

# A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood

## Chapter 96 - 100

### Chapter Ninety-Six

1... 2... 3... In... and out.

I sat outside in the fresh air amongst the trees, breathing carefully as I focused on clearing my mind. I'd been working on these techniques over the last two weeks, and it was coming along nicely. Or at least, it seemed that way. How well it held up when it came time to actually use it, I couldn't be sure.

However, I'd definitely been getting better. Creating distance had seemed to have worked a little since every day that passed, I felt her presence a tiny bit less. Almost enough to make me wonder if it was possible to just wait it all out until I was completely free of her. The only thing was that, unfortunately, at the rate I was going, that might be maybe months or even years away. Something we probably didn't have time for, much to my disappointment. Settling for just strengthening my mind would need to be enough in the meantime.

But... there were also some downsides to my improvement too....

I got up from the ground and brushed myself off, walking back towards the cottage. It wasn't that I didn't like going there, but I'd be lying if I said it hadn't been getting... difficult.

Upon entering, I immediately took off my shoes by the front door and was about to shout out that I'd returned, but something caught my attention before I could do so.

There, laying on the couch, I saw that Aleric had fallen asleep and was looking so peaceful.

What I wouldn't give to walk over, curl up next to him... feel his warmth around me... taste his lips against mine.

I quickly shook my head, pushing away that idea as far back as possible. These thoughts were becoming more frequent these days the more I regained control of myself. Similar to the negative emotions Thea had instilled inside me, my own natural ones were causing me issues of my own now.

...Not that it probably mattered anyway.

Over the two weeks that had already passed, I couldn't help but notice how it seemed almost as if Aleric was avoiding me. He would sit and chat for only small

periods of time before abruptly leaving, either to his bedroom or on another patrol. Truthfully, it was starting to feel a little lonely.

And whilst I had promised myself not to get romantically involved with him, it didn't seem to stop me from thinking about him that way. A part of me was craving his attention, even if that was only a little bit. Hell, even some proper eye contact once in a while would have been nice.

'Yet it seemed stupid to think he was trying to get away from me... right? I was surely just overthinking

things, even if he did literally leave mid-conversation a few days ago... and start eating in his room more often... or rarely initiate conversation unless he had to....

I sighed and sat on the armchair opposite the couch, watching him.

What the hell was I going to do about this? It was making my training more difficult with all these added uncertainties in my head.

Giving in and confessing seemed selfish... especially when these days it seemed like he didn't really want anything to do with me. Did he miss home maybe? Resent me for having to play babysitter? If I did tell him the truth and I got what I wanted, would it just be a reaction from the mate bond opposed to what he actually wanted? That was the main question I'd been asking myself for weeks now. One that still weighed heavily on me.

...But then, what was one more selfish deed in the pile of things I'd already done in this life? If it was just

one final time to do something I knew I shouldn't... when it would feel so, so good... surely that would be okay, right?

I'd accidentally seen him just after he'd had a shower the other day, catching a glimpse of his chest before he'd tugged on a shirt. It was times like that which made it difficult to do the right thing. Especially when I could still recall how he felt pressed against me, how perfectly I fit there....

"...Why are you staring at me?" he suddenly grumbled out, eyes still closed. It caught me off guard enough to make me jump in surprise.

My chest began racing as if I'd been caught doing something I shouldn't, even though I'd just been sitting there silently the entire time.

"1... I um, I just got back from... uhm training," I stuttered out, my cheeks burning.

He sat up and started rubbing his eyes with one hand, ending each movement by pinching the bridge of his nose. It seemed like he really had been fairly deep asleep if he was acting this tired.

"...And what are you doing now?" he asked, still not looking at me.

Was it actually all in my head when it seemed so apparent that he was annoyed at me? Had I done something since coming here to piss him off maybe?

"I'm... ah, I'm sitting here?"

He nodded his head quietly. "Alright, I'll go on another patrol before dinner then."

And with that, he got up and headed to the door.

"W—wait, you just woke up. You don't need to rush out yet. You seem tired."

He didn't turn around or respond in any way though as he started putting his shoes on. Odd since I would have thought that he'd prefer to shift for a patrol. Something he wouldn't need shoes for.

But his blatant disregard for even acknowledging what I said sparked a mild annoyance of my own, one I'd purposely been pushing down these last few weeks believing I was just overreacting. Clearly, I wasn't making it up if he wouldn't even reply to me anymore,

"Aleric, seriously," I said, getting up to approach him. "Is something bothering you? Ever since we came here it's like you can barely even look at me."

Considering everything going on at the moment, I didn't exactly expect him to give me any sort of courtesies but at the very least I thought we could hold a conversation. He hadn't been acting all that strange when we were still at the Winter Mist. This felt like something more specific to us coming here.

"Aria, leave it," he said, still without even turning back.

But I was tired of this. Tired of living with a brick wall.

"Aleric."

And I grabbed his arm so he was forced to turn around and look at me. A sight that almost made me jump back as I caught a glimpse of his face.

Or, more accurately, a glimpse of his eyes.

Because they were dark. Dark enough to tell me that his wolf was threatening to surface.

“...W-what..?” I asked, taken aback by his appearance

And suddenly I found myself being pushed against the wall, his head travelling to the nape of my neck as he took in my scent. He didn't continue to touch me as he did so, but he didn't need to for it to send a shiver through me.

“... You're driving me crazy,” he growled out. “I'm trying to respect your space but you're making that exceedingly difficult.”

He'd never been this direct before and I found myself frozen, completely taken off guard by the sudden turn of events. I could feel the warmth coming off his body as he stood so close to me, and it was unexpectedly making me want more despite the situation.

“Over these last few years, I'd like to think that you've helped me to become a much more patient person ...,” he continued in a low voice. “Though you might be pushing my limits a little bit too far now. I don't know what's going on in your head lately, but I'm pretty sure it's not Thea since my wolf has been clawing at me inside every day since we arrived.”

The mate bond.

This was just because of that.

But then... didn't that mean....

And my face went red realising that he'd been able to sense how much I'd wanted him over the last two weeks.

It was no wonder he'd been running to get away from me.

“I'm sorry.” I said quietly. “I... I forgot that you'd be able to pick up on that.”

And he let out a strained exhale as he took a step back, rubbing his eyes again.

“If you're going to think about Cai, can you at least keep it to your own room? Just meet me halfway on that one. That's all I'm asking for. I think that's more than fair.”

...Cai?

“I'm not... —

what?” I said, confused by how we ended up here. “Why would you assume I'm thinking about him? *We're* not... we're not like that anymore.”

