster. Because in my eyes you were, Aleric. You were my torturer, my abuser, and you would parade that bitch Thea in front of me like a prized possession you loved more than anything; never caring what it did to me, never caring that it hurt me. Me, your mate.”

“Aria—.”

“I gave you everything,” | continued, my eyes now filling with tears. “Everything. Anything that was within my power to give, I gave it to you. You wanted the world to kneel before you? I gave you the path to do it. You wanted my heart, my soul and complete servitude? I gave it to you. I let you lock me away, isolated

alone in this room with nothing but an attendant who in the end threw me to the dogs. And it

did it for you. I did it so that maybe you would love me... so that maybe you would just look at me, Aleric.”

I wiped angrily at the tears on my face and gritted my teeth. “And then suddenly I’m brought back by Selene and told to fix it all, to stop it all from happening again. That if I don’t then everyone dies. And so that’s what I did. I worked hard to stop the same future from happening, to stop myself from becoming your Luna, to stop you from trapping and hurting me again... and to stop myself from ever having to love you again... because I couldn’t bear the thought of living through your rejection twice. That alone had been more painful than anything else.”

“What the hell is this? You’re saying I apparently rejected you? Hurt you? ...None of this is making any sense.”

A humourless laugh then escaped my lips, realising I'd forgotten the best part.

"Oh no, haha... Oh no, no no, not just rejected," I said, a smile slowly creeping onto my face. "You see, to be reborn, you don't just get plucked out of thin air by Selene and sent back. No, no... you have to die first, Aleric. I died. And guess whose face I saw in my nightmares every single day?"

He could see where I was going with this, his face quickly starting to pale, and my smile only grew despite my tears.

"Yours," I answered. "It was yours, Aleric. It was you who believed Thea over me, you who convicted me of crimes I never committed, and you who held the sword as it came crashing down, slicing through my neck at the trial grounds. You killed me, Aleric. You killed me once I was no longer of any use to you anymore. And you wondered why I was so scared of you for so long? Why I'm so angry at you now given

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everything you put me through?"

He opened his mouth to speak but no words came out. Instead, he just looked at me, his eyes full of confusion, and, slowly, my breathing turned into sobs.

I quickly glared down at my hands which were now balled into fists, tightened around the blanket beneath me, and watched as my tears hit the fabric.

"... You don't get to dictate what's unfair this time..." I choked out slowly. "And you don't get to say that you love me. It's nine years too late for that."

I heard him step closer towards me but, even once he kneeled down to eye level, I still refused to raise my head.

"Aria, look at me," he said.

But I shook my head, wiping at my face. "No."

"Aria, look at me," he repeated.

Another sob escaped me but I just shook my head once more.

"Aria, look."

Losing patience, he gently grabbed my chin and raised my head up to finally meet his gaze, to meet his green eyes that were only too familiar.

“If what you’re telling me is true... then there is literally nothing I can say that will make what happened to you okay,” he said, his expression serious. “Because the reality is... it’s not okay. And I can apologise for those things if you want, to say that I’m sorry but, at the end of the day, even if I did, it wouldn’t mean anything. Yes, I’m sorry that those things happened to you, but I can’t look you in the eye and genuinely apologise for something I never did, and I guarantee you that it wouldn’t make you feel any better even if I *did*.”

“...You’re still young,” I whispered. “You have time to change, time to become that person.”

I pulled my chin out of his grasp and looked back down at my hands, making him sigh.

“You told me that you were wrongfully convicted of crimes you had no part in, that you died for those very charges,” he continued. “And yet you want to persecute me for sins I’ve never committed? When have I, me personally, ever hurt you, Aria? When have I ever given you a reason to not trust me? It’s true that there is nothing I can say to make right what happened to you, but I hope that my actions over these last few years have at least proven to you that, whoever the fuck you’re talking about... they’re not me.”

...I knew he was right.

It was the very same thing I had been trying to convince myself of, but it still didn’t lessen the sting. The cold truth was... I was never going to get my sincere apology. And the things that I went through were never going to be okay. Because the person I needed to hear the apology from was dead in another timeline that was now destroyed. \*My\* Aleric was gone. And, knowing him, it was likely that he didn’t regret what he did to me, even during his final breaths.

But this Aleric in front of me had never given me a reason to not trust him. In fact, he had proven to me time and time again that I could. And yet I still refused to let myself give in. On even the small chance that things turned bad once more, I knew that it would break me beyond repair. It would be the final betrayal I couldn’t survive.

“... I’m sorry, Aleric, but... regardless of who you are this time, I can’t be the person you want me to be,” I said, moving away from him. “I can’t become a Luna again, always living in your shadow and hoping that what I do ensures my survival for one more day. I refuse to live in another war-torn world created by us.”

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...Then don't," he said, making me look up sharply in surprise. "I never expected you to sit back passively in the shadows as a Luna anyway. I just want you to help me make this pack the best it can be."

I frowned, not seeing how it was all that much different. It still sounded basically the same as what I did for him in the past.

"I know you want change, Aria. That much is obvious," he continued. "You think I haven't noticed how messed up things have been? Hate me for the rest of your life if you want, but I would rather we work together than end up divided in a civil war for power, something that benefits neither us nor the pack. I'm not so naive as to assume you haven't at least considered taking over once you're of age. Especially after what Tytus has done to you." 2

He wasn't wrong. Only days earlier I'd had this exact conversation with this but had turned her down knowing the impact it would have on Aleric. At the time, I couldn't risk tarnishing our current relationship for fear it would lead to the very doom I was trying to prevent

But it was clear now.

If what he was offering was true then this was the best way forward

No secrets, no power struggle, no ruined friendship He was offering me mutual control, something that was the last thing I ever expected to hear from his mouth This would mean no Alpha commanding servitude from a Luna But more like split Alphas working together towards a common cause

It was a guarantee that, no matter what happened, whether it be Thea or some other imposing threat per Selene's warning, that I would still maintain enough control to handle it the way I needed to, all the while ensuring Aleric didn't fall back into the path I feared.

The only concern now was whether our interests would be aligned come time to make difficult decisions ... and whether he would end up betraying my trust anyway. A trust that came at the price of more than I could afford to lose

It was a leap of faith that demanded the most risk, yet offered the highest reward The kind of bet that was either all in, or nothing at all,

So just how much was I willing to gamble?

I slowly got up on my feet and stood before him on unsteady legs, my exhaustion still weighing heavily on me.

"Then swear to me," I said, and watched as he followed in standing up too. "Swear to me on your name and title that you will do night by me, that you will honour this pact for mutual control that you will allow me to have equal say in all pack matters and, in return."

I paused for a moment, my heart pounding. In return, I will personally ensure that you receive my full support in bringing prosperity to this pack, as well as pose no direct threat to completely remove you as Alpha."

It was a deal I couldn't believe I was making, an offer I had promised myself I would never give to Aleric again. Was I going to regret this in the morning once I'd had time to sleep? Was any of this even real right now?

"But make no mistake, Aleric," I continued, turning away from his gaze. "I offer you my hand but nothing more. I once made the mistake of giving you everything I had to offer, my heart, my soul... my life. This deal is for my cooperation alone, to keep a peace that we both know is in the best interest of the pack. Because even though I trust you right now, I still don't trust your future. Not yet, at least. I'm sure you wouldn't either if you were in my shoes, after seeing the things you were once capable of..\*"

I took a deep breath before looking back up, doing my best to maintain my composure and shake off the memories. "These are my terms for this alliance. If you break your oath then I make no guarantees for the

repercussions that may result. Are these terms agreeable to you?"

He then placed a hand over his chest, a sign usually reserved for showing respect among allied packs,

and lowered his head ever so slightly in a bow.

"I swear, upon my name and future Alpha title, that I will uphold this agreement we have made for mutual control and promise to do right by you."

I scrutinised his face but could sense that he meant the words genuinely, that he intended to keep this pledge. It was an ethereal experience, all things considered. And even though I stood a foot shorter than him, I couldn't help but feel as though we were on equal footing for once; a first in our history.

There was no fear, no deceit, no questioning his ultimate goal anymore... just two people who were once again forced together, bound by fate, now attempting to sacrifice something for the greater good; Aleric with his birthright, myself for my trust in him once more.

And so, despite the compromise, and despite my extreme fatigue, it was the best I'd felt in over ten years. My head was spinning, yet I felt very much alive inside.

A sense of calm then started to wash over me, feeling as though I'd finally won at least one of the battles I'd been fighting for almost a decade. And whilst it could easily still prove disastrous, for just this moment, I allowed myself the tiniest bit of respite.

Unexpectedly, my legs then gave out from under me, too tired to support myself anymore, and my vision blurred.

"Aria," Aleric said, quickly reaching out to stop me from hitting the ground.

"Sorry," I mumbled. I could feel as my brain was starting to quickly switch off, hungry for the sweet nothingness that sleep would provide; something it had been sorely deprived of too much recently. It seemed as though the debt was finally being collected and faster than anticipated. "I'm just... really tired"

He quickly helped me back into bed and threw the blanket over me, settling me in for the remainder of the night.

"There won't be any warriors in the packhouse for another few hours," he said, crouching down to speak to me.

"I'm going to crash on the couch in the other room until they're able to take over guarding you. I'll be in there if you need anything."

He stood up to leave but I reached out to grab his arm before he could go.

"Wait," I said, my eyelids becoming too heavy to stay open. Everything was quickly turning to black but I fought against it for just a little bit longer. "...Aleric... about tonight..."

"Aria... don't. You need to rest."

"... Thank you for believing me."

I heard him quietly sigh. "It's fine. Get some sleep and I'll come to see you once you're awake."

"...Night, Aleric," I mumbled, finally letting him go.

The light then turned off, absorbing me fully into the darkness.

"...Night, Aria." And sleep immediately carried me away.

## **A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 74**

## Chapter Seventy-Four

'Was last night real?' I asked myself, staring up at the ceiling in bed.

So many things had happened, so many truths had finally come out.

...And I felt... lighter.

I'd woken up after deep sleep, unsure how long had passed, but my body had been grateful for the uninterrupted rest.

Though a part of me was angry at myself for taking the risk of their reaction, I would be lying if I said

I wasn't happy with the outcome. Or I at least meant that in Aleric's case. Cai... well, I had to believe that what I did was for the best.

The fact that I wasn't locked away in a hospital right now pending a psych evaluation meant that Aleric had actually believed me. It was something I'd been worried about the entire time I'd been back. I knew how insane it sounded when being told the first time. So many days even I still couldn't believe it.

I slowly got out of bed, my body still aching in several places, and got changed into some clothes. There would be things I'd need to start working on and I needed food and water before I could begin anything.

But as I walked out into the living room, I was surprised to see Aleric on the couch reading documents. He looked comfortable as if he'd been there for some time. It was strange since I thought he would have been out for the day.

"...You're finally awake," he greeted without looking up. "Was starting to wonder if you fell into a coma."

I frowned, still groggy from sleep. "How long was I out for?"

My voice felt raw as I spoke, causing me to cough from the dryness in my throat. The amount of crying and yelling had probably taken its toll there.

"A bit over a day," he replied, leaning over to hand me one of the two coffees sitting beside him.

I took it from him and was instantly grateful for the small relief it provided after having a sip. Water probably would have been better but I wasn't about to turn down the caffeine. It was nice of him to have gotten me one.

"How did you know I was going to be awake now? The coffee is still warm."

He laughed a little. "I didn't. They were both mine."

I stared at the beverage in my hand and suddenly felt a little conflicted given the recent revelations. Truthfully, it felt a little weird between us. He had confessed to me and I'd turned him down, called him a murderer, and now I was sharing his coffee. And yet somehow he was acting as if nothing had happened, his expression not revealing that he felt phased in any way.

"Aleric-

"Relax," he cut me off. "I hadn't drunk from it yet."

Instantly, I felt a little stupid for even worrying about something as minor as that and quickly pushed it aside. It shouldn't have been a big deal anyway. Though I wished I knew what he was thinking. One of the most frustrating things about Aleric was that he was so unreadable.

"Have you been here long?" I asked, trying to focus on anything else.

"I'm a little surprised to see you're still here."

He snorted and finally looked up at me, amusement in his eyes. "Still? No, I left for a whole day, came

back and you were still passed out. I'm just taking a shift for guard duty since I was going to be working in my room down the hall anyway."

My cheeks immediately burned a little from embarrassment, having made an assumption once more.. Really, I just felt a little bad because of the circumstances. I didn't enjoy the feeling of having to be constantly babysat, as if I were a burden on everyone.

I cleared my throat and tried to brush it off once more, deciding to take a look at what he was so focused on instead. I quickly walked behind him and leaned over, scanning the pages over his shoulder.

It looked like a status report on a new Alpha who'd recently succeeded his father; Harvey Gallagher. Though no one really knew anything about him here yet, I could recall from the past that the boy was around our age and far too naive for the position he held. Mostly, I just remembered how easily he surrendered to an alliance under us when propositioned.

"You could reach out to him," I said, inputting my suggestion.

"Unlike his father, Ruben, Harvey is a complete pushover. Not necessarily a bad thing but he was never really cut out to run the pack on his own at such a young age. If you were to extend a hand out and send him someone experienced to help him through these first few years, then he would be indebted to

you. Though, I should warn you now, the value of their resources never really increases by much.”

He looked up over his shoulder at me and was momentarily confused. “How— ? Nevermind. Sorry, I’m still getting my head around... all of that.”

