

A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood

Chapter 81 - 90

Chapter Eighty–One

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Or so he thought.

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And everyone immediately froze around me.

I stood, waiting for several seconds and, when I was finally satisfied everyone had completely stopped, I cleared my throat, addressing the room.

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And everyone complied. Without anyone left with a comparable high rank, there was no doubt that my orders would be adhered to implicitly.

"Okay, then," I said, my tone relaxing a little. "Let's just all sit down... breathe... and talk for a second, shall

we?"

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"Alright. Well...", I started, looking out at the room, "I imagine you all have a lot of questions--."

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But I didn't," I calmly replied, "Alpha Tylus is now dead, his successor, whom I challenged during his attempt to mark me, is now incapacitated. According to the natural laws of our kind, the title is now rightfully mine. Though, need I remind you all that, with my mark from the Goddess herself, I was *a*lways just as entitled to this pack as Aloric was, My claim fontirely legitimate."

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However, Elder Luke then cut in.

"If you believe that Aria's right to the title of Alpha is any less than Aleric's... then you are in contempt of the Goddess' will," he said, "A challenge was issued... Aria then showed her strength and ability to overcome not just one.. but two Alpha bloods. *Anyone* who would even begin to discredit her claim to this title would be doing so out of their own selfish beliefs,"

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"Brilliant. Any other questions?" | asked the room, scanning their faces.

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When I was met with only silence then smiled. "Okay, perfect. Swear me in and we can all go about the rest of our day. Obviously, someone will need to deal with Aleric... and the body. Please ensure Aleric is given full medical treatment and is sent to the cells once he has recovered. No one is to have any direct contact with him unless I say so. Is that clear?"

The room mutely nodded around me.

"Very well," Elder Luke said, breaking the tension slightly from the council, "Aria, please approach and kneel."

I stood up and met Elder Luke at the front of the room, doing so under the watchful eyes of everyone else around me.

"Aria, do you promise to protect, serve and do right by this pack to the best of your ability?" he asked.

I bowed my head as I took on the responsibility. "Under the gaze of the Goddess, I, Ariadne Chrysalis, do accept these terms."

"Then let me be the first one to officially welcome you. On behalf of those present today, we, the council of the Winter Mist, hereby accept the Saintess, Ariadne Chrysalis, as our new Alpha and leader. We are all in your care now."

I wasn't expecting any applause or adoration, of course. After what I'd just done, I was completely realistic about the situation. But even if they hated me, this was for both their future and mine. Even if they didn't know it.

"Thank you, Elder Luke," I said, standing back up. "I appreciate your support and wisdom, as always. I'm looking forward to the great work we can accomplish together."

But then I felt it. Like an immense pressure building inside against one of the bones in my thigh...

...And I knew it would snap at any second.

"Okay, everyone! Apologies for this," I said, turning back around to face the entire room. "But... respectfully, everyone needs to get the fuck out. Like right now. I want warriors posted at the front door and no one is to enter. No one."

They all didn't waste time in moving, carrying out my order just as I'd asked. Aleric and Tytus were also removed swiftly, something I tried not to focus on. The last thing I needed was to dwell on that right now.

And so, after a few minutes had passed, it was finally only me and Elder Luke left.

"Do you need a hand?" he asked kindly, already knowing what was happening. "The first time is always the most painful."

But I shook my head. I'd already been through this once and knew what was ahead. And right now, I just wanted to be alone more than anything. Having someone else here would just be a sad reminder of my loss.

Though it felt strange to be doing this in here; this place being typically reserved for only gatherings. However, the meeting hall was the largest enclosed area within the pack and I knew that leaving to the woods right now would be far too dangerous. Especially when I wouldn't be able to defend myself for a while.

"Very well," he said, bowing his head at me. "Call for me when you are ready."

And with that he left, the room becoming completely empty. Now it was just me and...

SNAP.

I cried out from the pain, falling to the ground.

It hurt. It hurt so goddamn bad. This body had never felt what it was like, felt the new shapes and sensations that came with shifting. Unfortunately, just knowing what to expect didn't seem to lesson that in the slightest.

My breathing soon quickened until it became laboured and, slowly, I could feel my bones breaking, my skin moving, my limbs reforming....

“Fuck,” I cried, tears falling down my face. I just wanted this to be over with.

Normally one would have their family here to distract them from the pain, to help and support them through this. But I didn't have any family left. No, it was just me now.

Unsurprisingly, it wasn't long before the pain became so overwhelming that my body became numb to it, shutting it off inside my brain. Only the sound of my flesh being torn and bones snapping filled the air around me. Just the sickening melody of my pain to accompany me.

...And then, finally, it was done.

It could have been hours later before I felt myself reach the end of it.

Laid panting on the ground, my body now changed into that of my wolf, and new heightened sensations immediately swept through my body.

Everything became so... Vivid. Colours were sharper, scents were more prominent, and I could even hear distant muffled sounds coming from outside the room. It seemed like there were so many things I'd been missing out on, so many privileges I'd once taken for granted. It was hard to believe I'd lived another four years without this.

But then I felt it.

I felt her.

My wolf. She was waking up.

The only one who hadn't ever abandoned or hurt me in the past. The only real friend I had ever had. The only one who knew of all the pain and suffering I'd felt... because she had suffered through all of it right along with me.

Finally, she was back.

‘I missed you,’ I sobbed within my mind.

But something was wrong.

She was... anxious. On edge. Like she wasn't sure what was happening.

'Don't you remember? Look at what we've been through... look at everything that we have survived together,' I said internally.

And I showed her. Images of the past, of the present, of the pain and torture we experienced. Of the things she'd missed, of the heartaches we'd endured... of the betrayals we'd suffered.

But she instantly recoiled from me, pushing herself back into the furthest part of my mind. All of the things I was showing her had been too much. She didn't understand... couldn't handle the immense amount of pain in my memories or how it was possible to be from another timeline.

...And I realised then the cold truth. The devastating reality of the situation...

She wasn't *my wolf.

No, she belonged to the girl who had lived in this body for fourteen years. An innocent in all of this. It seemed that I, alone, was the only one who had been brought back... not my wolf.

None of this probably made any sense to her, yet I'd greeted her with an onslaught of pain carried through two lifetimes. And she chose to wall herself away.

Coward. Weak,' I spat at her.

My wolf had been forged from within the rejection of our mate, from the lives we'd claimed, and from the pain we'd lived through every day together.

This wolf... was nothing. More similar to the naive girl I'd originally been growing up than anything of true strength. Without even trying, she had already withdrawn in order to protect herself from me.

'Fine then. Have it your way,' I hissed inside and took back full control of our body.

I slowly stood up on all fours, trying to remember how to maneuver the fur-covered form, and began walking around the room. And I kept walking... and walking... every second spent trying to force my body to respond to my will, move to my command...

But there was no push back though... no contradictory force...

It was just me in here.

Just me... and not my wolf.

Eventually, my resolve finally broke and I fell to the ground, my body beginning to shift back. And I could feel myself shaking as I transitioned... but it wasn't from the physical pain.

As soon as I had returned to my human self, a sob wracked through me, overcome with the sheer emotional distress I'd gone through; something now made only worse by the realisation that I really was truly alone. That there was not a single being in this world I could trust anymore.

And Goddess, I didn't want to do this anymore. I didn't want to feel this way anymore. I'd lost everyone I'd cared about...

...And I was so alone.

So alone.

...We don't need them,' the familiar voice of my other self whispered inside.

And it was a jarring reminder that there was another who knew of what I was going through. Knew exactly what I was feeling. The only person who had given me the strength to do what needed to be done during that meeting today.

'We protect ourselves first,' she continued. 'We work hard and we get things done. Let this be the last time we shed any tears for those we have lost.'

I curled myself up on the floor, hugging my legs to my chest. Her words were comforting for the aching inside.

'But let us not forget the person behind why so much has gone wrong in our lives.'

'The person who was responsible for originally introducing Thea to the pack, for killing us, for why we no longer have our wolf, for gaining our trust before mercilessly betraying us... for killing our parents... for falsely claiming that they loved us.'

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...Aleric.'

'Aleric was, and always will be, our undoing. He was our beginning and our end. Time does not change that.'

'Now that Tytus is gone, he will try to kill us whenever he next gets the chance. We murdered his father. He cannot be trusted. Do you understand?'

And I closed my eyes, nodding my head in acknowledgement at everything she was telling me.

It was time to let go and accept that Aleric was the same monster inside.

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I didn't need him, after all. In fact, I didn't need anyone anymore. There was no one left in this entire pack 'who could ever tell me what to do again. No one left to chain me up or force me to give myself to

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A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 82

Chapter Eighty-Two

*Swear your oath," I said, my eyes marrowing at the man before me.

His body still lowered in submission, he placed a hand over his chest in respect.

"I, Alpha Tristan Green, of the Onyx Rock, hereby pledge my pack to the alliance offered by Alpha Ariadne of the Winter Mist. May our packs continue to prosper together under your guidance and protection."

Good.

Satisfied with his words, I stood up and walked over to clasp my hand in his.

“I accept.”

And with that, another pack had joined the alliance. Though, more accurately, another had sworn to continue their alliance. Something that was seemingly slow going lately, the days dragging out.

So much so, it was hard to believe that two months had already gone by.

Two months since I'd killed Tytus, imprisoned Aleric, and became Alpha of the Winter Mist.

And things were... okay.

Not to say I was doing anything wrong. On the contrary, I had the pack running like clockwork, making us more efficient than ever before.

No, the issues were laid more externally. Specifically, other packs,

I had been prepared for opposition to my rise in rank however, it seemed I'd miscalculated just how many would be against pledging to an alliance with a female Alpha.

The ways of our kind were apparently still too archaic, too set in stone with old beliefs.

But I'd been wearing them down slowly.

Little by little, I was showing them why it was in their best interest to continue, proving I was far more fearsome than most had believed. Not the helpless Saintess I'd initially built my brand to be... but rather a foe you didn't want to find yourself suddenly facing. The only issue was there were still so many packs left to go. There wasn't one simple way to get them all to agree at once so it had been a painstakingly slow process.

“You'll have access to your supply route again within the day.” I continued to the Alpha, my lips slowly twitching into a triumphant smile. “Pleasure doing business with you.”

“Now they'll never forget how easy it was for us to cut them off. How much they still need our support,” the voice said inside.

And I agreed.

The Alpha didn't stick around for much longer once the requirements for the alliance had been finalised. Not that I blamed him. I was far too busy to care though, needing to focus on other problems.

Behind the scenes of my new operation these last few months, Iris had been utilising her network of followers across the country to support me but, since hardly any of those ex

tended to the ranked members of those packs, the results were not instant. Not to say those contacts didn't have their other uses though. Uses like uncovering information for me on their packs' weaker points.

It hadn't been hard to figure out that most of these Alphas were never going to respect me unless I forced them into some sort of submission. Proof that I really was as formidable as the new rumours had hinted at. All they had wanted to see was a young, naive girl... right up until I suddenly had their whole pack in a checkmate.

Some were still trying to play a waiting game though, holding off to see if I would crumble under the new responsibility. They wanted me to prove them right, prove that I wasn't cut out for this. A gamble that some were even now risking their own packs for. Though soon they would start to feel what the loss of our alliance meant.

I wasn't entirely ignorant though. I knew under the surface that even my own pack was somewhat divided. They were forced to respect me because of the Alpha bond but I knew what some of them were thinking deep down. Or, at least, what some of them were hoping for.

...Hoping for the rising of their Alpha heir.

The one who had been living within a cell these last two months.

If only they knew the kind of person he really was.

"This is going too slow," I grumbled to Elder Luke as we entered back into my office. "At this rate, we'll start declining too far in status if we can't make enough progress."

"I don't disagree," he said, grabbing a few documents from the desk.

"I just... I don't get it," I said, sighing in my chair. "I know it's only been two months but I thought by now we'd be seeing a small upward trend of people joining. Except it's stayed about the same. It's almost like ... like they're dragging their feet. I get that they're waiting for me to slip up but this is just getting ridiculous."

"It is harder to break traditions than you might believe," he said, raising an eyebrow.

Though it wasn't of any comfort to hear that.

"Let me see the list," I said, holding my hand out for the documents he'd been looking after for me. "We're missing something, I'm sure."

But it was as I scanned the list of packs still pending for the alliance that I frowned, surprised over what I saw.

"...Is this completely accurate?" I asked sceptically, continuing to flick through the pages to ensure it hadn't been mistakenly written in the wrong section.

"Yes, Alpha," he answered.

But that couldn't be right... could it?

"This is saying the Silver Lake pack still hasn't sent word about whether they'll join or not."

"That is correct."

I finally looked up, dragging my eyes away from the page, though now only further confused. "But... why? mean... have they provided a reason? I didn't think they, of all people, would reject my extension for friendship."

Was Cai holding a grudge because of what happened between us? It seemed so petty to bring in personal problems when it was both of our packs at stake. Unprofessional even.

And it meant something far worse too....

But Elder Luke's mouth turned downward. "Well, after Caius was imprisoned here for so many months, to the point of almost inciting a war, I can't really blame Alpha Tobias for his logic."

"But that was Tytus' doing, not mine," I argued. "I was the one trying to free Cai that entire time. I was the one working day and night to prevent that war."

Alpha Tobias

"Right... that may be true," he said slowly. "However, and forgive me for saying this, but, were you not the reason why he was imprisoned to begin with? Was it not due to your actions that the misunderstanding originally arose?"

I bit the inside of my cheek, knowing he was right.

"The Silver Lake has risen in rank enough to where an alliance would only aid in avoiding war," Elder Luke continued. "If we were to fall in status now, they would just stand to gain becoming the next powerhouse pack within our region. They have the least to lose by declining our offer... Alpha, apologies, but..."

"I already know what you're going to say," I interjected. "I know what path you've calculated ahead and I see it too. I know what this means."

Because the effects were far worse than one would initially think.

And it would explain why there was so much push back to join the alliance right now, even putting aside prejudice.

... They were waiting to see if the Silver Lake would rise up, challenging us for our position.

Essentially, if the Silver Lake refused to join now, we'd be looking at a power struggle between us. The other packs within the previous alliance would need to choose a side and, in doing so, they would be deciding who would next become the strongest territory; gaining the ability to manage and impose taxes as they wished.

But it wasn't just that. If we really did fail to regain our position, the Winter Mist would then only have two options.

Either we submitted to the Silver Lake, hoping that they didn't refuse our request to fall under the umbrella of their alliance. Though, I was uncertain whether Tobias would even accept that.

Or, more devastatingly, it would mean our pack would be outcasted. Without the support of an alliance to strengthen us, we wouldn't be able to maintain our status for long. It meant putting ourselves in the hands of Alpha Tobias to decide our fate; leaving us defenceless to the snowballing side effects that followed.

It meant potentially the death of our pack.

So I knew what might lay ahead for us. I saw what Elder Luke did.

Either I had to convince them to join us now... or we'd have to implement an approach that had the best chance of success. A path that reduced the most risk of ending up in that vulnerable position.

...War.

An all in or nothing approach since, if we failed to acquire the numbers within the alliance, it would be almost impossible to win anyway.

The best time would be when the packs were still being divided between us, before any one territory could become a clear victor. It would be only during that moment that we would still be able to utilise the entirety of the alliance network we still had. Because once everyone had abandoned us, the battle would already be lost

On

The question now was whether or not we could convince the Silver Lake to join back into our alliance, avoiding that outcome entirely.

“This makes things... more complicated,” I mused aloud. “Has anyone had any official confirmation yet? Any indication for when we’ll receive their answer?”