“...Because you two made up before we left? I saw you two together under the tree, remember? Cuddled up saying you love him?”

So, he must have overheard our conversation a little, confusing the situation. Clearly, he'd missed the most important part though; the bit where Cai caught me in a lie over how I truly felt about Aleric.

“What? No! No, I do love Cai but... we're just friends. It didn't mean anything beyond that. We don't see each other that way anymore.”

“Then... then what have you been thinking about?”

And I immediately shifted uncomfortably on my feet, realising I'd now dug my own grave. It seemed like there was no way to avoid the topic now.

I stared at something behind him, literally anything else, too nervous to meet his eyes.

“I was thinking about... how I wish things between us had been fixed before I'd ruined everything,” I answered. “About how you're now connected to me regardless of whether you want it or not. How, after everything I've done, you're now tied to a girl who's broken.”

“And when were you planning on telling me all of this?” he said, moving closer to make me look up at him. “When were you going to let me make that choice? I understand your situation, Aria, really, I do. You feel like you have a responsibility because of the things you've experienced; because you once saw a future where similar scenarios ended badly... but I'm not a kid. Let me make up my own mind and make my own decisions – good or bad. I don't need you to be responsible for my choices.”

“I just... I don't—”

“Then don't use me as an excuse because you're scared of being vulnerable. Just tell me that.”

And I stood there, meeting his gaze as all my fears of rejection and guilt flew through my head.

I hadn't even needed to elaborate and yet he'd picked up on the exact issues holding me back. It was proof of how, once again, he was able to read me so well. That, despite the absence of the mate bond for me, that there was still a connection between us that ran deeper. Something stronger and irrefutable. He was right. I should have told him. I should have given him the chance to make the decision himself instead of just assuming it on his behalf.

“So, tell me... And I mean, tell me honestly this time..,” he said, bringing me out of my thoughts.

His hand then came up to my face, cupping it just below my jaw so I wouldn't turn away. Not that doing so would have even crossed my mind for a second. In fact, I wanted nothing more than to melt into his touch entirely, to finally give in and stop feeling guilty for wanting him.

“Tell me what you've been thinking about these last few weeks,” he whispered, his face moving in closer to my own.

“I've been...,” I started but my brain went blank as his proximity sent another shiver through me.

And his lips... they were right there. Promising to give me the relief I'd been craving so badly lately.

“Aria.”

I snapped into focus again, looking back up into his eyes.

“Tell me,” he repeated.

\*Thump.\*

“I've been thinking about... you,” I answered. “About how much I wanted you.” ...And those words ended up being the last thing I said before everything turned into a frenzied blur.

His free hand immediately found my waist, pressing me against him, and his lips enveloped my own. It was like we'd both been starving as we hungered for the other, everything happening so quickly. A response probably resulting from how long the two of us had been holding back now.

It didn't take long for my body to then find the wall behind us, his hands supporting my weight as I clung to him. With one of my arms around his neck, the other was grabbing at his chest greedily, feeling his body against me. Constantly wanting more... and more... almost as if an insatiable desire was moving me forward.

And though I was giving myself over to my yearnings completely, I'd never felt more in control than I did in that moment. That there was not even a shred of doubt in my mind that this was exactly where I needed to be.

“I want you,” I moaned against him, repeating the words he'd wanted me to admit.

Because I was hungry for so much more than just this.

He'd been kissing me along my neck, but the sensation was making me grow impatient. I couldn't take it much longer. I'd thought about this so many times over the last few weeks that I didn't want to wait. I wanted to feel his skin against mine.

Now.

"Tell me that you're mine," he growled in response, pulling away just enough to look at me with his still dark eyes.

But was that even a question?

I used to always say that Aleric held my life in his hands and, though different, that still held true in this timeline. He possessed a power over me unlike any other, supporting me even when that wasn't always easy

He'd saved me countless times and sacrificed his own desires just to make me happy, despite receiving no respite or recognition for doing so. If he wanted me after all of that, and was certain of that choice, then there was absolutely no argument to be made here.

Toward him my life, my soul, my very reason to keep going. I could walk through fire for him a thousand times and it still would not be enough, knowing I was only alive because of what he'd done for me.

So, of course I was his. Through and through. No matter what life I ended up in, no matter what that entailed.

"...I'm yours," I breathed against him.

And he immediately lifted me off the wall, taking us over to the couch; the closest piece of furniture in the vicinity. Clearly, just as impatient as I was.

"Take this off," I demanded, grabbing at his shirt.

And it became a sequence of us both undressing the other, only taking small moments of slowing down to admire the other. A sight I revelled in looking at.

I might not have been from this timeline originally, but there was no question that this was my\* Aleric. That I was always meant to find my way here, regardless of how it happened,

With his arms supporting his weight over me, he began placing small kisses all over my body, sending shivers through me where he touched. And I watched him as he did so, wondering the entire time what

was going through his head. I had so many scars and bruises these days that I knew parts of me were not pretty to look at

But he answered the question for me without even needing to ask. An answer that I had not anticipated, feeling that it was so far from the truth.

"... You're perfect," he said, his gaze quickly coming back up to lock with my own.

And the way he was looking at me, so serious in its intensity... it was the same way that I'd come to learn meant he was being completely honest. The same look that would pierce through everything else and allow me to believe his every word.

...And that fact alone ignited my restlessness once more, no longer able to endure the agonisingly slow pace we'd come to.

I wanted him now. I was done waiting even a second longer.

"Aleric," I whined, arcing my body up against him, and hoping he'd get the hint.

And his lips immediately captured my own again with a renewed urgency; his hand that had been tracing me suddenly trailing slowly lower...

... Trailing until, eventually, a gasp escaped me. The small feeling of relief finally being granted under his touch.

A feeling that he continued to build up, making a dizzying pressure start to form within me. An unyielding sensation that he didn't stop no matter how much I squirmed under him, accompanied by more kisses and nibbles to my ear, my shoulder, my chest.

"Is this what you wanted?" he asked, his breath tickling my skin softly. Referring to the last few weeks of me craving him.

But I simply shook my head in response.

"No...?" And, to my dismay, he then pulled away to look at me, his dark eyes burning into my own.

A reaction that was the complete opposite of what I wanted.



“No... I want more.”

And a sound left him that did all sorts of inexplicable things to my insides as he quickly obliged, realising exactly what I was truly after.

He grabbed my thigh tightly, hoisting it up around his waist and, without making me wait even a moment longer, I felt a different kind of pressure replace where his fingers had just been seconds earlier. I felt as he pressed his length inside, filling both my mind and body completely. Now, there was only him as he consumed my entire being.