No more secrets between us. Felt weird to finally be able to speak freely without needing all the excuses for how I knew what I did. Strangely as though I’d removed restraints, allowing me to work as efficiently as possible now.

I sat down on the couch beside him and grabbed the documents from his hand to look at them more closely. All the things he was looking into weren’t that major and all of them could be easily resolved. Though, I could probably write up a few pointers to nudge him in the right direction and give insight into how certain paths would sway...

“So, are you going to finally tell me what happened with Cai?” he suddenly asked.

He’d posed the question just as I’d taken another sip, causing me to almost choke on the coffee.

I coughed violently, struggling to clear my airway for a moment, all the while the thick smell of caffeine filled my nose in an unpleasant way.

‘I should have stuck with water,’ I thought bitterly to myself and patted my clothes down with a tissue.

“Aria?” he prompted after I continued to ignore his question.

“Nothing happened,” I said to which he just looked at me, waiting for me to tell him the truth.

I then sighed and leaned back into the couch, hugging my legs to my chest a little.

“...He found his mate,” I finally admitted.

“Ah.”

He would know what that meant, know how it would affect me. Even if Aleric supposedly had feelings for me now, he already knew about my prior relationship with Cai. How could he forget? He’d literally caught us in bed together.

“I’m sorry, Aria,” he said. “I didn’t know. I just figured it would make the most sense to contact him urgently since... well...”

Since we were romantically involved.

“Yeah... I know.”

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In my head, I started recalling the whole ordeal with Cai and my chest ached a little. I missed him. I shouldn't... but I did. Was it wrong of me to even feel that much? Would it be okay if I still wished, even just a little bit, that I could still be with him?

After everything we'd been through, it felt so... abrupt. Final. Though maybe that's how things were always **fated to** end between us. With painful finality.

A quiet humourless laugh then escaped me thinking back on it all.

“What's so funny?”

“...No, not funny,” I clarified, a small smile on my lips. “Just... It's crazy how things turned out. The very fact I was involved with Cai at all is bizarre.”

“What do you mean?”

I then turned to look at him, my expression turning more serious.

“Because we were the ones who killed him in the other timeline.”

His eyes widened a little before turning into a small frown. “What? Why?”

I shrugged a shoulder. “As your first major act of Alpha, you decided to kill his father, Tobias, during a meeting being held in the Winter Mist. Tobias came to negotiate the alliance tax given their large increase in pack size but your only counteroffer was his head. Never made any sense to me... Though that didn't stop me from helping you to finish his son off anyway.”

“... The fuck? Wouldn't that make things between you a bit... awkward?”

I paused to think on it for a second before answering. “... Not at first. You had me working from only within the Winter Mist so I had never met Cai personally. Because of that, I had no idea who he was in this life until after we'd already become friends. He was training me in fighting for a while before his exchange was over. And, well... then he came back and confessed to me... and then Myra died... and then...” I took a deep breath, steadying myself. “...It was an extremely dark time for me. Cai helped me through the worst of it and made me remember that not everything had to be so... shit.”

...And now he was a reminder of how quickly that could change.

“Because of the other version of... me... right? Because of what he originally did to you?”

I could tell he was uncomfortable hearing about it but he was trying his best to understand it anyway. Who could blame him in his position? It was probably a form of morbid curiosity.

...And so I proceeded to tell him everything.

I started at the very beginning from before we *were* even officially mates, then moved on to Thea, the Goddess, about our time together and what we did, and finally about some of the things I'd done up until now since coming back. But unlike the first time I told Cai about the past, I didn't hold anything back from Aleric.

I told him about every horrible detail as if finally confessing my sins... and it felt weirdly liberating; natural even. Though not technically the same person, it was easy to blend them into one when it came to recalling our history. And whether he hated me or not afterwards, it didn't have nearly the same weight as when I'd feared Cai's judgement. Cai had been an innocent, his death a byproduct of my own naivety, but the person it all started with was the very person sitting next to me on the couch... or rather, his other self **was**.

It was the same underlying feeling of false trust I'd had after Myra died. I'd driven myself to find Aleric first because I'd felt he couldn't judge me for my mistakes given the weight of his own. But they weren't *\* his\**. It's just that his features gave me that false impression, helping me to pretend whilst I unloaded the

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truth to him.

...So what was this Aleric thinking now? What would he think after finding out who I really was? Because whilst it might not have been him personally who did the things I was telling him about, there was no mistake that it had been me. That this was my past I was telling him about and, unlike him, I actually had done these things.

He sat and quietly listened

to me the entire time, his face unreadable as he took it all in without interrupting. The things I told him couldn't have been easy to hear if he truly was different now. Our combined death toll was easily in the thousands by the end, his own insanity being the driving force of that.

But I needed to be completely honest with him about everything if this new partnership was going to work. How was I meant to convince him of why certain decisions would end terribly if he didn't understand why I thought that way?

And so I spoke for hours, my voice almost completely gone by the time I was finished. I spoke for so long that the sky had turned dark outside.

And when I was finally done, we sat silently for a few minutes, both of us needing a moment to take in everything I'd just told him.

"... Tell me something," I eventually said after he still hadn't said a word since I'd stopped speaking. "I've been completely honest with you, telling you every painful detail of my past... and now I'd like you to show me that same courtesy."

"...And what did you want to know?"

"I need you to tell me why..." I said slowly, wincing at the thought.

"...Why you hated me so much growing up."

He looked at me confused, his brow furrowed. "Aria, I didn't--"

But I put a hand up to immediately stop him. "I'm not talking about right now or comparing you to him. I'm talking about *you* and how *you* acted towards me when we were kids. You think I didn't notice how you never seemed to like me, even before I was sent back the second time?"

He brought a hand up to his face and rubbed at his mouth, taking a moment to think about his answer. "...I didn't 'hate' you, Aria. I just... I don't know."

I quickly shook my head. "No, that's not good enough. I need to know the truth. I need to know because this is the one question that you're actually capable of answering for me, the closest explanation I'm ever going to get for why those things might have happened to me in the past."

He sighed but looked away. "I am telling you the truth. It wasn't you, personally, who I hated, Aria. I barely knew you. I just... I don't know what else to call it. Jealousy? Frustration? Misplaced anger?"

He then stood up and began pacing the room, thinking about how to phrase what he needed to say.

And I sat quietly the whole time, giving him as long as he needed to start telling me.

Because I knew that these sorts of emotional discussions weren't going to be in his comfort zone, even if he was different in this life. He was the kind of man who always kept himself hidden, rarely ever betraying how he actually felt inside. Just being able to even somewhat read his expressions in the past had become a skill I'd had to quickly pick up in order to survive. But now I was demanding that he open up to me completely; no more facades.

"For my entire childhood... it felt like the only thing people would talk to me about... was you," he started." I was young, stupid... but it used to piss me off. Every goddamn day there would be someone telling me about how well you were doing in your studies, how smart and pretty you were, how I was so lucky that

#### Chapter Seventy Four

the Goddess was going to match us together one day. Their words never acknowledged my own hard work though. Instead, I was just always compared to you. And pretty quickly, I started comparing myself as well."

He stopped pacing

and finally looked at me, clearly uncomfortable with the topic. "You can imagine that my upbringing wasn't exactly pleasant, what with having Tytus for a father. And I'm not sure if you remember this since you were really young when it happened, but my mother, the prior Luna, killed herself. To be honest, I still don't even know if it was intentional or not. She just stopped eating one day, wouldn't

sleep, wouldn't go out... she would just cry for my father all day. And Tytus? Well, he's not exactly a family man. I have no doubt that he loved my mother, I saw how he used to dote on her in the rare moments they actually were together, but I know he loved the pack more, always giving it more attention than her. I'm sure losing her was the last thing he'd needed in order to stop holding himself back and completely envelope into his work."

"... That's horrible," I whispered, my eyes brimming with tears. I'd had no idea how the former Luna had died, only that she had passed when I was still a child.

"And then there was you," he continued. "You seemingly had the perfect life with parents who, not only loved you, but also equally loved each other. And all the while I was going through this hell of losing my mother, of losing my father, people still compared me to you, still constantly reminding me of how amazing you were and how 'lucky' I was. Like they didn't even realise or care what I was going through. And so it didn't take long before I started to resent even the very idea of you. You became a symbol of everything that was going wrong in my life. And I knew it wasn't even your fault... but I blamed you anyway."

I then slowly stood and walked towards him, looking up into his eyes. "So then what changed your mind?"

He swallowed, his frown deepening.

“...You did,” he said. “That day I briefly came back from exchange, a week after the Jade Moon attack. Your face... the way you looked at me. I’d never seen anything like it. You had more fear in your eyes than I’d seen even a dying man show. And I saw myself reflected back in them. No, I saw Tytus and my mother’s desperation, saw what I could become... and it terrified me. It made me wonder if I’d accidentally done something to you without realising, whether I’d unintentionally put you under the same pressures I’d lived with up until then. But, more importantly than that, it made me wonder what the pack was going to think of me. Because if everyone could place you on such a high pedestal for my entire life, what were they going to think once they saw how you couldn’t even tolerate standing next to me without flinching?”

I wiped away a stray tear that had fallen down my cheek and grabbed his hands within my own.

“...And do you think that was enough? Enough to justify his actions?” I asked him softly. “Do you think that it would have been enough for him to do those things he did to me?”

He shook his head, teeth gritted. “No. I mean... I don’t know. I’m not him. But if he never stopped looking at you like a symbol of his problems instead of a human being? I guess it’s possible. Who knows what sort of path that mentality would eventually lead a person down? Even though I didn’t know how to best deal with it at the start, I realised soon enough that it was childish to keep blaming you for something that wasn’t even your fault. And whilst I didn’t understand at all how things had gotten to that point, I still did my best to try and fix whatever the hell I’d apparently done anyway. Anything just so you would stop looking at me the way you did.”

I gently reached up and touched his cheek against my palm, making him close his eyes in response.

He’d been working so hard to fix something that wasn’t even his fault. Paying for the crimes of someone else. He’d even made it a mission of his to support me, no matter what that might entail.

It made me see how messed up this world had become. How messed up the people had become

#### Chapter Seventy Four

Because maybe in this timeline, Aleric was meant to have ended up with his Aria and they would have been happy together. Unlike his counterpart, this Aleric actually seemed capable of learning compassion and maybe could have eventually learnt to reciprocate her feelings too, even despite his initial resentment growing up.

But instead, I'd stolen his Aria's place. Had my traumatised, hideous soul infused into her innocent, fourteen year old body, taking over completely and erasing her from her own timeline.

And so I pulled his face down to my level, his eyes still closed, and, ever so lightly, I kissed his cheek. An apology for something I was never going to be able to fix, for something I was never going to be able to give back to him. It was a mourning for his Aria that he was now never going to meet, and an atonement for how I'd treated him.

"Thank you for looking out for me," I whispered, "... and I'm sorry for what I put you through."

And as his arms then tightened around my waist, his head finding the nook of my neck, I did my best to remain as still as possible, allowing him this moment I felt he so desperately needed. Just for one night.

Because whilst I couldn't give him what he actually wanted from me, and couldn't give him back someone who was already gone, I could at least give him this one final thing. 1  
Forgiveness... and closure.

## A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 75

### Chapter Seventy Five

...I could just ask her,'i thought to myself, staring in the mirror at my reflection

After that night, Aleric and I had agreed that we needed to come up with a plan on how to *free myself* from the collar... as well as remove Tytus as Alpha in the process. For obvious *reasons*, allowing him to proceed with marking me was out of the question, regardless of the terms Aleric and I were on now. And so we'd conceded that it was time. Time for Tytus to step down, allowing *for* proper change.

...But now that just left us with having to think of a way to actually achieve that.

I'd spent hours already pouring over different ideas, but was mostly coming up empty. All of them either wouldn't work or were morally questionable.

... Which was how it eventually led me to be staring at my reflection, contemplating something I *normally* never would have considered.

To ask my former self for her help.

The girl I hadn't heard speak to me in months, yet was still a part of me. No, wait... that wasn't quite right... She *\*was\** me. Just a part of me that my brain had conjured up, creating a separate entity for me to be able to live with myself and everything I'd done.

'She would be better suited for this,' I thought, touching my cheek. 'She always had an idea or strategy to resolve stubborn problems in the past. And time deadlines just made her work more efficiently.'

...But did I even want her help?

She had been an instrument of chaos that was wielded by a madman. The only thing she truly knew was how to succeed by any means possible. No matter the cost. No matter who it killed along the way. So long as her Aleric would just acknowledge her existence.

I didn't want things to go back down that route. Just because Aleric and I were working together again, it didn't mean that I would allow for things to repeat. I'd already learnt the hard way that sometimes the easiest solutions in politics were only going to weave further conflicts later.

But he had given me an oath. I needed to believe that he would keep his word. It was true that I still

was absolutely certain that he wouldn't suddenly switch one day, but didn't I technically know him better? Couldn't I at least give him the benefit of the doubt? We'd now spent more time together in this life than we ever had in the past. I had been able to learn first hand of his capacity for patience, for kindness, for doing what he thought was right, even if it hurt him. I'd learnt his humour, his laugh....

They were little luxuries I'd never been permitted to see before this life. Things that made him suddenly much more human instead of the monster I used to perceive him to be.

And so I sighed, stepping away from the mirror.

No, I needed to do this on my own.

But how did I ever manage to think of such elaborate plans in the past? I'd brought an entire country to its knees... and yet I was struggling with one Alpha? Was it because I still felt tied to Tytus, my Alpha, even after everything he'd done?