“Not yet. Though Tobias has been busy these days, handling rogue disputes along their northern border.”

“Okay, fine, then ask for a meeting with Cai,” I replied. “He is able to represent the pack in these matters,

even if he can make the final say. He’ll have enough sense to realise this won’t benefit either of us. S katter everything we’ve been through, he will be able to help his father see reason.”

Weltladdach out and request his attention on the matter already, Several times, in fact,” Elder Luke started the response was that he didn’t want to get involved as he is ‘unwell. Evidently, sick enough to b

avoiding this for almost five months.”

That such a nerve

Seriously? What are we children?” I asked, incredulously. “This feels so... so immature.”

I knew we didn’t leave things on the best of terms, but making excuses to get out of dealing with something so entically important seemed ridiculous.

On the other hand though, I wondered if this was because of his mate. Because she didn’t want us to meet again given our history?

Well, whether or not his excuse is true, I’m unable to verify,” Elder Luke said. “Though I would agree that this does appear to be... a less than ideal response.”

I stood up and paced a few steps by the window, thinking of what to do in this situation. However, there weren’t many options here.

Technically their beta could also represent the pack if they were available. The only problem was that this indecision of theirs was due to personal history so my best chance at success was to appeal directly to Cai. He was the only one who would be able to sway Tobias on this.

Send a message to Cai from me. Tell him... tell him that I need his help," I said. "I want a meeting before the end of the month, Luke. 'No' is not an option."

Elder Luke simply bowed his head, acknowledging my order.

Though it was too horrible to even consider, Cai had been willing to leave his mate for me. Now it seemed that I needed to exploit his affection a little. I still could vividly remember how he'd looked at me even once I'd try to scare him away. We might not be romantically involved anymore, but he was the kind of person to try to help even when he shouldn't.

With the Silver Lake business now dealt with, I moved to return to my paperwork. However, Elder Luke remained seated, almost as if he had more matters to discuss. Matters that made my body go rigid.

...He was asking for you again today."

Aleric.

Instantly, I gritted my teeth, still too irritated from dealing with Cai to be handling this now.

"I don't care," I replied coldly. "He doesn't get to see me until he confesses what he knows about Thea. His refusal to cooperate is just selfish indignation at this point."

Aleric had been confined to a cell with only Lucy and Elder Luke having direct access to him. Currently, he was our best lead to finding out Thea's whereabouts though he was making things exceedingly difficult. Almost stupidly so.

"He still claims to not know anything about her," he said.

"And ** still know he's lying since both Lucy and I heard him mention her," I said. "The fact he's denying even that means he's being dishonest about facts we already know."

"Would it not just be easier to discuss these matters with him in person? Especially since he has asked for you several times now?" Elder Luke offered.

Truthfully, I knew he was right. But it wasn't as though I hadn't tried.

It took a few weeks after becoming Alpha before I finally built up the courage to go face him. Between what I'd done and the trauma he caused me, even the thought of seeing him filled me with extreme anxiety.

The problem was that I only made it about as far as his cell room door before I couldn't go any

further. My whole body had begun shaking so violently to the point I'd had to sit down, overcome with so much trauma and pain.

And, of course, *she* didn't make that any easier.

The entire time she was whispering to me, telling me to turn back. To leave him to rot in the cell for the rest of his life. Ever since I'd given myself over and fully acknowledged her presence, it was like she'd become stronger in her influence over me.

Now even the thought of seeing Aleric made me begin to tremble.

'He will kill you,' the voice inside whispered. 'He'll trick you into getting closer... ask that you give him a chance to hear him out and then...'

As I listened to her words, it was as though I could see it all inside my head. See as his hand would snake out quickly from the bars, grabbing my throat... squeezing slowly until...

A shiver ran down my spine, my hands beginning to shake from the terror she was able to manifest inside me.

'He can offer us nothing but lies, all stemming from a new personal vendetta. Look at how he continues to deny everything even though we heard the evidence ourselves.'

It wasn't the first time she'd done this. In fact, it was just one of several images she'd been showing me since my birthday. Always the same fear-inducing material she'd whisper to me over... and over... and over again.

"Anything he can say to me, he can say to you and Lucy," I reaffirmed, folding my arms over my chest to keep them steady. "There's no point in giving him what he wants when he clearly has no intention to tell us the truth."

Not necessarily a lie... but I knew I wouldn't be able to avoid it forever.

At some point, I would need to get it over with.

In the meantime though, I went to work preparing for the worst-case scenario. Things I could actually work on right now. No uncertain, unpredictable issues that only gave me more pain than answers. Just doing what I did best... strategizing for a potential war; with the Silver Lake, no less.

I'd already done it once... how hard could it really be?

But... without Aleric? Maybe harder than I cared to admit. He was a force to be reckoned with on the battlefield and a major factor as to why the Silver Lake didn't quickly finish us off the first time.

No, this would be a lot more difficult without him. I would need to think of something completely new this time that didn't rely on Aleric's brute strength.

All of this was just preparation though. The first battle would be in that meeting with Cai where the fates of four packs would rest in our hands.

...Something that didn't take too long to organise once he'd received my message.

Chapter Eighty-Two

As I had thought, he didn't waste much time in coming when I'd personally asked for his help. In fact, it felt like no time at all before that day was finally upon me.

I sat in my office chair, staring intensely at the door in anticipation for what felt like an hour, knowing that at any second he would arrive.

Having not seen him since that night I'd almost escaped, my chest felt so tight that I had to keep reminding myself to breathe. But I was here to do my job and, in doing that, I needed to push down any personal feelings I felt on the subject... regardless of what they may be. I had a pack that depended on me now.

So when the door finally opened and Cai walked in, I cleared my head and focused on only the task at hand.

Avoiding the worst-case scenario.

Avoiding a war.

"...Hey, Cai" | greeted in a casual tone. "Been a long time, aye?" And the meeting began.

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Chapter Eighty-Three

As soon as the words had left my mouth though, I slowly started to take in what I was actually seeing before me.

Because it was Cai, but... true to the excuse he'd provided, he really didn't seem well.

I could recall how he'd appeared worn out the last time we'd met, however this was on an entirely different level.

He looked pale with dark circles under his eyes, perhaps having even lost some weight. The difference in his appearance was almost like an entirely different person from the man I'd first met all those years ago.

"Aria," he greeted, his voice having a rasp to it that hadn't been there before.

And, inside, a pang of guilt hit me.

It seemed I really had dragged him out of his sickbed.

"Take a seat," I said, gesturing to the chair on the other side of my desk, and he complied. "I appreciate you coming here to meet with me."

"You didn't give me much of a choice," he replied.

I simply nodded in turn. "Well, you can't blame me. Your pack is still refusing to join the alliance and you can probably figure out what that means given my current position."

"I'm not refusing you anything, Aria," he argued, a cough following his words. "I've been too sick to be involved with politics; something that has lasted for months now since no one can figure out what's wrong with me. Yet, despite sending word to you of that very fact *multiple times*, you still insisted! come here."

"You won't be able to sit idly by in your bed if your pack is being killed outside your doors," I replied harshly, my eyes narrowing. "Apologies for dragging you out here but surely you can understand the very precarious position we're in right now. Only you can help convince your father to join back into the alliance."

"Really, Aria? Not even five minutes and already you're threatening a war?"

"Do you even understand the full gravity of the situation, Cai? There are only two options for me here. Either you join our alliance again... or I'll have no choice but to declare war. You already know I would rather avoid the latter."

"I came here only because you said you needed me, Aria," he said, his eyes meeting mine with unwavering intensity. "Needed *me*. Not my title."

And, suddenly, just like in the past, I could start to feel that magnetic energy form in the air around him, wanting to draw me in and listen to him. To give in to him and try to make things right.

Only I knew exactly what it was this time.

And it had nothing to do with what ** wanted to do.

"Stop that," I hissed, pushing past the influence threatening to sway my mind.

Now I knew what I was looking for, it was easy to tell when he used it. And it definitely wasn't natural. Internally, I scolded myself for being so caught up in his affection to not see it earlier.

But he only frowned, confused by my abrupt response.

"... Stop what? I'm just telling you the truth," he said slowly. "Using me for what I can offer you politically was not what I'd had in mind."

"No. I mean stop doing that thing," I replied, gritting my teeth. "It might have worked to get me into bed with you but I know what you're doing now. Stop trying to manipulate me."

"Wh... What the hell are you on about?" he said, sounding completely genuine.

And I actually believed him. It looked as though he really didn't know anything about the original lineages or his family's attribute. His confusion sounded sincere.

However, whether he knew what he was doing or not, it didn't really change anything. The fact of the matter was that it was definitive confirmation that he'd been influencing me during the times we were together. Now I would never know if what I'd felt during those moments was even real or just a byproduct of an ability.

"How about this then...", I started, doing my best not to let myself get further angry over that realisation. "If you agree to speak to your father about joining the alliance, I, in return, will let you speak to Elder Luke. There are things about you that, apparently, you don't even know about yet, things that would change your entire perspective. And who knows? Maybe he can help you with your mystery illness." 1

"Wait, so let me get this straight...", he said, his frown deepening. "You want to withhold access to someone who might have vital information to potentially cure me... on the condition I serve your agenda for Alpha?"

"...I'm doing what I need to do for my pack," I replied flatly.

But that, evidently, was the final straw for him.

"I'm finished here," he said, standing up, and began walking to the door.

Immediately, I got up and followed behind though, trying to make it there before him... only I was too late.

"Wait a second," I said, finally catching up. "Cai! Think about what you're doing. About what this means for both of our packs."

He paused at my words, his hand still on the handle, and looked down at me. It was as though he were searching my face, trying to look for something there,

...Only I found something before he did.

“...I don’t know who you are...,” he started coldly, “...but you’re not the girl I met all those years ago in high school.”

And perhaps I would have flinched at his words if it hadn’t been for the sickening discovery I’d just made myself.

A discovery I couldn’t believe I’d failed to distinguish sooner.

In my defence though, it had been hidden behind him the entire time, difficult to discern.

Quickly, without giving him a chance to leave, I then snatched his hand away from the handle and, with my other hand, I grabbed his throat, pushing him back up against the door behind him.

“Aria!” he choked out in surprise, struggling to pry away my grip.

But I was stronger than him now. Not just because of the training and my mark, but he was significantly weaker in his condition. He wouldn’t be able to escape me no matter how hard he tried.

“Where is she?!” I demanded, my body instantly ignited in a rage I hadn’t thought possible. “Where the fuck is she, Cai?”

“I don’t know who you’re talking about,” he wheezed.

But I just tightened my grip in response, his denial only further angering me. There would be no way out of it this time. I would finally get my answers. No matter what.

“Don’t play stupid!” I screamed back. “I can smell her on you! You think I don’t know what that bitch smells like after living with her for six years?!”

Cai’s natural scent had always had an undertone of sweetness to it that, given I now had enhanced senses from my shift, I hadn’t initially picked up the obvious difference at first. I’d brushed it off thinking it was just me smelling his scent properly for the first time.

But, no. Now I was up close, there was no mistaking it. No mistaking that overly sugary sweet smell that made my nose wrinkle.

He could deny it all he wanted but the evidence was there....

...He had Thea’s scent on him.

It might have been just a trace amount but I would know it anywhere.

“Aria, stop!” he pleaded, still trying to pry my hand away. “I don’t know who you think this scent belongs to, but I can tell you right now that it’s my mate’s; it’s Caitlyn’s.”

Instantly, my whole body froze and I loosened my grip on him out of sheer shock.

...He couldn’t be serious... could he?

But if that were true then...

...And my vision immediately turned red.

“You’ve been fucking Thea this entire time?!” I screamed. “What is wrong with you?!”

“Aria, I told you, it’s—.”

“Thea! You complete idiot! She obviously gave you a fake name! Why is it that every time I get involved with a man, they end up screwing her?!”

I took a step back and ran a shaky hand through my hair, in complete disbelief this was even happening. Happening *again*. How had both my lives led me here?

His brow only creased though, still adamant he was right. “You’re wrong, Aria. We have the mate bond. I know she’s not lying.”

“There is no mate bond. She’s not your mate, Cai! Why can’t you see that?” I yelled back furiously. “You want to know why you’re so unwell? Whatever your ‘mate’ is doing to make you think you’re together, is probably the same thing that is making you sick!”

“But I feel the mate bond...,” he stammered, sounding even unconvincing to me. “I mean... I think I do. Well, it’s not... no, I know she’s my mate.”

“Cai! Wake the fuck up!” I bit back. “Her scent was on me that night you found me sleeping in the trial grounds. I’d just come from trying to kill her, remember? If she was your goddamn ‘mate’, you would have smelt her as such back then!”

I didn’t know how she did it, but somehow she’d managed to create some sort of artificial mate bond, Enough to make Cai see her as his mate.

But something like that was completely unheard of.

...Unless, of course, Selene had something to do with it.

After all, there were already a bunch of us apparently running around with god powers.

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Chapter Eighty Four

“... You need to tell me where she is,” I demanded, stepping back towards him again. “Tell me where she is right now or I swear I will burn every fucking bridge to get that information out of you. I don’t care what it costs.”

“Aria... I don’t—”

“No!” I cut off, grabbing his shirt in my fists and pushing him back up against the door once more. “No, you don’t get to tell me you don’t know. I smell her on you, Cai. Tell me where the fuck she is right now!”

He mustered up enough strength to push me back, but I didn’t release my grip on his shirt.

“Aria! I don’t know where she is. She comes and goes a lot since I’ve mostly been in bed these days,” he explained. “And she has family. Not in a pack but—” |

“A human family,” I finished for him. “Yeah, it’s the same bullshit line she fed everyone here when she turned up after killing Myra. You’re all morons for believing her. I assume you didn’t even bother to ask her about it.”

He just pushed me again in reply, confirming my thoughts, and I finally relinquished my grip, but not for his sake.

Without looking at him, I then quickly walked over to the cabinet and threw across the room whatever ornament had been sitting on top of it, needing to physically vent my anger somehow.

“I don’t understand any of this. How can it feel like she’s my mate but she’s not? I mean ... it always felt a bit... weak, but the signs were all there. Whenever I look at her, it’s like something inside tells me she is my mate. How can you fake something like that?”

“Who the fuck knows, Cai? Why don’t you ask her next time you’re both sitting down together for dinner?”

“Stop blaming me, Aria!” he then growled back. “I never knew what she looked like! When she was living in the Winter Mist, I was living in your goddamn cells, remember?”

“Oh, shut up, Cai!” I snapped back, finally losing the last shred of restraint. “You don’t get to play the victim here. In fact, I’m done. I’m so done with all of this. Of you... of Aleric. Somehow both of you have found your way into her bed no matter what I do! Is this wh

y Selene actually brought me back? Entertainment to see how long it takes before I completely lose it?! Because I'm there. I'm there, Selene!" 1

'What if he's lying and he knew it was Thea the whole time, the voice inside finally piped up. 'What if he knew and is in league with her? What if he just wants you to think he isn't on her side so you'll open up

and let him steer you in the wrong direction?'

"Aria! Get it together! I can help you find her but you need to calm down," he said, taking a step towards me

...It was just as my other self had cautioned me about.

And so I quickly took a step back, now doubting even his presence here.

"No... no you stay the hell away from me," I warned, my hand resting on the dagger by my hip. "I want you off my territory immediately. I don't even care if you talk to Tobias or not anymore. In fact, don't. I dare you. Don't join back into the alliance and I *promise you* I will wipe your pack off the map again, just like! did in the last timeline. This meeting was only a courtesy... for you."?