But this.

This is what I'd wanted. No, what I'd needed.

And a cry of pleasure left me. Something that sounded out in unison with a groan of his own as I adjusted around him.

Everywhere felt alight, my body responding to his in every imaginable way, and we stayed like that for a moment, breathing heavily as we took a second to just enjoy the immeasurable satisfaction.

How had I been missing out on this the entire time? It seemed criminal. I felt so incredibly intoxicated by his touch, his scent, his warmth...

“Aria,” he then said, his forehead resting against mine.

It was his way of telling me what would happen next. But I didn't need the warning. I was already more than ready.

And suddenly, I felt him begin to move, pressing in further before releasing. A soon-to-be repeated chain of movement continued to steal small moans from my lips; encouraging a rhythm to build between us as he thrustled into me.

A rhythm I found myself completely caving into.

But I could tell that he was still holding back though, doing his best to restrain his strength from hurting me. He was trying to be gentle in how he moved, his touch never pressing more than necessary.

Only I was past the point of wanting to be treated like glass. I didn't want to feel fragile anymore, like I was incapable of handling more than this because of everything happening.

No, I wanted to feel alive, like equals... I wanted to feel everything I could from him.

“...More,” I murmured against his shoulder.

...And he immediately stopped, looking down at me with eyes containing a mixture of surprise and lust.

“What did you just say? You want even more than this?” he asked, almost as if daring me to say yes.

My heart raced at his words, wondering just what he had in mind with that sort of reaction.

“... Stop holding back,” I found myself saying, a little in disbelief over my newfound confidence.

And he immediately pulled me up and spun me around, so my back was pressed against his chest; moulding me to his body as he now knelt. An unexpected result from my initial request.

“W–wait...-.”

“If you insist,” he whispered in my ear.

And I felt him push inside me once more, stealing yet another cry of pleasure from my lips, my mind forgetting whatever I'd just been worried about.

With one arm now wound entirely around my torso, I became completely trapped against him as he began to move again; helpless in the best way possible as his pace and force increased from earlier.

Every emotion we'd been suppressing for so long was bubbling to the surface, driving us forward as we succumbed entirely to our desires. There was no room for doubts or second thoughts here anymore, just pure needs that were begging to be gratified.

I was utterly under his control as he moved, feeling that same pressure building up with every thrust he had to offer; now stronger tenfold from before. Truthfully, I was already close to my limit as I offered myself to him, giving him whatever he wanted from me... but then his free hand found its way in front, between my thighs, and it was game over from there.

“Aleric,” I cried out

If he kept going like this, I wasn't going to be able to hold on much longer....

“What is it?” he asked innocently, teeth gently grazing against my ear... my neck... my shoulder...

But whilst he was asking me what was wrong, I couldn't help but notice his own pace had just increased. A sign he probably wasn't that far behind me.

"I'm going to....". I tried to say but couldn't get the words out.

Harder and faster he pushed into me, his actions became more fervid as he touched me, quickening as the seconds ticked by, sending me closer and closer to the edge until....

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With one final scream of pleasure, an electricity of ecstasy suddenly ripped its way through my entire body, making me succumb to a moment of pure bliss. I'd reached my boiling point and instantly came completely undone against him.

Wave... after wave... after wave, it swept through me, making me tremble with every second that passed. An intense bodily reaction beyond comprehension... and I apparently wasn't alone in that either as I felt Aleric then reach his own release, the sound of his groan filling my ears behind me.

We

both collapsed to the couch not long after that, our heavy breathing in unison as I savoured the feeling of his body against mine for a while. It was as if I'd finally been able to scratch the itch that had been bothering me for so long.

Though, if I was being totally honest... and this wasn't to say there was anything 'wrong', but there was maybe just one thing...

"Aria," Aleric

then said softly by my ear, his hand travelling down my body again. ...Well, that answered that. Apparently, he was able to read my mind so perfectly yet again.

I spun around to face him, weaving my fingers through his hair as we kissed once more. And we proceeded to pick up where we'd just left off, though slower to savour the moment this time. A time that then became the second of many more that occurred that night. ...Who needed sleep anyway? I was on vacation. Sort of.

## **A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 97**

### **Chapter Ninety–Seven**

I woke up with a long, satisfied stretch in bed, feeling more content than I had in years.

The last few days had all blended together so much that I could barely keep track of time anymore. Was it a Tuesday? Morning? Night? I didn't know. All I knew was that my last week had been spent with Aleric, living and breathing every moment he could spare for me.

I continued to stretch, trying to wake up but, as I did so, I suddenly felt a pulse of pain emanate from my shoulder. Something I'd been ignoring the last few days despite my actual purpose in coming here.

Well, if it gave another reason to stay here a little longer, it couldn't be all that bad, right?

I sighed.

I didn't want to leave. Of course, I didn't. It was so easy to ignore all my impending problems waiting for me at home, choosing to just live inside my own little bubble instead. I was happy here. Actually happy. Something I hadn't felt in so long. Given everything I'd endured, surely I deserved even the tiniest bit of respite?

And Aleric seemed happy, though he hadn't explicitly vocalised it. Not that I expected him to. He wasn't one to normally express feelings through words unless he was prompted, usually choosing to convey things in his actions instead. But I could tell by how he was acting that he seemed to be enjoying himself, appearing lighter and more relaxed in his mannerisms.

Thinking back now, it seemed crazy that I'd spent so many years of this life trying to run away from him. I had even planned to reject him. And I knew from previous experience how much that hurt, more than would warrant the benefits of going through with that process. The constant empty void it created inside was tortuous.

It made me

wonder how good things could have been from the beginning if we'd just been allowed a chance to live our lives the way we were meant to. If there were no prophecy pressures, no Selene, no markings, or Thea. Just... two people from the same pack who found each other. Would the Aria and Aleric of that timeline, though no doubt very different from the people we are now, find themselves happily together too?

However, it

was strange to even think of the person I once was. My first life felt more like a bad nightmare and so did the person from that timeline. I'd lived such a sheltered, structured life that the girl from back then could barely be considered anything more than a doll. And whilst I couldn't say I enjoyed the journey, I couldn't exactly deny that the misfortunes I'd experienced since dying hadn't matured me either; hadn't helped me grow up from the naïve, juvenile Luna I'd once been.