But I knew that wasn't true. I'd been thinking about it for a while now but, the night I had broken free of Aleric's Alpha order to stay away from Thea, had been the same night I might have inadvertently freed myself a little from Tytus too. I definitely still felt the connection to the pack. It's just that his hold over me was now... lessened. A quirk of my marking, I was sure.

Documents were sprawled all over my dining room table, bits of information i'd asked Aleric and Lucy to

acquire for me since I was no longer up to date with the current affairs in the country. *Or maybe it was just that some of my information wasn't quite relevant yet, the incidents having not yet occurred,*

And so i stared at the pages before me, contemplating over the very familiar layout I hadn't seen in such a long time.

...And, finally, I thought of the answer to the question i'd asked myself earlier.

Like a game.

She used to look at war and politics like a puzzle, something to be solved that held a *reward* for her at the end of it. Night after night she would sit at her desk... imagining it all in her head ... being able to see and predict how certain people would react... where they might move. She would utilise everything and everyone available in order to get her the result Aleric wanted.

...But I didn't want to do that. I'd already vowed once to never fall into that mentality again after the last war; the war that made me realise Aleric had just been using me the entire time. The war that made me realise that my pieces on the board were actual living, breathing people.

So was that why I was holding myself back still? Fear of the damage I was capable of? Of becoming her" once more?

It was true that, since coming back, I had dabbled in petty strategy now and then, but I hadn't done anything near the scale I used to do in the past. Since returning, I'd tested Lucy's loyalty with 'poisoned' tea, exploited governments, set up minor traps for potential spies. But I hadn't done anything overly significant. Not really. And I think a part of the reason may have been because of that promise to myself... that promise to not let myself become that person again.

I sat slowly down at the desk in front of me, my eyes scanning over all the documents before me, my hands moving over the pages. It felt almost exactly the same as in the past, the words calling out to me, offering to help me see what I needed to. Think what I needed to.

...But we could do it the right way this time, right? Find a solution that didn't entail hurting everyone else in the process to just get what we wanted?

And so I closed my eyes... and broke yet another one of my promises to myself. 1

“...Do you know what wolfsbane is?” I asked Aleric, a few days later.

We were walking in the garden outside, the sun high above us, both of us enjoying the fresh air.

I’d sent him a personal request asking that he take a walk with me today. Though that wasn’t to say didn’t have other reasons for the abrupt invitation either.

“...You mean like... the poison?” he asked confused, looking at me with concern.

I smiled. “Yeah, that’s the one.”

“...Are we still discussing the plan to remove Tytus as Alpha?”

I laughed. “Yes, we are.

Don’t worry, it’s not what you think. Are you familiar with what it actually does? Wolfsbane?”

“Do I look like a doctor?” he replied rhetorically. “All I know is to avoid it. It literally says everything I need to know about it within the name.”

“Okay, well, I’m not the greatest with herbalism, so don’t quote me here, but the interesting thing about wolfsbane is that it slows your heart down... to the point of being lethal if not careful,” I explained. “In werewolves that lethal point is a hell of a lot quicker, which is why it’s so dangerous for us. But in small doses, it actually works similarly to silver. It moves inside us, slowing us down, making us weaker.

Making us more.. compliant.”

“That’s your plan? You want to poison him?”

“Well, no... that’s not my plan. Not the entire plan, at least,” I corrected slowly. “Just a part of the plan.”

“You just admitted to me, right before suggesting this, that you weren’t great at herbalism,” he pointed out. “And you want to somehow administer him with a dosage so accurate that it doesn’t kill him...just weakens him? And then what?”

“Just wait a second, okay? I’m getting there,” I said, taking a moment to touch one of the flowers we were passing. It was coming into autumn so I knew they’d all be dying soon. The colder air was *a*lready coming in much sooner than anticipated, as evident in how it cooled the metal collar around *m*y neck.

“You said that you weren’t a doctor, but let’s not forget who is,” I continued. “For my plan to work, we have to involve more people than just us. It’s impossible not to. At the very least to take over we’d need the general support of the pack but, in particular, there are also several individuals who are critical for helping us reach this goal. Like for example, in this instance with the wolfsbane... someone like my mother would be required.”

He stopped in his tracks to look at me, frowning. “Aria... are you sure? Your mother? What happens if something goes wrong?”

I chewed the inside of my cheek, thinking about it again. “She is the best person for the job... maybe the only person given her position as head doctor. Besides, even if I tried to get someone else, she would likely just insist on doing it anyway. We also can’t forget that we need to stick exclusively to people we can trust. The only way I foresee my plan becoming dangerous in any way at all is if someone leaks it too soon... hence why we need my mother.”

He held my gaze for another few seconds before finally looking away, continuing to walk.

“Okay, fine... So then how will that work?” he asked.

“I’ll have my mother send out a memo to Tytus requesting his presence at an annual check-up; something that is mandatory for Alphas if issued,” I proceeded. “According to the documents you managed to get your hands on for me, he hasn’t had his yearly check-up yet. Once he arrives, my mother will then administer the wolfsbane, which will hopefully be mixed in with something else to prolong the effects a little bit. This will then mean that, come the next day of my eighteenth birthday, he will be weakened.

But just a small enough dosage for what we need it for. It’s important he doesn’t instantly feel a noticeable difference.”

“Your birthday? You really want to wait until your birthday in a few months to remove him? Isn’t that... cutting it a bit close?”

“Unfortunately, we don’t have a choice,” I said. “The only plan that guarantees Tytus will get out of this unscathed revolves around me having my collar removed first; something that is going to be impossible prior to my birthday. He keeps the key on him at all times so the only chance we’re going to get is in that small moment between him removing the collar... and when he expects you to mark me.”

“...And then what?”

I stopped and turned to face him directly. "...And then I order him to revoke his title and hand the pack over to us. Maybe even exile him to live out his life somewhere else far away from the Winter Mist so he doesn't interfere."

His eyes narrowed slightly, trying to fully understand what I was suggesting. "But... Aria, no offence, but I was there the last time you tried ordering someone. It took you several attempts and it left you almost passing out on the floor. And that was just against an unranked warrior. How do you expect to use that against Tytus, an Alpha?"

"I've been practising," I admitted, a little guilty for forgetting to mention it earlier,

Surprise instantly crossed his features and I didn't blame him. Honestly, it still surprised me too that I was capable of accessing the ability, especially given the collar should have made it impossible,

"I don't know how it works," I quickly explained, "just that I can still feel it. Though... it's a lot harder. Like trying to filter a water dam through a funnel. But I can still do it, or rather, I can still practice it. It's just that I'll need to have the collar taken off first before... before I can remove the funnel and harness the dam instead, if you get what I mean."

"And you said that this plan was only dangerous if it gets leaked? You're literally betting everything on the small chance you can accomplish something you've never done before. Something you can't even test out prior to the day."

"Well... I mean, there are several things I'm implementing to increase the success rate," I defended. "Like, for example, the wolfsbane should make him a bit more susceptible to the command even if I'm not at full capacity... but you're also incorrectly assuming a little here. I never said that I was betting everything on this. I'm not stupid enough to put all of my eggs in one basket. Technically... there is a Plan B as well."

He stood studying my face, waiting for me to proceed.

"I said that there was only one plan which guarantees Tytus abdicates the position unhurt. Unfortunately, Plan B is not as pleasant as that. Actually, it's where you come in."

"...You don't actually mean—."

"... You'll need to challenge him directly," I finished for him.

"Aria... are you nuts? You want me to kill him?"

My eyes widened. “What? No! No, you don’t need to do anything as drastic as that,” I hurriedly corrected.” No, technically, if you read the laws of challenging an Alpha, they state you are only required to incapacitate him. It’ll be even easier because of the wolfsbane too. But, in the event that I can’t pull off the command, then you’ll need to challenge him, Aleric. There’s literally no other choice. If you don’t then I doubt he’ll even permit you to go through with the original punishment of marking me. Currently, he just sees me as only a threat to your future. What do you think he’s going to do to me when he sees me as trying to threaten his?”

I could tell he was slowly realising that what I was telling him was the truth, that it really was the only viable backup plan. And, whilst I also knew their relationship wasn’t the greatest, it was still something I wished I didn’t have to ask of him. Because at the end of the day, Tytus was still his Alpha... he was still his father

“...Fine. I’ll do it,” he agreed. “But I’m only agreeing because I want to put my faith in you that Plan A works.”

I laughed. “It’s good to keep positive thoughts like that,” I said, brushing off the pressure he was trying to place back on me.

The packhouse then came back into sight ahead. We’d almost returned to the main area where other people would see us. Even from here, I could tell there were a few members out and about.

“Oh... and one more thing,” I added, now subconsciously playing with the collar. “In order to mitigate the fallout after we take over, we need to start working on public image immediately. I’m sure there will be some who don’t agree with our more... forceful methods of title succession. We’ll need to start preparing the narrative as soon as possible so it won’t be as negative once the time comes. The goal is to show people that removing Tytus early is the right thing to do. To help them see our side. That’s the only way that people will even begin to entertain the ideas we’re proposing.”

Or, more accurately, the only way they’ll probably completely accept me,

” I assume that’s the actual reason for why you invited me out here today then,” he said before his eyes lowered to where my hand was touching the metal around my neck. “And why *you’re* finally letting people see that.”

It was something I’d been procrastinating all morning. I’d stood by my door for the longest time, trying to find any reason to put off leaving without my scarf. But we were running out of time, and even rumours needed time to travel.

“Building a narrative...,” I reiterated. “Like... Tytus enjoys chaining a Saintess who did nothing wrong. He likes... proving he is better than the Goddess herself by imprisoning her earthly embodiment.”

Aleric scoffed and looked at me amused. “You’re hardly innocent... and you don’t even believe that Goddess crap. You told me yourself that the whole ‘faith in the Goddess’ thing is basically a scam.”

I shrugged. “They don’t need to know that. They just need to believe it. Honestly, the more pious they are, the easier it’s going to be for people to accept our mutual co-alphaship.”

We’d walked up to the packhouse then and proceeded to start heading back upstairs to where our quarters were. Along the way, several curious faces of pack members had turned to look at my new accessory, something that fed perfectly into my plan.

“...Are you still worried about that?” he asked. “About... if something happens and things don’t turn out the way we agreed?”

He was asking me if I was still worried whether he would betray me. The answer was, of course, yes. How could I not be? It was something that was on my mind almost every waking second.

Everything that I was doing, everything I was planning, all of it hinged on him honouring the pact we’d made. Even the very trust I was putting in him to help me execute this strategy was already too much. After all, the second Tytus found out about any of this, I would be screwed.

But it was a gamble I’d told myself I would take and I needed to see it through to the end. The benefits of eliminating civil war with Aleric outweighed the alternatives, and it gave me the position I needed in order to start focusing on stopping Thea instead. Stop... Whatever the hell she was planning. Something I still had no intel on.

I paused to then look at him, my expression becoming more serious than any of the prior conversations we’d already had.

“...You already know my answer to that, Aleric.”

And quickly, I continued walking up the stairs, not wanting to discuss it any further.

“Alright then. So what’s the next thing I can help with?” he asked once we’d arrived back at my quarters.

I pulled out a key and slotted it into the shiny new lock that was fitted onto my door, pushing it open. Only Lucy, Aleric and I had access to my quarters now, as it should have been from the start. And, to my relief, it decreased the necessity of needing constant babysitters.

"I've already sent a few letters out, but... here," I said and handed him a large pile of papers that had been sitting on my table inside. "This is for you."

"What is it?" he asked, inspecting the pages curiously.

"A compilation of important things that have happened, of things that are currently happening, and of things that may happen in the future. I've also sorted it by date order. Not in the way you're probably thinking though. What I mean is that I've sorted it in the order of things that require your attention right now, through to things that you probably don't need to worry about for another few years. Unfortunately,

the majority of these are things only you can accomplish right now since I don't presently hold any rank within the pack. There isn't a way for me to justify my involvement without looking suspicious."

"... You managed to do all of this in a few days?"

"It's probably still a bit incomplete," I admitted, eyeing off the pile. "Though I'll let you know if I add anything else to it as I think of it. For now, at least, it's a starting point. If we can tackle some of the bigger items then it'll make the first year or so easier on... what is that?"

Something then caught my attention behind his head, making me lose my train of thought.

It was books. A lot of them. Almost as if a whole shelf of the library had been moved in here.

"Oh... I noticed a while ago that the books you had were just collecting dust despite you having nothing to do," he said, a little awkwardly. "I don't know... was just a bit weird since I know you liked reading so much. But everything sort of clicked when you told me you used to live in here. Thought you might want some new things to read instead."

...He was trying to give me a gift. Or... sort of. It was a gift, in a weird 'probably stole these from the library' kind of way.

And they were definitely from the library. I recognised all the titles immediately, could even almost remember exactly where they would be placed on the shelves. After all, I'd already read all of these books too.

...However, the sentiment was there and I appreciated it. Building good rapport with Aleric was only going to work in my favour for the future.

“Oh... Thank you,” I said, giving him a small smile. “I’ll be sure to read them when I get a chance.”

But his eyes narrowed immediately.

“You’ve already read these too,” he stated, exposing me instantly.

“What? No. They look great, thank you.” “Aria... Seriously.”

I sighed, “Look, truthfully, you’d probably have a hard time trying to find something in the pack I haven’t already read. Once upon a time, I had more free time than I knew what to do with. It doesn’t mean that I don’t appreciate the gesture though.”

“Isn’t there anywhere else? Any other libraries or collections? Surely there has to be something,” he said, adamant on following through with this.