"Aria! Wait—"

"No! I said I'm done."

"Aria—"

"Get the fuck out of my office, Cai!" I finally screamed, my eyes ablaze.

He just stared at me, his eyes glazing for a split second under my order, *before breaking early,*

It seemed my Saintess authority wouldn't work on him.

Not to say I was aiming to order him like that but it did open up an interesting *revelation* I hadn't expected.

If I had to take a guess why, it would probably have something to do with him also possessing attributes of the Goddess. Perhaps it was the same for Aleric too. *Maybe this was always the way things were going to end up.* That there was no outcome where I could have commanded Aleric or Tytus to stand down given their lineage.

"You don't need to order me," he growled, finding his composure. "I'll leave myself."

And, with that, he finally walked out, leaving behind the solitude I had so badly craved.

In fact, now in the empty office, the only thing that filled the silence was the sound of my breathing, threatening to turn into sobs at any second.

But I couldn't give in to that.

No, not today.

We'd made a promise on my birthday to never shed tears for anyone again.

If Cai was working with Thea, then so be it. We'd get to her somehow now we had a link

More so than that though, I just couldn't believe that all of these months had passed and she'd literally been across the border in Cai's bed the entire time. Given how easily girls seem to fall into his lap, .. perhaps I should have checked there first.

But all of this boiled down to Selene. Because she had sent me back with no information on the powers—at – be that extended far beyond the normal I knew of. It was as if she had wanted me to fail, setting me up to lose when the enemy clearly wasn't ordinary.

No, Selene had sat back and watched me slowly die during my first life.

...And now she was watching it happen again, only this time with more variables.

Did the first death bore her too much?

Did she just need a bit more spice for the second time around?

Well fine.

I'd bring it to her

Since she liked watching so much, I'd give her a front-row seat.

And with that, I stormed out of my office, out of the packhouse, and into the forest behind it.

The forest I used to go running in. The forest where I'd apparently forgotten something very important.

A distant memory from another life, almost completely overlooked now, yet had somehow retained nonetheless. Perhaps Selene had intentionally tried to make it that way.

Because I could recall now the day I'd come running through here to clear my head, the day Aleric had told me Thea was pregnant.

...And I'd seen a woman.

A woman in a white dress with golden hair who had seemingly made it over the border without patrols seeing her.

Who had no scent or presence and magically disappeared into thin air when I'd approached.

Who I discovered merely weeks later resembled the Goddess herself, only once I'd met with her in the Abyss.

Because she might have claimed that she couldn't involve herself in our affairs, but it didn't stop her from watching us anyway. After living for so long, what else was there for a Goddess to do?

Well, whatever the reason, I was well and truly done. Done with her neglect, her omissions, her ability to send me back without even a shred of information as to what was happening or what I needed to fix. I was done with this life.

If she really needed me to change our fate so badly, then she could prove it. No, she could tell me herself.

"Come out!" I screamed into the forest. "I know you're watching me!"

The sky was already darkening as the afternoon was turning into night, and I knew the conditions were almost the same as that day I'd first seen her.

"Selene! Show yourself!"

But only silence followed.

"Fine then," I hissed and pulled out my dagger. "Either come out, or I swear to you that I'll make the decision for both of us right now, Selene!"

And I held the dagger up to my throat, threatening to move it at any second.

"You think I won't do it?!" I yelled when she still hadn't appeared. "You think I give a shit about saving anyone anymore? Everyone who loved me either lied or is dead. I have nothing left Selene, no one worth saving. So fuck your laws. If you really need me so badly then you can show yourself or..."

I pressed the silver into my flesh more, waiting for when she would stop me.

...And yet, still, no one appeared.

Did I get it wrong?

... Did I not matter as much as I thought?

It seemed she really was committed to calling my bluff. Maybe once I was gone she would just send someone else back to try and stop Thea. Maybe it never mattered if I agreed or not because she would have chosen another poor soul if I'd declined being sent back.

...But could I really do this? I'd come out here to demand answers on the assumption she needed me more than I needed her, that she couldn't take the risk of me ending it. If she really wouldn't appear... could I go through with it? Was I actually at my limit?

'It would be a fitting end, the voice inside said. 'To have lived and lost everything in both lives is no small thing to endure. But surely the Abyss would be better than this hell? Maybe this doesn't need to be a bluff after all....

I wasn't sure if those words were comforting or not.

"...Alright, then," I whispered after a few minutes had passed with no result. "Have it your way. I'll see you on the other side, Selene...."

And with that, I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and prepared myself mentally for what I was actually considering....

It couldn't be that hard, right? There would be no Aleric, no Cai, no Thea, no wars, no packs, no heartaches or loss. A sanctuary away from all of that was just waiting for me on the other side. If the Abyss could show me my worst memories then perhaps, one day, it could also show me my best. Maybe, i

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I was lucky. I could see my parents and Myra again. Maybe I could finally be at peace....

And so my grip tightened on the blade, my heart now racing.

Just a quick movement would be enough and...—

"—

Stop," a voice then came from the forest. And my eyes flew back open to see who had spoken.

The second I saw her standing there, I quickly collapsed to my knees, my grip releasing from the dagger immediately.

I'd been merely a second away from doing it. From ending it. From finally letting go.

And yet I was still alive.

I gasped at the air around me, my body shaking from adrenaline as it pulsed through me.

It had started as just a bluff... but somehow I'd found myself almost going through with it.

...Had I really fallen to that point?

Regardless of the means though, I couldn't dispute the results.

Because Selene had shown herself. Standing in all her glory, her silver eyes analysing as she silently looked down at me.

Even from here, I could feel that air around her. The one that made me want to give myself over to her. Funny how eerily similar it really was to Cai's ability. The familiarity in the energy surrounding her was almost uncanny.

After a minute or so had passed, I finally managed to calm down, my heart now back at a semi-normal rate. And so I proceeded to address her directly, Selene still having remained silent this entire time.

"You know what I want," I said to her. "Though I'm unsure if 'want' is even the right word. Tell me...what word would be best to describe the information you so negligently deprived me of?"

But her lips only creased into a tight line as she continued to scrutinise me.

"Is she one of us?" I proceeded to ask, slowly getting back to my feet. "Is she one of the original lineages descended from you?"

She paused for another moment, considering, before finally answering.

"... No," she said, her voice almost melodic.

"But she possesses the abilities of a God?" I pressed, stepping towards her. "Because, on the possibility that Cai is telling the truth, then what she did to him is not normal."

"...It is... complicated."

"No," I immediately barked back. "I told you already. You're going to give me the answers you owe me... or we're done. You can find someone else to do this. I'm not participating in your rigged game anymore."

Only more silence followed as she quietly regarded me, almost as if weighing up her options. And, for a moment, I wondered whether or not she really would just leave me here. Become just another number in the lives she had inadvertently ruined.

But then she finally spoke once more.

"You wouldn't be able to understand if I told you," she replied. "There are things in this life far beyond what you could possibly begin to imagine. You are merely a child in a world of adults who have lived and ruled over everything since the beginning of time."

"Then help me understand," I pleaded. "Help me to see what I need to because I'm not equipped for this war you threw me into. It's clear you need me to stop whatever triggers the end of my kind and yet you give me nothing but a mark that only made my life infinitely more difficult. I don't possess the knowledge I need in order to benefit you, or anyone else, in stopping this cataclysmic event. Please ... help me, Selene

.... Help me stop her."

She took another few moments to think further on my request, her silence so eerily unnerving, and, as **every** second ticked by, my own anxiety grew. This was my last hope. My only chance of getting the answers I needed. If she refused to intervene then I would remain lost in the dark.

"I can't make you understand... but perhaps I can try and show you instead," she finally said and approached me slowly. "Apologies, child, but this will... not be pleasant."

And before I knew what was happening, her hands then cupped each side of my face, little sparks erupting from where my skin met hers, and, gently, she brought her face in, kissing my forehead. But it was as she brought her lips down that suddenly those sparks magnified and became like searing explosions in my mind, burning it from the inside.

And I began to scream.

I could recall her doing something similar to this when she'd brought me back to life. However, back then I had been dead. I knew now that whatever she was doing was not intended for the living. Maybe not even for those who did not possess a piece of her.

...What followed next was something cross between a vision and a burst of knowledge combined; my brain now overcome with intense overwhelming sensations all at once.

...Something that only stopped when I saw it.

When I saw it all.

A timeline of our origin, spanning since the beginning of time.

Playing out like a story in my head.

The story she wanted to show me.

A story that went like...

Long ago, well before man drew breath, the Gods ruled over everything.

Twelve children had been born to the universe and amongst the eldest, there was a girl.

The young Goddess was best known for her kindness and affection towards her siblings, caring and doting over them always, and helping them wherever possible. And, as such, she was soon given the title of "Great Mother".

But her life wasn't easy. Whilst she loved and held her family dear, she had always refused to engage in any personal relationships. Her devotion and dedication to seeing her family rise in power had become something that consumed all her time and energy, and she had no desire for children of her own. And so, whilst she had become known as the Great Mother, she would soon find herself becoming bitter at the title when it became a constant reminder of the pressures she felt from her siblings to begin a family.

She was the Goddess of Sight, capable of influencing the perception of what people saw. She could create value and sway others' minds, and things that previously might have meant nothing, she could manipulate the image in their heads to her own will, making them see what she desired them to. It made her exceptionally great at earning the trust and love of those around her, and her power of true sight also gave her a small insight of prophecy into the success of whatever ventures she set her mind to.

It was therefore with her help and influence that many years later her family finally ascended to become the Great Circle of Gods, a now aged and forgotten council in modern days. But to her, this had been everything she had been aspiring for, everything that her family had worked so hard for. Finally, they all

reigned on thrones above all else.

But as she witnessed the years of peace go by and the times begin to change, she eventually felt the pressure for motherhood become too much for her. She knew that it would be her duty to leave behind a son to succeed her on her throne one day.

Before long, she found herself wed to someone who had always been a source of support, and the two of them were united happily. The names of these two Gods, now known as the 'old gods' or 'Titans', were Hyperion... and Thea.

Hyperion had loved Thea for as long as he could remember and was overjoyed when she chose him as her partner. For him, this had been all he had wanted. Just a glance, a touch, a whisper of affection from the woman he revered. And he was even happier when together they produced two healthy twin children; Helios and Seiene.

Their children were unlike any others, admired by everyone for their beauty and purity. And as the twins grew, she saw how their bond became stronger also. They were almost inseparable, their lives entwined as they both grew together. And Thea even found herself happy too, something that surprised even her as, unexpectedly, the children had become her life and new purpose.

But, as whispers of a new age were beginning, one where the new generation of Gods would look to overthrow their parents, many began to distrust even the ones they loved.

Including Hyperion, a once good man who slowly became wrought with fear and anger. Because Thea no longer needed Hyperion now she had her children, and even his children felt no need for his love as they only needed each other. Soon, he found himself falling victim to those whispers of an uprising, no longer trusting even his own family.

And, eventually, it became too much for even him.

Hyperion acted by any means possible to stop his son from ever stealing his power....

...And drowned him in the Argyros River.

Upon hearing of Helios' death, Hyperion was immediately sentenced and killed by his siblings for actions of filicide. His actions had only served to sow more distrust between the generations; what previously had been a source of only rumours before.

But worse than Hyperion's demise, Selene also learnt of her twin brother's death and was distraught. Her other half was now dead and her life now felt meaningless.

...And so she followed after her sibling, drowning herself in the same river that he had lost his life to.

Within a day, Thea learnt of the news about her husband and son, and immediately ran to the river knowing what Selene might do next.

...But she was too late.

Thea searched the riverbank for hours, searching for the body of her only remaining child, but soon she became devoid of all strength as she fainted by the water...

...And a vision came to her.

In the vision her son, Helios, spoke to her and told her not to mourn their passing. That they were to become immortalised in death as living worldly natures, new Gods beyond what she could possibly imagine, becoming known as the 'Sun' and the Moon'. Helios and Selene would dance forever in the sky, chasing after one another, but never to be reunited.

Thea was both enraged and devastated upon waking from the vision. Devastated at having lost so much so quickly... and angry at, not only her husband, but her daughter too who, unlike Helios, had purposely chosen a cowardly path to leave her.

And so Thea took off into the mortal plane, no longer caring for her previous titles or polities as she cast aside everything she had previously known, Thea needed a change, a new life that she could live herself. But inside, she could never forget or forgive those who had hurt her, especially her daughter and every night, it was as if Selene mocked her still as she moved across the sky, looking down at her.

The world then changed, man began to walk the land and the Titans were overthrown by the new Gods, just as Hyperion had learned before his death. But Thea continued to stay neutral, knowing none of it concerned her any more. To her, the mortals were easily enchanted with her abilities and the new Gods held no qualms with her. She was therefore left in peace,

... That is until she found herself one day back at the Argyros River, somewhere she hadn't been in centuries, and saw her daughter once more. In the flesh, walking on the mortal plane, no longer a child, but a woman full grown.

Thea observed from afar under the darkening sky and watched as her daughter played with live children. Five mortal children. She saw how Selene imprinted on them, showing them the love of a mother, something that Thea had been forcefully robbed of because of Selene's actions,

Night after night, Thea would return to the river and find Selene playing with the same children under the light of the moon. And she became angry, spiteful. If her daughter had the ability to take form and walk the land once the sun was set, why did she not tell her? Was her son, Helios, the same? Did they both purposely choose to abandon her?

And so she'd finally had enough. The next night, before her daughter could come to the riverbank to see the children, Thea killed them all and left their bodies for Selene to find.

Naturally, her daughter was heartbroken as something she had cherished so much was seemingly taken too soon. Something that Selene was already familiar with given she'd had to relinquish all familial ties to the Gods upon her ascent to becoming the Moon. Because a God of Nature could not be involved in the politics of their kind.

However, Thea didn't know this and only sought retribution for the pain that had been inflicted on her. She didn't know of the sacrifice Selene had made to uphold her position.

But, in the end, it didn't matter.

Furious, Selene immediately caught Thea, there being nowhere under the moon she could hide, and was enraged at her mother for killing the children she had loved.

And whilst she couldn't bring harm to any mortal because of the laws that contained her, those rules did not extend to the Gods.

«Thea had little experience with the new Gods though; especially a God of Nature such as Selene. Worst still, she had become so blinded by her rage and pain that she hadn't been able to foresee what would happen next.

Selene quickly robbed her of her godly powers... and gifted them to the five children to breathe into them new life. Thea had only been allowed to live past the War of the New Gods because of her stance to stay out of the deity affairs. By choosing to publicly oppose Selene, she was declaring herself a threat. Something Selene realised Thea would not ever stop in her mission for revenge.

But in carrying out her punishment, Selene saw inside Thea, saw her life; her history, her battles, her pain... and she knew she did not want to kill her. She pitied her mother and felt bad for leaving her the way she did, but knew she would only continue to interfere in her life if she were to leave her be.

Selene only took what she needed. Just enough of Thea's powers to no longer be dangerous should she turn that anger against her once more. And she used those powers on the children, now tied to Selene through their rebirth, and each possessed a quality of Thea; some being natural to all Gods, some more

unique to Thea.

One child held the ability of strength, another with influential reverence; one with perception manipulation, another with youthful longevity... and one with foresight.

But these powers were not meant for mortals and there were unforeseeable side effects, cursing the children as a result. Since they were now children of the moon, born in the night, they would become

half beast. They, and all of their descendants, were to share their bodies with that of a wolf come their eighteenth lifecycle.