It was probably most evident in the way I'd acted upon returning. As if I were sometimes more a bratty girl than a woman who had once held a high status. Far too much freedom and trauma given to a child all at once, driven by an intense motivation to escape and be their own person finally. Yet, all the while that was happening, also dealing with the basic body changes that came with being a teenager once more.

So, who was I actually? Without Thea, without the naivety, without the fear and pain? If, by some miracle, I somehow survived this until the end, living to see a world where I was finally free of Thea entirely, what did that even look like for me? When I could finally just be myself without pressures or manipulation? Who will I eventually become?

...But would I even survive? Selene coming to retrieve what was hers seemed more than likely for when this was over. She'd told me herself how she considered the other saints, the ones that came before me, mistakes. Did victory mean getting to live? Or was that expiration still waiting for me regardless, only buying my time the more I procrastinated facing Thea?

...Would it mean saying a final goodbye to Aleric before we left to fight her?

Trolled over and threw my legs over the side of the bed, no longer wanting to think about it anymore. The outcome for that was not something in my control so there was no point in mulling over it.

For now... I just wanted to be happy for the time I was certain I did have.

And so I left my room, walking down the stairs to the only place I wanted to be right now.

"What are you reading?" I asked softly, standing in the doorway of the living area.

It was gently raining outside, the sound of the drops hitting the roof in a soothing way. The clouds outside were also darkening the sky enough that, once again, I couldn't be sure what time it was.

Aleric was sitting by the windowsill, book in hand, and only looked up after I spoke, a small smile warming on his face as he did so. His eyes reminded me of the moss and trees within the woods when he looked genuinely happy, almost as if he were a living personification of my little cottage sanctuary outside.

"Nothing really," he answered. "Did you have a good sleep?"

"I don't know if I can call that 'sleep', since there wasn't much of that happening... but it was good. Some might even say... great."

"...Is that so?"

And I crept closer until I stood in front of him, intending to look at the book in his hands, but instead he reached out and pulled me into his lap, forcing a squeal of surprise out of me at the sudden movement. Not that I was complaining though.

And, as he positioned me to sit comfortably against his broad chest, I'd never felt so cosy and safe before.

"This looks like one of my books," I said, reading the words on the page. "Only a small portion of this is in the common tongue though."

"Well, it's raining and there isn't much else to do for entertainment around here..."

And I felt as he then tilted his head down towards me, proceeding to nip at my ear. "Unless you had something else in mind."

A shiver ran through me, sending endless possibilities to run through my mind... though it was shortly followed by another dull ache in my shoulder, a reminder of why we were here. I had healed a lot since we'd arrived, but our recent activities were probably regressing that process.

"I need a little break... I'm still healing, after all," I said laughing, and I squirmed away from his teeth. "I'm pretty sure these last few days have been the opposite of allowing my body to rest."

Much to my own disappointment, he then eased off just as I'd asked, and went back to looking at the book instead. It was a situation where I didn't particularly want to be the responsible one.

In fact, I could think of several more irresponsible things we could be doing right now....

"Aria," he said in a low voice behind me. "Make up your mind."

And I felt my cheeks redden, realising we were back at square one.

I needed to be more aware of myself.

"Umm, anyway.. can you even read this?" I asked, quickly changing the subject.

He flipped it over to look at the cover and back to the page he was on. "Not really. I didn't really bother with languages during study. I'm mostly looking at the pictures and reading the small bits of common tongue that pop up."

"...Did you want me to read it to you?" I offered. "I can't say I'm fluent anymore but I've been getting a lot better over the last few months."

I felt as his body then chuckled behind me, the vibrations making me want to melt against him more

“...Sure,” he said.

And even

though the book contained nothing but factual retellings of pack dynamics several centuries ago, he sat and listened diligently to me anyway over the next hour or so that followed.

A moment that only ended as I failed to stay awake, my lack of sleep finally coming to catch up with me. I'd tried so hard to fight against it, willing myself not to let the moment go. But, in the end, it proved too much.

...And I fell asleep in his arms.

I woke up to the feeling of my hair being gently played with, the strands delicately tugging in a pleasant way, and a smile slowly crept on my lips.

“...What are you doing?” I murmured softly, waking up to see Aleric next to me in bed.

His eyes instantly locked with my own, looking as if he'd been caught doing something he shouldn't. A reaction that would have made me laugh if not for it being a bit sweet.

My chest instantly tightened at the scene before me and I grabbed his hand in mine.

“Do you like it?” I asked. “I never really did as a kid. The silver is like an old lady's.”

“...It's a pretty colour,” he replied. “I've always liked your hair. Even when I was younger, I thought it was interesting.”

\*Thump.\*

He pulled me closer until I was flush up against him, resting my head on the pillow next to him so we could face each other.

“...What else do you like?” I whispered, though a little nervously.

Truthfully, apart from the

mate bond, I had no idea why he'd be interested in me. From what I could tell, it wasn't as if I'd given him many reasons to. It was something I'd been wondering about for a while now, always secretly speculating why, but in true Aleric fashion, he hadn't said anything yet.

As awkward as it was, getting this sort of information from him was probably going to be impossible unless I directly asked him.

He shifted a little next to me and cleared his throat, a small frown forming between his brows. Was he uncomfortable?

"...I think..." he started and then paused, silently considering my request before continuing.

"I think you're... beautiful... funny... smart... or at least, smart \*sometimes," he teased.

I playfully hit his shoulder as he laughed, but, before I could do much else, he then quickly grabbed my hand in his and kissed it to restrain me.

"I think... I think you helped me to become a better person, whether intentionally or not," he continued, now back to being serious once more. "I think... you became someone I looked forward to seeing every day, who I genuinely enjoyed being around... someone to give me a reason to get out of bed and try to do better than the day before."

I felt as my eyes began to brim with tears, feeling overwhelmed by his response. I hadn't expected him to go into such detail.

"I admire your confidence and strength," he continued, "your ability to change things around you; both people and the pack. You have a way of setting your mind to do something and sticking to your convictions, despite others who might try and stop you."

"...I think that last one is called being stubborn," I chimed in lightly, though my voice betrayed how emotional I was feeling.

"That's probably true," he said and cupped my face, placing a quick peck on my forehead. "Speaking of which... were you going to train today? I couldn't help but notice you haven't done that in a few days now"

"I'm on a break," I grumbled as I averted my eyes to the unwelcome change in topic. "Let me have this for just a little bit longer."

He started to silently chuckle though, and I quickly looked back to see him watching me with amusement, his eyes holding that warmth to them I adored.

"No," he said flatly, a smile on his lips. "Go train today. Just like how I have to patrol. Which..." He then looked out towards the window, gauging the time. "... Which is probably about time I do so."