...But was there actually anywhere else that had books I hadn’t read?

And suddenly a thought came to me; a way to solve one of the issues I’d been mulling on. Something that I needed to confirm before I could start working on the next part of my plan.

And, somehow, Aleric had just handed me the perfect way to do it. “Actually...,” I said, speaking slowly in thought, “...there is one place...” 1

Scanned with CamScanner

...I could just ask her,’i thought to myself, staring in the mirror at my reflection

After that night, Aleric and I had agreed that we needed to come up with a plan on how to free myself from the collar... as well as remove Tytus as Alpha in the process. For obvious reasons, allowing him to proceed with marking me was out of the question, regardless of the terms Aleric and I were on now. And so we’d conceded that it was time. Time for Tytus to step down, allowing for proper change.

...But now that just left us with having to think of a way to actually achieve that.

I’d spent hours already pouring over different ideas, but was mostly coming up empty. All of them either wouldn’t work or were morally questionable.

... Which was how it eventually led me to be staring at my reflection, contemplating something I normally never would have considered.

To ask my former self for her help.

The girl I hadn't heard speak to me in months, yet was still a part of me. No, wait... that wasn't quite right... She *\*was\** me. Just a part of me that my brain had conjured up, creating a separate entity for me to be able to live with myself and everything I'd done.

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wasn't absolutely certain that he wouldn't suddenly switch one day, but didn't I technically know him better than his Aleric? Couldn't I at least give him the benefit of the doubt? We'd now spent more time together in this life than we ever had in the past. I had been able to learn first hand of his capacity for patience, for kindness, for doing what he thought was right, even if it hurt him. I'd learnt his humour, his laugh....

They were little luxuries I'd never been permitted to see before this life. Things that made him suddenly much more human instead of the monster I used to perceive him to be.

And so I sighed, stepping away from the mirror.

No, I needed to do this on my own.

But how did I ever manage to think of such elaborate plans in the past? I'd brought an entire country to its knees... and yet I was

struggling with one Alpha? Was it because I still felt tied to Tytus, my Alpha, even after everything he'd done?

But I knew that wasn't true. I'd been thinking about it for a while now but, the night I had broken free of Aleric's Alpha order to stay away from Thea, had been the same night I might have inadvertently freed *myself* a little from Tytus too. I definitely still felt the connection to the pack. It's just that his hold over me was now... lessened. A quirk of my marking, I was sure.

Documents were sprawled all over my dining room table, bits of information i'd asked Aleric and Lucy to

acquire for me since I was no longer up to date with the current affairs in the country. *Or maybe* it was just that some of my information wasn't quite relevant yet, the incidents having not yet occurred,

And so i stared at the pages before me, contemplating over the very familiar layout I hadn't seen in such a long time.

...And, finally, I thought of the answer to the question i'd asked myself earlier.

Like a game.

She used to look at war and politics like a puzzle, something to be solved that held a *reward* for her at the end of it. Night after night she would sit at her desk... imagining it all in her head ... being able to see and predict how certain people would react... where they might move. She would utilise everything and everyone available in order to get her the result Aleric wanted.

...But I didn't want to do that. I'd already vowed once to never fall into that mentality again after the last war; the war that made me realise Aleric had just been using me the entire time. The war that made me realise that my pieces on the board were actual living, breathing people.

So was that why I was holding myself back still? Fear of the damage I was capable of? Of becoming *her* once more?

It was true that, since coming back, I had dabbled in petty strategy now and then, but I hadn't done anything near the scale I used to do in the past. Since returning, I'd tested Lucy's loyalty with 'poisoned' tea, exploited governments, set up minor traps for potential spies. But I hadn't done anything overly significant. Not really. And I think a part of the reason may have been because of that promise to myself... that promise to not let myself become that person again.

I sat slowly down at the desk in front of me, my eyes scanning over all the documents before me, my hands moving over the pages. It felt almost exactly the same as in the past, the words calling out to me, offering to help me see what I needed to. Think what I needed to.

...But we could do it the right way this time, right? Find a solution that didn't entail hurting everyone else in the process to just get what we wanted?

And so I closed my eyes... and broke yet another one of my promises to myself. 1

"...Do you know what wolfsbane is?" I asked Aleric, a few days later.

We were walking in the garden outside, the sun high above us, both of us enjoying the fresh air.

I'd sent him a personal request asking that he take a walk with me today. Though that wasn't to say didn't have other reasons for the abrupt invitation either.

"...You mean like... the poison?" he asked confused, looking at me with concern.

I smiled. "Yeah, that's the one."

"...Are we still discussing the plan to remove Tytus as Alpha?"

I laughed. "Yes, we are.

Don't worry, it's not what you think. Are you familiar with what it actually does? Wolfsbane?"

"Do I look like a doctor?" he replied rhetorically. "All I know is to avoid it. It literally says everything I need to know about it within the name."

"Okay, well, I'm not the greatest with herbalism, so don't quote me here, but the interesting thing about wolfsbane is that it slows your heart down... to the point of being lethal if not careful," I explained. "In werewolves that lethal point is a hell of a lot quicker, which is why it's so dangerous for us. But in small doses, it actually works similarly to silver. It moves inside us, slowing us down, making us weaker.

Making us more.. compliant."

"That's your plan? You want to poison him?"

"Well, no... that's not my plan. Not the entire plan, at least," I corrected slowly. "Just a part of the plan."

“You just admitted to me, right before suggesting this, that you weren’t great at herbalism,” he pointed out. “And you want to somehow administer him with a dosage so accurate that it doesn’t kill him...just weakens him? And then what?”

“Just wait a second, okay? I’m getting there,” I said, taking a moment to touch one of the flowers we were passing. It was coming into autumn so I knew they’d all be dying soon. The colder air was already coming in much sooner than anticipated, as evident in how it cooled the metal collar around my neck.

“You said that you weren’t a doctor, but let’s not forget who is,” I continued. “For my plan to work, we have to involve more people than just us. It’s impossible not to. At the very least to take over we’d need the general support of the pack but, in particular, there are also several individuals who are critical for helping us reach this goal. Like for example, in this instance with the wolfsbane... someone like my mother would be required.”

He stopped in his tracks to look at me, frowning. “Aria... are you sure? Your mother? What happens if something goes wrong?”

I chewed the inside of my cheek, thinking about it again. “She is the best person for the job... maybe the only person given her position as head doctor. Besides, even if I tried to get someone else, she would likely just insist on doing it anyway. We also can’t forget that we need to stick exclusively to people we can trust. The only way I foresee my plan becoming dangerous in any way at all is if someone leaks it too soon... hence why we need my mother.”

He held my gaze for another few seconds before finally looking away, continuing to walk.

“Okay, fine... So then how will that work?” he asked.

“I’ll have my mother send out a memo to Tytus requesting his presence at an annual check-up; something that is mandatory for Alphas if issued,” I proceeded. “According to the documents you managed to get your hands on for me, he hasn’t had his yearly check-up yet. Once he arrives, my mother will then administer the wolfsbane, which will hopefully be mixed in with something else to prolong the effects a little bit. This will then mean that, come the next day of my eighteenth birthday, he will be weakened.

But just a small enough dosage for what we need it for. It’s important he doesn’t instantly feel a noticeable difference.”

“Your birthday? You really want to wait until your birthday in a few months to remove him? Isn’t that... cutting it a bit close?”

“Unfortunately, we don’t have a choice,” I said. “The only plan that guarantees Tytus will get out of this unscathed revolves around me having my collar removed first; something that is going to be impossible prior to my birthday. He keeps the key on him at all times so the only chance we’re going to get is in that small moment between him removing the collar... and when he expects you to mark me.”

“...And then what?”

I stopped and turned to face him directly. “...And then I order him to revoke his title and hand the pack over to us. Maybe even exile him to live out his life somewhere else far away from the Winter Mist so he doesn’t interfere.”

His eyes narrowed slightly, trying to fully understand what I was suggesting. “But... Aria, no offence, but I was there the last time you tried ordering someone. It took you several attempts and it left you almost passing out on the floor. And that was just against an unranked warrior. How do you expect to use that against Tytus, an Alpha?”

“I’ve been practising,” I admitted, a little guilty for forgetting to mention it earlier,

Surprise instantly crossed his features and I didn’t blame him. Honestly, it still surprised me too that I was capable of accessing the ability, especially given the collar should have made it impossible,

“I don’t know how it works,” I quickly explained, “just that I can still feel it. Though... it’s a lot harder. Like trying to filter a water dam through a funnel. But I can still do it, or rather, I can still practice it. It’s just that I’ll need to have the collar taken off first before... before I can remove the funnel and harness the dam instead, if you get what I mean.”

“And you said that this plan was only dangerous if it gets leaked? You’re literally betting everything on the small chance you can accomplish something you’ve never done before. Something you can’t even test out prior to the day.”

“Well... I mean, there are several things I’m implementing to increase the success rate,” I defended. “Like, for example, the wolfsbane should make him a bit more susceptible to the command even if I’m not at full capacity... but you’re also incorrectly assuming a little here. I never said that I was betting everything on this. I’m not stupid enough to put all of my eggs in one basket. Technically... there is a Plan B as well.”

He stood studying my face, waiting for me to proceed.

"I said that there was only one plan which guarantees Tytus abdicates the position unhurt. Unfortunately, Plan B is not as pleasant as that. Actually, it's where you come in."

"...You don't actually mean—."

"... You'll need to challenge him directly," I finished for him.

"Aria... are you nuts? You want me to kill him?"

My eyes widened. "What? No! No, you don't need to do anything as drastic as that," I hurriedly corrected. "No, technically, if you read the laws of challenging an Alpha, they state you are only required to incapacitate him. It'll be even easier because of the wolfsbane too. But, in the event that I can't pull off the command, then you'll need to challenge him, Aleric. There's literally no other choice. If you don't then I doubt he'll even permit you to go through with the original punishment of marking me. Currently, he just sees me as only a threat to your future. What do you think he's going to do to me when he sees me as trying to threaten his?"

I could tell he was slowly realising that what I was telling him was the truth, that it really was the only viable backup plan. And, whilst I also knew their relationship wasn't the greatest, it was still something I wished I didn't have to ask of him. Because at the end of the day, Tytus was still his Alpha... he was still his father

"...Fine. I'll do it," he agreed. "But I'm only agreeing because I want to put my faith in you that Plan A works."

I laughed. "It's good to keep positive thoughts like that," I said, brushing off the pressure he was trying to place back on me.

The packhouse then came back into sight ahead. We'd almost returned to the main area where other people would see us. Even from here, I could tell there were a few members out and about.

"Oh... and one more thing," I added, now subconsciously playing with the collar. "In order to mitigate the fallout after we take over, we need to start working on public image immediately. I'm sure there will be some who don't agree with our more... forceful methods of title succession. We'll need to start preparing the narrative as soon as possible so it won't be as negative once the time comes. The goal is to show people that removing Tytus early is the right thing to do. To help them see our side. That's the only way that people will even begin to entertain the ideas we're proposing."

Or, more accurately, the only way they'll probably completely accept me,

"I assume that's the actual reason for why you invited me out here today then," he said before his eyes lowered to where my hand was touching the metal around my neck. "And why *you're* finally letting people see that."

It was something I'd been procrastinating all morning. I'd stood by my door *for* the longest time, *trying* to find any reason to put off leaving without my scarf. But we were running out of *time*, and even rumours needed time to travel.

"Building a narrative..." I reiterated. "Like... Tytus enjoys chaining a Saintess who did nothing wrong. He likes... proving he is better than the Goddess herself by imprisoning her earthly embodiment."

Aleric scoffed and looked at me amused. "You're hardly innocent... and you don't even believe that Goddess crap. You told me yourself that the whole 'faith in the Goddess' thing is basically a scam."

I shrugged. "They don't need to know that. They just need to believe it. Honestly, the more pious they are, the easier it's going to be for people to accept our mutual co-alphaship."

We'd walked up to the packhouse then and proceeded to start heading back upstairs to where our quarters were. Along the way, several curious faces of pack members had turned to look at my new accessory, something that fed perfectly into my plan.

"...Are you still worried about that?" he asked. "About... if something happens and things don't turn out the way we agreed?"

He was asking me if I was still worried whether he would betray me. The answer was, of course, yes. How could I not be? It was something that was on my mind almost every waking second.

Everything that I was doing, everything I was planning, all of it hinged on him honouring the pact we'd made. Even the very trust I was putting in him to help me execute this strategy was already too much. After all, the second Tytus found out about any of this, I would be screwed.

But it was a gamble I'd told myself I would take and I needed to see it through to the end. The benefits of eliminating civil war with Aleric outweighed the alternatives, and it gave me the position I needed in order to start focusing on stopping Thea instead. Stop... Whatever the hell she was planning. Something I still had no intel on.

I paused to then look at him, my expression becoming more serious than any of the prior conversations we'd already had.

“...You already know my answer to that, Aleric.”

And quickly, I continued walking up the stairs, not wanting to discuss it any further.

“Alright then. So what’s the next thing I can help with?” he asked once we’d arrived back at my quarters.

I pulled out a key and slotted it into the shiny new lock that was fitted onto my door, pushing it open. Only Lucy, Aleric and I had access to my quarters now, as it should have been from the start. And, to my relief, it decreased the necessity of needing constant babysitters.

“I’ve already sent a few letters out, but... here,” I said and handed him a large pile of papers that had been sitting on my table inside. “This is for you.”