But Selene couldn't forget what had started this mess. How it had been the unrequited love of her father that had begun the chain of events that led them here. And so Selene gifted her children destined mates. Two people that would be chosen at the time of their conception to love one another. There would be no question over their sincerity for the other as she would make them feel immense joy at just the touch, sight and smell of their partner.

Immediately after Thea's powers were taken, she was in agony; a part of her core having been ripped out of her forcefully. The result was leaving her to now become almost completely mortal.

...Something much to the horror of Selene as she realised she had now inadvertently applied the laws of nature to her own mother.

Thea was now untouchable to her as mortal blood ran in her veins. And worse, she retained some of her immortality. She would now be free to roam the earth until her death, something that would never occur naturally unless forcefully robbed of her.

In order to prevent Thea from stealing her powers back, Selene quickly gave the children a blade blessed by the Argyros River water and tasked them with guarding their powers. The water was imbued with the souls of both Selene and Helios and therefore had the ability to kill even Thea. It was during this moment she showed them the ritual of how to bless the silver with water; something that would later become known as silver 'kissed by moonlight'.

But more so than just the silver, Selene also blessed a protection on the children. A protection where Thea would be unable to directly draw the blood of any direct descendant, preventing her from ever killing them by her hand.

After the events of that day, the five powers were passed down to only the eldest of each house, the rest only inheriting the curse of the night beast. However, without the need to utilise their blood gift, many of the chosen families never realised their full potential; most possessing no noticeable trace as it laid dormant inside them.

And as the generations of children came and multiplied, they soon began to completely forget the true history of their origin altogether. They forgot the true purpose in having the abilities... and, soon, they even forgot their worst enemy, stalking them from the shadows, slowly picking them off as the centuries went by.

.. Waiting for the right moment to make that last... fatal... strike,

A moment that finally presented itself when a girl was born.

A girl who would be mated to another of the direct descendants. And with only three families left, Thea was close to becoming whole once more.

A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 85

Chapter Eighty Five

Nebunang inside my head was enough to eventually snap me out of the vision and I fell to the ground, the pain subsided.

What I'd just seen was indescribable.

And not just seen but felt. I'd felt what they had; what both Thea and Selene had gone through. Their pain,

was a universe spanning far beyond my limited knowledge, a timeline as old as time itself.

And it has now been burned into my brain.

Selene had been right. Only describing this story wouldn't have been enough. What I'd just experienced gave me a deeper understanding than just simply being told.

She had completely accepted what this meant for me. For all of us. Something she was probably electing me to be lenient on given her status.

"We don't mean anything," I whispered to myself, still somewhat in a daze. "We're just ... fodder. Pawns. Foot soldiers for you."

I looked back up sharply and met her eyes. She was staring at me with caution, taking in my manner. And she probably was right to do so.

"This is why you didn't tell me earlier. Why you kept everything a secret," I said, my voice slowly becoming stronger. "You knew that if I knew the truth, the real truth, that I would have immediately declined to come back. We're not stopping a war to protect *us*, we're fighting it purely because of you. Because of your own selfish actions that began all of this. *We* didn't do anything to Thea. *We* didn't hurt her, betray her or even ask to be reborn with her powers. *You* made that decision. *You* put us in the front line to face your mother so you wouldn't have to take responsibility for your actions. And once we're done Thea will just continue with her original mission for revenge. All because you couldn't accept losing something you loved again. Just like when your brother died. Tell me, Selene, how many more of my kind need to be because you couldn't accept that fact?"

My mentioning of her brother must have been a sore spot as I could feel the pressure start to exude off of her, a nerve apparently now struck.

“My child, let us not forget—.”

“But we’re not,” I interjected, shakily getting back up to my feet. “Your children, that is. Not really. We’re born of Thea’s powers. She is, by technical definition, our so-called ‘Great Mother’. Her powers gave us new life and we carry her blood. You are merely a surrogate, at best.”

“You carry a piece of me directly,” she argued, a tone of anger now obvious in her voice. “However you want to look at it for the others, that is your choice. But I, personally, gave you this new life. How dare you act ungrateful.”

“And were the others grateful too?” I asked. “The ones who came before me? Because I know I’m not the first one you have ‘blessed’ with your mark. What happened to the other Saints, Selene? Did they die for you too?”

Her eyes narrowed, clearly not happy with the change in topic.

* ..Were they descendants as well?” I prompted when she still hadn’t replied. “From the other two lines that died? Are they gone now because of your actions?”

Finally, she spoke, her voice low with the undertone of warning.

“...They were.. mistakes.

Mistakes? What did that mean? That they made a mistake... or that she regretted marking them?

...What had she done to them if she thought that way?

‘What would you do with something that failed to do its job?’ The voice inside whispered. *We were created only to benefit her, an organic tool to keep her mother trapped on the mortal plane. What do you think she’ll do to us if we aren’t useful?*

She wasn’t wrong but I wasn’t sure what I could do about it.

‘Think for a second,’ the voice continued. ‘When she gave us a piece of herself, she was weakened, remember? She told us she was. Just as Thea was broken into pieces, she, too, broke off a piece of herself for us. What do you think she’s going to do once Thea is gone?’

And suddenly I realized what she was implying.

‘If we truly want to survive this then...

... Then I needed to be wary of Selene too.

'Not just wary,' the voice corrected. 'There is little chance she'll let you keep that piece of her once we've removed her biggest threat. She'll want it back – she'll want to become whole again. And who's to say what is even keeping us alive right now? What if that piece is the only thing sustaining us? We were meant to be dead. We don't even belong in this timeline.'

...She was saying that Thea wasn't our only enemy.

'At the end of the day, it's you or her,' the voice said.

But what was I meant to do? Kill Selene? That was insane. She was a Goddess.

So is Thea'

But I couldn't kill her. I wasn't strong enough for something like that. Thea was at least weaker.

'Do you honestly think you'll get a better chance than right now? Or do you want to wait until she comes back to rip that piece out of you? After we've done her dirty work and we're tired from fighting against a different Goddess? What do you have to lose by trying?'

I didn't disagree per se but that didn't mean

'We're going to die either way. You need to act now!'

But

'DO IT NOW

And almost as if acting on reflex from her order, I pulled my dagger from my hip...

'She is the enemy

... With one goal as my hand came swiftly up, adjusting my grip...

'She is the enemy'

...Aiming for her throat...

She is the enemy.'

"She is the enemy.'

She is the enemy

“KNEEL!” Selene roared.

And I immediately fell to my knees before her, crushed under the command.

We’d had the element of surprise but we’d been just a second too slow. Just one second away *from* accomplishing something I’d originally thought impossible.

It was a blow for sure, knowing Selene wouldn’t ever let her guard down like that again. It meant that, like it or not, we probably weren’t going to survive this ordeal to grow old one day. She’d made it clear that we were created to fulfil only one purpose; to protect everyone else.

Around Selene, it was as if the air had suddenly become thick and almost electrical. So much so that even the rocks and dirt were vibrating from the pressure radiating off her. And her eyes... her eyes *were* now ablaze, blindingly bright like silver stars.

But I saw it... on her shoulder, just barely drawing blood... I saw where I’d nicked her skin as I’d fallen.

It proved one of my suspicions correct; she really *was* part mortal now and capable of bleeding. It may have been caused by the tiniest of pieces missing from her but it was enough. Enough for me to know Selene wouldn’t want to remain this vulnerable forever.

“I have given you everything, and yet you act this way?” she said furiously. “No, forget it. I have *grown* tired of this. You now have had more help than what any of the others received. Perform your duty, Ariadne.”

And with that, she began to walk back into the forest, the ground still trembling as she left. It was a testament to what a complete Goddess looked like.

...Or, at least, an **almost** complete one.

A chuckle started to bubble in my chest, building more and more until it became full laughter. Almost hysterical as the adrenaline pumped through me from accepting my new fate. Something that caught Selene’s attention enough for her to turn back around.

Her silver eyes looked me up and down, a *frown* forming between her perfect brows.

“You are a coward, Selene,” I said, a smile *slowly* straining against my lips. “A coward and a liar. The weakest creature I have ever met. You once told me I could choose my own fate... and yet you knew *from* the very beginning that such a thing was impossible. But I want you to know something... Even if I should fail, I want you to know that I’ll live m

y eternity in the Abyss happily. That just the thought of you getting what you deserve will mean I can rest easy in hell.”

Her *frown* only deepened as she took in my words, her head slightly tilting....

...And then she vanished. Vanished back into thin air, just like she'd done the first time I'd seen her.

But it was more than just that, more than just a *frown*.

Because I could have *sworn* I saw something else in her *eyes*.

It was for just a split second, just behind the surface, but it had been visible enough.

...For just a moment... I'd seen Selene show her fear,

The days that followed felt... empty. Like I wasn't sure why I was trying.

Not long ago I'd been prepared to die... then felt relieved when I'd lived. Now, after being shown the cold truth of my world from Selene, nothing felt as though it mattered anymore. I'd already lost everyone! cared about, *everyone* who I truly wanted to protect.

And now it was like I was just waiting for the inevitable.

As though I could feel my expiration date looming above me; something that I'd thought I'd prepared myself for and yet having to suddenly acknowledge that made things feel so... pointless. Because the chances of killing not one, but two Goddesses were extremely low. That was just the brutal reality whether I liked it or not.

And, sure, I had the pack... but even that didn't hold the appeal it used to.

After all, we were just disposable objects. All of us. Just so long as Selene survived. And stopping Thea would help them... but it wouldn't help me.

It meant that I

would be fighting this war for just their future; for just the rest of my species. For even the ones who hurt me, betrayed me, rejected and humiliated me. For even the ones who stood in opposition of me with such prejudice even though I was just trying to broker peace.

Which was exactly what the majority of packs were still doing in the pending alliance war.

So why should I concern myself with such standard definitions of right and wrong when the only thing that mattered was the results? Just as Selene had said, we were all children in this universe with our naive perspectives. But, unlike everyone else, I'd been enlig

htened now. I knew that they didn't truly know what was in their best interest because they hadn't seen the real truth as I had.

It was something that she* had helped me to see too; my other self. She'd shown me how all of these niceties to avoid war were pointless when none of these children held the same power I did.

...When I could just make them all kneel before me anyway.

Because that's all the ranked system was. How much of Thea's power you held; how much 'Goddess' was in your veins. The things Selene had shown me had given me a higher understanding of how all of this worked; probably more so than even all the Elders combined. It was clear to me how we'd built a hierarchical system in our society based around those varying levels of diluted birth authority.

...And I held more power than any other Alpha.

Sure, I couldn't force the Silver Lake to submit thanks to their lineage, but that didn't stop me from commanding loyalty and respect from the other packs. To force them into a submission that would ultimately be for the better good.

So, no, there would be no war with the Silver Lake. Nor would there ever be.

Why would there need to be war when I had the alliance, and more, completely back under my command within the month? Starting a war with the Winter Mist now would be only a death wish for them.

I did make sure to constantly keep tabs on Cai though; Iris having helped to secure an inside source to notify me should Thea ever return there. I even sent Elder Luke to visit him and assist with his ailment. Because whilst I still didn't trust him, it didn't mean that I wanted her to retrieve her powers back from him either. She might not be able to physically hurt him but who knew what her level of manipulation was truly capable of?

... Before too long had passed, I'd made sure everyone knew Thea's name, knew she was public enemy number one. And, without any further arguments from opposing forces, she quickly became the most wanted woman in the entire country. Just as things should have been from the very beginning.

Finally, all unified in one single goal; to find Thea.

"Alpha," a voice called out, making me look up from my desk.

It was Elder Luke, his face expressing an urgency to it I hadn't seen before.

I wasn't sure what could make a man like Elder Luke worried but I'd be lying if said it didn't pique my

curiosity, Nothing had seemed to sway him during our work together over the past month, something admired about him.

"What is it?" I asked, straightening up in my chair

He took a second to calm himself but his expression didn't change,

"It's Aleric," he said, "He's demanding to see you."

I exhaled, already knowing that much, I'd heard this same line almost every week since my birthday

"I already told you," I said with a mild tone of irritation. If he has something to say, he—"

"No, Alpha," he interrupted, much to my surprise, "He's demanding to see you... or he'll kill Lucy. He's (got her hostage."

That caught my attention.

"He's what?" I asked, standing up.

"She was bringing him his dinner, just the same as every other night," he started, "but she must not have been looking or came a little too close to the bars."

"I don't understand how we've gone all these months and she suddenly slips up today. I thought she'd know better than to let something like this happen."

"Truthfully, Alpha, I can't really blame her for letting her guard down," Elder Luke said, "I didn't exactly expect him to do something like this so suddenly."

How could he not expect Aleric to do something like this? He killed my parents. Obviously, he wasn't opposed to murdering innocent people. In fact, it was partly for that reason I'd tasked everyone with containing him until we could better understand his relationship with Thea. He was meant to be treated as dangerous as her until we could get the answers we needed. Who knew what she'd told him to get him on her side?

...But it did raise some interesting questions. Did he even know who she was? Who she truly was? Would he still be so determined to keep secrets if he knew?

"How long ago was this?" I asked, already moving towards the door.

“About fifteen minutes, perhaps? A warrior noticed she hadn’t come back out for a while and discovered the scene upon looking inside. I was then immediately notified of the situation.”

And, with that, I quickly left without another word.

But as I walked to the cells though, suddenly I could hear *her* inside my head, almost as if appearing on a cue. Just the same as always. Trying to convince me that seeing Aleric was the wrong decision.

...Yet the more I thought about it, the more I realised it didn’t hold the same weight as normal.

‘He’ll kill you,’ she whispered inside, repeating the same words I’d heard so often.

To which I just pushed it away, continuing to my destination.

That threat didn’t even matter anymore. I was going to die soon anyway. Whether that be from him, Thea or Selene. I was already living on borrowed time.

‘He’ll lie to you.’

And that was fine. Expected, even. Nothing really different there.

‘He’ll tell you what you want to hear so you’ll do what he wants. You can’t trust him.’

I couldn’t trust anyone. This wasn’t new information. It didn’t negate the need to go down there myself

Chapler Eighty–Five

though. It was time to share with him some of my new knowledge so he could see just how messed up his actions were; that he was only aiding and abetting someone who was planning to kill him for her powers back.

No, there was no avoiding this anymore. I knew today was the day I’d face him.

But over... and over... and over again, she whispered to me, showing me the images of his betrayal, of the danger he posed. And I did my best to fight it off, to ignore it and keep moving towards the cells.

Yet no matter how much she tried to convince me, all of her warnings felt so... empty. Just as empty as how I’d felt inside the past month. He was just another person now. Another name in a list of thousands who I would

d eventually end up giving my life for. All of this, of course, being on the assumption I could even stop Thea.

'You can't go in there,' she still insisted upon arriving. But I didn't understand why though. What more could he possibly do to make me so afraid? Behind cell bars, no less?

The whole thing seemed so strange. She was literally the one who had helped me to see that there was no surviving this war with Thea. That our demise was inevitable and our only purpose in living was to serve a higher purpose. How was it then that she could be so terrified of us seeing just one man?

And so I reached out and grasped the door handle anyway, beginning to twist it open...

'Don't go in there!' she all but screamed at me inside, causing me to wince.

But I ignored her words..

...And pushed the door, allowing for it to slowly swing open to reveal the other side.

And there he was.

Seemingly unchanged since the last time I saw him, yet now viewing him in a completely different light. But it was still Alric, the man himself. The one who had taken so much from me.