"No00000," I whined softly, enjoying our lazy day in bed too much.

Just an hour or so more would be fine, surely. I didn't want him to go yet. Not after all the sweet things he'd said to me just now.



“Yesssss,” he replied, mimicking my tone, and pulled himself away to sit up.

“Just stay in bed with me for a little bit longer,” I said. “We can fight off intruders from here, if need be.”

“Mmm, tempting,” he said, bending back over to kiss me.

Immediately, little butterflies filled me as I revelled in the sensation his touch offered, and I grabbed his shoulder to draw him closer.

If it were up to me, it wouldn't have stopped there but, before I could initiate anything further, he then quickly pulled away.

“It's tempting,” he reiterated, “but I prefer to be focused when fighting, not distracted by a lazy seductress in bed.”

“I'm not lazy,” I pouted, and I sat up as he went to get changed.

Then feel free to prove me wrong,” he laughed, throwing on some loose clothes. “Go train.”

And I quietly grumbled again, making him laugh harder.

“Alright, I'm off,” he said, coming back around to my side of the bed. “Stop looking so forlorn. I'll see you soon.”

And with that, he quickly kissed me, a tiny spark erupting from where our lips met, and I left before I could say anything else.

I wondered how long it'd be before he came home today, knowing sometimes he was gone for a few hours. He was right though... I probably should train

Wait...

...A spark.

I quickly brought a hand up to my lips in confusion.

I'd felt that. I'd felt that.\*

That was definitely a spark from the mate bond. Just a small one. But it had happened.

I jumped out of bed, tripping over my own legs in haste, and made it to the top of the stairs.

...But, before I could follow after him, I heard the front door to outside open and close.

...He was already gone.

'Then I guess I'll have to tell him later,' I thought with a smile.

It would be something to look forward to. What better progress could I tell him than to say I'd finally felt a spark? And it would definitely be cause for some... scientific research. To test when I could and couldn't feel it, of course. Probably some 'extensive physical contact' would do the trick.

I bit my lip knowingly and went back into my bedroom, throwing myself down against the sheets once more.

Somehow, I was feeling better than ever. Better than even before I'd put on the ring. I was feeling stronger and more fulfilled, my shoulder feeling basically completely healed. Things were really great.

In fact, now I thought about it, my shoulder *\*did\** feel healed. Not even an echo of an ache was coming from it now... which was kind of strange considering just yesterday it had been hurting me.

I got up and walked towards the mirror, pulling my shirt to the side to inspect the wound. It probably still had another few weeks given I was wearing silver...

...But, as I finally saw it, I immediately frowned in surprise.

... Because it was healed.

Fully healed. Now only an undertone of a bruise remaining on my skin.

But then, didn't that mean...

I quickly looked down at my hands....

...Only to find they were completely bare.

"...Fuck."

The ring was gone.

"No...", I whispered in disbelief, staring at the place the ring should have been. "No... no, no no, no."

I was so used to the feeling of silver that I didn't even register the burn anymore. How long had it been missing? A day? Two?

...Had Thea realised?

I ran down the stairs, an overwhelming panic fuelling me as I scrambled to find it and started looking everywhere I could. Under and behind furniture, the laundry amongst my clothes, literally anywhere! could think of.

When had I seen it last?

...Hadh't it been there yesterday?

The windowsill.

I looked up sharply to where we'd sat together the day before... and saw it.

Nearly entirely hidden by a pillow, it was there. Glinting as the sun hit the exposed surface, almost as if mocking me for losing it.

This meant it must have accidentally fallen off my finger when I fell asleep.

How many hours had passed since then though?

However, as I started to run towards it, suddenly I felt a familiar sensation I hadn't felt in months.

One that filled me with dread. Something I hadn't felt in so long yet hadn't particularly missed.

Everything around me instantly began to blur, my legs giving out from under me.

And, before

I could completely wrap my head around what was happening, suddenly, I was in the woods.

...And I became trapped within a vision.

The sounds of birds and nature surrounded me as if I really were there, even the scent seemed indistinguishable. Everything felt so real... and familiar.

With a lurch to my stomach, I realised these were the woods outside the cottage.

I spun my head around frantically, searching for the one thing I desperately didn't want to find. ...But, of course, they were there. I'd suspected as much the second I'd seen where I was, but I'd fervently hoped I was wrong.

Because I knew what this meant now. How could I not?

Aleric stood by a tree, surveying the area around him, looking the same as when he'd left not even twenty minutes earlier. Even his clothes were the same. Which told me two very crucial details....

One; that it was happening today.

And, two; ...that he hadn't even shifted yet... meaning it was literally happening any second now, if not already

"Aleric!" | screamed out, running towards him.

But he didn't respond, being unable to hear me inside the vision. It was yet another cruel restriction that came with this ability,

I immediately felt myself begin to cry, my breathing becoming shallow as I watched helplessly in mute terror.

Because there was one other very important, yet cruel restriction that came with having visions. One knew painfully well, having experienced several over the last few years. ..And that was that they always\* brought bad news.

## **Chapter Ninety-Eight**

"Aleric...," I cried, feeling completely useless.

This wasn't good. This was really, really not good.

And worse, even on the small possibility that this wasn't Thea's doing, there was no chance she didn't already know by now. Either way, I was wasting time being stuck inside this vision.

I needed to get out. Now.

'Wake up.'

| slapped at my cheeks, wishing more than anything to break out, but it was no use. I wasn't really 'here's o there was no physical pain trigger.

A snapping sound then came from somewhere in the distance, and I immediately looked up towards it. It sounded like someone had stepped on a branch further into the woods.

I wasn't the only one who noticed either as Aleric also detected something, walking cautiously towards it. It didn't leave me many options in what I could do next... I had to follow him.

We walked for maybe a few minutes, deathly silent the entire time, before a clearing came up ahead. I knew this had to be it. The place where it would happen.

He took two steps, assessed the area and then

\*THUD.\*

A wolf tackled into Aleric, sending them both flying to the ground as the beast began to growl and bite at him. But it was more unfortunate for the wolf, if anything, since something like that wasn't nearly enough to keep Aleric down... and he swiftly proved my point.

Without much effort on Aleric's end, he managed to easily take care of the wolf, twisting its neck, and finishing him within seconds. He hadn't even broken a sweat by it, let alone exerted himself in any way.

...But was that really it? That seemed a little... too easy.

Not enough to warrant a vision anyway.

Though, of course, I didn't need to wait long to find out.