“What is it?” he asked, inspecting the pages curiously.

“A compilation of important things that have happened, of things that are currently happening, and of things that may happen in the future. I’ve also sorted it by date order. Not in the way you’re probably thinking though. What I mean is that I’ve sorted it in the order of things that require your attention right now, through to things that you probably don’t need to worry about for another few years. Unfortunately,

Scanned with CamScanner

the majority of these are things only you can accomplish right now since I don’t presently hold any rank within the pack. There isn’t a way for me to justify my involvement without looking suspicious.”

“... You managed to do all of this in a few days?”

“It’s probably still a bit incomplete,” I admitted, eyeing off the pile. “Though I’ll let you know if I add anything else to it as I think of it. For now, at least, it’s a starting point. If we can tackle some of the bigger items then it’ll make the first year or so easier on... what is that?”

Something then caught my attention behind his head, making me lose my train of thought.

It was books. A lot of them. Almost as if a whole shelf of the library had been moved in here.

“Oh... I noticed a while ago that the books you had were just collecting dust despite you having nothing to do,” he said, a little awkwardly. “I don’t know... was just a bit weird

since I know you liked reading so much. But everything sort of clicked when you told me you used to live in here. Thought you might want some new things to read instead.”

...He was trying to give me a gift. Or... sort of. It was a gift, in a weird ‘probably stole these from the library’ kind of way.

And they were definitely from the library. I recognised all the titles immediately, could even almost remember exactly where they would be placed on the shelves. After all, I’d already read all of these books too.

...However, the sentiment was there and I appreciated it. Building good rapport with Aleric was only going to work in my favour for the future.

“Oh... Thank you,” I said, giving him a small smile. “I’ll be sure to read them when I get a chance.”

But his eyes narrowed immediately.

“You’ve already read these too,” he stated, exposing me instantly.

“What? No. They look great, thank you.” “Aria... Seriously.”

I sighed, “Look, truthfully, you’d probably have a hard time trying to find something in the pack I haven’t already read. Once upon a time, I had more free time than I knew what to do with. It doesn’t mean that I don’t appreciate the gesture though.”

“Isn’t there anywhere else? Any other libraries or collections? Surely there has to be something,” he said, adamant on following through with this.

...But was there actually anywhere else that had books I hadn’t read?

And suddenly a thought came to me; a way to solve one of the issues I’d been mulling on. Something that I needed to confirm before I could start working on the next part of my plan.

And, somehow, Aleric had just handed me the perfect way to do it. “Actually...,” I said, speaking slowly in thought, “...there is one place...”

## **A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 76**

### **Chapter Seventy Six**

” Why Elder Luke” Aleric asked me a few days later

We were in his car, driving towards the housing estate where the Elders resided. A placid had awaited since my marking confirmation three years ago.

"Are you seriously asking me that?"

"Well, it's just he's the least experienced Elder, right? Alenc said "Didn't he join only a few years ago? Wouldn't one of the other six Elders be better to reach out to since they're more experienced

"The fact you're even asking me that means you mustn't be overly familiar with how this pack is actually run yet," I replied.

"I know enough," he said defensively, making me laugh.

"Okay, okay, sorry. I'll explain," I said. "Have you ever noticed how all of the workload Tytus gives you consists of only very minor issues? Like petty problems that don't need much thought

"Yes but I'm not a fully sworn in ranked member yet. The larger issues would be looked after by Tytus and the Elders."

"On the surface? Yes," I said. "If it's the same as the past, then, yes the Elders are the ones currently looking after all the bigger issues. Back then, Tytus and yourself would have the final say but you weren't typically the people coming up with all of the ideas. You relied on the Elders and me for that

"On the surface? Is this where you finally tell me why just this one Elder? \*\*

"\* needed to give you context first," I said, disapproving of his impatience. "So, as I was saying, currently the Elders are looking after all the major issues. Now, if you ever get your hands on the private meeting minutes one day, you'll see one name constantly popping up: Luke Hastings."

"Elder Luke?" he asked to which I nodded.

"Elder Luke is single-handedly one of the most dangerous people in our pack and he doesn't even need to lift a finger for that title," I said. "After I'd completed my Luna coronation, I went into the pack vault and read through most of the classified documents relating to meetings and politics. In a way, he is basically running the place right now with his strategies and was the person who sparked my initial fascination in the field"

The pack vault was located in a secret location under the Winter Mist, reserved for only ranked members and Elders. Not even heirs were allowed in there; it was the place where all treasures and important documents were kept for safekeeping. Among

many other things, a notable item in its inventory right now was the ancient sword that beheaded me

In the past. Aleric had banned me from going in there but technically, by holding a Luna rank, I normally should have had access. Apparently in this life, he didn't seem to care as he now didn't even remark on the fact I'd been in there.

Aleric drove quietly for a bit mulling over what I'd just told him. He was probably piecing it all together. You're right. Thinking about it now, he does seem to influence far more than the others

I smiled. "Don't feel bad. If you hadn't noticed Elder Luke subtly pushing meetings his way up until now then you were just doing exactly what he expected you to. If everyone knew what he was doing I'm sure it would be a lot harder for him to accomplish some of the things he does. Hell, even I only found out a few years ago that he has people working under him directly. Pretty sure even the ranked members might not know about that one as it was a surprise to me."

I recalled how he'd somehow known Cai was training me in combat even though only Mira, Cai and I knew about that. He was a master of secrets on a higher level than most probably realised. After all, as he had so nicely put it in the past, he didn't get to where he was now without help. Who knew how vast his network actually was?

"If we find ourselves on the opposite side of Elder Luke then I can't guarantee the outcome," I continued. "Truthfully, I would rather face Tytus head-on several times than go up against Elder Luke even once. He's a lot smarter than I think some give him credit for... and I owe him a lot for helping me get to where I am."

If he had never suggested I pursue becoming Beta then there was no telling where I'd be right now. Sure, it hadn't worked out, but without it, Aleric and I would have never gotten closer. And I would have never become stronger or more confident. I was where I was today because of him. Because he believed in me to do something that was previously unheard of.

It was exactly that mentality of his that I was counting on. The sort of progressive, open-mindedness that he was renowned for even prior to this life. He'd been an ally towards me up until now... but would it be that way when the moment for change finally arose?

Because I knew approaching him wasn't without its risks. I was still completely aware of the fact that this would be asking him to betray his current Alpha... and everyone had their limits.

"We're here," Aleric said, pulling up to the gated property. "I'll try to be here to pick you up when you're done. All good?"

I unbuckled my seatbelt and nodded. "Yep, all good. Oh... and if anyone asks why I'm here?"

"You're meeting with Elder Luke to read his book collection. It caught your attention during your marking confirmation a few years ago."

I smiled. It wasn't a lie but it was a nice double-sided coin nevertheless, acting as a cover for my main reason for coming here.

"I'll see you later, Aleric," I said and exited the car.

Upon leaving, I approached the intricate black iron gates being manned by a warrior. Just like the last time I was here, they opened the entrance up for me immediately without needing to announce who I was.

It was almost a strange feeling though. When I first came to this house, I was nervous because of what the marking confirmation would mean for my future. This time I was nervous because of what I was now trying to do with that mark.

Once inside, I stood in the lobby silently but didn't need to wait long before a familiar voice called out to

"Saintess," Elder Luke's deep voice greeted, making me turn around.

He still looked as he always did; a messy unkempt look about him which somehow fit his character perfectly

"Elder Luke," I replied, bowing my head slightly. "Please call me Aria, just as you always have in the past."

He quickly waved off my bow and gave me a small smile. "So I heard you've requested to spend some time reading my collection?

Given your reaction last time, I'm a little surprised you've waited so long to stop by."

"That would make two of us," I said and began walking with him towards his office. "Funny how life sometimes gets in the way. But perhaps there was a reason for why it's taken me this long."

"Are you referring to a greater divine plan?" he asked, looking at me curiously from the corner of his eye. "If so, should I take that to suggest you've found new meaning in your mark from the Goddess?"

I laughed a little. "Where possible, I prefer to sway my future in the direction I choose, rather than rely on a higher power for that. Wouldn't you agree, Elder Luke?"

His lips twitched in a knowing half-smile but we kept walking. Given his position, it was probably best he didn't publicly answer that since Elders were meant to uphold the teachings of the Goddess.

We soon arrived at his office and he ushered me inside. Just like the last time, my breath caught in my throat a little at the sight of his collection. It really was a marvel how he'd managed to acquire so many of these rare volumes.

I walked over and instantly began perusing the different books, an eagerness bubbling inside that reminded me of how much I missed the thrill of reading something new.

But I had to remember why I was here... and it wasn't just for the books.

"Say... I've been doing some research lately and I've become interested in a particular event that occurred a few years ago. Are you familiar with the history of the Blue Vale pack? I'm sure you know which incident I'm referring to."

I turned around to see he'd raised an eyebrow at me, quickly catching on to where I was going with this.

"...I am. Was there a particular part of that event you were interested in?"

"Well the circumstances were abrupt and the results unpredictable. I know you're pretty experienced in this field so I was wondering what your opinion on it was. Do you think that what they did was correct? That the results they achieved justified their actions?"

His eyes glinted with that same look of curiosity I was familiar with. There was no question he knew what I was talking about. What I was *actually* talking about.

Because the Blue Vale pack was a rare case in history where the title succession hadn't been passed down to the next in line but rather a relative. In a protest against the current leadership, their pack had rallied behind a cousin of the Alpha, stripping the current one of his title and bringing about new change. It caused civil turmoil for some time before the pack stabilised under the new regime.

So when I asked Elder Luke what his opinion on the matter was, whether he agreed that the change in leadership was the right decision, what I was really asking him was if he would support me in doing the same.

And he'd figured out my cryptic message immediately.

“Well it was a strange circumstance, to say the least,” he started, giving it some thought. “Some might even say an unnecessary change.”

My heart sunk a little inside. I really didn't want to start a game of chess against the same man I'd originally learned from.

“However... I am not personally of that mind,” he continued. “In fact, seeing the advancements the Blue Vale pack has made in recent times, it's easy to see that regardless of the initial impact, they believed it was the right thing to do. And in that belief, they have accomplished more than they probably would have achieved previously.”

“So... if done all over again, you would support their decision for change?” I asked, doing my best to keep my voice neutral despite the excitement building inside. “You wouldn't stop them from taking the steps they did?”

He paused and took a moment to fully think through the implications of my question. If he agreed to help or, at the very least, not intervene, then it would technically be considered treason.

He slowly went and sat in his chair behind the desk, leaning back into it.

“No,” he finally said. “No, I wouldn't stop them from doing what they thought was right, because change can be a much worse thing for everyone involved.”

I smiled, unable to hide it any longer. I think they would probably appreciate that.”

But his eyes narrowed ever so slightly, looking into mine. “Have you asked any of my other colleagues this question?”

My smile quickly jumped into a knowing smirk. “I think we both know I don't need to.”

He then laughed and instantly broke the tension. “Looks like someone did their homework thoroughly on the subject.”

“Well. What can I say? I've always been a quick study.” I said, turning back around to face the books. “Though I can't say I've had the most positive of experiences with them anyway.”

My distaste for the other elders was probably no secret since I always seemed to be publicly butting heads with them. But it also stemmed deeper than that.

They had thrown me to the sword in my past life and had barely lifted a finger to help me in this one. And who could forget that prophecy they'd had when I was born? It was the foundation for most of my

problems growing up and, apparently, Alenc's too,

...But what even was that prophecy? I know now that Selene couldn't intervene with our choices as that infringed on the laws she was bound by. So how was it that a bunch of old cronies came up with a prophecy about Aleric and I's future, of all things? Was it even really from her?

Was there a particular subject you might be interested in reading?" Elder Luke said, pulling me from my thoughts. "I might be able to help recommend some books relating to the topic."

Given where my head had just been, the request came easy to me.

"Do you have anything on the Goddess?" I asked, turning to look at him, my expression instantly becoming serious. "And I don't mean those vague books I've already read in the library before. I mean... actual information. Like that book I saw you use for my confirmation."

He gave me another knowing look before he went about pulling a few from the shelves. Eventually, after a few minutes had passed, he handed me over four different ones; all of which looked far older than I felt comfortable touching. They looked almost fragile enough to break by just breathing on them.

"This is probably what you're after," he said, gesturing for me to take the guest seat at his desk. "They're copies of originals so I'm not sure if the information is as accurate as it could be provide you with some new information that you won't typically find elsewhere."

Copies? So there were originals out there even older than the ones in my hand? Seemed impossible to even consider

I took the seat opposite Elder Luke and began flicking through the first book. There was definitely a lot of information I already knew, general topics and ideology, but I could see there were some new things too.

"...Selene has a brother?" I asked surprised, reading a page relating to a family tree,

"Helios, her twin," Elder Luke replied. "God of the Sun. The two are referred to as Gods of nature, deities considered separate from the typical belief system. They're immortalised beyond the normal standard because of their status being the Sun and Moon."

Strange we weren't taught about him given that it would surely have some sort of impact on Selene. And it made me wonder about other things too. Like... did he have children as well? Creatures he'd birthed like Selene had our kind?

I finished flicking through the first book but was still left feeling a little unsatisfied. It hadn't really

answered anything of significance for me.

“Elder Luke... I know this was before your time, but... do you know anything about the prophecy?” I asked slowly, my mind still unable to shake the feeling that I was missing something there. “The one that stated Aleric and I would be together and bring prosperity to the Winter Mist? It’s just... I have my doubts that Selene would involve herself in such a petty matter... and yet the Elders seem so sure of their prediction.”

