

# A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood

## Chapter 91 -95

### Chapter Ninety One

There was only one choice.

Only one that would allow me to salvage what little I did have left. I'd already burnt bridges, destroyed faith... ruined any chance of having the life I used to so desperately crave. I couldn't necessarily fix what I'd already done but I once used to believe that more bloodshed wasn't the way to solve the past, and that was probably still true now. Even if Thea made it harder to see things that way.

No, I needed to save him... even if it proved more difficult than worthwhile.

Calm down and think. I needed to consider this very carefully.

There was always a logical explanation for these things when analysed, some sort of strategy. She could mess with my emotions and how I perceived things, but she couldn't change the hard facts. They were there if I just focused enough. I just needed to push past what I felt I needed to do, and concentrate on what the situation was actually telling me to do.

I needed to put myself in her shoes... and see the incentive behind her actions.

And so, I quickly closed my eyes and tried to see myself as her, thinking through what her decisions might have been that led her here, to this very moment....

\*...I entered the vault and grabbed the sword because I need it to break the protection ... but I'm caught. The young boy who came with Aria isn't with her but instead is in the weapons section... but maybe I wanted that to be the case. Maybe I waited so long because I needed to catch him alone.\*

\*"I don't kill him... because there is something else I require to break the protection. Something Aria has or is located next to. If that wasn't the case, I would have just disposed of him and attacked her immediately. But, no, I need him alive and to come with me because I still can't injure her directly; I need collateral. Something to use as a shield... someone to be a hostage.\*"

\*"I approach Aria with the boy and talk to her... Partly because I want to... partly because there is another reason. I try to force her into a situation where she has two options; to attack me or to flee.\*"

\*... Why though? Am I gambling that Aria will do one over the other? And how would either of them help me?\*

I opened my eyes again and looked at the scene in front of me, frowning in thought. Without more key information, I wasn't sure which path was the one she was betting on. Both of them were plausible and yet had their own issues.

... But then I realised something. Something I was overlooking....

She was talking to me.

It might not be in my head anymore but it was still the same thing she'd always done; bringing up memories, making me lose hope... trying to make me scared and angry. Her weapon of choice was, and always has been, her voice.

So maybe I didn't need to know which one she 'wanted' me to do. Maybe all I needed to know was which one she didn't.

...Which left only one thing I could do.

"I surrender," I suddenly said, standing up from the table in defeat.

"...What?"

A look of surprise and confusion immediately crossed her and Brayden's faces... though Brayden's erring

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more on the side of terror than shock.

"I surrender," I repeated. "You got me. I'm contained in silver, underground, my bodyguard hostage... What am I supposed to do? You win."

"What is this? You don't care whether I kill him, is that it?" she said and proceeded to throw Brayden to the ground before her, sword still pointed to his throat. "You think I won't?"

I paused for a second, taking in her abrupt reaction calmly. "No... I don't doubt that you will. I just don't know what you expect me to do here. I've fought long enough, am both mentally and physically drained to my limit. I surrender, Thea. You win. Give Selene my regards when you finally face her."

Hesitation. She's hesitating, unsure what to do here. But, more importantly, it proved my theory correct; she couldn't hurt me yet. Which meant she couldn't kill Brayden either, her only leverage against me. Not yet anyway

She had tried to push me to act out of emotion, to elicit a reaction that would make me flee or attack her. Which meant there was only one option left. By process of elimination, surrendering was the only thing I could do, the only thing I knew she didn't want me to do. I was basically having to read myself and do the opposite of what I felt I was being persuaded to do.

'Your move, Thea.'

Quickly, she then looked around the room, scanning the area around us before her eyes finally settled on a book stacked by the table. Was that what she was after? A book? But why would a creature as old as time need a book?

I didn't get a chance to think on it more though as suddenly she kicked Brayden towards me, sending him flying across the ground.

So that was it... she was going to try and run. I called her bluff and she couldn't do anything else.

True to my assumption, she instantly turned around and started sprinting towards the exit. But she made a fatal mistake though, one crucial error...

She kept Brayden alive.

"Brayden!" I yelled. "Get up. You need to shift and follow her. Do not engage in combat. You are to follow her only."

She must have thought I'd waste time to make sure he was okay first but that was a bad assumption. We weren't civilians. We were trained, ranked members in one of the most elite packs in the whole country. If a kick to the gut was enough to keep us down, we didn't deserve the title. Sure, Brayden might be annoying and arrogant, but he had been trained since he was a child to handle more pain than that.

And he didn't disappoint.

Brayden quickly got up to his feet and, without saying another word, ran after her, shifting mid-air to take advantage of the better speed and senses.

Now for the hard part.

I looked down gravely at the handcuffs encircling my wrist and gritted my teeth. This was not going to be pleasant.

3...2... 1...

\*Pop.\*

And I cried out in pain, all the while wasting no time in sliding the handcuffs over my now dislocated thumb.

I'd prepared myself for this situation years ago but it didn't lessen the pain. After being sent to my death in handcuffs already once before, I made a point of learning how to escape from them in this life should I ever find myself in another life—threatening emergency. I'd told myself that, if they were going to send me to the trial grounds again, it wasn't going to be while wearing them. Luckily for me, werewolf anatomy meant our joints were a bit more flexible thanks to our ability to shift.

Immediately, I felt my strength return to me, now free of the silver. A small part of me wondered if maybe I should be thanking Cai for the cuffs instead of the old silver collar... After all, it wasn't as though I could dislocate my head.

There was one major drawback in doing this though. It meant one of my hands were now out of commission. I would only be able to defend myself with just my left; the hand that wasn't my dominant one. It also meant I couldn't shift right now as running with only three good legs wasn't going to be any faster.

But I sprang into action nevertheless, chasing after the scents of both Brayden and Thea as it led me towards the exit.

I could only assume that if she'd managed to sneak in here, that she had some way of staying hidden this whole time. That she'd found an entrance that wasn't through the packhouse door upstairs. This meant I couldn't rely on her hopefully being slowed by warriors upstairs because she probably wasn't going to be running past any.

But when I was almost back at the vault entrance, I heard it. Loud growls and snapping noises coming from just outside. It sounded as though Brayden had engaged in battle, despite my clear instruction not to get involved. The idiot was just meant to follow her, not attack her.

"Brayden!" I yelled as I made it outside, only to see Thea had him cornered.

He was on the defensive but that wasn't going to work now. He would need to shift back if he was planning to do close combat like that. Wolf form was better for battle when you had a large number of allies within an open space.

The only issue was that if he tried to shift now, Thea would just use that time he was transitioning to make her move.

"Don't shift!" I ordered as I quickly approached.

But I was a second too late.

Brayden had already realised that his wolf wasn't going to be enough to win and started to shift before I could get the words out.

And, just as I had predicted, Thea didn't look like she was going to wait. She'd already made the error of letting him live once, I doubted she was going to do that twice.

She pulled the sword up, ready to strike, waiting for the moment he'd be mid-transition as that would be when he was weakest...

And, as she did so, Brayden's face then turned to me as he shifted, finally realising his mistake.

Full of terror as it was too late to stop what he had already started.

The look of a man who knew he was about to die.

And so I did the only thing I thought would work....

At the last moment, before she brought the sword down, I threw myself in front of Brayden, using myself as a shield. If she needed the book inside then it meant she still wasn't going to be able to touch me, it meant that

Siiiiiiiiickkkk.

The sword pierced right through my shoulder, slicing into me as though I were made of butter.

And I stared in shock. Frozen in place.

I stared from where the sword was embedded inside me... up to where Thea was looking down at me with the biggest smile on her face.

Of course, I'd sensed the attack but that didn't mean I expected it to be fulfilled. In fact, I didn't understand how this was possible at all. I'd thought through everything so carefully. If she'd been able to hurt me this entire time then why had she waited so long? Why had she bothered to capture Brayden and flee when I tried to surrender?

And then the pain finally hit me.

I screamed out and fell to my knees, tears starting to fall down my face. The silver mixed in with the injury was one of the most excruciating things I'd ever felt. Perhaps it had b

een a blessing that this sword had killed me with just one strike in the past. Death would have been a kinder result than this pain.

...But maybe that wish would be a reality soon enough.

“Aria!” Brayden yelled, now finished with his shift.

He tried to lean me against the wall for support but the sword made that difficult.

“Let me help with that,” Thea then said and quickly pulled the blade back out, forcing another cry of pain to escape my lips.

So it really was over then. My expiration date was finally here.

I knew what would happen now. With the blade removed, I would start to lose too much blood before I had time to heal. The poison from the silver would prevent my accelerated healing from closing the wound quickly. So even if she decided not to finish the job herself, the silver would do the rest for her.

With what strength I could muster, I then grabbed Brayden's shirt with my one good hand and pulled him down to look me in the eyes, forcing contact so he wouldn't be able to refuse me. That there would be no questioning my very clear order this time.

“Get. Out. Of. Here,” I commanded through gritted teeth, pouring as much authority into it as I could.

This whole situation had been a mess from the beginning with odds stacked against me. I'd wanted so badly for it to be possible to retrieve both the sword \*and\* save Brayden. But it resulted in just the way I'd expected; I really couldn't have it both ways.