Aleric must have sensed whatever it was since he immediately prepared himself, looking around the area as if expecting something to jump out.

But it wasn't just 'someone'.

No, for lack of a better word, it was a small army. At least five or six dozen people suddenly emerged from the trees into the large clearing ahead; some shifted, some not. All of them either armed or ready to fight... against just Aleric. The odds were not in his favour.

But, to my surprise, Aleric didn't even seem remotely phased. His face was completely calm as he assessed the situation, his eyes scanning the area as if taking internal notes of exactly where everyone was. And, with a final small sigh, he rolled his shoulders back and stretched his neck from side to side.

The enemy *was* either taken aback by his collected manner or, at least, were waiting to see what he'd do next. It meant they knew who he was, knew what he was capable of as they didn't dare rush in. But they wouldn't want to hold their breath if they were waiting for Aleric to blindly rush in and stan. He wasn't that stupid.

A minute or two passed with both sides still cautiously evaluating the other. It dragged on almost to the point of being ridiculous before, finally, Aleric reached down and grabbed a rock, lightly tossing it within his hand as he got a feel for its weight. And of the few who weren't shifted, I could see their expressions become tenser, as if expecting him to finally attack.

...Only Aleric didn't need to use the rock as a close combat weapon. Instead, he promptly took a step back with one foot, twisted his body... and threw the rock with so much force it immediately hit the closest wolf.

They bled out almost instantly, the rock cutting into the flesh by their neck. There hadn't been remotely enough time for the wolf to react to the impending projectile.

Judging from the reaction of the crowd, none of them had anticipated Aleric to throw it with that\* much speed and power. But it was apparently the final straw for them. Quickly, they all started to charge at him, the woods erupting in a chorus of cries and growls.

Five wolves came at Aleric first from all sides, trying to impede his ability to dodge, but he swiftly kicked back three and took two out without any trouble, finishing the other three easily by the time they'd recovered to charge him again.

This must-have enraged the group, having seen him just take out five of their men so effortlessly, and several more advanced on him. In fact, Aleric became almost a blur as he rapidly defended and attacked.

Regardless of the direction or their approach, he was always ready and anticipating their next move. It was the exact reason Aleric and I were somewhat balanced when fighting now; where I could literally sense his next move from my ties to foresight, Aleric, on the other hand, was such a skilled fighter with insanely keen senses that he was able to predict the next move based on body language alone. In such a large-scale event as this, it was easy to see just how powerful he was. \*This\* was his true ability, both natural and from his lineage. It made me wonder if he'd just been going easy on me up until now.

By the time he'd taken out approximately twenty enemies, I could tell he was finally starting to properly try. Not to say he was getting tired, but I knew it would probably become difficult to finish off the remaining fifty or so enemies still waiting to have their go.

On... and on... and on the battle went. Twenty... twenty-five... thirty... forty. He worked through each opponent methodically and never slowed... but when there were finally only around fifteen enemies remaining, I could see he was reaching his limit.

He looked... exhausted. Now covered in dust, blood and sweat, he heaved at the air as he awaited the next attack. But his eyes were still as sharp and focused as when the fight had started. He might have been tired, but he was still ready to keep going regardless.

I knew he would probably shift soon. Now the numbers had lowered, he would be able to take advantage of his wolf to manage the open space better and conserve strength, utilising the extra stealth to pick off

remaining enemies and kill any who tried to run. It was something the opposition probably realised too as they paused for a minute to reassess the situation.

...And another stalemate ensued.

The majority of their numbers were now dead or too injured to continue and yet Aleric was still standing with barely more than a few surface scratches. Surely, they had to realise they weren't a match, right?

Only... I remembered then that I wasn't watching this live.

I'd become so engrossed in watching the fight that I'd almost forgotten what this was. A vision.

And that meant there would be no happy ending here,

'Wake up,' I internally screamed at myself, wanting more than anything to snap out of it already

But then a man walked forward.

Unlike the others, he didn't look afraid. He didn't cower or act cautious... No, the only way to describe him was that he looked... unstable.

With wide eyes and nose flaring, he approached Aleric, seeming completely out of it. A man possessed in how he moved. Was it from witnessing all his comrades mercilessly die or from something else?

Aleric quickly focused in on him, watching carefully for when he'd attack.

But... something didn't feel right. Something about him, about how he was acting...

'Wake up, wake up, wake up.'

He slowly reached behind him, grabbing something from his pocket...

'Wake up, c'mon already!'

...Pulling out a metal looking object, something that made everyone in the area look at him confused; even his fellow allies. None of us apparently had ever seen it before... Which only made me more worried.

' WAKE UP

He lifted it up, pointing it directly towards Aleric...

\*Click.\*

'WAKE UP ALREADY.'

\*BAAANNGGGGG.\*

A small flash of light emitted from the device before sounding off a deafening noise in its wake. The birds in the area immediately flew off, fleeing as fast as possible. It was loud enough to make me fall backwards to the ground in surprise, along with several of the enemies too. Like me, they were taken off guard just as much as I was.

...And then silence fell.



Silent enough to hear a pin drop.

"Not a single person moved as we all stared in shock, wondering what the hell had just happened....

...Something that was only broken as Aleric then suddenly groaned... and fell to his knees.

I quickly got back up to my feet and ran toward him... only I couldn't touch him. I wasn't really here. This wasn't really real... not yet anyway.

He was bleeding from his shoulder though I hadn't seen any knife or weapon thrown towards him. Yet there was so much blood. From just one tiny hole. What the hell could do something like that?

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" one of the other enemies yelled.

I turned around to see that the man who'd just yelled had grabbed the crazy one with the metal object, shoving him around.

"Are you trying to have the Goddess smite us? Have the entire country hunt us? What would possess you to wield a forbidden human weapon?"

...Human weapon? So this was... this was something banned from our species. This was the highest offence he could have committed; a crime that jeopardised our way of life and the entire country. This went beyond pack wars and petty disputes, but was something deemed to be taboo by our kind as a whole; a pact to remain hidden and safe from the outside human world. Regardless of whether he belonged to a pack or was a rogue... no one would ever dare to overstep that line.

The crazed man began to laugh, clearly out of it as he watched Aleric suffer with amusement.

"I fear that witch more than I do the Goddess," he said. "It was her will that I wield this weapon. This is the only way to earn my redemption."

"Even if we survive this now, we will die anyway thanks to what you've just done. You're delusional if you think the witch is going to protect you when people find out about this."

But he simply smiled, his body shaking from laughing. "Then I die knowing I did all I could to survive this world. A rogue's life is one filled with only tragedy. Just look at the fate of our fellow brothers surrounding US."