Who knew how in-depth that deceit really was in this life? There was no doubt in my mind that he was keeping secrets since he'd refused to co-operate the entire time he'd been down here. However, maybe telling him the truth of our existence would make him return a bit of honesty finally. Maybe I'd finally get a lead to Thea's whereabouts or her plan. Even if that meant working with the man who killed my parents and was now threatening my attendant.

I quickly analyzed the scene before me, inspecting how he was pressed up against the bars, his arms around Lucy's body and throat as he held her from the opposite side. It was immediately obvious that, with one small movement, he could snap her neck very easily

And with that, I took a deep breath, preparing myself for what was about to unfold....

And the conversation I'd been dreading for months finally began.

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Chapter Eighty-Six

“Aleric,” I called out to him and carefully approached.

Immediately, I saw how he tensed up at my presence, his eyes flashing dark for just a moment. I suppose it wasn't that surprising to think he'd be furious after all this time down here.

However, his words seemed to contradict this first impression, only succeeding in confusing me.

“Aria,” he breathed, almost as if in a sigh of relief, before quickly focusing again.

My eyes narrowed as I looked at him, unsure what game he was playing at. Was this some sort of act?

“You can let her go now,” I said, jutting my chin towards Lucy. “If you kill her, you won't have anyone to bring you your meals every day.”

But his head moved back in confusion, taken off guard by my blunt response.

“...What?” he simply asked, perplexed by my words.

“I said... let her go or you'll probably end up starving,” I repeated, taking a few more steps towards him. “She isn't a part of this... But I get it though. You wanted to make some sort of big statement to get me down here, wanted to feel like you had a bit of control since I've kept you

locked up for so long. Well, Aleric, now I'm here, just like you wanted. So what's the next step of your plan? Are you going to kill her and make me watch? Are you disappointed I missed that part when you killed my parents?”

“I don't... what?” he asked again. “Aria... what the hell happened?”

I tried not to laugh at that. What hadn't happened?

Apart from learning that my existence was purely to serve the agenda of a higher power? Apart from Cai sleeping with Thea for months and possibly working with her? Apart from Aleric's betrayal?

...Apart from feeling so empty inside all the goddamn time?

It was a wonder that I was still bothering at all.

“Just let her go or get it over with, Aleric,” I said. “Don't drag this out any longer than we need to. I'm sure there are more important things we could be discussing right now. Such as... Where Thea is and why are you working with her?”

However, he still didn't move, as if debating internally as to what he should do. His reluctance was only frustrating me further though. Why debate when he never gave my parents that courtesy? Did he value an attendant over them?

"Go on, do it!" | goaded and moved in so close I could have reached out to touch them. "Do it, Aleric! Kill her! Just like the murderer you are!"

Abruptly, he then let her go, finally releasing her from his grip.

"If only you'd shown this sort of restraint earlier," I muttered and quickly grabbed Lucy a way from the bars to safety. "You're okay, Lucy. Get out of here. You're safe now."

She didn't need to be told twice, scrambling to leave as soon as possible.

"So you actually believe this false story that I'm involved with Thea then," he said. "You know, when you didn't come down to see me I thought that maybe something horrible had happened to you. But looks like I was wrong. Apparently you just decided to not even give me a chance to explain and believe wholeheartedly that I'm the bad guy."

| shrugged a shoulder. "Don't need to 'believe' anything when I heard it with my own ears. Or Lucy's ears,

depending on how you want to look at it. I saw in a vision how you asked her if she was there because of Thea 'as well'. I don't know why you continue to deny involvement with her."

"You mean the attendant who just so happened to be at the hospital the exact moment I was there? You didn't think that was suspicious at all? And it was the exact moment that—," but he stopped himself and looked at me more closely. "Nevermind."

"...What? You're actually going to blame Lucy now?" I asked, half laughing over how absurd that was. "Go on, tell me, Aleric, tell me how Lucy is actually the villain here. In fact, I bet it's somehow her fault my parents are dead too and next you'll be telling me how she forced you to do it."

"Aria!" he growled. "It's the same attendant you put in charge of my care down here all these months. Why do you think I've refused to say anything? You've got a goddamn spy and you don't even realise it. I don't know what the hell happened to you but if you're so blinded to even the possibility she's involved then I don't know what to tell you."

"No, Aleric, I'm not blinded to it," I argued, walking back up close to the bars. "In fact, nothing would surprise me these days. I just can't believe you're trying to distract me with stories of Lucy though when you were clearly the one at fault, when I saw you with their blood on your hands! Do you even realise who Thea is? Who you're protecting?"

“Why would I need to realise anything when I have nothing to do with that girl?”

‘He’s lying,’ the voice whispered. ‘He knows. He’s just pretending.’

“Girl,” I scoffed, ignoring the voice. “That would be a gross understatement. She is the literal Goddess of Sight; Selene’s mother. A being created at the beginning of time that is now bound and trapped inside a mortal body. That ‘girl’ is more powerful than you could possibly imagine.”

“What...?” was all Aleric managed to say.

“That is who you’re choosing to protect,” I continued, grabbing the bars. “Whatever she’s offering you, I hope it was worth it because she’s going to kill you the second you’re done being useful. It’s the same strategy she did to Cai; making him think she was his mate. She needs us to kill each other because she can’t do the dirty work herself. That’s all your pathetic existence is to her—” 1

“I’m not working with her, Aria!” he finally yelled, cutting me off.

He was now right up against the bars making him only a foot away and I looked up into his eyes. His green eyes that were so familiar to me.

...And a shiver ran through me, his close proximity still having an effect I wasn’t expecting. An odd sensation all things considered given how long it’d been since I’d felt anything properly.

«He looked so... genuine. Like he might really be telling the truth. And a part of me really did want to believe him. Was that naive of me? To have a part of me that still reacted to his way to him?

...But those feelings were inconsequential now. Grotesque, even.

Whether or not he was working with Thea, he still killed my parents.

No amount of apologies were going to make up for that. Nothing would be enough to overcome such a thing, regardless of who’s orders he might have been acting on.

And, apparently, he didn’t want to wait long to prove my point either, my senses picking up on an impending movement.

Aleric’s hand came up quickly, moving through the bars... aiming for my throat...

...And I immediately jumped back to dodge it, falling into a defensive crouch as I maneuvered away.

I told you not to get close,' the voice scolded. 'I told you he would try and kill you.'

It was just as it had been in the images she'd shown me over the past few months. His hand snaking through the bars, grabbing my throat... slowly squeezing the life out of me... She knew he would attempt this and yet I still gave him the opening.

"Really, Aleric?" I yelled, still completely flustered from having to quickly react. "Didn't want to miss your only chance at getting to me? Were you not listening to what I just told you?! I can't kill you just like you should forget about killing me. Your survival is dependent on me living, just as Cai's is as well. Don't listen to whatever she's told you."

*Aria... I wasn't trying to kill you," he argued and grunted out in frustration. "What is wrong with you?"

But I stood up, tired of hearing his same lies, and started to leave. I could feel already as my arm began to shake next to me, the fear she had induced inside starting to work its way back.

"Don't bother asking for me to come down here anymore," I said over my shoulder. "And the next time you threaten an attendant, expect to be sharing your cell with a corpse for a few days."

Behind me, I heard as he slammed his hands against the bars angrily.

"If you have even an ounce of sense left then you'll look into Lucy," he yelled out just as I made it to the exit. "She's been there since the beginning, Aria. Think about it. Something doesn't add up."

And it made me pause for a moment, allowing for his words to sink in... before, finally, I closed the door behind me.

He was so adamant about Lucy being the one working with Thea even though his actions screamed otherwise. How could I even possibly entertain the idea when it seemed so clear to me that he was falling back into the ways of the prior timeline?

...But what if he was right?

Suddenly, I was so lost in my thoughts that I didn't even sense Lucy when she threw herself at me, pulling me into a hug. Her sobs were evident as I felt her trembling against me.

"Miss," she cried, grabbing at my shirt. "Miss, thank you for coming to save me."

And, for a second, I felt guilty. Not because I had just been doubting her loyalty, but because I'd been ready to let Aleric kill her if it meant proving a point. That I didn't see her,

or any of the other non descendants, as overly important anymore so long as it served a purpose. That they were all just more fodder for Selene's war.

c...Yet somehow she was thanking me?

A month ago I might have been disgusted with myself. But now...?

"How did you know he wouldn't call your bluff though?" she asked innocently. "I really thought for a second there that he was going to do it but your quick thinking saved me."

I tensed up before quickly detangling myself from her, moving to be able to look at her face—on squarely.

She looked so genuinely scared, shaking where she stood, and yet held so much faith that I'd been trying to do right by her. How could someone with so much trust in me be a traitor working for Thea? I'd blatantly thrown her to a meaningless death and she thought I'd been bluffing.

"Get some rest, Lucy," I finally said, choosing not to answer, and walked back towards my office.

...But all of it began eating away at me.

Sure, I didn't trust Aleric... but he wasn't wrong. Lucy had been there since the beginning. In fact, she had

been the very first person I ever mentioned Thea to, therefore knowing since I was fourteen that I was after her. She was even privy to information regarding my whereabouts at any given time, about the pack, not to mention access to rooms where confidential documents might have been held.

Out of all the spies we'd ever allegedly had... Lucy made the most sense.

And she had been right there in front of me the entire time.

Admittedly, it was the motive that I was struggling with the most though. What was in it for her?

She had a respectable job where I treated her fairly, making sure that she was never left wanting for anything financially. The position she held was even one that most unranked would be honoured to hold, even to the point where they would probably accept it for a fraction of the salary I offered Lucy. So what could Thea possibly offer her that I couldn't? More than money, status or the pack?

What was so valuable that she hadn't even come to me for a counteroffer just as I'd always told her to do?

And, slowly, it started consuming my every thought more and more, driving me crazy from not being able to figure it out. Wondering whether there was even the tiniest possibility that Aleric was correct... that there was one thing he wasn't lying to me about

...And so I decided it was time.

With no real reason to hold me back, I decided it was time to confront her.

Truthfully, it felt as though I was giving in to Aleric by doing so, that I was indulging his stories of denial, but somehow I couldn't seem to get it out of my head. On even the smallest chance that it was a lead to Thea, shouldn't I explore it?

"Lucy," I said a few days later, making her pause from working.

She'd come to my office to arrange a few things for me but I'd been staring at her the entire time as she moved around, unable to focus on anything else while questions of her loyalty swarmed me.

"Miss?"

...Was I really about to do this?

"... Take a seat for a second," I said, gesturing towards my visitor chair.

"Oh, no that's okay," she said with a smile. "Thank you though. I'm almost done here and then I'll get onto my other errands."

But I looked back at her with complete seriousness.

* "...I wasn't asking."

This earned me an odd look as her smile faltered, moving to quietly carry out my request.

"Everything okay, Miss?" she asked when I still hadn't spoken for a few seconds.

I'd been scrutinising her silently, wondering if I was mentally ready to hear yet another person admit to betraying me. After all, there'd been a lot of that recently.

But I felt... ready. Or maybe I didn't care anymore.

Because there was a prominent reason I'd never allowed myself to fully open up to Lucy, my attendant, even after everything she'd done for me over the last few years. My

personal history with the position she held had admittedly stopped me from ever closing the gap in trust.

“I guess I’m just going to come out and say it. There isn’t exactly a nice way to phrase it anyway, so...” I said, and took a deep breath, “...have you been working for Thea this entire time, Lucy?”

Her body tensed up immediately and she looked away. “No, Miss. Of course not. I’ve been working hard to manage our sources so I can find her for you.”

I bit the inside of my cheek, the reality of the situation now looking grim. She hadn’t even been able to look at me as she answered.

“Lucy.” I said sternly, making her look back up. “You can either tell me the truth... or I can order it out of you. I promise you though that the latter will only succeed in making me infinitely more pissed off should I find out you’re lying. So, one last chance... Are you working for Thea?”

And I could visibly see as she began to shake, tears welling in her eyes.

“... Miss, please,” she begged. “Please... please... I—I don’t... I didn’t want to. I’m sorry. Please.”

Surprisingly, I felt completely calm as I watched her start to sob from admitting her treason.

“...Why?” was all I asked as she continued to stutter out apologies.

“My mother...” she cried. “I did it for my mother. I’m so sorry, Miss.”

Family. Somehow Thea had managed to offer her the only thing more valuable than anything else I could have.

“Explain,” I instructed, doing my best to sound neutral. “I want all of the details.”

Like it or not, Lucy was now my best chance at finding Thea. Getting angry was only going to make getting those answers more difficult.

“...Miss, I-I can’t, ...,” she stuttered, continuing to cry.

It took a few minutes before she finally inhaled deeply to calm down, closing her eyes in acceptance.

And she began to tell me her story.

“...I should start off by telling you that I was born to a semi-privileged family, Miss. My father held a respectably high warrior position before he passed away fifteen years ago... something that was extremely difficult for me to bear. Mostly because he was a single parent for me up until that point, doing his best to raise me. My mother, who I barely knew back then, had been outcasted when I was still just a child, banished from the pack for crimes she didn't commit. The result was she became a rogue... and suffered every day for it.”

Tears were still falling down her face as she recounted her childhood.

“I was sent to the orphanage after my father passed, filled with promises from everyone that I would be looked after in honour of his memory. And it was true enough, I was very fortunate despite my new “environment... but I still felt sad. Like I was missing something. Something that was only found once my mother managed to reach out to me. She explained to me about her wrongful conviction, about how she loved me and wished she could be there for me during the difficult period I was experiencing... and I felt happier than I had in a long time. Even in her absence, she still somehow managed to fill the hole that had been left by my father's death.”

“So how does Thea come into it?” I asked.

She rubbed at her eyes, clearing the tears there before she proceeded once more.

“I stayed in contact with my mother as I grew up in the orphanage. First, it was just letters, but, before long, we would meet secretly along the rivers that stemmed from across the borders. We used to leave codes on the rocks to find our way and the patrols weren't able to track her scent because of the water. It worked perfectly. But it wasn't really... enough. I wanted her name to be cleared and for us to be a family without all the hiding. It was around this time that you then came to me, Miss. This crazy, far too intelligent, fourteen year old who honestly scared me a little, and told me to track down a woman named

Thea. But, and I mean this truthfully, I didn't end up finding her... she found me.”

You met with her?”

Lucy nodded. “Maybe a month after we began searching for her, my mother introduced me to a girl at one of our secret meetings. Imagine my surprise and excitement when she suddenly told me who she was. I couldn't wait to tell you. But... the thing about Thea is that she is very... charismatic, persuasive even. She told us how she could help clear my mother's name. Not just hers either, but other wrongfully convicted rogues just like her. She had a goal of slowly integrating them into jobs as though they always belonged there, helping them restart their lives after years of suffering. Of course, I laughed and

didn't believe her at first... but then I met the others. The ones she'd already helped; so me of who I'd already known for years and never realised the truth. And suddenly the dream of being with my mother didn't seem so insane anymore."

"Thea actually told you who the other rogue spies are?" I asked, leaning forward in my chair attentively. "She trusted you enough for that information?"

"A few, yes..." she answered hesitantly. "She had no choice but to earn my trust because... because she needed me... for you. She told me I was crucial to her plan and promised to help my mother after I did what she wanted."

And just like that, my world had been opened up as the most vital information became available to me.

Not only did I suddenly have access to someone who knew Thea... but they were someone who knew the identity of other spies just like her.

And now, for the first time ever, I had a real advantage in this war. I finally had a lead on Thea.