The blade then came swinging down towards Brayden and I quickly kicked his legs out from under him, forcing him to hit the ground just as he narrowly avoided her attack. The difference in speed between the two of them was obvious. There was no chance Brayden would be able to take her on by himself. He couldn't even see her attacks coming, let alone defend against them. Thea was far stronger than even an Alpha. A Gamma heir alone would be too weak.

“I said get out of here, idiot! Now!” I yelled again.

And, with one final look of hesitation towards me, he finally carried out my instructions, jumping back and shifting mid-air to escape up the stairs.

He was free. He was safe.

“That was stupid of you.” Thea commented as she watched him leave. “Wouldn't the smarter thing be for him to try and save you?”

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“And just let him die?” I asked. “Wouldn’t make any of this worth it if he just got instantly cut down. He doesn’t stand a chance against you in one-on-one combat. We both know that.”

If we were going to start the apocalypse then let it not be completely in vain. If Brayden lived then maybe I could die with at least some redemption. It was just one person’s life but maybe it would be the one good thing I could accomplish before I left.

I never thought this would be how I finally went though. Who would have guessed that I would end up dying for the asshole who testified against me in my trial? Someone who, in this life, had made my time just as miserable with every interaction. Who had stupidly ran into battle when I’d expressly told him not to, knowing full well that her strength outweighed both of ours combined.

“Tell me then,” I said, pushing myself backwards to sit more upright. I was trying to use the wall to put pressure on my exit wound whilst I held the front, but I knew that was a futile hope. No one could survive this injury. “What was it then? I’m assuming the book you brought to my attention was just a ruse?”

Her smile grew smugger as she looked down at me. “Correct.”

So she did that to lull me into a false sense of security. Made me think that the piece she needed to break the protection was still incomplete so I would act more confidently. But then what had changed between the moment she’d fled to when she had cut me down?

“I’m going to die any minute. Are you really going to drag this out for suspense? Just tell me already.”

“Do you know what the protective curse actually entails?”

I sighed at her refusal to just give me a straight answer. “It stipulates that you cannot directly wound those of us who come from the original lineages.”

“Right. And I didn’t.”

I frowned at her confused. She sliced into me like it was nothing. How was that not a direct attack on me? Was it just because my head was becoming light that I wasn’t able to see what she was getting at?

"It wasn't a direct attack on you," she said, answering the question in my mind. "It was a direct attack on the boy. You willingly stepped in between him and the sword of your own volition. Just as I wanted you to do from the beginning."

And I slowly started to see how it fit perfectly with her actions inside the vault up until now. She had been trying to get me to attack her all along, wanting me to fall on the sword myself. But that meant...

"It means that this was the missing piece," she answered. "Selene did her best to make the curse almost like an impenetrable loop; something that would basically guarantee her protection from me. In order to sbreak it, I had to shed blood from one of the mortal children, and do so by the sword that first forged the curse. But the curse stipulated that I couldn't directly spill your blood. Therefore it seems impossible, a never-ending cycle of being unable to complete the requirements. Except, over the many years, I finally theorised two ways around it. Ways I don't think even Selene considered when she initially created this dumb riddle"

She then moved the blade and held the point to my chest.

"The first way I thought of was to use one of the children. You all, by proxy, hold a piece of me inside you, so if I were to have one of you shed the blood of another on my behalf, this would, theoretically, mean that I have completed the criteria to break it. It also seemed like the easiest method if I could just get you all to turn on each other."

So that's how she succeeded in my first life. She had Aleric finish me off, framing me for a crime that was punishable by death and waited for the ceremonial sword to be used. With Cai and I both dead, and the curse broken, it would have been easy enough to finish off Aleric by herself.

She had to be extremely careful with that method though which was probably why she took so long to do it. If she had me killed off without breaking the curse, it would have been incredibly difficult for her to finish off Aleric. He would have become almost untouchable with no other lineages surviving.

"But you seemed to figure out that plan once Selene got involved and showed you our past. A surprise to even myself given her aversion to intervention. Regardless, I did my best to make you mistrust her, to make you turn on the others despite that, but evidently, it wasn't enough. I was forced to completely back out of that strategy once you realised it was actually me manipulating you the whole time."

"And the second..." I panted, my breathing becoming more shallow as I grew weaker. "The second was to have one of the children stand in the middle of your attack, right? To willingly accept the blow of the sword even though you're not intentionally directing it at them."



“Correct.”

“So what now then?” I asked weakly. “What are you going to do once you’ve taken back your power from

me?”

“I’m taking more than just ‘my’ power back,” she said, crouching down to eye level. “I’m taking that piece of Selene too, snatching it away before she can come to retrieve your soul. Her affinity for prophecy was always far better than my own, a testament to how it’s manifested inside of you, a mere mortal. The other two won’t really stand much of a chance once I acquire that.” 1

Would she have full control over it unlike me? Seeing the future had always been unpredictable and I’d just accepted that it was something I would never have command over. Thea on the other hand, having been born with the power, would probably have the strength required to harness it the way it needed to be.

And she was right. Aleric and Cai really wouldn’t stand a chance against an enemy who could predict their every move. Especially now the curse was broken.

They were as good as dead as soon as I was gone.

Thea then stood back up, breaking me from my thoughts, and quickly positioned the sword’s point against my chest once more.

“Any last words?” she asked.

And I looked up at her face. Well, since I was going to die anyway....

## **A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 92**

### **Chapter Ninety-Two**

“My last words?” I asked, my breathing heavy.

“Yeah... I guess I have something to say.”

Or at least, I have something to do.

“Fuck you,” I spat.

And

with that, I grabbed the blade firmly within my one good hand and pushed it backwards with all of my strength in one quick movement. Strong enough for it to fly right into Thea’s face, sending her straight to the ground.

I waited a moment to make sure she was down before proceeding to throw the sword into a corner as far away as possible. With two injured hands, it was impossible to wield it so removing it from the field entirely was better.

I didn't waste time after that though. Somehow, even though I was still weak, I then slowly managed to get back on my feet. I had to use the wall to support me, pressing against it until I could stand on my own unsteady legs.

However, my legs were probably the least of my current issues. After all, with two severely damaged hands and a sword wound to my shoulder, the condition of my body was already terrible.

Despite my grim situation though, I was thankful for one thing at least. Thankful that she hadn't anticipated my attack. I'd picked up on the fact that she was acting as though she'd already won. Her grip had been loose, barely even trying to hold it steady against my chest, and that had cost her. A mistake born from her over-confidence.

"You bitch," she yelled, getting back to her feet.

But I didn't wait

Immediately, I stepped forward and kicked her directly in the chest with all my strength, sending her flying right into the opposite wall.

...And everything instantly swayed around me. As if the walls were living creatures.

I wanted to throw up.

## FOCUS

Before I could fall down, I quickly shot my leg out to the side and steadied myself, allowing me a short moment to balance again.

"You think that will be enough to hurt me?" I heard her say from somewhere in front of me.

And with that, a blow was then suddenly dealt to my face, stinging pain replacing where her hand had just been... and, before I knew what was really happening, the ground looked a lot closer than I remembered it being.

I reached out with my arm, grabbing for the wall desperately, and thankfully prevented myself from completely falling down at the very last second.

"You think a child like you is worthy of such a thing?" she continued.

...And it was followed by yet another blow. This time it was a kick to my ribs that forced all the air out of my lungs... and a metallic taste to fill my mouth.

“It’s a good plan... but you need to adapt better,” | suddenly heard Aleric’s voice say in my head. They were the words he’d said to me the day we were sparring in the gym, an echo of a distant memory now.

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\*You can’t expect the other person to just stand there and not counter it. You need to think ahead more. Visualise how your opponent will move.”\*\*

But that was easier said than done when it was already taking all of my energy just to not pass out. I could forget about using any of my abilities to sense her moves right now. I would be lucky if I just somehow managed to survive the next few minutes alone.

Though I couldn’t help but think it was a little ironic. How, of all times to recall that memory, I was remembering that day in the gym right now. Because, just like how Aleric had been during that practice fight, I now, too, didn’t have use of my hands anymore. With one dislocated thumb and another with slices embedded into it from the sword blade, it was almost as if the roles were reversed. Though, obviously, I would rather my hands be handcuffed behind my back as opposed to my current painful situation

... But maybe that was the exact reason I had dredged up the memory.

Just a little longer. I wanted to survive... for just a little longer.

And so I pushed myself off the wall, immediately turning my body as I saw her move in for another hit, and narrowly managed to dodge her attack. Once again, it seemed she had underestimated me severely and was surprised by my quick evasion. In fact, she had underestimated me so much that she didn’t even expect me to use her own momentum against her, kicking her leg out from under her mid lunge, and sending her flying back to the ground.

It was the same technique Aleric had once used against me. I’d spent so long trying to win against him that day that I must have learnt a few of his tricks in the process.

But the move came at a cost though, one that immediately took its toll as the whole room began to sway once more. Worse still, it was followed shortly after by specks of black dots that began to cloud my vision. I wouldn’t be able to keep this up for long. My body was already past its limit.

“You stupid...,” Thea started, pulling her leg up in what would have been an attempt to kick me from the ground.

But I quickly jumped away as fast as I could.