He creased his lips in thought, frowning for a few seconds. “I don’t know if they should call it a ‘prophecy’, truthfully,” he said, scratching his chin. “Though your word ‘prediction’ might be more accurate? At least in my opinion. I think the old fools had a bigger flair for the dramatics before I joined.”

“Then... what are they basing it on if it’s not provided by Selene?” I asked. It was the first time I’d heard anything like this. My whole life I’d grown up being told it was a prophecy. Everyone had been told that.

He reached over and grabbed at one of the books in the pile, opening it up to a page showing a diagram of a triangle. The lettering looked to be in an old dead language we didn’t use anymore and was one I was no longer very fluent in. Maybe ten years ago I could have done a better job reading this but now too long had passed. I was very rusty... but I gave it my best shot anyway.

‘Direct Lineage’, the page seemed to say at the top. I frowned trying to decipher the rest but it didn’t make much sense without any background to what I was even looking at.

“...What is this? Some sort of... ‘direct line’? What does that mean?” I asked, attempting to read it.

“It’s the theory around the founding families. They supposedly descend from the original children of Selene. The first werewolves. There may have been more once but we now only know about three lines, Presumably, if there were any others, they were completely lost or died out.”

I looked back down at the page and tried to translate it again. The triangle showed three families, each with a different... focus? Attribute? I wasn’t sure.

“‘Strength’? Or... is it ‘power’? And this one... is it sight? No... maybe ‘foresight’ is a better word...,” I said slowly as I read them aloud, confusion thick in my voice. The third family I couldn’t translate properly at all. “I don’t understand what this is. Are they like family mottos? House values?”

Elder Luke then leaned forward to look over the book better. “Something like that. Depends on which translation you like to go by. Some even believe they’re qualities of the Goddess herself, passed down within the blood of each family.”

An uneasy feeling started settling inside me. "And people actually believe that?"

"No. Which is probably why no one ever discusses it," he answered bluntly. "This information is usually only spoken about between the Elders of this pack these days. Other packs either don't believe in it or don't have the information available to them."

"...I don't know what this third one is," I admitted, still trying to read the book.

"...Love? Acceptance? | don't think that's quite right though."

He gave a small smile at my attempt at translating. "Not quite. Though truthfully this one doesn't translate well anyway. I believe it's sort of like... reverence? Like unquestionable adoration."

If these really were attributes of Selene, I wondered if the third was that overwhelming feeling you get from being in her presence. That sense of wanting to cry from joy and wanting to do anything to please her. I remembered how hard it'd been to remain focused around her during my time in the Abyss. If I hadn't felt so strongly about my circumstances, perhaps I would have fallen to my knees before her.

"This is all ridiculous," I said, looking up at him as though he were crazy.

"More ridiculous than a marking from a Goddess?" he asked, posing it as though it should have been obvious. "I can't say I ever gave this sort of thing a second thought before I met you. But now...? Well, who

knows what is actually real and what is just a myth?"

I shook my head, frowning. "And this is the crap the Elders built a prophecy on? My entire childhood I was being used as a tool, groomed for a Luna position and stripped of all my freedoms... because of this?!"

He gave a small shrug. "I personally wouldn't have done any of that... but I can see why the other Elders, men of faith, would have pushed that agenda. It is easy enough to piece the puzzle together. You're the

first female born to Chrysalis in over a century. *Maybe longer.*"

He then pointed to one of the houses on the triangle. The one I'd labelled foresight. Immediately, I swallowed back the bile in my throat.

"Born to a Beta who served an Alpha that had a son not two years prior."

His finger then moved to the first one I'd read; strength or power.

"It seems like an obvious match given these are your houses," he finished. "If the lineages were to be believed, you'd be the first mated pair recorded in modern history that hail

from the original direct descendants. How could that not be seen as prosperous for the pack?”

I shakily shook my head. It wasn't like they were wrong in predicting Aleric and I were mates but... this? Really? This was what it was all based on? Speculation?

“No... No, that seems like too far of a leap. Who's to say I wouldn't be mated to someone else... or... or that other line? ...Which family is the other line anyway?”

Elder Luke shrugged. “That one was lost since they didn't remain within the pack after their book was recorded. No one knows who they are anymore.”

I looked up and studied his features, reading his expression. He'd known much more about this than I'd expected, had proven himself as a curator of knowledge, and so I wanted to believe him... but he had that goddamn look in his eye.

“You know,” I accused him softly. “You know who it is.... don't you? There is no way your curiosity wouldn't have driven you to find out, even if you didn't personally believe in it back then.”

“You know me far better than I thought,” he chuckled before his expression slowly changed to one of more serious calculation, gauging my reaction. “But... I think you already know the answer to who it is, Aria.”

And my stomach instantly dropped as he confirmed what I'd been fearing.

What I'd realised the minute he'd corrected my translation, but refused to admit.

There was only one person I knew who fit that description so perfectly. One person who could walk into a room and immediately make everyone crowd to them, enamoured by their every word.

Someone who could talk his way out of almost every situation and could always be forgiven.

...One person who even I'd been completely helpless against.

“...Fuck,” I hissed. Cai.

## **A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 77**

### **Chapter Seventy–Seven**

“This is fake,” I said, coming off far more flustered than I intended. “There is no way there are people out there just running around with... with god powers. That's... that's so stupid.”

It's absurd. Insane. Some sort of joke.

Because if it was real then that meant my life had been far more controlled than I initially realised.

That there were powers at be far more advanced out there than just a Goddess mark. And it meant that Cai...

I wanted to throw up.

"Based on your reaction," Elder Luke said, his eyes examining me, "I can't help but wonder if this discovery isn't actually all that foreign to you. Would I be correct in assuming that perhaps you have personal insight into the theory?"

He was right. I was getting overly worked up because a part of me had already started piecing it together ... and it scared me. The more I thought about it, the more plausible it became.

Because, truthfully, there was something I was already all too familiar with; my visions. 'Foresight'. It fit perfectly with the attribute allegedly assigned to my house. But I'd always thought the ability to see ahead was something new, something Selene gave to me only once I returned. What if I'd always had the latent foundation inside me but couldn't harness it until after Selene had directly gifted me a piece of herself?

...What if, prior to coming back, the ability had only had enough strength to manifest itself as something more diluted, something more normal.

...Like a keen interest in strategy; the art of being able to plan ahead.

So that meant the new piece of Selene was sort of like... a booster shot. It wasn't just a gift of authority and visions.... It was something already written inside my DNA, just enhancing me to the point of unnatural ability

But what did this mean for Aleric and Cai then? What did this mean for all of us?

And, quickly, I started to wonder something else too.

...Like if this had something to do with why Selene brought me back.

In the past Aleric and I had joined together to kill Cai... and then Aleric had killed me. We ended up destroying each other. Was this what it had come down to the entire time? Some more bullshit because of Selene? ...But then how did Thea equate into this?

The room then started to sway as pangs of a headache began pulsing in my head.

This was too much. Too much information to process all at once. And that was just with me ignoring every rabbit hole of dark thoughts I wanted to fall into relating to my prior relationship with Cai. Was it even real or....?

I gritted my teeth and closed my eyes, fighting against everything inside that wanted to let all of this get the better of me. I already thought I was completely blind when it came to the seemingly never-ending war for the future... and yet it turns out i'd just been looking inside of a cupboard this entire time, never seeing the much, much larger room attached to it. This new information opened up theories I hadn't even considered, much less thought possible.

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...Until I made a decision that I knew was a mistake from the beginning. 1

"You're shaking," Aleric said, breaking me from my thoughts. "What's wrong?"

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I folded my arms over my chest and turned back to look at Aleric.

I felt... vulnerable. Insecure. Cai had been someone I could rely on, someone I could trust. Was there really no one I could completely depend on? Was this my fate regardless of which life I lived?

"...And I get he has a mate now, I'm not stupid," I said, my voice now softer. "I wouldn't ever interfere with that. But it doesn't change how I feel... or how I thought I felt. Even if it's just a memory now, I wish I could still believe wholeheartedly that it was entirely mine... not Selene's."

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the major pack issues or the dire problems that plagued me. For all the uncertainty and fear that filled me upon my return, the days I spent with *Myra* were still the happiest I'd been in either timeline.

"Sorry," I mumbled, rubbing my arm. "I don't know why... I just... I'm sorry."

"You're not the only one angry at Selene, Aria," he said, thankfully not bringing attention to my faux pas. "I understand it. Really, I do. And not just because of all this shit you've just told me now."

I was going to ask him for his other reasoning but he continued before I could get the words out.

"But let's not lose focus on what we're working on right now," he said. "Because all of this information you've told me now is great and we can piece it together, but we've got less than

two months until your birthday, Aria. Two months to plan an insurrection against one of the largest packs in the entire country. Finding out about direct lineages doesn't change anything for us right now, but successfully executing this plan will put us in a better position to focus on it after we're done."

He was right. I could continue my research in my downtime, but my main attention needed to be on preparing for the big day. It was at least something I could actually work on, as opposed to the uncertain questions I had about the lineage theory.

"What do we still have left to do?" he asked, taking a seat by the table.

I gave it a second of thought before I realised what was next... and it was yet another awkward topic of conversation.

"Ah, I've got a doctor's appointment with my mother next week and I'm going to use the time to go over the plan with her," I said, my tone a little stiff.

"...Doctor appointment for what? Are you not feeling well?"

"No, that's not... um... I have the doctor's appointment," I said. However, still no recognition showed on his face even after the emphasis. "You know... the one Luna's are required to undergo...? Tytus requested I get my... physical examination' completed and they decided to treat it as if I were a Luna given the circumstances."

Finally, he caught on to what I was telling him. "...Oh," was all he said.

"I would normally be angry that he was pushing that on me so soon," I continued, "but I'm trying to make the most of it. I suppose it's better to have the conversation in her office anyway in case we have to go over her medical books for the wolfsbane."

It was yet another part of my plan I'd been dreading. In fact, it was something I'd been dreading since coming back. And though I'd had this exact kind of examination before in the past, it was previously conducted by a man who I now believed to be a rogue.

So what would my results say this time?

Because whilst this kind of check-up covered standard physical health, it also covered one other major aspect too. An aspect that was seen as crucial for any Luna, becoming a cause of yet more awkward air in the room now between Aleric and I.

...And that aspect was a medical examination for my ability to conceive children. The very thing that had originally started so many of my problems.

## **A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 78**

### **Chapter Seventy-Seven**

"This is fake," I said, coming off far more flustered than I intended. "There is no way there are people out there just running around with... with god powers. That's... that's so stupid."

It's absurd. Insane. Some sort of joke.

Because if it was real then that meant my life had been far more controlled than I initially realised.

That there were powers at be far more advanced out there than just a Goddess mark. And it meant that Cai...

I wanted to throw up.

"Based on your reaction," Elder Luke said, his eyes examining me, "I can't help but wonder if this discovery isn't actually all that foreign to you. Would I be correct in assuming that perhaps you have personal insight into the theory?"

He was right. I was getting overly worked up because a part of me had already started piecing it together ... and it scared me. The more I thought about it, the more plausible it became.

Because, truthfully, there was something I was already all too familiar with; my visions. 'Foresight'. It fit perfectly with the attribute allegedly assigned to my house. But I'd always thought the ability to see ahead was something new, something Selene gave to me only once I returned. What if I'd always had the latent foundation inside me but couldn't harness it until after Selene had directly gifted me a piece of herself?

...What if, prior to coming back, the ability had only had enough strength to manifest itself as something more diluted, something more normal.

...Like a keen interest in strategy; the art of being able to plan ahead.

So that meant the new piece of Selene was sort of like... a booster shot. It wasn't just a gift of authority and visions.... It was something already written inside my DNA, just enhancing me to the point of unnatural ability

But what did this mean for Aleric and Cai then? What did this mean for all of us?

And, quickly, I started to wonder something else too.

...Like if this had something to do with why Selene brought me back.

In the past Aleric and I had joined together to kill Cai... and then Aleric had killed me. We ended up destroying each other. Was this what it had come down to the entire time? Some more bullshit because of Selene? ...But then how did Thea equate into this?

The room then started to sway as pangs of a headache began pulsing in my head.

This was too much. Too much information to process all at once. And that was just with me ignoring every rabbit hole of dark thoughts I wanted to fall into relating to my prior relationship with Cai. Was it even real or....?

I gritted my teeth and closed my eyes, fighting against everything inside that wanted to let all of this get the better of me. I already thought I was completely blind when it came to the seemingly never-ending war for the future... and yet it turns out I'd just been looking inside of a cupboard this entire time, never seeing the much, much larger room attached to it. This new information opened up theories I hadn't even considered, much less thought possible.

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“What do we still have left to do?” he asked, taking a seat by the table.

I gave it a second of thought before I realised what was next... and it was yet another awkward topic of conversation.

“Ah, I’ve got a doctor’s appointment with my mother next week and I’m going to use the time to go over the plan with her,” I said, my tone a little stiff.

“...Doctor appointment for what? Are you not feeling well?”

“No, that’s not... um... I have the doctor’s appointment,” I said. However, still no recognition showed on his face even after the emphasis. “You know... the one Luna’s are required to undergo...? Tytus requested I get my... physical examination completed and they decided to treat it as if I were a Luna given the circumstances.”

Finally, he caught on to what I was telling him. “...Oh,” was all he said.