The second man looked disgusted by him yet scared all at once. Even for someone planning to hurt Aleric moments ago, it was abundantly clear that some things were too far.

"Our orders were to 'capture' him. Capture. Not 'kill,'" a different rogue interjected.

Though despite those orders, all of them were arguing whilst Aleric continued to bleed out.

"Why isn't he healing?" one of them finally chimed in.

"... It's a silver bullet," the insane man explained. "The witch had it prepared specifically for t his."

So, it was Thea's idea. Of course. Only she would be brazen enough to bend the very morals of our kind. And who could say what she'd even done to the man? She could have easily preyed on a weaker willed mind and turned them into this\*. Made them see what she wanted them to. Was this who she had been manipulating whilst I'd been out of her reach?

"...Oh, Goddess..." one man said, beginning to pray.

"Enough, we don't have time for this," the second man snapped. "Regardless of the means, we've got him now. We can't change what's already happened."

"What about the other one? The girl?"

"If this one could kill so many of us with his bare hands alone... I don't particularly feel like fighting the Saintess who, up until recently, was also considered an Alpha of that cursed Winter Mist. I've heard rumours that she's as crazy as she is dangerous."

"...Aria..." I heard Aleric then softly whisper.

| quickly looked back towards him as he gritted his teeth, applying pressure to his wound.

"...Aria... if you see this, don't come for me."

I felt myself tense up from shock. Was it just sheer luck or did he actually correctly guess I would witness the battle?

And not just that, but he wanted me to leave him. As if such a thing was possible. The very second this vision was over, I would make it to him in time... with two of us and my knowledge, they wouldn't have a chance.

"We're done. The witch said we only needed one and to focus on the male. Grab him and let's get the hell out of here already."

"—Aria. Don't. Think it through clearly."

The rogues grabbed at Aleric and pulled him to his feet, wasting no time to badly bandage the wound and handcuff his hands behind his back.

'WAKE UP ALREADY. WAKE UP. WAKE UP. WAKE UP

'WAKE UP. WAKE UP:

'WAKE UP

... \*Snap.\*

My eyes flew open and I gasped at the air, finally free from the horrific experience.

Truthfully, I definitely felt weakened... but not enough that I would be completely useless in a fight. I had become strong enough to withstand the energy it stole from me, though that didn't make it any easier.

I got to my feet and sprinted out the door, instantly shifting mid-air into my wolf form, and started bounding it towards where Aleric was. His scent was unmistakable as I followed it, pushing myself to go faster and faster....

Going as quickly as I could, all the while focusing on nothing else except getting to him. Making it there before

\*BAAANNGGGGG.\*

I came to a halt so quickly that I fell to the ground, tumbling along the rocky dirt several feet before finally stopping

...I was too late.

No... no, no, this couldn't be happening.

And I shifted back, tears filling my eyes as my body shook.

How much further into the woods was he? Another five minutes? Another fifteen?

What was I meant to do?

If I made it there and Aleric was already in handcuffs, then it would make things considerably more difficult. They could use him as a hostage to make me comply, threatening to hurt him further. Not to mention, they also still had *that weapon*. Whatever it was, it had been so quick that I hadn't even seen what it did to Aleric. How was I meant to fight against something like that? Something completely unknown? I probably wouldn't even be able to get a word out before it hit me.

...So, was I just meant to leave him then?

No, that was unthinkable. Regardless of the consequences, saving him was all that mattered. It was the only thing I cared about.

Except...

*'\*"...Aria. Don't. Think it through clearly."\**

Aleric's words.

I swatted back my tears angrily. He was right. I didn't want to do the logical thing because it hurt too much ... but he'd already figured out what the cost of losing here was. And it was extremely pricey.

The rogues mentioned that they were sent by Thea and their orders were to capture one of us. Only one, with the focus on Aleric.

This told me one thing, and one thing only.

They wanted to use him as bait.

I could assume her goal was to send me back into an emotional frenzy in my attempt to rescue him. With us at her mercy, she could do what she wanted. And, for all I knew, there were others waiting in the woods that I hadn't seen too, waiting with different orders for when I'd arrive.

But this was possibly my only saving grace too. It meant she couldn't kill him yet. Aleric was more useful to her alive than dead so she could lure us in. And, unlike my ability, Aleric's wouldn't make it near impossible to defeat her should she acquire his power. More strength wasn't going to significantly tip the power balance in her favour like my foresight would.

...So, this was what Aleric meant by don't follow. He'd calculated that his life wasn't worth risking the chance of Thea acquiring my ability. That it really would be game over if she got her hands on me. Not just for both of us, but for everyone. Our whole species.

...He'd valued his own life less than everyone else's. Something that broke me a little inside to even think about

But knowing the safest thing to do here didn't make it any easier.

Even the very thought of letting him go was destroying me. How was I meant to remain calm when they had him? When Thea would be getting her hands on him to do whatever she wanted? She might not kill him, but I doubted she would make his stay very pleasant.

Was I meant to just sit back and ignore that?

"FUCK," I screamed out in frustration, hitting the ground with my fist.

I was so sick of sacrificing everything because of interference outside my control. Giving up my life for a Goddess that had never shown me gratitude. I never asked to be born into his lineage, never wanted to be reborn again even.

...I should have just let them all burn. Take my chances now to try and kill the rogues. Rescue Aleric. Run away with him and never turn back. Run so far that, even without the ring, Thea still wouldn't be able to find me.

Screw this world and the constant demands of me. I was done.

'Breathe.'

...Dammit. instantly inhaled deeply, hearing Aleric's voice in my head to remind me to control myself.

... This was her influence, still rooted inside. The very thing I'd be training against. Yet I'd almost fallen prey to it once again.

It was true that Aleric was now in a deadly situation but there were still things worth fighting for. My parents, for one. Living to hopefully see them again without putting them in danger. Elder Luke and Alexander too. hell, even Brayden didn't deserve to die.

I needed to separate myself from her and focus instead.

But even in times like this where I couldn't completely trust myself, I knew I could trust Aleric. He'd been a voice of reason to help cut through the mess Thea created inside me. So, despite the fact that every ounce of my being was screaming at me to run in there and save him... I had to trust him now more than ever. Trust that my first assessment was correct. And that was telling me not to follow.

It was the 'logical' thing to do... even though it killed me to even consider it.

Scanned with CamScanner

Chupke Ninely tight

And so I stood up, forcing my legs to move one after the other back towards the cottage, back towards the Winter Mist

The opposite direction from Aleric, from the very being I'd found happiness with.