Although, that ended up being maybe a little too fast.

The sudden jerk to my body caused me to wince from the pain and I grabbed at my shoulder, teeth gritted.

“Enough!” Thea roared, now completely furious.

...And I cautiously took another step backwards to be safe.

Her eyes were filled with nothing but malice as she got back on her feet. So much anger ... so much hatred. It was as though she wanted my death more than she even wanted Selene's in that moment. I could feel the sheer frustration and aggression rolling off of her in waves.

\*This was the creature inside my head all these years.

“Why are you prolonging the inevitable? Do you think you can actually win against me? In your condition?” she sneered

And I barely dodged another hit to my face, avoiding it by not even an inch as her fist flew past my eyes. I didn't respond though, instead I just silently countered the attack by kicking her knee out from the side, focusing everything on just my will to keep going. The move was weak but it at least forced her to spin into a crouch in order to prevent herself from hitting the ground again.

Unfortunately for me though, she didn't let it stop her for long. Instead, she took advantage of the new position and used it to try and counter kick me, this time aiming for my shins in an attempt to submit me

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the floor. If she could manage to get me down, we both knew the fight would be over. I wouldn't have the strength to get up again.

And, though I did end up successfully jumping backwards to dodge her attack, I quickly realised she'd done just that anyway.

Checkmate.

Whether her last attack hit me or not, it didn't matter. No, she had just been betting on me being too injured to have any real sense of spatial awareness, jumping away from her until my back was suddenly pressed up against the corner.

...I was trapped.

“Answer me!” she demanded and threw another punch towards me.

...But I moved quickly, bringing my sliced up hand in front of my face and grabbing her fist before it could make contact. And, as a result, I could feel the cuts there begin to bleed once more.

“You keep...,” I tried to say between breaths, my body beginning to slump. Already my grip on her hand had slackened, forcing me to release her. “You keep underestimating me... because of what I am. Because... because you think you’re better than us.”

“If you think we’re equals then you’re grossly mistaken. Possessing a piece of a God does not make you better than what you are. The fact you have even tried to fight me like this is proof of how delusional you are.”

“But I wasn’t...,” I said weakly, now starting to slip towards the ground. “I wasn’t trying to win, Thea. I knew it was over... the moment you pulled that blade back out of me.”

“Then I don’t understand. What was the point in attacking me? In causing yourself further needless pain?”

“The point was... the point was to distract you... to keep you here... Just long enough for...”

And then the thunderous sound of footsteps suddenly exploded from the top of the stairway, a melody of growling to accompany it.

I’d never heard such a sweet song before. A fitting tune to die to.

It was the sound of allies... the sound of my pack.

Brayden had done exactly what I hoped he would do. He’d rallied up an attack unit. Not just a few stray *warriors* who had been standing around upstairs... but a real force, with substantial enough numbers to be able to handle someone like Thea. It meant he had figured out that I was planning to delay her.

And a small smile crept to my lips as Thea’s face slowly turned to one of horror, the realization of her situation now dawning on her.

She may possess strength far greater than any Alpha but even she wouldn’t be able to defend herself against an army of trained wolf warriors. Not in such a small enclosed area as this.

...Your move, Thea.

She looked frantically between where I sat to where I could only assume her secret passage was located. It was like I could see her trying to calculate the time required to complete each task in her head, the cogs quickly moving to figure out what she should do... and it would have made me laugh if I physically could have

I already knew if she took the time to kill me now, that she would likely be surrounded by wolves upon finishing the job. Even almost dead, I wasn't going to make it easy for her; something she should have realised by now. I would squirm and dodge as much as possibly could just to make every second count.

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Which meant she had to put her faith in me dying of my own injuries. It was the only way to utilise the time needed to escape. However, for someone like Thea, I knew that even that would be excruciatingly difficult for her. The only person Thea truly trusted was Thea; even if it was just to put trust in me to die of injuries impossible to recover from.

And with every second ticking down, she had maybe a minute before my pack made it down all those flights of stairs.

"Better... start running. Thea," I smirked.

But she had other plans.

She immediately reached down and grabbed at one of my ankles, now determined to drag me away with her. It was almost suicidal to waste time doing something like that. Something she surely had to realise, especially since the unit was so close by.

"What are you...?" I started asking before I used my other foot to kick her hand away. It was the very last ounce of energy I could muster but it was luckily just enough to free myself.

It seemed even Thea was surprised I had enough in me for that, her anger only burning further. In fact, if looks alone could kill, there wouldn't have been a reason for Thea's current dilemma. For someone with such a pretty face normally, that scowl sure did not suit her.

The real question now though was why would she attempt to bring me with her..? To attempt something so reckless?

Not unless...

Not unless she needed my body too. That my death alone wasn't going to be enough to retrieve her power back.

Well, then. It looked as though I'd managed to royally screw her out of her long-awaited victory. My last ditch effort to stall her might have been far more effective than I initially intended. Maybe my death wasn't going to be the beginning of the end as I originally thought.

We stared at each other silently for a moment, our faces resolute as we both refused to let the other get what they wanted. But unlike Thea, I wasn't playing a game as bad as hers. For her, the situation was growing more dangerous as every second ticked by.

But, in the end, it resulted in just the way I thought it would. One where, finally, with a last curse spat towards me, she bolted towards where a stack of boxes laid in the corner, shoving them aside and disappearing behind them.

...Finally, she was gone.

I breathed out a sigh of relief upon her exit and laid staring up at the ceiling. And every time I would start to feel myself let go, I would quickly reel myself back into consciousness.

I still wanted to hang in there... for just a little bit longer.

That memory from earlier was still dancing in the front of my mind; the one that had helped me to fight against Thea for as long as I had. I'd been so reluctant in agreeing to spar with Aleric that day and yet it had ended up being the thing that possibly just saved thousands of people. Now I wouldn't even get the chance to tell him or thank him.

I'd won that fight too,' I recalled with a small smile. I remember squealing in delight over how happy I'd been to knock him down. And I remember... I remember how it had been the most excitement I'd felt in years. That, in that moment, it was a reminder of how I was still strong despite it all; despite the collar and my situation.

And, as I continued to reflect, I remembered something else too. Something I'd buried over the last few months. I remembered what happened right after that match.

...How we'd kissed.

What would have happened if I hadn't fallen asleep that day? If I'd gone back to speak with him and worked things out like I wanted to? There never would have been a misunderstanding about Lucy, no confusion over my parents' death... I never would have given in completely to Thea due to my feelings of grief and betrayal.

Thinking back now, it had been her voice screaming at me to pull away from him that day, filling my head immediately with doubt instead. But then... didn't that mean the feelings I'd had for him were genuine during that moment?

I guess I wasn't going to find out.

But if I was lucky... maybe, just maybe, I would get to see him one last time if he arrived with the attack unit. Was that too much to ask? To want to die with confirmation that he didn't loath me for my actions? That, even in my last moments, he didn't lose faith in me despite everything I'd done... despite that being more than I deserved? More than I ever did for him in either life...?

I'd let him become his own destruction the first time, too weak to save him from Thea. I despised him for years because of the things he'd done that were out of his own control. And, unlike him, I had missed all the obvious signs. The signs that he had immediately picked up on inside me; the anger, the rash behaviour... his inability to feel the mate bond. Because they had all been there the first time... I'd just wrongly assumed that it was purely because he hated me so much.

He became a monster in that life, completely unrecognisable from the man I knew today. A creature of pure hate and drive to acquire power. Now, knowing exactly what Thea's influence felt like, it was a wonder he held on as well as he did for the almost ten years he was involved with her. I'd lived through just three and already I'd succumbed to almost killing everyone.

And yet, with the roles reversed, he hadn't once doubted me in this life. He'd kept fighting, kept believing that whatever made me become this way, wasn't actually my fault. That I was still me deep down... somewhere. Something even Cai had given up on.

He might not have been able to fix what Thea did to me... but he did save me. Save me from myself... and save others from me.

He'd been doing it since almost the beginning too. Countless times he'd stopped me from making mistakes based on negative emotions, quickly becoming the only one to truly get through to me; a task that even my father and Cai had previously failed at. He'd been a voice of reason to call me out on my insanity, never being afraid to step in if he thought I'd gone too far. It was the sort of thing I could have

used most after giving in to Thea... yet I'd imprisoned him.

If only I'd trusted him sooner, if I'd judged him based on the man he actually was instead of continuing to believe he would inevitably become the same person I'd known. Maybe I would have been able to rely on him earlier and prevent all of this from getting so messed up.

"I'm sorry." I whispered, closing my eyes.



I wanted his forgiveness as I plunged into the darkness; for leaving now and making him pick up the fight in my absence. Leaving behind a world where I, once again, was unable to save him from Thea.

“I’m sorry...”

I was sorry to Cai too. I’d turned a good man who once only saw good in others, into someone who hated even the sight of me. For a time, he was my best friend... someone who I loved and relied upon. If not for him, I would have followed in those same steps which led me to becoming another docile Luna. Who

**knew where I’d be** now if he hadn’t shown me that I could be more. That I was stronger than what others

**saw me as.**

“Aria.” I heard a voice yell nearby.