A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 87

Chapter Eighty–Seven

'Why are you letting her live?' The voice inside hissed 'She's a traitor. A rat.'

It'd been going on like this for a few days now ever since I made the agreement with Lucy.

The original plan had been for Lucy to reach out to her mother in order to uncover Thea's whereabouts, but something had gone wrong with that. According to Lucy's mother, Thea hadn't come back yet from whatever she'd been doing recently. Which caused several dilemmas.

The main one being the safety of Lucy's mother. Someone who apparently was now so scared for her life that she was demanding immunity within the pack for her information.

A huge ask considering she was a rogue and it would mean losing an inside connection.

Looking at her record, Stephanie Faulkner had crimes of fraud and theft committed against higher-ranked members. And whilst Lucy herself believed wholeheartedly that her mother was innocent, the evidence was stacked up against her.

Personally, I would have preferred for her to stay among the rogues for intel but it seemed as though she felt her position was now far too compromised. She wanted to return to the Winter Mist or she wouldn't help at all.

It was bold, I'll give her that, especially since I was still debating her daughter's fate for when this was all over. Obviously, she wasn't the smartest tool in the shed since she had to ask for Lucy's freedom in her immunity terms.

However, now I was left with the voice inside tormenting me over what I should do with Lucy for lying to me all of these years. It was almost incessant and making it difficult for me to think.

But today was the most important day. It was the day Stephanie would be arriving. According to her, the rogue pack she had been living with was the same one terrorising the borders of the Silver Lake the last few months. I was hoping that whatever information she could provide would make all of this worth it.

'Why are you honouring your word for a liar?' The voice continued. 'And not just a liar, but a murderer too. Aren't you forgetting that she created the river system for the rogues? Don't you remember who died because of that?'

Myra. She was blaming Myra's death on Lucy now.

'Not only Myra but she's someone who almost got you killed several times too,' she said. 'Did you forget about the kidnapping from the packhouse? The Golden Blade pack attack? The river cave with rogues? All of that stems from the information she would have provided them. How can—'

"Shut up!" I finally screamed aloud. "I can't take it anymore."

I was at my limit, my head hurting from all of her talking. It was just nonstop as she kept bringing up memories I would rather not focus on right now. How was I meant to do my job and get information with all of this going through my head? When she kept telling me to just kill her already?

'You know it's the right thing to do. You need to end this now.'

But then a knocking came from the door and I saw as Lucy entered hesitantly, evidence on her face to tell me she'd been crying. Presumably, I took that to mean her mother had arrived.

"Alpha," she greeted, a timid smile on her lips as she walked up to my desk. "My mother is here. Let me introduce you."

'Kill her.'

I ignored the voice and stood up, walking to the middle of the room to see who would enter. To see who would be giving me the information on Thea I'd been so desperate for all these years.

And then an older woman walked in, with greying black hair and a kind face.

I recognised her immediately.

"Hello, Alpha Ariadne, it is a pleasure to finally meet you," she bowed respectfully, smiling. "My name is—"

But I didn't wait

'Never again. Never again.'

"Never again.

'NEVER AGAIN. DO IT.'

I quickly spun around and, without even an ounce of hesitation, I slit Lucy's throat with my knife, allowing for her to instantly begin bleeding out.

And I watched quietly, watched as she coughed, wide-eyed and spluttering on her own blood, before finally falling to the ground. Her body stilling within just seconds.

"LUCY! NO!" the woman cried, tears immediately falling down her face. "Why? Why would you do that?"

But I just calmly walked up to the woman's shocked, frozen form and began cleaning the knife on her shirt.

"Partly for myself. Partly because you gave me the incentive I'd been waiting for. I wanted to see if you were genuinely capable of crying over someone you considered a daughter," I said evenly. "I wanted you to

know how it feels when you actually meant it."

"I—I don't... I don't know what you mean," she stuttered, her face distraught. "Who even are you?"

"Her blood is on you now," I said, taking a step away from my old attendant. "Enjoy that last thought before I have you locked inside the cells."

"You can't do that! Y—you need me! I have information on Thea. Don't you want her?"

"You're going to tell me everything I want, whether you like it or not, Sophie Forrester," I hissed, instantly moving back in so I was right in front of her face. "...Or whatever fucking name you go by in this life. 'Stephanie'. I want you to sit in those cells, rotting, the inkling of every despicable thing you ever did which led you to this very moment. Never forget that you're alive right now because I allow you to be. I want you to live, knowing that at Lucy died for your mistakes."

And then I side-stepped her to walk away, pushing open the office room doors to leave.

"Lucy!" I heard her cry behind me. "My baby, my poor baby... Oh, Goddess."

"Take her to the cells," I ordered the warriors on the other side. "...And have someone clean up the mess."

They nodded at my request, though I could tell they were doing their best to not show me what they really thought. But it didn't matter. I had bigger problems to worry about.

And I walked away calmly, knowing I'd finally gotten my revenge on at least one person. Even if it wasn't the person I originally thought I'd be finding today. Finally, my old attendant got what she deserved for throwing me to my death in my past life.

I knew I didn't need to worry though. If Sophie went back to Thea, she would just be killed for being useless, her identity now uncovered and Lucy's advantage gone. If she remained in the cells refusing to talk, I would just throw her out of the pack for Thea to find. It was her choice.

chapter tifty Seven

There had been nothing in our immunity agreement for her to live freely, just that she would be allowed back into the Winter Mist in exchange for information. And truthfully, considering Sophie was one of the people who had gotten me killed in my first life, the cells seemed mighty generous of me.

Like mother, like daughter, I suppose. Both finding some way to help Thea destroy us all.

"Alpha," a voice then said near me, causing me to look up.

I'd been wandering in a daze, so lost in my own thoughts that I hadn't realised I'd ended up in the garden.

"Alpha, are you okay?" Elder Luke said, a frown on his face. 1

"I'm fine," I replied quietly.

But he looked at my clothes more pointedly prompting me to look down. "Is that... blood on you?"

I stared at it.

"Not mine. Lucy's," I answered factually.

He was quiet for a minute, not knowing what to say. "Is she... Are you feeling okay?"

Was I feeling okay? I thought that getting revenge on Sophie would feel great except I didn't really feel...

anything. Like at all.

But the voice inside had at least gone quiet, having done what she wanted, and that made me feel a little better. A minor victory, all things considered.

"I'm fine."

"Okay...

well, I was going to show you something I'd been working on that's pretty important," he said, clearing his throat. "Did you want to do it later or...?"

But I just shrugged, not really concerned. "We can do it now. Though if it's in my office we might need to wait a bit."

And I thought I saw him shiver but I could have been mistaken.

"It's in the meeting hall," he replied. "I've been using the smaller office attached for extra space since it's not often you call ranked meetings with everyone."

That was true. Not much to negotiate with the others when their opinions couldn't possibly take into account everything I knew.

"Alright, we can go," I said, already heading in that direction.

And so we left.

It only took a few minutes to get there and I walked in front through the doors, heading through the hallways. But it was as I was about to head towards where the office was that I caught something surprising.

A scent.

A familiar one.

And I swiftly pivoted and opened the large double doors of the meeting hall instead, finding something! never would have expected to see on the other side.

“Aria,” they said.

And I looked from where Aleric was standing... to where Cai was right next to him.

It was an ambush.

A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 88

Chapter Eighty–Eight

“Please forgive me, Alpha,” I heard Elder Luke quietly mutter behind me before he quickly closed the meeting hall doors.

Click

And suddenly I was locked in here. With them.

“Aleric... Cai,” I said cautiously, my hand already moving slowly towards my dagger. “Didn’t expect to find either of you here of all places.”

Not only had someone broken Aleric out of the cells but they’d also succeeded in getting Cai over the border without my knowledge. And I knew, without needing to think too hard on it, that only Elder Luke was capable of something like this.

My mind was already racing with what was going on, analysing their movements carefully to ensure I wasn’t taken off guard. If they were under Thea’s influence then they might try to kill me. I couldn’t think of any other reason for why they would have trapped me like this.

“We can do this the easy way or the hard way,” Aleric said, taking a step forward.

And, immediately, I unsheathed my dagger and held it up defensively. They were mistaken if they thought I would go down easily.

“Who’s blood is that?” Cai then asked, bringing Aleric’s attention to it as well.

“None of your business,” I bit back.

“...What the hell have you done, Aria?” Aleric growled. “Is that Lucy’s scent I can smell on you?”

“Nothing you wouldn’t do, Aleric,” I snapped, taking a few steps forward cautiously.

I heard him then sigh quietly at that and look towards Cai. “We’re going to have to go with Plan B.”

And quickly, I got into a crouch and readied myself. “What is this? Did you just tell me that Lucy was a spy to throw me off your trail? Didn’t want me to suspect you of working with Thea anymore so you could organise this? Are you all in on this? Elder Luke too? All of you working for her?”

“Not everyone is your enemy, Aria,” Aleric said. “You’re sick and you don’t even realise it.”

I laughed at that. “Oh, *I’m sick*? How about the person who murdered my parents?” I asked before turning towards Cai. “Or the person who slept with the creature trying to kill us? Did you just forget that taking me out is just one step closer to your own death?”

“We’re not trying to kill you, Aria. We’re trying to help you.”

«But then I saw it. A flash image of him charging at me, throwing me to the ground and ripping out my

throat. Almost as vivid as a vision... but different.

“I knew it! You’re lying!” I yelled, adjusting my stance. “Always lying! You think I’m going to let my defences down this time? I won’t be taken out so easily anymore. There’s no silver collar to hold me back

now,”

“You should kill them before they kill you,” the voice said. “Maybe there is a way to take their abilities. If we could gatekeep all three lineages then there wouldn’t be any need for them. No more liabilities.”

I was too focused on the situation at hand but I knew that what she was saying sounded too risky. *We weren’t a God* and even if I could take their abilities, I wouldn’t even know how to go about doing that.

Just try it, she said. ‘Before they get to you first. Before they make the choice for you.’

Cai ended up being the first one to move, charging from the right, but I sensed his movement perfectly. He was aiming to tackle me to the ground but he was mistaken if he thought something like that would

work on me. Aleric's distraction of talking to me wasn't going to be anywhere near enough to get the drop on me.

Instantly, his body flew past as he missed me entirely and I quickly turned to be ready for a counter.

He was still too slow though. In the month since I'd last seen him, it looked as though he'd regained the majority of his strength but he wasn't yet back at his peak. I knew what Cai was capable of on his best day and this wasn't it.

He tried several more attempts at landing a hit on me to no avail. In fact, it was useless for him to even try since I could sense his attacks seconds before he moved.

"That's not going to work on her," Aleric then shouted from the side, moving in to flank behind me. "She can foresee your movements."

"Evidently," Cai replied dryly, not taking his eyes off me.

"Scared, Cai?" I asked and faked a lunge forward. He immediately jumped backwards defensively causing me to laugh.

But the humour was cut short as I felt Aleric attempting to take advantage of the mild distraction.

"Nice try," I said and moved back just as Aleric's hands tried to grab me.

He'd left himself open by doing this though and, utilising his proximity, I quickly brought my knife up to get a hit on his arm, hoping to maim him. However, he was almost as fast as me, managing to move out of the way to avoid in time,

The whole thing was reminiscent of the day before my birthday when we'd been sparring in the gym. Except neither of us had things holding us back now. For what I was lacking in brute strength and extensive fighting knowledge, I was able to make up for in speed and foresight. And, unlike him, I was actually armed.

The dance began as we both attacked and countered each other, now almost perfectly balanced and in sync. It was impossible to say who had the upper hand as everything moved in a blur. Perhaps it might have even gone on forever... but then I felt it;

Cai coming in from the side, deciding to finally interfere.

He looked for an opening and I sensed his next move, but I was only just able to miss it by a second. Taking on just one at a time might have given me the slightest chance of victory... but two?

And it ended up being just as difficult as I thought. The only thing giving me a real edge now was the knife, both of them having to give a clear radius to avoid that. If they managed to disarm me I knew it would be over.

... The strange thing though was that neither of them had shifted. Taking them on in human form was only giving me the better advantage. I knew that if they were both to take their wolf forms I would be in trouble; my own wolf now lacking in strength since her absence.

“Kill them both,” the voice instructed frantically inside my head.

‘Do it. Before it’s too late.’

‘Do it.’

“Shut up!” I screamed back aloud in frustration.

It was never—
ending. Never enough. Never stopping. I couldn’t take much more. I just wanted my head to be mine again and mine alone.

“Who are you talking to?” Cai asked, closer behind me than I realised.

But I didn’t reply

Instead, I just immediately turned around to lunge and, using my elbow to strike his jaw, I sent him straight to the ground with a thud. The impact alone had probably hurt more than my attack.

But I didn’t waste time after that and quickly jumped on top of him, using my weight to pin his arms down. I needed to be fast because I knew he was probably capable of overpowering me in overall strength again; him having recovered enough for at least that much. However, truthfully, I found it a little surprising when he was barely struggling against me.

“Aria,” he yelled urgently, his golden eyes locking with mine. “Stop. This isn’t you.”

And I felt that wave of electricity in the air, trying to persuade me to stop. That same energy he’d manipulated me with for years.

...And I tightened my grip on my dagger.

Do it kill him. We can defeat Thea once we have his power.'

...And positioned my hand.

'FINISH IT. ...And

"NO!" a voice yelled from behind me...

...And a wall of muscle quickly tackled me off Cai, sending us both flying along the ground and sliding several feet away.

I

pushed and shoved against Aleric's grip but he was putting everything into this. It was almost impossible to free myself.

But I had something he didn't, something to give me the advantage here; my dagger.

And, as quickly as I could, I brought it up... Angling it and...

"Enough, Aria!" Aleric ordered and he disarmed the knife from me, throwing it as far away as possible." Enough."

It was over.

"Do it then," I spat, still wriggling in a futile attempt to escape. "Get it over with. Kill me. Just like my parents, Aleric. Is that the kind of 'help' you had in mind? Is that how you helped them?"

He growled and pushed my shoulders back down again to try and stop me from struggling.

"Yes, it is actually!" he said furiously. "That is exactly how I helped them. I saved them!"

"Stop it!" I screamed back. "You honestly think that what you did helped them? Do you just see their murder as some sort of messed up reversed logic where you're actually the hero? I bet that was Thea's doing. I bet she made you think that what you did was just fine."

"Your parents are alive, Aria!" he shouted, cutting me off. "That's what I mean by saving them!"

Immediately, my body stilled, shocked at what he'd just told me.

"No...", I said. "No, you're lying. You're just lying so I let my guard down."

"Why would I need to do that? I could just finish you off now if I wanted to."

“I saw their bodies, Aleric,” I argued. “I saw their blood on you. How can you possibly expect me to believe you?”

“If you actually saw their blood then tell me... where were their wounds?”

And I stopped for a second. Had there actually been wounds? I’d seen their lifeless forms in my mother’s office but I couldn’t recall ever seeing where the blood would have come from. I’d just put two and two together when I saw Aleric’s hands.

“That blood belonged to a spy, Aria. Someone posing as one of the warriors,” he continued when I didn’t answer. “He came down to the office with me when Tytus ordered for your mother to be detained. Except he didn’t try to bring her in. Instead, he tried to kill her.”

“Then why were they dead on the ground?”

“They’re not dead,” he stressed again. “They just looked that way. After the attack, your father came bursting in, having heard the news about your mother, and found me with the body of the spy. We concluded that he was going to try and frame me for killing your mother... so we let them all think that it worked. If Thea was going after your family then we all agreed it was safer for them to be thought dead rather than alive, or at least until we could remove Tytus for full control. Your mother then quickly dosed your father and herself with a drug to give them the appearance of being deceased; obviously working well enough to fool even you. But they’re both alive, Aria. Your father has been protecting them in a safe

Chapter Eighty–Eight

location outside the pack all these months, waiting for me to give them the okay to come back.”