“I would normally be angry that he was pushing that on me so soon,” I continued, “but I’m trying to make the most of it. I suppose it’s better to have the conversation in her office anyway in case we have to go over her medical books for the wolfsbane.”

It was yet another part of my plan I’d been dreading. In fact, it was something I’d been dreading since coming back. And though I’d had this exact kind of examination before in the past, it was previously conducted by a man who I now believed to be a rogue.

So what would my results say this time?

Because whilst this kind of check-up covered standard physical health, it also covered one other major aspect too. An aspect that was seen as crucial for any Luna, becoming a cause of yet more awkward air in the room now between Aleric and I.

...And that aspect was a medical examination for my ability to conceive children. The very thing that had originally started so many of my problems.

## A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 79

### Chapter Seventy-Nine

Warm!

It was so warm.

Everything around me felt like it was burning, our skin already flushed enough from the t raining just prior.

...And I wanted more.

With one hand tangled through his dark hair, my other was tracing slowly down the front of his chest, feeling every muscle under my touch. And Goddess was it flawless. His body moulded against mine perfectly, as if it had been made to fit there.

... This is wrong,' a voice whispered inside.

And yet that thought only seemed to excite me further.

It felt a million times better than I thought it would, his mouth moving hungrily as it responded against mine. His lips softer than I would have ever imagined.

...Stop...

There was a sense of urgency, a sense of need as I clung to him, pressing myself up against him closer, desperately searching for as much contact as possible.

... You need to stop.'

No, I really shouldn't have wanted this, wanted him, but it was like a flood gate of buried emotions unexpectedly poured out, mixing with new ones I hadn't even noticed before. And the result was a desire shooting through me that felt insatiable.

His body then shifted under me, trying to sit up and I moved back to allow it, giving him the space he'd need to get himself free without leaving too much distance.

But as he tried to bring his hands out to touch me, probably having momentarily forgotten the cuffs were even there, I suddenly realised what was happening.

As the metal from the silver dagger loudly sounded out against the handcuffs, it was as if someone had just thrown a bucket of cold water over me.

...ENOUGH!

...And I immediately pulled myself away.

“Give me a second...” Aleric said quietly as he began to free himself. He hadn’t even realised my abrupt change in mood yet.

But, without waiting, I quickly stood up and took a few shaky steps backwards.

“...Aria?” Aleric asked, looking up at me now confused.

“I—I made a mistake,” I said, my heart still pounding heavily, my head cloudy.

...And I knew I’d messed up badly.

Because nothing about our situation had changed. I still didn’t know his future, I didn’t know what would happen to him, or if there was some sort of trigger that would set him down the same path... I still couldn’t trust him implicitly. Not entirely.

In fact, the only thing I’d learnt about our situation over the last few months was that there were now even more factors from both inside and around us that were completely unknown. Especially that one ever

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nagging issue....

Power,

I’d already once seen what his drive to achieve that had cost. Seen just what he was willing to sacrifice in order to reach that status.

...Who was to say what he’d eventually be willing to do this time?

Was it just waiting inside his core, ready to change him into that power–hungry man once more without

any moment’s notice? When dealing with the abilities of a Goddess, who could say for sure?

I’d made a deal with him to keep our relationship professional for that exact reason. A way to avoid any conflict of interest should the worst–case scenario happen in the future.

And somehow I'd already ruined it.

... Somehow I'd almost fallen into yet another mistake, one that could have also had severe impacts on the pack... just like it had with Cai.

"What are you talking about?" he said, slowly standing up.

"I-

I mean... I shouldn't have done that. That's not... That's not something we should do."

"Seriously?"

But I didn't want to get into that argument now. No, I just wanted to leave. There was nothing good that would result from talking about any of this the day before my birthday.

And so I quickly turned around to walk away... only his voice called out after me.

"I don't get it, Aria. I really don't," he said, frustration thick in his voice. "You made it clear that you wanted nothing to do with me in that way and I understood why that was. I completely respected it. I didn't question it because, given everything you've apparently been through, it would be stupid of me to think that I'd ever have a chance. How could I when some bastard already well and truly fucked that up for me?"

My heart was racing but I kept walking. I needed to remain strong and leave.

"So how am I meant to convince myself that you don't want me now? Not even the tiniest bit? ... How the hell do I just let it go after you kiss me like that?"

"I said it was a mistake, Aleric!" I yelled, turning back around. "I— I don't even know what I want... but I know being with you potentially jeopardises this pack if one day I can't make an impartial decision between you or their best interest. I've already seen a future where I've given myself to you and seen what you did with that. You think I'm stupid enough to let that happen again?"

"...So that's it then? This is what our future will look like together? Barely trusting one another, silently wondering if the other person will rip the carpet out from under them at any second?"

I bit my lip but remained silent, not having an answer for that.

"Actually, you know what? No. Fuck you, Aria," he said, taking a step back. "I've done everything humanly possible to prove to you that I'm not \*him\* That I'm worth your trust and respect. And now... this? You lead me on and then rub salt in the wounds for shit that isn't even my fault? Things from a past that I have no control over? Yeah, no... I'm done."

I could feel my blood rushing through my body furiously, my anger now tipping over the edge. It was fueled only more on from the emotional rollercoaster that had just occurred.

“Oh, you’re done, are you? Just like that? After everything we’ve prepared?” I spat back, seeing red. “So then am I taking this as your confirmation that you no longer want to manage the pack together? Because you should tell me that now. It’ll be good to get that sort of information out in the open so I realise just

how lucky I am for walking away. Actually, I wish you’d told me sooner. Because if I’d wanted

to make yet another catastrophic mistake by sleeping with someone, Aleric, I could have just run away to the Silver Lake pack for that.”

... That seemed to do it.

Aleric’s eyes instantly turned dark and the loudest snarl ripped through his chest, an aura coming off him that would have made any lower ranks fall to their knees. He was angry to the point his wolf was now visible at the surface.

And I knew my words were a low blow. In fact, I instantly regretted what I’d said. Somehow, I couldn’t seem to help it though. It had left my mouth before I could stop it, being said purely out of my anger.

But seeing his reaction, his own fury and manner... well, it only succeeded in sweeping a sense of calm throughout my body. Immediately, all my anger left me as I stood before him, looking him up and down. The only thing he’d managed to do was further reiterate one thing for me...

And that was that I was making the right decision.

“Case in point,” I muttered and quickly turned around, walking out the room before I said anything else I’d regret.

However, the second the door closed behind me, an onslaught of anxiety and guilt immediately began to drown me.

...Why the hell had I just done that?

‘Because he’s a lethal threat. A potential danger to himself and others,’ the voice inside reminded me.

Oh, great.

I had almost missed it in the clutter of events earlier... but it appeared she was back, having taken the most opportune moment to return.

I fervently wished she would have just stayed gone since now was definitely not the time for her to be filling my head. No, I needed to figure out what to do next in light of everything that just happened.

'I can handle this myself, thank you,' I hissed back internally, continuing on my way. I needed to cool down before deciding my next move.

Inside my quarters I found Lucy walking about, organising a few things for me before tomorrow. She was kept extremely busy these days so it was rare to see her around.

"Miss?" she greeted, looking up in surprise at my appearance. "Is everything okay?"

But talking to anyone about it yet was the last thing I wanted right now.

"Can you please go and collect my bag and dagger from the gym at some point today? I left in a hurry and seem to have forgotten them."

She looked as though she wanted to query me about it further but thankfully kept quiet, acknowledging my request with just a bow of her head.

And with that, I headed straight for my bedroom to rest for a while, now exhausted from everything that had transpired; including using my abilities. It was a room for privacy... and welling in my own regret.

I'd somehow made things even worse than just the kiss. Lashing out at him for what he said wasn't remotely called for, especially when I knew he was probably right. Or, at least, he was justified in what he was saying from his perspective.

Truthfully, I didn't even know if it was him I was so angry at. I had been keeping a barrier between us, purposely ensuring that I didn't get that\* close, and now the thought of suddenly losing that protection

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scared me. Like I was grasping at any excuse to keep that distance, even though he really did appear to be different.

It seemed I'd been pushing him away so forcibly that I hadn't even realised what had been happening inside me. Blinded to even the smallest possibility that I might have

been getting too close. And now I'd found out in the worst possible way after giving in to the desire all at once. A shock to say the least.

But then... what even was that? Just a momentary lapse in judgement or...? When had I even begun to see him that way again?

I brought a hand up to my lips absentmindedly, remembering how it felt. Remembering how his mouth had responded to mine...

And a burning flushed through my body.

After tomorrow.

I'll deal with these new... \*thoughts\* after tomorrow. For now, I just needed to cool off for a bit before I go and apologise to Aleric. I needed to fix what I'd messed up so badly.

But as I thought about going to seek him out to talk, I became conscious of just how tired I'd already become, my eyes quickly becoming heavy against my own will. I should have realised sooner that using my abilities to that extent with the collar still on would have had this side effect.

Okay, fine then.

I'd have one small nap... and then...

The sound of heels clicking inside an empty hallway roused me from my sleep, waking me up to find myself standing inside the pack hospital.

The attached rooms were darkening, early night beginning to fall already outside as was evident from the few windows I could see.

...But how did I even get here?

I looked around for the source of the noise only to find Lucy walking, heading in the direction of my mother's office.

"Lucy?" I called out to her.

No reply.

...So it seemed as though I was having a vision.

Running to catch up to her, I then followed behind, letting her lead me to whatever it was I needed to see, but it didn't take long for us to arrive at our destination. Soon, my mother's office came into sight just ahead.

But before Lucy could even make it to the door, suddenly it was pulled open... and Aleric stepped out.

"Oh, Alpha heir," Lucy said, having jumped a little from his abrupt exit. "I wasn't expecting to see you...-."

And it was then that we both slowly took in his appearance, the situation now dawning on us.

Because his hair was dishevelled, his demeanour completely on-edge... and his hands... his hands were covered in blood.

"What are you...-?" Lucy started but then Aleric moved swiftly to be in her face.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he demanded, cutting her off. He looked just about ready to rip her

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throat out before his face finally softened slightly in realisation. "Wait...did Thea send you here as well?"

"Alpha heir, sir... please, I— I don't know what's going on," Lucy stuttered out, trying to take a few steps back in distress. "I just came to get Doctor Chrysalis' status report for the young Miss. Aria's been sleeping since

...But then she caught sight of it, her head tilting to the side. Behind him, there was a crack in the door which showed what was laying ahead just beyond it. Something that brought my attention to it also.

And my blood ran cold.

I quickly ran to the door but it was no use. It seemed I was limited to only the space Aleric and Lucy were present. However, it didn't stop me from seeing what I needed to... seeing the bodies I needed to.

After all, the two bodies of my parents lying lifeless were hard to miss.

"... What's going on?" Lucy asked, now painfully aware of the danger she potentially was in, "What does this have to do with Thea?"

Aleric spun his head around to see what Lucy had been looking at and then quietly cursed under his breath.

"This is Alpha business only," he stated, turning his dark eyes back to her. "Orders from Tytus himself for the attempted poisoning to his person. The doctor was meant to be brought in until trial but then... well, Beta Jarrod found out and it didn't go so amicably after."

"But... the plan... I don't understand."

"Lucy!" he barked out to try and get her to focus, his tone then shifting. "If you don't want me to lock you up right now in the cells then you'll listen to me very, very carefully. You do not tell Aria anything. Anything at all. Do I make myself clear?"

...An alpha order.

Lucy couldn't do anything except swallow back her fear and nod feebly.

"Good. I've got things I still need to... finish up here. You should leave."

She didn't need to be told twice though.

Immediately, Lucy took a few shaky steps backwards to make some distance, terror wrought on her features, and, without hesitating for even a second longer, she then turned around and began walking quickly back the way she came.

"Oh, and Lucy?" Aleric yelled out after her, making her freeze mid-stride. "...You can tell Aria I need to speak to her when she wakes up."

...And then my body lurched forward in my bed, gasping awake from the vision.

'What the fuck was that? What the fuck? What the fuck? What the fuck?'

I was shaking all over, a cold sweat covering me. There were just too many thoughts going through my head for me to be able to process at once.

But there was one more prominent than any other... none of this made any sense.

I looked towards the window and saw it was still somewhat sunny outside. This was good. It meant I still had time since, in the vision, the light was darkening.

Throwing myself out the bed, I did my best to hurry and leave. I needed to warn my mother and help her escape before Tylus gave the order.

But as I reached my hand out towards the handle of my front door, it was then pushed open from the

another side...

And Lucy stood there.

“Lucy! Quick, we’ve got to hurry!” I said, grabbing her hand to drag her with me.

If she was all the way here instead of near the hospital, then that was even better. It meant I had even more time.

However, under my grip Lucy barely budged, her face showing signs of anxiety. “Lucy? What’s wrong?”

It was enough to make me finally pause for a moment, inspecting her more closely... .. And, suddenly, it all seemed to click.

“...What time is it...?” I asked slowly, my heart starting to race.

She held my gaze intensely, her eyes only full of sadness. “...It’s six in the morning, Miss,” she answered quietly. “...Today is your birthday.”

## **A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 80**

### **Chapter Eighty**

“No...,” I whispered, the words choking out of my throat.

Almost a whole day. I’d slept for almost a whole day. My vision hadn’t taken place just after sun\*set\*, it had been just before sun\*rise\*. And now an hour or so had already passed since then.

I felt myself go completely numb, releasing Lucy’s hand from my grip.