The warriors had arrived. They would need to hurry if they wanted to catch Thea. I knew they would be able to track her scent through the hidden passage without any issues but they would have trouble finding her if she made it outside. With her skill, it would be too easy for her to hide once she was back in an open space.

“Aria!”

“...I’m sorry,” I replied weakly, unable to open my eyes again. “I wasn’t... I wasn’t strong enough.”

“Hang in there.”

But it was too late for that. ‘Hanging in there’ implied that there was a chance of survival, of which no person was capable of doing. Everyone knew the effects of silver were merciless.

“Protect... the morgue,” was all I could say with my final breath. My last and final warning to help them in their future battle.

And I let myself relax, the pain finally shutting off as I gave in to the darkness enveloping me.

I didn’t get my final wish but maybe that was only fair. I didn’t deserve the absolution I desired. I hadn’t done anything worth receiving that blessing.

For what it was worth though, I couldn’t be too disappointed in my current state. After all, my regrets and guilt did tell me one thing in my final moment.

...It told me that I truly was still capable of caring. That I truly was still myself... deep down.

## **A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 93**

### **Chapter Ninety-Three**

...What the hell is this?

I should be dead. I know I should be. I'd received a lethal blow to my shoulder with silver. No one could survive that.

And yet...

And yet I couldn't help but notice that, if I were dead, then the Abyss smelled oddly like a hospital room. A new renovation they must have added since the last time I visited.

Everywhere in my body ached, everywhere felt... cold. Except for one place. My hand. My right hand felt warm compared to the rest of me.

So, if I'm not dead... then what sort of intervention had Selene done this time? Was this the same year or had she brought me back to an earlier time?

Honestly, it wouldn't surprise me if she had just sent me on my way without even telling me. After all, I did try to kill her the last time we met face to face. That probably didn't instill a desire to catch up and chat.

Though how many times could she do that without completely destroying herself? I'd seen the way Selene looked after reviving me the first time... she'd basically faded into nothing from exhaustion. Knowing what I knew now, I was pretty certain that she'd already used up whatever she could spare.

But if I was alive... didn't that mean I could warn the others? Tell them everything I'd learnt?

And with that thought, all the past events suddenly started to swarm at me inside. The things Thea had told me, the fighting, the pain... all of it. The weight of the memories finally hit me and I felt my face wincing under its brutal reminder.

Cold. My hand abruptly felt colder now. As if whatever had been warming it just disappeared.

"Aria. Are you awake?"

It was a voice I was familiar with.

And my breathing caught in my throat, relief instantly flooding me.

So, I really was alive... and he was here.

Despite all my failures, I'd somehow been given my final wish after all.

I slowly opened my eyes and turned to see Aleric by my bedside.

I'd never seen a sweeter sight.

Only, he looked tired. His black, wavy hair out of place, appearing the same way as when he was woken up too early. Though, all things considered, that didn't really surprise me. He'd probably been out leading the search for Thea for however long I'd been in here.

...But that would mean I was still in my own present time, lessening the chance of Selen being involved.

Which then still begged the question...

"...How am I alive...?" I asked, my voice barely louder than a whisper.

He didn't look surprised or taken aback by my question. A reaction that told me he probably knew just as well as I did that my survival shouldn't have been possible.

"I guess you could call it a medical miracle," he answered. "One that you can thank your old silver collar for."

"My... collar?" I asked, frowning. Maybe I really was dead as that would have made more sense than what he'd just said.

"The doctors are pretty confused too but everyone seems to agree that the collar is the most likely cause of your survival," he said, "They think that, because you were exposed to silver all day, every day, for such an extended period of time, your body built up a sort of... natural resistance to the poisoning effects. Trace amounts must have been entering your system via the irritation it left on your skin."

When Elder Luke had once said that the effects of prolonged silver exposure were unknown, I don't think anyone would have predicted this. This was... completely unheard of.

"I'm immune... to silver?"

“Silver ‘poisoning’,” he corrected. “And, no, not entirely. Just a better resistance. I guess it’s sort of like when people regularly subject themselves to low doses of poison if they deal with venomous animals. Makes the effects not as bad should they ever get bitten.”

“I don’t...,” I started but wasn’t sure what to say. I was so confused... but at the same time, none of this seemed possible even if it were true. “I saw the blood... there was so much of it. Too much to survive.”

“Don’t remind me,” he said, his eyes narrowing from the memory. “Honestly, I’d never felt so sick in my entire life before when I saw you just lying there, lifeless as your blood embellished the walls and floor.”

He then paused and took a deep breath before continuing. “...But, that being said, you managed to start healing before it became irreversible. In fact, by the time I arrived with the others, you’d already stopped most of the worst bleeding on your own.”

so I guess it was lucky I’d managed to get the handcuffs off then. Resistance or not, I wouldn’t have been able to use my natural accelerated healing had I not taken extreme measures to remove them.

“But that’s not to say you didn’t almost die, Aria...,” he said, a small crease forming between his brows.” Calling it a close call would be a gross understatement. Over the last few days, you’ve undergone several surgeries and a blood transfusion to fix what your body couldn’t do on its own to stabilise. You’re going to be recovering for a few more weeks yet.”

I stared at the wall, completely in shock over everything he was telling me. If what he was saying was true

then....

“So... I’m alive because of Tytus and Elder Nathaniel?”

Words I never thought I’d say in my life. Somehow their barbaric approach at imprisoning me in silver, forcing me to suffer through the humiliation and burning for over a year, had become the very thing that had allowed me to live. If I still believed in divine plans, I would have used this as a prime example,

Next to me, I heard Aleric then softly chuckle under his breath, catching my attention to see he held a small smile. He probably realised just how absurd this all sounded too.

...And yet, I couldn’t help but ache a little at seeing him do so; to see his smile. To think I almost never saw that again.

“Yeah... something like that.”

“And... and I’m not dead,” | reiterated.

“... Not dead.”

Some things were perhaps beyond even Selene’s interference. The chances of this happening seemed... astronomical.

Carefully, I then scrunched my right hand into a fist to test how much it’d healed. Unlike the rest of my injuries, the dislocation was probably the easiest to mend given no silver was involved. And, after a few more checks, I was pleased to feel that it had basically completely healed.

Good... because there was a lot of work to do.

Namely, I wanted to start working through everything I remembered before I forgot. Especially when the information included theories of, not only how Thea’s ability most likely worked, but also how to possibly counter it.

They were things I’d managed to figure out during our fight. It was the only reason I’d been able to hide my plan from her, the one to stall her for time. Otherwise I was sure she could have just meddled inside my head to find out what I was up to.

No, like all things, she wasn’t perfect. And her arrogance had given me more clues from just within a ten minute encounter alone than out of the entire four years I’d been hunting her.

Unfortunately, the way to keep her out of my mind was not going to be easy. In fact, if my theories were correct, it might not be possible at all for a while; not whilst I was recovering anyway.

For what it was worth though, it wasn’t all bad and I even felt a little satisfied. Because if I focused enough, I could still feel that nagging bond inside that used to be the place I mistook for my ‘past self’. I might have let her in, allowing her to dig through, but it was also a two-way street. It meant that I could be certain of one, very important thing.

I was certain that she would know I had survived... and she would be pissed.

Despite the impossible odds, despite even the outcome of our battle, somehow I’d managed to dig my claws in enough to live... and that very fact alone would be eating her up inside.

“Aria?” Aleric then asked, a little alarmed when I started to suddenly move. “You shouldn’t do that...”

I was trying to sit up in bed but immediately hissed from the pain in my shoulder. I wanted to start work as soon as possible. There was too much to do. Even if that just meant writing down my ideas until I could walk again

“Help me... help me sit up,” I huffed, grimacing from the effort.

He looked less than pleased by this idea but probably assumed I was going to do it whether he helped me or not, and stood up to assist.

And it had seemed like an innocent enough request when I first thought of it; asking someone to help me sit up. Only I swiftly realised my mistake as the contact made me recall the revelation I'd had right before I was going to die.

The one that made me painfully aware of just how close his body was as his arm wrapped around my back, supporting my weight to sit upright.

... That if I turned my head right now, his face would be right there.

I found myself picking up little details I probably wouldn't have normally noticed. Things like his calm breathing, the warmth seeping into my skin from where he held me.

Yet I wondered if....

He promptly finished helping me up and was about to pull away, but, before he could even take a step, I quickly pinched at his shirt to pause him a second.

It had been a reflex reaction I hadn't expected, finding myself reaching out for the comfort his presence gave me. Having almost lost it forever made me now critically aware of just how much I craved it.

“...Aleric,” I said hesitantly, unable to meet his eyes as I stared at my hand.

There had been so many things I'd wanted to say before dying. So much I thought I'd never get the

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chance to find out. I owed my life to him and more. A debt I was never going to be able to repay.

And I wanted so badly to apologise, to find out if he hated me for what I'd done to him. To hear from him that things hadn't been completely destroyed between us, even if that came at the cost of his rejection.

...Because, after all, I was the dangerous, unpredictable one now.

And, though it was probably wrong of me, I wanted to know I hadn't ruined everything.

"... I, umm..." was all I said, unsure how to say the words I needed to.

"\*The second you walked into the cells, it was like all of my anger and frustration just immediately evaporated, \*\*" was what he'd said to me not long ago. "Almost as though the world just completely stopped... and there was only you."