I looked at him, battling inside over whether I should believe him or not. On the one hand, I was struggling with how it contradicted what I thought I saw... but on the other hand, I really wanted it to be true. i

“... Then why wouldn’t you tell me sooner?” I argued.

‘When could I?! When did you even give me the slightest chance to? I’ve seen you once in over three months and it was after I was holding yet another spy hostage.’

“You could have told me then. You could have told me in the cells after she left.”

He sighed. "I'm just trying to protect them, the same as I have been this entire time," he answered, his voice calming down a little. "...Only now I've had to protect them from you. I knew it the second you walked into the cells, Aria... you're sick. And you don't even know it."

I started struggling again under him, trying to move free.

First he tells me a story about my parents being alive, now he was trying to say that I was the problem. That my parents actually needed protection from me?

"No... no, no, there's nothing wrong with me," I said, wriggling in his grasp. "You're wrong. You're just being used by Thea. You're—"

"Snap out of it already!"

And I stilled once more, looking up at him wide-eyed. He had that serious expression about him, the same one that made me want to believe him. Like something tugging at me inside to listen.

"Fine, you don't believe me? You're so sure that you're fine, right?" he asked and pulled himself back upright, allowing for me to sit up. Risky considering I could have made a run for it. "Just see for yourself then."

And then he grabbed my arm forcefully and stretched it out between us, his grip tight as he held it in place.

"Hey! W—what are you doing," I said, trying to pull it back. "Stop."

"Look Aria," he ordered and he proceeded to slide his hand down the inside of my arm along my skin.

"I don't... I don't know what I'm meant to be looking at. Your hand? My arm?"

"You're eighteen, Aria," he said as if that was going to make things any clearer.

"And...?"

But he just sighed, obviously unimpressed by my answer. "And what happens after your eighteenth?"

I frowned in thought, looking at where he was still holding my arm. What was he talking about? Shifting maybe? Was he referring to how my wolf was absent? What would that have to do with my arm though?

...But then I finally realised what he was referring to.

...And a cold feeling of dread quickly spread throughout my whole body.

“Wait... No...,” I whispered in shock and grabbed back at his arm frantically, touching his skin over and over again. “No, no, why can’t ... Why isn’t it there?”

Selene had said there was no changing it, that it was set in stone the moment of our conception. So where was it? I knew what this was supposed to feel like, I’d lived a life of knowing the exact sensations that should be there.

But there was nothing.

Aleric was my mate... and I couldn’t feel the mate bond.

“...Where is it?!” I asked, panic filling my voice. “Why can’t I feel it?!”

And I quickly looked up into his eyes, full of sadness as he quietly watched me, and everything came crashing down. Just his look alone was enough to tell me that, whatever this was, it really was just my side who couldn’t feel it. That I was the problem.

No sparks, no pull, no feeling of relief from being near him.

Just... nothing.

...And a tear fell down my cheek as I held his gaze.

“...What’s wrong with me?”

I hadn’t thought about it much since I already knew from my prior life that we were mates. I’d lived four years already knowing he was tied to me so it just felt like any other day. Somehow between everything that happened with Tytus, with my parents, with losing my wolf, with becoming Alpha... it just slipped my mind. Something so important and yet I’d forgotten in between all the chaos.

But then why wasn’t it there? Why couldn’t I feel it?

Was I actually sick?

...And I realised that if I really was the problem, if something really was wrong with me, didn’t that mean Aleric was maybe telling the truth? Were my parents alive?

It started to feel as though I couldn’t breathe and I began questioning everything that had happened over the last few months, instantly overwhelming me

"The second you walked into the cells, it was like all of my anger and frustration just immediately evaporated. Almost as though the world just completely stopped. and there was only you," he said quietly. "It was like nothing else I'd ever experienced and words couldn't come close to properly describing it. You'd already told me previously that we were going to be mates but I guess I just didn't expect for it to feel like... that."

I knew what he was talking about even though I hadn't felt it in this life. I could still vividly recall the first time I'd seen him in the past, how it was meant to feel and how world-changing it was.

But then he took a deep breath, his jaw tightening "Except the person who entered was acting as though nothing was different, as though we hadn't just felt the most intense emotional pull of our lives, forcing us to gravitate to one another. Instead, you just looked at me coldly, speaking words that I would have never expected you to say. Behaving in a way I didn't even recognise to be you anymore. And I knew something was wrong."

"I— I'm so confused," I said, frowning. "I don't understand how this happened. Why I can't see you as —"

And I immediately remembered where I'd heard something like this before this ability to affect one's perception of the mate bond. After all, they'd done something similar, yet the exact opposite, to Cai.

Thea.

But it wasn't the same as him and I didn't have Thea hanging around... so how was it she was able to manipulate me this much?

—Click-ck-ck-ck—CK

The metal sound of closing handcuffs broke my deep thought and I looked sharply down to find a pair had been tightened around one of my wrists, immediately draining me from the silver

Cai now stood next to us, his expression completely stony as he stared down at me. Almost as though he were looking at a stranger he detested... and I knew instantly this was his doing

"...What's this for?" I asked and began tugging at the metal. "Take this off. Now."

"No," he replied flatly.

"Cai... let's just try and figure this out first," Aleric said.

"We both agreed to do this," Cai snapped back, annoyed. "Don't get all soft now just because she's close by. That's the mate bond messing with you. You know as much as I do just how dangerous she is."

"That was before..." Aleric said. "Back when I thought she wasn't going to listen."

"She didn't listen! She's still batshit insane and was ready to attack before we even had a chance to talk. Until we work this all out, we're sticking with the original plan."

"You're not doing anything." I said, anger flaring. "Let me out of these. Right now. This is still my pack and you'll show me respect."

"Or what?!" Cai asked furiously, turning to me. "You're going to try and kill me for a third time? Or should we say fourth if we take into account the first time you held a knife to me? I really, really* tried to give you the benefit of the doubt, Aria, but there is only so much I can take. And let's not forget everything else you've done on top of that."

"Like what?"

"Like enslaving almost half the country and forcing them to submit into an alliance? Like killing Tytus? Lucy? Spy or not, she was your attendant for four years and you didn't even look remotely shaken up. You've gone from being a girl who worked relentlessly to a void war and needless pain; a girl who wanted nothing more than to change the oppressive system and to create a better world... to this. A cold blooded killer who doesn't even trust the ground they stand on, let alone can act rationally. If you could just see yourself clearly, you would agree."

"Enough, Cai," Aleric said, standing up to face him. "She's sick. You've made your point already."

"And what if she's not?" he asked. "What if you're looking into this more than you should be because you just want it to be true? Hoping that the girl we both knew still exists? You know, I had Thea around me for months manipulating an artificial mate bond... doesn't mean I forgot how to act sane. Whoever this is, she's completely devoid of compassion, rationality... morality. I looked into her eyes as she was about to kill me before and it was like looking into soulless holes. Not the first time she's looked at me like that either."

"Enough, Cai!" Aleric growled, grabbing his shirt. "You're not helping."

And they both stared at each other, silently furious at one another, until Cai finally sighed.

“I’m going to go cool off outside,” he said, taking a step back so Aleric would let him go.
“But I meant

let her out of those cuffs. Seriously. Whether she realises it or not, she’s clearly one of the most dangerous things out there. Second only to a goddamn mortal Goddess trying to murder us all.”

“Fine,” Aleric conceded. “But I’m not putting her in the cell. She can sleep in her room guarded.”

...Listening to all of this I felt... helpless. Vulnerable. Unsure of everything I’d done.

All of my actions had felt... justified. I did what I thought I had to do in order to survive. But they both sounded so outraged by everything, so convinced that I was acting crazy. So was I wrong? Was I so far gone in whatever was wrong with me that I couldn’t see what I’d done wrong?

...When I didn’t feel even the tiniest bit guilty?

It meant either they were wrong... or I was. And I was struggling to cope with everything that the latter would entail. Who could I trust above all else if not myself?

... Three years of making me distrust everyone.

... Three years of convincing me I was better off alone.

...Of convincing me to kill everyone.

And, suddenly, everything I believed to be true instantly fell to pieces around me. I finally realised how Thea had been able to affect the mate bond.

Because it turns out that maybe Aleric had been right. Thea really was closer than any of us realised. Closer than anyone would have ever expected.

In fact, the answer had been right there the entire time.

... Thea was inside my head.

She was the voice I’d been listening to all these years.

And I quickly realised that I really was the dangerous one.

“Aria?” Aleric asked, worried now from my silence.

But I could barely hear him, my own body starting to shake with the realisation of what I'd done. What I'd accomplished because of her.

From the very second she'd appeared, she had been pushing me away from everyone under the pretence of being a part of me. She used my previous memories and pain against me, manipulating it in a way to make me think they were my own choices. Hell, even the very first thing she ever tried to get me to do was to pull the knife out of Aleric and let him die. Just how long had she been planning this? How skewed had she warped my perception of everything and everyone around me?

No wonder she was always one step ahead of me.

No wonder it seemed like she wasn't making a move all these years.

She didn't need to. She didn't need to do a single thing.

Because she had me doing it all for her.

She'd been slowly moulding me into a weapon for years.

...And, suddenly, the sound of her laughter filled my head.

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Chapter Eighty-Nine

No, no, no, no...

No, this couldn't be happening.

I'd been so guarded against everyone else that I hadn't seen the real issue sinking its teeth within me the entire time.

"Aria?" Aleric asked again, grabbing onto my shoulders to steady me.

But I recoiled quickly away, taking a few shaky steps away.

"No, don't... don't touch me. I'm... I'm not..." I said disjointedly, unable to even finish my sentence in my current state.

"Are you okay?"

'What if he's just trying to gain your trust,' I heard her say inside.

'What if he's lying to you.'

'What if he's going to betray you again?'

Over and over, her voice started to fill my head. All the things she'd told me once before now beginning to overlap until it was the only thing I could hear. As if I were in the middle of a crowded room filled with people shouting.

'You could pull the knife out. No one would even know it was you. They'd say it was the rogues.'

"You did the right thing. Either way, this is the best thing for us.'

'We made a vow. Myra's death was a result of making that same mistake once more.'

'Kill her. Kill her now. Strangle her until the light dies from her eyes.'

"Stop!" I shouted, covering my hands over my ears. "Stop, please! Get out of my head! Get out!"

'He trapped us, degraded us, tried to force us into a union... and then had our parents kil—'

— They don't respect you enough. You should make them kneel. All of them. It would force them to acknowledge yo—'

—

Don't need them. Aleric was, and always will be, our undoing. He was our beginning and our end. Time does not change t

'—

Offer us nothing but lies, all stemming from a new personal vendetta. Look at how he continues to deny everything even though we heard the evidence

'—

And is in league with her? What if Cai just wants you to think he isn't on her side so you'll open up and let him steer you in the wrong direction—?'

"STOP! STOP! STOP!" I yelled as I fell to my knees, the onslaught of imagery and voices filling my head too overwhelming to cope with.

I couldn't hear anything else, couldn't see anything else. There was now only one thing.

There was just Thea.

Only Thea.

‘—
What if that piece is the only thing sustaining us? We were meant to be dead. We don't even belong in

this time!—,

—Going to die either way. You need to act now! Selene is the enem

‘—know it's the right thing to do. You need to end this now. Kill Lucy

—Should kill them before they kill you. No more liabilities. Just try it—‘

—Do it. Kill him

—FINISH IT

And I began screaming.

Somehow louder than even the voices in my head, I screamed a piercing shriek into the air, wishing more than anything that all of this would just end.

My brain now felt as though it was completely on fire, burning me up from the inside as it struggled to compensate for the sheer amount of chaos happening internally.

“Aria! Aria! Talk to me!” | vaguely heard Aleric yell once my scream had subsided.

But I couldn't reply, couldn't find my voice as she continued to swarm my mind. Showing me every step I'd made in my journey of becoming her pawn.

“Cai, get in here! I need help! She's convulsing. We need to get her to the hospital.”

And I wasn't sure exactly what happened next but I had never been so grateful for every thing to cease.

...And, finally, everything went black.

When I eventually awoke, I felt cold everywhere.

The feeling of crisp bed sheets welcomed me along with the smell of strong chemicals filling my nose. A scent I was instantly familiar with.

I was in the hospital.

“Alpha?” a voice asked and I finally opened my eyes slowly to see Elder Luke.

It felt as though I were waking up without enough rest, my body still incredibly sore and exhausted everywhere. But inside I felt worse than I did outside. As if my mind had been put through a shredder.

However, putting aside her mental assault on me, the new discovery also left so many unanswered questions in its wake. So many confusions about myself that I wasn't sure how to get the answers to.

Like... just how much of 'me' was still here... and how much was the version that Thea had moulded me into?

I still didn't feel the weight of my actions as I probably should have; I didn't have that sense of guilt or sickness in the pit of my stomach to tell me I was wrong. To me, the things I'd done had felt justified, as though I could see the rationality behind those decisions.

So was Cai right? Was I devoid of compassion and morality now?

...Was that permanent?

"...How... how long?" I asked, my throat still raw enough to force a cough from me.

He walked to the side of the bed and handed me a glass of water. A welcome relief.

"Not too long," he answered. "Perhaps a day."

A whole day? And I still felt this tired? It really was worse than I initially thought. Though, the silver handcuffs around my wrist probably weren't helping with that.

"From what Alpha Aleric has told me, I presume that Thea has been meddling with your mind a little? He mentioned you were screaming for something to get out of your head."

I winced at the rank title he gave to Aleric, a reminder of my own inadequacies. It was a sore spot, for sure, but I had to remember that it was for the best given my current situation. We would need to discuss it further, but I had to assume we would be running with our original plan for split ownership... one day.

"I think she's been in here for a long time," I answered. "Truthfully, I don't even know for sure how deep her influence goes. When I discovered from Selene that Thea was once the Goddess of Sight, I assumed her ability of perception manipulation was a little bit more straightforward like with the mate bond and Cai. Instead, it seems far more complicated. She presented herself as being a part of me, slowly lulling me into a false sense of trust. It's been three years that she's been whispering to me, manipulating me to see things the way she wanted me to. She would always come to me at my most vulnerable moments."

Elder Luke nodded his head thoughtfully, listening carefully to my explanation. I took that to mean Aleric had told him about Thea's identity already; information I divulged back when he was still in the cells. What he probably wasn't expecting though was for me to name drop Selene. But if he was surprised or shocked at all, he didn't outwardly show it.

"Alpha, if I may...", he started, his eyes full of a keen curiosity. "I can't help but wonder that, for a being who has so much power at her disposal.. why did she not just kill you when you were younger, if that is her goal? Seems strange to go about this in such an indirect way."

"She can't," I answered. "There is a very long, very in-depth explanation for why, one that revolves around the origin of our kind. Simply put though... Thea wants revenge on Selene and is trying to regain the abilities stolen from her. Those abilities being the same ones you once spoke to me about; the ones possessed by the original lineages. In order to protect Thea from simply killing us to get them back, Selene placed a curse that would prevent her from spilling the blood of the chosen children protecting them."

He frowned, deep in thought over my words as he digested what I'd told him. If only he was able to see what Selene had shown me. He was the kind of person who would rely on that sort of knowledge.

"And did she explain to you how the curse can be broken?" he asked, catching me off guard.