There was a crumbling beginning within me. Like I was falling... falling into an Abyss that was completely of my own making. One that was a hole I’d been desperately trying to swim away from these last four years, trying so goddamn hard to believe that there was still good in people. That even though I had been rejected, killed and abandoned by everyone around me, that there was still potential for people to do better. That I could do better.

And now it seemed the final betrayal had embedded its dagger. The one I knew I would never survive. And, apparently, neither would my parents.

... There was no one left.’

...No one.

...I was alone.’

Just as fate seemed to have always planned for me.

And everything felt... so empty.

"Oh... I didn't... I didn't realise," I whispered to myself in a daze, the world slowly moving around me.

"Miss...?"

"...I didn't realise we were playing that sort of game."

... Ready to do this my way?' My prior self's voice then whispered in my head, offering to give me the support I so desperately craved right now.

It was the kind of help I would have instantly turned down before... but now?

Honestly, I was starting to wonder why I'd been so opposed the entire time. She had managed to endure years of hell, doing whatever it took to survive and prove her worth. If anyone knew how to keep working when it felt like the world was falling apart, it was her. Only she possessed the strength I would need now.

...What did I even have to lose anymore? Myra? Cai? My parents?

And I felt myself slip deeper into the hole inside.

"There's something I need to tell you but I..." Lucy said to me, disjointedly. "But I—I can't, I'm sorry... —."

"It's okay," I said, stopping her, my body quickly becoming calm. "I already know he ordered you to stay quiet about what happened in the hospital. I already know about..."

I couldn't finish my sentence though. Speaking of my parent's demise still felt wrong.

Surprise crossed Lucy's features, my knowledge taking her aback since there was no way I should have known.

"Miss? How do you...?"

"Don't worry about that. We have bigger things to concern ourselves with now and I need your full concentration."

Without waiting, I then walked over to where Lucy had laid out the outfit I was going to wear today and began changing tugging on the long sleeve dress over my head.

"But the plan is ruined," she objected. "Plan A is now far too risky and Plan B is..."

Her voice choked to a stop as the Alpha order constricted her. But I didn't need her to elaborate. I already knew what she was trying to say.

Plan A would now mean ordering not just one, but two Alpha bloods. A feat I wasn't sure I was capable of pulling off even when it had just been for Tytus with wolfsbane in his system.

you're right," I said, fastening the finishing touches to my attire. "Which is exactly why we're going ahead with Plan C.

Miss? Plan C? You never mentioned there was a Plan C."

Contact Iris. Tell her it's time," I instructed, proceeding to grab the last of everything I needed.

The reason Lucy didn't know about Plan C was because no one knew about it except for me.

It was something I'd come up with at the same time I had the others. A plan I had continually pushed away, knowing it shouldn't ever be used, knowing it was something that only *\*shet* would do. However, it wasn't a backup for if I failed to order Tytus, or if Aleric failed to challenge him.

No, it was what I'd come up with for in the event the worst—case scenario happened, the absolute point of all else failing

It was a plan that had to be completely hidden from everyone else in order for it to work. The ultimate trump card, the final stand. I had never wanted to resort to it, let alone consider implementing it. But I had prepared for it nonetheless.

Because Plan C was for in the event Aleric betrayed me.

End suddenly I found myself in that very position.

Contrary to Aleric's request, I did not seek him out before the meeting.

From everything Lucy was forbidden from telling me, yet everything I had already witnessed myself anyway, I knew it was too dangerous. Who wouldn't be expecting some sort of trap?

After all, if he could kill my parents so easily then what else was he capable of? He'd deliberately chosen not to challenge Tytus once the order came through, showing his alliance to him over me. Hell, he most

rely was the one who had leaked the information about the poisoning to begin with. 1

No, he'd made his message clear....

He wanted to take his succession naturally, not by force alongside me.

Of course, I did wonder whether our argument yesterday really was enough to drive this kind of response; whether it *really* had demolished our trust to the point of him making the first move. But there was another possibility also one where I recalled his dark eyes the day before, already knowing what *monster* was possibly dormant inside of him.

But none of that *really* mattered right now. *Wondering* about the motives wasn't going to bring my parents back to life. No, it was too late for that.

My safest strategy here was to go through with what I needed to do, get through the day, and then reassess once it was all over. On even the slightest chance that Aleric really was planning something before the meeting I couldn't risk seeking him out privately on my own

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If anything, his belief that I was completely oblivious to what had transpired the night before was only going to work in my favour.

And so, I busily went about the remainder of my last few hours, pushing myself to stay focused on what I needed to do; never staying in one spot for too long, never giving in to the pain threatening to fester within me. Every single second of today was going to be crucial, and I hadn't even made it halfway through yet.

But then, finally, it was time for the big event.

I pushed open the double doors of the meeting hall as I entered and the entire room on the other side immediately switched to hushed voices, whispering amongst themselves.

I couldn't hear what they were saying but I didn't need to. Their faces said it all... Sympathy, sadness... caution, disgust. It seemed I was once again the daughter of a traitor; this scenario being one I was already painfully familiar with.

Holding my head up high, I walked over to where Aleric stood, refusing to meet his eyes. I probably

should have wanted to confront him, to scream at him, maybe worse, but inside all I felt was complete calmness; my mind entirely focused on what I needed to do.

Now the only one who was left to arrive was Tytus himself.

“Where the fuck have you been?” Aleric hissed in a low voice, his hand grabbing my elbow.

Apparently not low enough as a few Elders turned their heads in our direction.

I quickly forced a polite smile on my face and pulled my arm free of his grasp. The same hands that had been covered in my parent’s blood only hours earlier.

“Aleric,” I greeted back loudly so the entire room would hear. “It’s good to see you. Apologies, I’ve been a little busy this morning. But what’s a few hours when we have our entire lives together, right? It seems as though you’re so excited about marking me that you couldn’t even bear a few hours without seeing me.”

‘Disgusting,’ the voice inside me added.

“What are you—”

But then Tytus entered, ending all chances of continuing the conversation, and I looked up as the man himself walked in.

‘He trapped us, degraded us, tried to force us into a union... and then had our parents killed.’

“Greetings everyone. You may be seated,” Tytus said as he walked to his chair.

The council at the table then all sat back down, filling the space around him. Or, at least they did for all but one chair... my fathers.

“I understand that today was meant to be a joyous one of celebrating not only young Aria’s birthday, but also her union with my son, Aleric,” Tytus said to the council and warriors present. “However, it is with a heavy heart that I announce to you all now that there are some who will not be present for this monumental day. A day where every daughter deserves to be with their parents. It is something I wished were not true.”

‘Lies.’

I knew he didn’t actually give a shit about me.

“I’m sure most of you have already heard,” he continued. “But a situation arose yesterday whereby I was made aware of a plan. A plan to poison me during a routine doctor’s appointment. Upon ordering the arrest of the individual in question, an altercation unfortunately broke out that tragically resulted in the

loss of two very special people that I hold dear  
*pace Bettid Mootout* I could feel everyone's eyes on me but I refused to let *them*  
*at the* everything from me, they would not get this.

"Aria..I am truly sorry for your loss and that it happened *4g/ I* focused on mine. "Naturally, I have some questions *for you see is* can still find some happiness today in what is otherwise *a desweh.*"

\*Thank you, Alpha," I said, bowing my head respectfully "*side the o* dedication you put into this pack. And whilst, of *course, numer* realise their actions are ones more befitting those of *all , 2014,* it is just unfortunate that not everyone can share in *your vie! ./ .*

Tytus gave me a small smile, his face softening "I know *we have had* hope you feel you can come to me with anything should but through circumstance, you will also be gaining a *new one.*"

I bit my tongue and bowed once more, acknowledging his *olles which, 10 latxa* better word, was suggesting he replace my parents.

*you 21001a*

"Very well," Tytus then said, standing back up. "Let's get this *over with these were* Aria is itching to get the collar off after all of these months and *believe the* stoff either."

\*Thump, thump... My chesi began pounding...

thenes laceho ang the

And I watched Tytus start approaching me, walking with intent as he

key...

\*Thump, thump\*...

"Aria," Aleric's voice hissed next to me, desperate to get my *attention,*

But ignored him. It was too late for anything he could possibly *say to me now.* Therboot would be forever on his hands, never truly washing off.

Sinking ever deeper...

...Falling further and further into the hole inside...

... There was no turning back now as I relinquished myself over to it.

“Now, then...,” Tytus mumbled to himself as he moved his hands to my neck

Hands that made quick work of the collar...

And, after the key was turned several times, the satisfying click then echoed into the room.

...And suddenly I was free.

The metal fell to the ground next to me with a heavy clank... but i barely noticed

Because immediately it felt as though my body was alight, coming alive with the mass amount of energy that poured through me, and I gasped at the air as if breathing for the very first time

After spending so long severely deprived of my natural abilities, the difference in my strength was extremely noticeable. Noticeable enough that I struggled to even remain standing, having to take a few seconds just to balance myself once more.

However, it felt different than from even before. All these months I'd trained with a resolute intent that essentially made me human, forcing me to work harder to get results. Now it appeared as though I was

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stronger than ever before.

But the euphoric feeling, unfortunately, didn't last long though as a shiver of nausea then quickly travelled up my spine, chasing right behind the new sensations.

And I knew exactly what it was.

It meant I didn't have long.

“Alec, please go ahead,” Tytus instructed, gesturing towards myself.

I'd managed to collect myself once more, knowing I needed to remain focused now more than ever. Though it appeared Alec was currently struggling more than me.

I pulled my hair to the side, giving clear access to my neck, and presented myself to him.

He didn't move though, his gaze still fixated on Tytus as if internally wondering what he should be doing. Funny how he was seemingly only having second thoughts *after* murdering my family.

"Aleric?" | prompted after he still hadn't moved. "What are you waiting for? Isn't this what you wanted? To make me yours?"

Finally, he looked away from Tytus and down towards me. But as he met my eyes I watched as his then glazed over for just a few seconds... before he snapped out of it, taking a step back as he shook his head.

"Wait... wait a second," he said flustered, trying to remain focused. "I don't... Aria? What do you want me to do here?"

But I just simply smiled back before closing the distance between us, now only inches away.

"...I want you to mark me," I said quietly, looking up at his face. "Please... mark me, Aleric."

It was as though an internal battle then ensued within his own head as he struggled with what to do. One! was only privy to as I watched his eyes continue to flicker in colour, his wolf seemingly getting the better of him over my display of acceptance.

But it was as another shiver went up my spine that I was reminded of how I was running out of time.

"Aleric," I repeated, grabbing his hand. "...Come on."

And I pulled him towards me, allowing him to then grab me by my waist and neck....

Wrapping my arms around his shoulders in-kind....

Feeling for that exact moment I needed....

... The moment I'd been waiting for...

... The moment I'd feel his breath on my neck....

There.

"...I challenge you, Aleric Dumont, for the title of Alpha," I whispered into his ear.

And then, without any hesitation, I flicked my wrist out, dislodging the item I had stashed away up my sleeve. It was so quick that, even if anyone had seen me do it, there wasn't any time to react.

No, they were helpless to stop me from stabbing the needle into his back, immediately injecting him with the drug I'd had my mother prepare for me almost two months ago.

It was the last thing I ever asked of her, back then being something I didn't think I would ever actually need. Now it had become a lifeline from her beyond the grave.

But the battle wasn't over yet.

Just as I was anticipating, Aleric's grip on me instantly began to loosen, and I easily slipped out his arms, taking a few steps backwards.

"Alec?!" Tytus shouted, alarmed at his son's state. "What's wrong? What's happened?"

But I merely watched silently as Aleric's face then turned quickly from confusion, to shock, to anger, his body barely able to hold himself up now.

"Aria... What did... What did you do to me?!" he choked out.

I couldn't stop now though. No, this was just the beginning.

After Aleric's accusation, Tytus' eyes then instantly turned to me, ready to demand answers.

Only I never gave him that chance.

If only he hadn't been so distracted by Aleric, he would have seen what I'd stashed away for him instead. What I'd immediately unsheathed from the strap around my thigh the second his attention had been diverted elsewhere.

In fact, it ended up being so quick that it was almost pitiful when my silver dagger slid across his neck, swiftly making him begin to bleed out.

It was done.

It only took a few seconds for him to fall to his knees before me, his hand pointlessly trying to cover the wound. But I knew he was already dead the second he'd taken his eyes off me.

That was for my parents.

For the collar.

For the humiliation and captivity.

For my freedoms being so completely stripped from me... even to the point of who I should let claim me.

"I want you to know something," I said, leaning forward to speak into his ear.

Naturally, he tried to recoil away but I grabbed at his head, holding him in place.

“Listen to me! I wanted you to know that you brought this upon yourself, that I had no choice but to do this ... but that doesn't mean I won't enjoy it,” I whispered. “Truthfully, I want to remember this. All of this. I want to remember seeing you slowly realise that all of your actions led you here. That this is the fate \*\* have chosen for \*you\*, Tytus.”

Pushing his body away, I then watched as he flailed pathetically on the ground, the whites in his eyes distressed as he struggled to come to terms with what was happening.

“...Enjoy reliving this moment for all eternity inside the Abyss, Tytus,” | spat.

...And then his body became still.

“LEFT.’

Almost as if by second nature now without the collar, the new ability to feel for oncoming harm alerted me to something next to me. Though, I had already expected an attack of some sort given what I'd just done.

Rolling out of the way, I quickly came back up into a defensive position, my hand poised with the dagger prepared for anything. However, it ended up just being a false alarm.

Aleric only managed to take two steps towards me before the drugs finally came into full effect, his body finally falling to the ground beside his fathers.