But that... that wasn't \*him\*. That was just him describing the effects of the mate bond. I knew all too well what it was like to want to hate someone under its influence; to be trapped by the emotions the bond forces you to feel. I'd often found it disgusting how it could make you forgive the most heinous of acts.

...No, it would be wrong of me to exploit that.

I couldn't just disregard everything that had happened in the last few months. If I were him, I would want to hate me... and it meant that, if I were to ask him for a straight answer right now, I'd possibly be taking advantage of that bond.

.Broken.'

...Insane.'

... Monster.

And I sharply inhaled, shaking my head as Thea's influence reared its ugly head inside me. A reminder to stop this chain of thoughts immediately before I regretted it.

I'd definitely become a little better since before but obviously not enough. I still had a long way to go in my journey of recovery.

It was yet another reason to avoid this topic for the time being. Something that would need to wait until I could process all the information I'd gathered and work on countering what I could. It would be safer for everyone that way.

"Aria?"

"I... I think the drugs are wearing off," I lied, letting him go.

"I warned you not to get up. I'll get a doctor."

"Wait," I said, cutting him off. "That'll just knock me out. We both know it's more important to discuss what happened with Thea first."

He looked like he was going to argue but hesitated, probably realising I was right. This information could be time-sensitive and who knew how long medication might make me sleep for.

“Brayden told me a little about what happened but it wasn’t all that helpful,” he said, giving in to my request “There is only so much he remembers because he doesn’t have any context for what you and Thea were talking about.”

Oh, right. Brayden wouldn’t have known about my first life, or about the lineages, or even Thea’s involvement with Selene. The only thing he knew was that I’d made Thea a national public enemy.

“Then it’s a lot worse than he was able to tell you,” said. “Much, much worse. Before now, Thea wasn’t able to touch me; or any of us, for that matter, directly. It was caused by some sort of curse on her which

Selene had set up to keep the original families safe. Something that made playing the waiting game a bit easier as I tried to dig up information. Unfortunately for us though, she’s now managed to meet the requirements for breaking that.”

“So... all this time....”

“She was using me as a pawn on her behalf,” I answered. “Now, she doesn’t have to entirely rely on that anymore. She’s able to enter the arena on her own. It means... It means none of us are safe. If she manages to get her hands on one of our bodies... it’s over.”

“That’s why you said to protect the morgue.”

And I nodded.

“First thing we need to do is tighten security,” I said. “Given how you look as though you haven’t slept in a week, I’m assuming you weren’t able to find her. Not that I’m surprised. She’s far too good at hiding in plain sight. She won’t be too far away though, I’m certain of that. We have to be on the defensive at all times.”

I then paused for a second, thinking through everything as much as possible.

“...By the way... did we manage to retrieve the old ceremonial sword?”

Even though I wasn’t sure why Thea would still need it, that didn’t mean the blade wasn’t still important. I couldn’t be certain she hadn’t taken it with her before she’d fled.

“The one she stabbed you with?” he asked. “Yeah... they cleaned it up and returned it to the cabinet inside the vault.”



I bit at the inside of my cheek. I wondered if...

However, I didn't get to finish my thought though as suddenly a fresh wave of pain came from my shoulder wound. I'd been bluffing earlier about the drugs wearing off but I guess that had quickly become a reality anyway.

"I'm fine," I said, grabbing my shoulder.

Though he obviously didn't believe me.

"No, very clearly you are not," he said. "You need to lay back down."

"But I can just do a little before—"

"No."

"But, Aleric—"

"Aria, stop," he said, and then immediately poked his finger against my forehead to push me back into bed.

It had been so unexpected that my only initial reaction was to freeze, staring up at him wide-eyed in surprise. It might have even been enough to keep me quiet had another wave of pain not hit, resulting from the abrupt jolt to my shoulder.

"... That hurt," I whined.

"Good," he said, leaning over the bed to raise a brow at me. His face said he was being stern but his eyes gave him away. I could tell he was laughing at me a little inside. "You're too stubborn. Hopefully, you can use this as a reminder for exactly why you need to be laying down."

"I wanted to help though—"

"You're not going to be very helpful long term if you don't give yourself time to properly heal," he said,

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cutting me off, 7f not for yourself, then for the rest of us If what youve told me is true, it means we need t o be preparing for more physical attacks in the future now. You're only going to hold us back if you wear yourself down without healing first,"

And I closed my mouth again, no longer having an argument for what he was saying. He was right. I would be a liability in my condition. Forcing myself to work was only delaying the time I needed to get better

The best thing you can possibly do right now is rest. Heal. We need you at full strength if we have any hope of getting through this.'

And I gave in, accepting that my condition was probably a lot worse than I realised

Since that looks to have finally sunk in," he said, moving back, I'm going to get a doctor now. I imagine there'll be no further objections?"

And I shook my head.

"Alright, then."

And he immediately left to get a doctor, just as he said he would.

So it seemed I really was going to be recovering for a while. A strange feeling since I'd never had an injury this bad before. The wounds I'd had in the past had never been more than what my natural healing could handle.

Though I'd wanted so badly to start work as soon as possible, to write everything down and begin solving more of the puzzle, but.. clearly, my body had other plans. I needed to accept that the first step of

stopping Thea meant letting my body heal before anything else. Too long had it been under multiple stresses and pains, constantly exhausted from anxiety and fear. The sword wounds were just cosmetic when compared to the mental damage inside.

And so, before Aleric could even return with the doctor, I closed my eyes willingly, trying to let my drowsiness carry me back to sleep.

It might not have been in my original plan, but it now became a necessary one.

And, after a minute had gone by, I finally fell asleep peacefully to the smell of Aleric's scent still on my clothes

## **A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 94**

### **Chapter Ninety-Four**

A week.

I lasted a week before I started to get restless, wondering how much longer I'd need to wait before my body could finally cope again.

But

surely a week was long enough, right? Enough that I would be allowed to begin what I wanted to?

And so I quickly grabbed the clipboard at the end of my bed, the one that was for my medical chart, and flipped the pages over to start writing on the blank side.

...And I closed my eyes, concentrating as I gave myself over to the old side of me that knew how to effectively strategise an enemy.

It took several hours over the course of three days before I finally finished. To be safe, I only worked within small windows every day, choosing to do so between when I would get another dose of pain medication and when I would need to let myself sleep. This was something delicate and I knew I needed to be at my most relaxed for it to work.

By the time I was done, it was an in-depth timeline of everything since I'd been reborn. Correlating the different events to everything I knew Thea had done, and then using those to theorise why it had been done the way it had been. Even in the moments she hadn't done something, I was still able to use it to better understand it all.

... This was it.

This was a 101 guide to Thea over the last four years

Now I just needed to have a meeting with the others to let them know. Something I was sure Aleric would be less than pleased with considering I was meant to still be resting.

Fuck it.

I knew the time window was perfect. This would be my only chance until tomorrow.

...Not to mention, that thing\* had finally arrived earlier.

And so I threw my legs over the side of the bed, getting slowly dressed into some normal clothes, and started heading towards the meeting hall. Knowing Aleric, he was probably going to be there this time of the day.

"Where are you going?" a voice then said behind me, making me jump in surprise.

I quickly turned around to see Brayden there, right outside my hospital room.

"... To see Aleric," I replied, my voice a little tense at seeing him.

It was because of him.

If he had just done what he was told, none of this would have happened.

But as I looked at him more closely, I noticed how he looked exhausted. He had dark circles under his eyes and didn't have that normal confident air about him that used to annoy me so much.

"You're not supposed to be leaving your room," he said. "Aleric was pretty strict on that."

"So, you follow orders now?" | replied back a bit coldly.

\*Breathe.\*

And I sighed, clearing my head. I needed to remember that there was no reason for me to get angry now.

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"..I'm sorry, Arla," he said, his face crumbling a bit to show how guilty he felt, "I didn't. I didn't realise. I just wanted to stop her from getting away. If I'd known she was going to do that to you, I never would have engaged in battle. I feel terrible."

"Don't apologise to me," I said. "Just.. learn and do better."

And with that, I turned around, continuing on my way to where I wanted to go.

"W—wait! Aria, seriously! We've got this whole place on lockdown because you're injured. You can't just leave. Please. I don't want you to get hurt again because of me."

"Brayden," I said calmly, turning back around to face him. "Stop. If I thought I couldn't cope with this then I would still be in bed. I've been stuck inside for *over a week* now. If you're so scared of Aleric, just accompany me to the meeting hall yourself."

And so he did just that, though begrudgingly. Going as far as to drive *me* himself with several other

wasn't complaining though. Whilst I was pretty sure that Thea wouldn't publicly attack me on my way there in broad daylight, it didn't mean the extra precautions *weren't* necessary.

"...What are you trying to say?" I heard Aleric's voice speak from the other side of the meeting hall's door

I had followed his scent to one of the smaller adjoining meeting rooms and found the door slightly ajar, allowing for me to hear inside.

"I'm saying we should consider hiding her somewhere else for a while," Cai's voice then replied, "You're basically using all your available people to just keep her safe right now. Clearly, Thea knows where she is or she wouldn't keep sending rogue attacks along the border to split your people and weaken your defences. It won't be long before you're fighting a battle from both within and outside."