"... What do you mean?"

"Well... nothing is completely invulnerable. I imagine that, since Thea's attempt of having you all to turn on each other has failed, perhaps she will find another method to achieve her goal?"

I hadn't considered that. Was there a way for Thea to break the protection? In the past I was fairly sure she hadn't ever accomplished such a thing, having relied on Aleric to do her dirty work... but then that didn't explain how she dealt with him.

With the other two lineages gone, how did she plan on retrieving Aleric's last ability without directly killing him?

And I tensed up immediately over the revelation.

...It meant that there was possibly a loophole.

Perhaps things weren't as safe as I initially believed.

“No, you’re right...,” I said, still in thought. “There probably is something about the curse I don’t know about, something Selene didn’t tell me.”

But since information like that would have assisted us immensely in our defence against Thea, I couldn’t

Chapter Eighty–Nine

help but wonder why Selene wouldn’t divulge that information. Did the answer negatively impact her in some way?

“In my experience, I have found that things are rarely ever one–sided,” he said. “Something remarkable enough as to protect you on such a large scale would surely have some sort of weakness. Nothing in life is perfect.”

It would be in line with what I already knew about the Gods, reconfirming that there was definitely a correlation between benefit and impact....

Like when I would use my ability, it used to drain me significantly to the point of passing out. It took a lot of training before I could tolerate the energy it required from me.

And when Selene created our kind and rebirthed the mortal children, it resulted in them becoming cursed by the moon; sharing their bodies with a wolf.

Even the mate bond wasn’t perfect. It would give us immense bliss but, if it were to ever be formally broken, it would also cause us immense pain. And that was without taking the marking process into consideration. A bond–breaking occurring after one was marked would have a high chance of making the parties perish. Higher risk, higher reward.

Nothing was without fault, just as Elder Luke said.

“You’ll need to excuse me, Alpha,” he then said, breaking me from my thoughts. “There is a meeting soon and I am required to attend. I would very much like to continue this conversation at a later date though.”

“A meeting now?” I asked, quickly sitting up in the bed. “Where is it? The meeting hall?”

“... Yes, Alpha,” he answered hesitantly.

“Give me five minutes and we can go together.”

But as I started getting out of bed to retrieve the clean clothes left for me, I noticed Elder Luke was still looking at me with an unsure expression. Almost as though he wanted to say something to me.

“What is it?” I asked, frowning at his reaction. “Can’t I attend my own pack’s meeting?”

But he simply bowed his head. “You may do as you wish.”

I did my best not to feel insulted at the silent insinuation and, instead, focused on getting ready instead. My body still felt tender everywhere but, true to my word, I managed to leave with him for the meeting before too long had passed.

The meeting seemed to have already started by the time we arrived. The ranked members and council in attendance were in deep conversation related to pack affairs and I did my best to quietly enter. A futile attempt in itself. The room went completely silent the moment I entered through the door.

“Aria,” Aleric greeted, a note of surprise in his voice. “You’re here.”

“Yep, I’m here,” I repeated.

But Aleric approached me before I could make it too far, intercepting me after I’d taken only a few steps through the door.

“...Are you sure you want to be here?” he asked quietly, directing me to face away from the group. “Are you feeling better?”

“I’m feeling well enough to be here. We’ve got a lot of work ahead and I want to be a part of that.”

“Well... it’s just... You know,” he said, an awkwardness to his words.

“I ‘know’ what?” I pressed, my eyes narrowing.

A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 90

Chapter Ninety

The pack vault.

Reserved for only fully sworn-in ranked members and Elders. It was a place where the Winter Mist’s most valuable possessions and secrets were kept, passed down through all the generations.

It was my first time coming down here in this life and, out of all the people, I never expected to be accompanied by Brayden; someone who was neither a full ranked member nor someone I particularly liked. I knew he would take this experience to engorge his ego but

It there didn't seem to be much choice. I refused to spend my time doing nothing when there was so much going on. Thea or not, I would still make myself useful somehow.

The vault was huge and packed from top to bottom with everything one could imagine; books, important documents, items, weapons, heirlooms. A collection more diverse than probably all other packs in the country. Now, considering what I knew about the lineages, I wondered if perhaps our ancient origins were to be thanked for that.

But, more so than what we could visually see, I couldn't discount the smell of the old literature surrounding me. A scent that I was so familiar with and took immense comfort in. If I closed my eyes, I could even recall some of my fondest memories spent in libraries; once somewhere I took sanctuary in.

"So, this is the pack vault," Brayden said next to me as we entered through the large metal door.

The undertone of excitement in his voice was impossible to miss but I brushed it off, doing my best to ignore him. Or at least I tried to.

He walked directly ahead of me towards a cabinet of artifacts and was about to reach out and grab one when

"Don't touch anything," I snapped, his hand pausing only inches away from a chalice. "I have no choice but to let you in here but you're sorely mistaken if you think this is some sort of reward. You've been tasked with keeping an eye on me. I don't see where in that order it says you can take a private tour of the vault. To me, that would be considered doing the opposite of what you were instructed to do."

Brayden's jaw tightened in disapproval but he dropped his hand nevertheless. For a Gamma heir, he sure didn't show much promise in the ways of using his head or following directions correctly. Perhaps his position was something I would need to reconsider in the future.

"This way," I said, and started walking towards the back of the room.

I hadn't explored everything in here but I did have a basic understanding. I knew it was sorted by age and then into each individual category within that e.g. books, artifacts etc. In the past, I'd only stuck to modern history, focusing on war and politics, so it was my first time seeing the very back.

And it did not disappoint.

A sharp inhale of surprise passed my lips as I saw what was waiting for us. The books were as beautiful as they were old, someone obviously taking the time to embellish the covers long ago. By all accounts, they were stunning

"I'm going to start reading through these. There is an armchair in the corner if you want to get comfortable," I said to Brayden and sat myself down at a nearby table.

And so it began. Reading carefully through the books around me. They were far too fragile, and the majority written in the old language I could only vaguely understand, but I persevered regardless. If

anything seemed remotely useful then I knew I could always ask Elder Luke to translate it correctly for me later.

But with the success rate I was having, that seemed like a small chance anyway.

After an hour of reading, I was yet to find anything with even the tiniest mention of Thea, the lineages or even just Selene in general. Everything I'd found was mostly historical and spoke about the pack affairs at the time of writing, or just the pack itself.

And Brayden wasn't making the process any easier.

He sat in the corner, staring daggers at me the entire time. Presumably making a point at how miserable he was and attempting to make me as uncomfortable as possible.

Admittedly, it was working.

"Okay, fine!" I finally burst out, frustrated from both the lack of results and his behaviour. "You win. I can't focus with you acting like a bored toddler."

He perked up in his chair immediately but was still hesitant, waiting for me to give him verbal permission. "...What do you mean?"

"I mean go and look around. Leave me in peace to read and, in return, I won't tell Aleric you wandered off," I said, defeated. "But I'm serious when I say don't touch anything. If you accidentally break anything then you'll have the entire council demanding punishment for your carelessness."

He didn't need to be told twice, suddenly a new spring in his step as he basically skipped down the aisle and out of sight towards the weapons section.

I sighed at that. Very typical.

Turns out that being left alone didn't prove to be that much different in the end. I still struggled to find anything useful.

However, though not overly important, I did find it interesting to learn that the Knight family, Cai's ancestors, were once a part of the Winter Mist. In fact, it looked as though the two territories used to be combined but

broke off somewhere down the line. The 'silver lake', which eventually became the pack's namesake, used to be connected to the same river system that flowed through the Winter Mist. Would they then be the Silver River pack if still connected today?

For some reason, something about that was nagging in my head, as though I should be remembering something I couldn't. What could be so important about that though?

"Aria," Brayden then said nearby, returning already from his short expedition.

But I didn't look up, trying to remember the thing I was close to forgetting. I couldn't lose focus and he was literally the last distraction I wanted right now.

"Aria," he then said again, more urgently this time.

"What!?" I snapped and looked up furiously.

...And there she was.

Thea.

In the flesh.

And an all-too-familiar looking sword in her hand that was being held against Brayden's neck, keeping him hostage. The ancient sword that once beheaded me in the past.

My body instantly froze in shock, almost as though time had stopped. Of all the moments she could have chosen to appear, now was by far the worst.

With Brayden at sword point, myself in handcuffs, and all of us so far underground inside the vault that no

one would hear us call for help, we *were* basically at her *mercy*. The *real* question was how she managed to get inside the most *secure* location of the entire pack without anyone even seeing her... and why she was choosing now to appear.

"Aria," she greeted, her sickly sweet voice sending dread through me.

Calm, I needed to remain calm. She couldn't touch me which meant I already had the advantage. From everything I'd learned, she *would* always bet *everything* on me acting emotionally without much thought; something that her influence moulded me to *become*.

"What do you want?" I asked and slowly started to stand up from the table.

“Ah—
ah, don’t do anything stupid now,” she *warned*, pressing the blade deeper against Brayden to make

me sit back down. “I came for the *sword* but this little one caught me in the act. Told me you were still *wearing* your new accessory. Of course, I couldn’t resist coming over to say hi.”

Brayden told her I was still wearing the handcuffs? So she didn’t already know? That was interesting.

“What’s so special about the *sword*?” I asked, keeping my voice as even as possible.

“Oh, this?” she said, looking it up and down, “This right here is an instrument of my most recent troubles. The *weapon forged* by my daughter in the Silver River, now imbued with the souls of Gods upon my children’s deaths.”

Silver River?

And then I realised why that sounded so familiar earlier, ‘*Argyros*’, as in the *Argyros River* from the origin lore Selene showed me, translated to ‘Silver’ in the modern tongue of today. The river that used to connect the Silver Lake and the Winter Mist was the *very* one that had birthed our kind. *We were* once ground zero,

So what made the sword so special that Thea wanted it?

Well, unfortunately, I could already begin to answer that without thinking too hard. And I didn’t like what it meant for me.

Under the table, I started to tug on the handcuffs, knowing that getting them off was possibly my only chance at survival. But *freeing* myself would prove to be almost impossible. Not without...

“It astounds me how hard it is to get into this shithole vault,” she continued. “Breaking in is hopeless... and yet I hear there *are merely* ten people who have access to it; none of whom *ever* seem to come down here.”

And now I had just opened the door for her.

“So instead of just leaving with what you wanted, you took Brayden hostage and came to gloat?” I asked.

“Something like that,” she said. “I have a bit of a soft spot for you, I guess you could say. We’re not so different when you really think about it. Both of us having o

ur lives ruined by Selene. Both of us sacrificing everything for our duty and then losing e
everything we love anyway.”

I gritted my teeth. “*You* ruined my life,” I argued. “You ruined *both* my lives. And now
you’ve manipulated and turned me into ... into whatever this* is. You took away those I
loved and made me push

away those I still had.”

She paused to consider for a second. “I guess that’s true. I didn’t know about the prior ti
melines until I met you, I’ll be honest. Every now and then you would just give me snipp
ets until I finally had full control. I I was extremely entertaining to see. I knew Selene wa
s marking those selected from the original lineages but I never realized that they had
been reborn by her own making. I wonder how many times I’ve
succeeded in my goal without ever knowing.”

Snippets... so

she couldn’t see everything; not at the beginning anyway... and apparently not everythi
ng of late either. It meant there were limits to what she could do.

“Is that why you targeted me instead of Aleric? Because of the mark?” I asked.

“Oh, right, because that’s how it went the first
time, right? I suppose that would be the case. I found out you were looking for me
and discovered Selene’s energy radiating off you. You were the bigger threat out of the t
wo. Of course, I didn’t expect you to let me in
so easily. It took a lot of work to break you down to pieces... but when you finally gave i
n to me completely? ...Bliss.”

“Two? Why not Cai?”

Truthfully I was surprised she was

telling me any of this but I also realised that this must have been a big moment for her.

Thea liked me to know how badly I’d messed up, know where I’d gone wrong so she

could revel in it. Just like how she left the

note on Myra’s body. She’d been working towards this for years, if not centuries, so of c
ourse she wouldn’t miss the opportunity to brag about it.

I wasn’t upset either. Partly because I was finally getting answers, partly because I was
waiting for the perfect moment to do what I needed under the table.

“Cai? Well... he’s fun, isn’t he? You two once had a thing, right? I can see why,” she win
ked, causing me to wrinkle my nose in disgust. “Alas though, his genetic predisposition i
s too similar to my own. At best, I can influence only on a surface level but to fully manip
ulate someone who by nature can also manipulate, even if that’s in a slightly different w

ay...? It just doesn't really work. Just sort of made him sick. Like two magnets of the same pole repulsing each other. I did what I did purely to break you down further. Create

chaos and feed fuel of mistrust."

Cai had mentioned that he wasn't sure about 'Caitlyn' when I questioned him. In fact, the more we spoke about it, the more uncertain he sounded. Was he therefore more immune than the rest of us? Becoming a little unwell seemed like a fair price to pay for retaining control against what she was truly capable of.

But... hearing this from her, I quickly realised that the information about Cai was pretty invaluable to us. A bit too important to just let slip. More so than what could be justified by only wanting to gloat.

"...Why are you telling me all of this?" I finally asked warily.

"Well... it doesn't really matter, does it?" she said, almost a little smug. "I've got the sword... I'm sure you've already worked out what that means from just the fact I want it."

So I was right. The sword meant that she was able to somehow break the protection.

It meant I couldn't let her leave with it.

...But... one wrong move and she would just kill Brayden.

A fate, I realised, that was probably inevitable, if not required here.

As horrible as it might seem, to me, it felt like fair collateral damage. One life to potentially save our entire species. To save myself. It was a logical decision.

Given how much Brayden likes to brag, he'd be dying in the best possible way. A hero's death, of sorts. And I, for one, sure as hell wouldn't miss him on a personal level either.

All I'd need to do was wait until she was talking out another lengthy explanation, execute my plan with the handcuffs, and then, whilst she was taking care of Brayden, I would use that time to disarm her. Best case scenario would be if I could kill her right here, right now. End this once and for—

"Aria... please," Brayden then whimpered, bringing my attention to him. "Please... I—I'm sorry for ever being mean to you. I—I'm sorry."

It didn't take a genius for one to realise that he probably wasn't going to survive this, no matter which way

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it went. Even if Thea got her way, she wouldn't just let him live once it was over. No loose ends. He was likely already dead the second she found him.

But there was something so tremendously pathetic in the way he looked at me which made me realise that perhaps the decision wasn't as obvious as I thought.

Once this was all over, would this just become another moment for Cai to look at me with disgust and call me a monster for letting Brayden die so easily? Was the 'moral' choice to find a solution to let us both live, whatever that entailed?

... Would Aleric slowly begin to see me as a monster too if I didn't?

The problem was that there truly was no option that had good odds for both his life and the sword retrieved. Not to mention, implementing a plan with less chance of success seemed far too risky when the stakes meant Thea could leave with the sword. And then what if I failed? Would they then criticise me for not stopping her, no matter the cost?

How was I meant to make the correct choice when I didn't even know what *|* thought was right, when I didn't even know what was me and what was just Thea's desire now ingrown within? When I was so damaged inside that it was like I couldn't even trust myself?

The choices were to let Brayden die... or open ourselves up to the possibility of thousands eventually dying. So if I saved Brayden now but lost the sword, would there be another chance to stop her before she finally killed us all off?

To say I was panicking over this decision was an understatement.

...But, as difficult as that choice was, after a few more moments of consideration... I did manage to make up my mind. I knew what I needed to do.