"I'm not saying you're wrong but—" Aleric's voice then cut off abruptly mid-sentence, followed only seconds later by a disappointed sigh.

"...Come in, Aria," he finished.

I'd forgotten how sharp his senses were. Sharper than anyone else's.

I slowly pushed the door open and entered, finding the two of them alone as they discussed the current issues the pack was facing. Things they'd obviously been keeping from me while I was resting. And they were probably right to do so. If I'd known we had been suffering attacks because of me, I probably wouldn't have been able to sit by as idly as I had been.

"You're not supposed to be here," Aleric said.

"I know..." I replied, coming over to sit opposite them at the table. "I feel well enough to walk though."

"Looks like you've done more than just walk," he said, staring down at all the pages of writing I was carrying with me.

I bit at the inside of my cheek.

"This is important. This is... everything you need to know about Thea. Everything I was able to figure out. If we really are undergoing attacks then this might be able to help us come up with a better plan"

I looked up to Cai and saw his expression still stony, eyes narrowed. It wasn't as bad as it was... but he still didn't trust me. Fair enough.

"I just need you all to sit and listen to me for a bit," I continued. "This is going to take a while but it's important you all understand. The only way this works is if we start to trust each other implicitly. Any doubt or concerns over what the others are doing and she'll just use that as fuel"

And Cai exhaled, softening his expression enough to tell me he was going to at least give me that much.

“This is a timeline of everything,” I started, laying out the pages in front of me. “I’ve used the events I’ve experienced in this lifetime in conjunction with the things I’ve learnt about Thea’s history, to try and figure out how she operates. Luckily for us, she unintentionally told me more than she probably should have. I’ve broken up her weaknesses into three key components; distance, detachment, distraction.”

I grabbed my pen and wrote it down on a fresh page so they could follow along.

“But, firstly, I need to tell you about the abilities themselves,” I said. “You two probably have never tried to figure it out since you’ve just let it flow naturally. I, on the other hand, wasn’t that fortunate and had to learn how to control it due to being stuck in the collar. The most important thing to know is that these abilities are primarily powered by emotional energy. The more intense feeling you’re experiencing, the easier it is to utilise. So, for Aleric, that would usually be in the heat of battle when you’re in high-stress situations, taking advantage of a heightened ability of strength and better senses, and... for Cai...”

My eyes flicked back up to meet his. “An emotional drive helps create an atmosphere of devotion. It’s something you probably won’t understand completely unless you ever meet a proper God in person. Basically, it’s like an intense pressure to give in and appease them, gravitating without even fully realising it’s happening. A form of manipulation, even if not intentional.”

And he instantly averted his gaze, realising what I was implying in my explanation.

“Our abilities originate from Thea though – \*not\* Selene,” I continued, turning back to the pages on the table. “So if that’s how our abilities work, it’s logical to assume that it’s also how hers work too. Which brings me to the first of her weaknesses – ‘detachment’. All of her moves against me since the beginning were solely aimed at triggering a negative reaction. Because the more emotional I felt in that moment, the easier it was for her to weave her way in and magnify those already existing fears I had. It’s how she eventually ended up taking over too; waiting until I was completely at rock bottom so I would give in to everything she was saying. Detaching yourself and reducing those spikes in emotional changes will help with keeping her out. The only one of us who doesn’t need to worry about that one as much... is Cai.”

This seemed to earn me a few confused looks from both of them.

“Thea admitted to me herself that it doesn’t work on him in the same way it does on me... or, if looking at the previous timeline, Aleric.”

“That can’t be right,” Cai spoke up finally. “She was messing with me for months. No, actually, it was worse than that. Thinking about it now, it was a few months short of a whole year.”

“Right, but you said so yourself— you didn’t lose your sanity like I did,” I pointed out. “She can only manipulate you on a surface level because you’re both too similar. Where hers is an outward focus in swaying others to see things her way, yours is more internal in how people perceive you specifically, both stemming from a manipulation in perception. She said it’s like two magnets of the same polar, pushing away from each other. I take that to mean she convinced you of the physical effects of the mate—bond, like sparks, scent etc, opposed to you actually \*feeling the attachment to her. You sort of never expressed that much interest in her emotionally when you spoke about ‘Caitlyn... something that was truthfully a bad sign from the beginning. If you are ever able to experience a mate bond one day, and I mean a \*real one\*, you’ll know exactly what I mean. When that bond is formed... it’s like nothing else, no one else. It takes over both your body \*and\* mind – not just one of those.”

And I hesitantly looked up to see Aleric staring at me intensely, making my heart jump a little.

No, not yet. I couldn’t jump down that rabbit hole right now.

I quickly cleared my throat and looked back down at the pages. “The whole thing ended with you just getting sick from her trying to do it anyway. This means you’re the only one of us who is capable of resisting her internal manipulations and should be able to pick up if she is influencing you in other ways.

Her interference should make you feel sick, something you need to start keeping an eye out for as an early warning system. It’s important to note though that this sickness was something you were only able to start recovering from once she left the Silver Lake... bringing me to the next weakness; ‘distance’.”

I wrote the next few notes down before looking up to see Cai had gone completely pale. I took that to mean that I must have correctly figured out his questionable commitment to Caitlyn perfectly, if his reaction was anything to go by.

‘When she was with you full—time in the beginning, Cai, I didn’t experience any issues with her inside my head. In fact, it was pretty much dead silent and I felt in control for the most part... with one exception; when we met up during what was meant to be my escape. This tells me she is probably limited to a certain range and, possibly, is also limited in how many she can focus on at once. Cai, you mentioned to me in my office that she started leaving for longer periods of time after you started to get more ill... I’d wager those times she was away from you would match up perfectly to when I was at my worst, moments that took place after

I'd turned eighteen when she was required to be here more. I'd also guess she never returned to the Silver Lake after I broke the news to you about who 'Caitlyn' really was. She already knew I'd told you because she would have seen it from me."

"All of these are good defensive tactics but don't really help much should we find ourselves in an actual fight," Aleric then pointed out. "Fighting is pretty emotionally fuelling and so, really, that would just leave running away. Doesn't really help to defeat her."

"Right," I agreed. "Which brings me to the last one... 'distraction'."

"How will a diversion help against a creature that can see in your head?" Cai asked.

"The distraction isn't external," I corrected. "It's in *her* head. This one was something she gave away during our fight and it was how I managed to keep her guard down. Stupidly, she admitted to me that she considered us pretty similar and, well, though I don't like to consider it, it did get me thinking about a few similarities we actually did share. Namely, her own reactions and history."

I started writing more notes down.

"I met with Selene in person who showed me the entirety of our kind's origin," I continued. "Rather, I saw Thea's origin. She used to be pretty normal. Hardworking, dedicated to the people she cared for. She gave up her entire life just to make them happy. But when she was finally at her happiest, everything was ripped away from her. It destroyed her."

"But if she has nothing left, what can you possibly do to catch her off-guard?"

"That's not what I'm getting at. It's her own negative emotions that are her weakness to distract her, just like they were with me. Both of us became blinded, unable to see clearly ahead when things turned bad. Back when Selene robbed her of her powers, she wasn't able to use her ability to see ahead because, in that moment, she was solely focused on her revenge. She is her own worst enemy, not to mention arrogant with a bad superiority complex."

I could still remember that moment in our fight when she had shown her true colours; how it was a mirror image of the way she'd made me angrily react to things in the past. Seeing the comparison now had made me realise how painfully obvious her influence was.

"So, we just need to get her angry?" Cai asked sceptically

I then sighed, turning my lip in uncertainty. "Truthfully, this last theory of 'distraction' is the most unreliable one I have and that's mostly because it could change at any minute without warning. We need to keep in mind that this weakness could still very easily turn into a strength for her, what with it also stemming from a strong emo



tional response. If she learns how to overcome her urge to just immediately attack in a pure rage, she could always use that emotional energy to her own benefit instead. Then we'd probably be in a lot of trouble. I was only able to survive because she lapsed into that overconfident fury

and I just used it to my own advantage. My hope is that old dogs really can't learn new tricks; especially when that bitch is thousands of years old and believes they're better than us already."

"That sounds like a pretty big variable," Cai said.

"I don't disagree," I said. "It's not going to be easy, I know. We definitely still need to figure out a proper plan. However, in the meantime ... I was going to say that I didn't entirely disagree with what you were saying to Aleric earlier."

And they both frowned in confusion.

"I think you're right in what you said," I repeated. "We probably should send me somewhere away into hiding. At least until I've completely healed. It's extremely difficult to keep myself feeling neutral whilst I'm constantly in pain; something I've been mitigating by timing my work with when I've had another dose of medication. But I can't stay medicated forever. The best thing to do will be to force some distance and wait until I'm able to defend myself again. So long as we can buy some more time, then we can make her start playing our game instead. Use all that time to then think of a plan, to prepare ourselves and, hopefully, make the first move before she realises it's happening. Too long have we been fighting against her in the dark, blinded by our own lack of knowledge. Well... we've got an advantage now. Time to use that. Being away from the Winter Mist should also stop her from constantly attacking the borders as well. She wants us to make a quick, rash decision; we need to make sure we do the opposite."

"But won't she be able to just track you down? You said so yourself – she's in your head," Aleric pointed out. "Who's to say she doesn't have a way of tracing you?"

And I knew he was right. She was definitely connected to me thanks to when I gave myself over to her. I could feel her presence always lurking.

But I'd thought of something for that too.

"She probably can... but I already came up with a theory to possibly counter that," I said and pulled something out of my pocket, placing it on the table.

"What is that? A silver ring?"

I nodded.

"I had Elder Luke make it for me after he visited my hospital room a few days ago."

"What's a silver ring going to do? She still managed to get into your head when you had the silver collar, didn't she?"

"Right... but this isn't ordinary blessed silver," I explained, picking it back up to show the m. "This is made out of the ancient ceremonial sword. The same silver that Selene herself blessed, making it the first—ever of its kind. The only silver to have not only her life essence, but her direct sanctification too. I had Elder Luke melt it down for me and forge this instead. I'm hoping that it might be stronger than your average handcuffs and help keep Thea from immediately tracking me down."

"...Seems risky without any real evidence to support it working," Cai said.

"I don't see why you're arguing when it was literally your idea to send me away to begin with," I replied.

And we glared at each other.

"Enough," Aleric said, breaking our stare—off. "Even if Thea can't track you, it doesn't mean it's safe for you to just up and leave. What if she does find you? If we have an entire team of warriors protecting you, it will be extremely noticeable regardless of where you're hiding Word will get to her immediately."

"Well, then do you think it's better to just leave me here with all of these attacks happening?" I argued. "We can't keep splitting forces from both inside the Winter Mist and outside of it as well, you know this. It's not only safer for me if I go, but it's also safer for everyone else in the pack too. You two included, since

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she won't be able to use me to get secrets I might accidentally leak."

This apparently caught Cai's attention as he looked at me oddly, frowning slightly at what I'd said.

"...You care about what happens to the pack?"

And I gritted my teeth, looking away. I didn't want to make a big deal out of this right now. Mostly, I didn't want anyone getting their hopes up by thinking I'd recovered because

I hadn't. Not even close. It was better for everyone if they kept thinking I was completely dangerous.

"Well, if you're planning on doing this," Aleric then interjected, probably realising from my reaction that I didn't want to talk further. "Then I think the only way we can go about this is if I go with you. I'm the only one who can protect you as effectively as an entire unit of warriors could, making the whole thing far more covert. Not to mention that it also wouldn't hurt to distance myself if she decides to change focus in your absence."

"... Then what about the pack?" I argued, shocked by his suggestion. "Someone needs to be here to run the place. They need an Alpha."

"Then... then I'll do that," Cai cut in hesitantly. "Your Elder Luke and cousin can assist to keep your pack's image intact. I'm the only one who can stay here though without any fear of Thea getting to me. We can just combine the Silver Lake and Winter Mist on a temporary basis. My father doesn't need me home right now and this is the best way to ensure the Mist stays protected whilst you're gone."

...And it was as though history was repeating itself; the two territories once again joining. Something they hadn't done in centuries.

Now we just had to hope that history didn't repeat itself in other ways. That this would be an example of there being good things resulting from repetition.

Because I'd already seen in one lifetime what Thea's victory historically looked like. And that one had ended with all of our deaths.

## **A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 95**

### **Chapter Ninety-Five**

Most of the preparations were made within that meeting. Or, at least, right up until I could start to feel the medication begin to wear off. After which, we all agreed I should be moved back to the packhouse until

everything was arranged since that would be easier to defend.

For obvious reasons, I wasn't privy to any information regarding the move. It was all to be kept completely secret from myself, and even Aleric wouldn't know exactly where until it was time to go. Cai took on the responsibility of choosing the location to ensure that there would be no chance of Thea finding out beforehand, preparing envelopes for us both; one for Aleric, to be opened only when we were leaving, and another for myself, for in the event of an emergency occurring.

I was nervous, to say the least. How could I not be? So much was riding on just theories. But I had to believe that it would be correct. I needed space to be able to work on fixing myself; both internally and externally. And staying in the Winter Mist until I was ready was just going to be putting everyone in danger. Not to mention, it would be potentially lethal should I accidentally let my guard down for even a second.

I was most nervous about the ring though. I had purposely not tested it out yet, afraid of tipping Thea off too soon that something was wrong. I wanted to wait until the very last minute to do that, utilising the time she took to figure out what was happening to then leave safely.

It wasn't meant to keep her out of my head for good. Something like that wasn't possible. It was more meant to be like a Band-Aid... hopefully just strong enough to keep her from finding me immediately. I knew she could sense Selene's mark on me, she had told me so herself as that was how she originally found me. So, if I could dilute that in any way possible, it was worth at least trying.

Though, if there was a way to test it \*before\* we left, that might just benefit us more...

And so, before too many days had passed, finally it was time to leave.

I finished packing the last of my things into a bag and had an attendant take it outside to the car. It was mostly just clothing, necessities, and books from the vault to read through whilst I was away. With any luck, I could find something else useful in them to help form a plan against Thea.

Now, there was only one last thing I wanted to do before I left...

And I headed towards the garden, following the familiar scent I hadn't sought out in such a long time. But given the circumstances and what they were doing for us, I figured it was only right to at least say thank you... and attempt to try and fix things.

"Can I join you?" I asked quietly, finding Cai sitting under a tree not far from the packhouse's back door.

He looked up at me, his expression still reserved, but nodded after a small pause.

"I, um..." I started, fidgeting with the hem of my dress as I sat down next to him. "I wanted to say thank you for looking after the Mist whilst we are gone. And..."

Hesitantly, I then took another breath. "And... I wanted to apologise. If you and Aleric hadn't figured out what was wrong, who knows where I'd be right now?"

He frowned at me as he listened, taking in all my words. However, once I was done, he then moved abruptly, catching me off guard as he grabbed my chin to make me look him directly in the eyes.

“C—Cai, what are you—.”

“For how long?” he asked, holding me still. “...Since the fight?”

“I don’t know what you’re—.”

You don’t look completely soulless anymore,” he said. “It’s like there is a spark again. Just a small one, Why would you hide that?”

And I finally managed to free my face as I turned away, unable to meet his gaze.

... Because it’s better for everyone if we still treat me like a threat,” I replied softly, “Because I’m not better. Far from it. I still struggle to stay in control and her influence can hit me quickly at any moment.”

“...I never cared about that,” he said, “I just... I just wanted to know you weren’t completely dead inside. That you weren’t gone forever.”

And I was silent at that, feeling a little guilty over keeping it from him.

“Does he know?” he then asked suddenly, and I knew who he was referring to.

“If he does then he hasn’t said anything,” I answered. “But it’s better if he doesn’t. He’s safer without getting further attached to me. The mate bond will make it difficult for him to make an unbiased assessment and I don’t want to take advantage of that.”

Cai went quiet for a few seconds before saying something that then immediately made me become tense.

“... You love him,” he said, matter-of-factly.

And I looked up at him sharply to see he was being completely serious, his expression neutral.

“What?! No, I... I just don’t want him to get hurt. I’ve been in his exact position during my original timeline. It’s not fair on him.”

“That’s the same thing, Aria,” he argued. “Acting in the best interest of someone else, even if at times that means sacrificing your own happiness, is a sign that you love them. Why do you think I kept coming back

after all the shit you put me through?”

And I gave him small smile, almost laughing at how horribly true that was. He was probably crazier than even me if he still cared after everything I'd done to him.

And so, slowly, I reached out and entwined my fingers with his. So much had happened but there was no doubt that my journey with Cai had been a long one. One that made me appreciate how lucky I was to have people in my life who still loved me even if I didn't deserve it.

“... I love you, too,” I said, resting my head against his shoulder.

And, though unspoken, I could tell that he reciprocated those feelings in the exact same way I did.

We had grown into two completely different people over the last few years. And now that we had treated each other in ways that were pretty damaging, becoming romantic again felt basically impossible. Where I couldn't ever be certain over how much of 'me' had been driving our more intimate moments, courtesy of his ability, he probably wasn't exactly itching to get back together with the girl who'd tried to kill him on several occasions either.

And that was also putting aside the horrible things Thea did to Cai too. I was sure that had its own deep psychological effects on him, having devoted so many months of his life to a mate who he was unable to truly feel love for. Wondering if something was wrong with him as his body also got sicker over time too. Long gone were his playboy days, that much was for certain. I wouldn't be surprised if Cai suffered from some pretty deep trust issues after that. My only hope was that those issues didn't persist should he ever find his real mate.

But I wanted to repair what we could between us at least, to stop the bad blood and fighting before I left for who knew how long. Because, ultimately, I still did love him. And, clearly, he was in the same boat. He was my best friend and somewhere along the line, that had gotten blurred with everything happening between us. It would be nice to go back to that simplicity. To be able to laugh and joke around again like

I didn't fault him for his actions recently either. He'd been upset and angry these last few weeks because he was hurting, maybe even feeling helpless since time and time again I kept reverting to insanity despite his persistence to reach out to me. We were both victims of Thea in this.. and we needed to band together, not tear each other apart.

“Everything will be okay,” he said, resting his head on top of mine.

And my heart ached a little from hearing that reassurance from him.

“Aria,” a voice then called from the backdoor.

I quickly spun my head around to see Aleric standing there.

“Time to go,” was all he said as he turned back around, heading towards the car.

So, this was it. It was finally happening.

This was going to be my longest time ever away from the Winter Mist. I never expected it to happen like this.

“Look after yourself,” Cai said. “Come back with a plan to defeat her.”

“I’ll try,” I said, standing up to leave. “Look after yourself too... Oh! And start training as well while we’re gone. Your ability... it’s not something you should have to feel guilty about so long as you can learn how to wield it correctly. Right now, you’re just firing it off whenever without even realising it, but it would be best to get that under control as soon as possible. Not only for you... but for others too.”

I could tell that he felt bad, understanding the undertone of my words, but I gave him a small smile nevertheless to reassure him that I wasn’t upset about it anymore.

“I’ll see you soon, Cai.”

And with that, I went to meet up with Aleric by the car, ready to start the journey ahead.

“Have you got everything?” he asked, to which I nodded. “Alright then. Here are your things.”

He then handed me a blindfold and some medication.

“Wait...,” I said and proceeded to slip on the silver ring instead. “Let’s make a detour first before we go to the spot. I want to make sure Thea knows we definitely left and double-check the ring works before we commit to this.”

He didn’t seem to have any complaints with that and soon we were on the road, driving in a direction I couldn’t see. I’d put on the blindfold but held off on the medicine, enduring it for the next thirty minutes that passed. I didn’t want there to be any doubt in Thea’s head over what was happening and, for that, I needed to retain my pain to use later.

“Pull over anywhere here. This should be far enough,” I finally said to Aleric and felt as the car began to swerve to the side of the road.

I was immediately hit with blinding light as I uncovered my eyes and had to wait a few seconds for them to adjust. However, once I did finally look around, I was pleased to see I really didn't know where the hell I was.

"What are you planning?" Aleric asked but I was already stepping out of the car and taking several steps away.

...Here it goes....

One deep breath....

And I slipped the ring off, feeling myself free of the silver once more.

"Thea? Are you there?" I asked quietly.

...But after waiting several seconds of waiting, there was only silence. Clearly, it wasn't sufficient. I wasn't worked up enough.

I groaned out a little in frustration over that, knowing what this meant I needed to do next. I hadn't wanted it to come to this but...-

\*smack\*

—

And I quickly hit myself in the shoulder, against my wound, making me buckle to my knees with a cry out in pain.

"Aria!" Aleric yelled from the car, taking his seatbelt off to run out, but I held up a shaky hand to indicate I was fine.

"Thea... are you there?" I asked again, now between gritted teeth.

...And I felt her presence come forward.

'It looks as though you're running away to save yourself,' her voice whispered. All of your pack, your friends, your family, left behind to die. Do they know that you're still the same? That you'd still throw them to the dogs if it meant being able to finally kill me? To get revenge for destroying your lives? For killing your old best friend? Because that's what you're doing effectively right now. Abandoning them. Again.'

I immediately froze up at her words, having not expected her to start up her old manipulations so quickly nor with such insane, brutal force. I had just been anticipating a conversation, not this.



And it wasn't as though she plucked these sorts of triggers from thin air either. They were always pre-existing fears and doubts of mine that she would turn against me, magnifying them ten-fold.

'Even your mate is secretly afraid of you,' she continued. 'What will happen when it's just the two of you? What if you suddenly... snap? Don't you remember what happens after you give in to me? There'll eventually be some reason to justify hurting him. Just wait.'

And she abruptly threw an old memory in my face, one from my prior timeline as she showed me what Aleric became in the end. The painful reality I'd lived with daily that had almost repeated itself but in reverse within this life. A reminder of what I was potentially putting Aleric through now.

"Enough," I hissed out, but my eyes were already beginning to brim with tears.

'Do you think running away will honestly help? I know where you are. Your little tricks don't work. I'm coming for you, don't you wor—'

"Aria!"

And suddenly Aleric was there, trying to grab my hands.

I'll finish you first. Then I'll leave him for last. Make it slow... methodical... Savouring every scream as I finally get my—'

"N-no... No," I whimpered, pushing him back.

But he barely budged, immediately restraining me to force the silver ring back on my finger.

"Breathe," he said sternly and grabbed my head in his hands. I had no choice but to look at him as he slowly nodded his head in time with my shaky inhale and exhale.

"...I'm sorry," I gasped out, a tear falling down my cheek. I wasn't sure for which part I was apologising for though.

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"...You're okay," he said. "Just... remember what she's saying isn't real. She's just trying to get to you."

And I felt myself begin to relax from the reminder.

"Take the medicine now and we can wait another few minutes for you to calm down."

I didn't need further encouragement to do so though as I greedily took the medicine, desperate for the pain to subside in my shoulder and for Thea's presence to release once more.

"She can't... she can't find me," I said, my breathing still a bit heavy "The ring works."

"How do you know? Did she tell you?"

I then took another few seconds to settle down further before a small, humourless laugh escaped me." She didn't need to explicitly say it. The last time she attacked me with such force was after I worked out it was her in my head after all these years. Her aggressive approach means that she's worried about losing the upper hand. That I'm slipping out of her reach, and she'll have to figure out a new plan."

I leaned back and slowly lowered myself flat against the ground, closing my eyes as I waited for the medication to kick in. Already I could start to feel the numbing effect begin to spread, the drowsiness threatening right behind it. I'd requested for this dosage to help me sleep in addition to pain relief. Blindfolds were good but unconsciousness was better.

"You should have warned me you were going to do that," Aleric said. "That seemed stupidly reckless."

"It was the only way to ensure we're making the right choice. There won't be any reason for her to waste resources attacking the Winter Mist now," I said, my voice already becoming thick. "She knows I'm not there and she knows I'm planning to hide. She'll just start diverting her people to look for me instead."

If he still disagreed with my actions after that, he didn't vocalise them.

"Tired?" he then asked after another minute had passed of me not moving.

And I just nodded my head sluggishly in response.

"Alright, then," he said and then scooped me up in his arms, carrying me back to the car. "Get comfortable since it'll be a while before we make it there."

And I appreciated that, tying the blindfold back around my eyes as a precaution, and drifting off quietly to sleep

"Hey... Aria. Aria."

A gentle shake of the shoulder and my eyes opened slowly in response.

"Mmm... Are we there?" | asked sleepily.

“Yep... time to wake up.”

And I took off the blindfold, looking around to see we were in a forest. Deep in one, at that Tall trees surrounded us completely, almost enough to block the sun, and the smell of earth and foliage was overwhelming

I got out of the car, though still a little lethargic, and stretched with a wide yawn.

“Sleep well?” he asked, heading to the boot of the car.

“Mmhmm.”

It felt so peaceful here. So quiet. The perfect retreat.

But it was more than just that as something nagged inside.

And, as I looked ahead, down the small dirt driveway, I realised why.

A cottage was situated there. A small cottage in the woods.

It was the kind of place I'd once described as being my ideal life; something I'd only divulged to Cai in private. I'd told him that if I could be doing anything at that moment, it would be absolutely nothing as I hid away from the pack and all my responsibilities to live a quiet life instead.

“\*“Living in a house? Whereabouts?”\*“ he'd asked me as we'd laid in bed together.

\*“In the woods. A small house just big enough for me that no one would find. I'd be sure to spread rumours of a witch living there to scare off any wandering strays who might think to come looking.”\*“

And, just like that day when I'd told him, a small smile came to my lips.

He'd chosen this place specifically because of that, I was sure. Even though he'd prepared this location before we'd made up today, he apparently hadn't lost all hope in me, despite how he'd been acting. He'd wanted me to have my happy place, even if that was just for a short time before we returned to the chaos awaiting us.

However, the words Cai had said next then popped into my head, making me become tense, and I turned around to see Aleric by the back of the car.

\*“Just big enough for you? No partner?”\*“ he'd asked,

It was just the two of us here now. Alone. In the middle of the woods.

And I could feel my cheeks begin to flush a little over realising that. How the full gravity of the situation didn't occur to me sooner, I didn't know. Now, there was no way to ignore it.

"What are you thinking about?" Aleric then suddenly asked, making me jump a little in surprise.

"N—nothing," I replied. "Did you need a hand with the bags?"

But he just closed the boot and came back around with our things in hand, managing to juggle everything with ease.

"I've got it," he said, immediately walking past me towards the cottage.

And I cleared my throat, pushing all my thoughts from my head as I trailed behind.

Inside, it was exactly what one would expect a cottage to be decorated with. It was bare essentials with a cosy sort of vibe to the décor it did have. Just perfect for two people with the living and kitchen areas located downstairs and a couple of bedrooms upstairs.

"I'm going to patrol the area," Aleric then said, dropping our stuff by the door.

...And with that, he was suddenly gone.

Not even a conversation or small talk about the place. Just... leaving two minutes into arriving.

I'd be lying if I said my heart didn't sink a little... but I had to remember why we were here. No, I needed to use this time to get better and focus on strengthening myself for what was ahead.

And with a sigh, I took my bag upstairs to unpack.

Somehow, I had the feeling that my time spent here was going to be far more difficult than I'd originally anticipated.