The best decision here was the one that was hardest to make. The decision where I left to formulate a plan instead of giving in to exactly what Thea wanted.

I needed to focus. To stay composed. To push out every single one of my doubts and vulnerabilities because that was going to make saving him impossible.

And with every step away from him I took... I detached myself a little bit more.

It was time to form a strategy and finally fight back.

## **A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 99**

### **Chapter Ninety–Nine**

It was the most difficult decision I'd ever made. Sacrificing someone in order to save my self. I felt sick even thinking about it... but I didn't have a choice here. And not just that, but I also didn't have time to digest it further if I wanted to escape safely.

On the off chance that Thea had people lying in the wait to catch me, I gathered only whatever I could pack quickest, ripping open the emergency envelope with my location and beginning the long drive home. And whilst I had taken the time to retrieve the ring, I, unfortunately, couldn't risk wearing it. If I were suddenly ambushed, then I needed to be ready to fight. One critical blow to my body and I would be instantly dead in seconds without my natural healing, something the ring would prevent.

It meant I needed to work even harder to keep Thea out of my head, despite everything threatening to overwhelm me.

'Calm. Composed.

'Everything was fine.

We were two hours drive west of the Winter Mist and I was both sad and relieved when I finally returned to the pack. There were going to be a lot of questions, I knew, but I just needed to take it one step at a

time.

'I could do this.'

'I needed to do this.'

Heading directly to the packhouse, I immediately had patrols start double-checking the borders, wasting no time in ensuring we were ready for if Thea decided to attack. There was always the possibility that she assumed we were weakened right now by her kidnapping Aleric, and I didn't want to give her the satisfaction.

"Send out only the most trusted warriors we have," I instructed. "I want a status report that everything is secured within the next two hours. After that, we'll review again if anything needs to be changed. And I need you to send word to—"

“Aria?” I heard someone say behind me in surprise.

I instantly spun around to see Cai by the entrance of the door, frowning.

“Cai,” I greeted. “We’ve got a lot to do and we need to start working on a plan.”

“Woah, woah, woah,” he said, putting his hands up. “Slow down. What the hell is going on? Where’s Aleric?”

\*Thump.\*

“Not here,” I replied stoically, swallowing back my pain. “Thea had rogues grab him while we were at the cabin. They took him down before I could make it to him. She’ll most likely try and use him as bait”

“Then shouldn’t we be getting you somewhere safe? I can find Elder Luke and start working on a plan.”

“I’m feeling fine,” I said, picking up the shift roster for patrols. “I’ll be assisting with the planning. Once Elder Luke has been made aware, we can begin looking at different options.

“Aria...”

And I looked up at him, finally meeting his eyes.

“...What?”

I could tell he was analysing me carefully, his eyes narrowed slightly as he watched me. But then the tension broke as he sighed in defeat. “Alright. Fine.”

...And I immediately got to work.

It took another three days before I felt reassured Thea wasn’t planning anything directly against the pack. With the people within the Winter Mist safe at least, I could begin thinking of ways

to counter her movement. But without much information surrounding her whereabouts, I was

beginning to wonder what her next step was. It’d been eerily silent since I’d returned. Well... except for her presence every now and then in my head.

I was doing a pretty good job at keeping her out for the most part, but I’d be lying if I said everything had been going smoothly. At times, my anxiety would get too much and I’d start to hear those thoughts again. The ones nagging at me to stop wasting time and focus completely on trying to save Aleric. To ignore the pack, Cai, everything else, and do whatever it took to rescue him.



In the last few days that had passed, I'd used the time in sending scouts out to find information. And whilst there were a few potential leads, there wasn't really anything definitive enough to warrant building an entire strategy for. There was yet to be any real confirmation.

"... What are we doing, Aria?" Cai suddenly asked in the meeting room, breaking me from my thoughts.

We were usually holed up in here all day unless we were briefly needed elsewhere. It was important to be accessible in case someone needed to find us.

Today, Cai seemed agitated. Restless, even. He'd given me several suspicious glances the last day or so and they were slowly becoming more frequent. An added stress that was not needed, nor wanted, given how hard it already was to remain focused.

"Maybe he doesn't care if Aleric dies. He's never really liked him. Perhaps he'll use this as a chance to hurt me."

\*Breathet.

There it was again. Getting more and more frequent. I needed to be more careful.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean... It's been three days and we still don't have a plan. What are we doing?"

Timmediately put my pen down to look at him, addressing him in an even tone despite the mild attitude I was sensing.

"We're ensuring the pack remains strong until we can track her down. After that, we can look at the different options to hopefully recover Aleric. Until then though, we're managing resources to ensure we're fully prepared to leave at a moments notice."

There it was again.

Another guarded look that seemed borderline distrustful.

"...I thought leaving was meant to have helped you with getting better," he said, finally deciding to say whatever he'd been holding back. "Instead, you're possibly even colder than when you left."

'He'll stop me from trying to save Aleric. He thinks I'm dangerous. What if he locks me up?'

|  
swallowed back against the urge to lash out, reminding myself what was more important right now. And I wasn't giving in to those thoughts.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Cai. That's exactly what I did."

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Standing up, I then walked away, turning my back to him so I could concentrate on literally anything else. Anything to stop the thoughts surfacing that I was trying so hard to push down.

From his perspective, I knew why it might have seemed like nothing had changed... but, in reality, it was because of how much I'd managed to recover that I was now more vulnerable. It was a struggle to remain so collected when I was so emotionally attached to someone now.

"Then how can you just act like nothing is really happening? As if we are just discussing petty pack issues?"

I remained silent, trying to ignore him.

"... Do you even give a shit that he's gone?"

That did it.

Of everything to assume, that was taking it too far, piercing directly into the thin shield I'd managed to create inside.

I instantly spun around to face him again, teeth gritted.

"Of course, I care! How could you possibly think that?!" | bit back, a flood gate opening inside. "You think I don't want to break down, scream or cry because I'm scared of losing him? That I don't want to rush into action and do everything I can to save him?!"

I balled my hands into fists, taking several steps towards him.

"I'm sorry if I seem cold, but it's because I care that I'm trying not to endanger us further! This isn't the first time Thea has done something like this. She wants me to get angry. She wants me to yell and stop thinking rationally. I've already told you that's how she digs her claws in. It is taking literally every ounce of my restraint to resist playing into what she wants."

He was taken aback by my response, looking a little guilty as I confided in him all of this.

“...I’m terrified, Cai,” I said, a tear falling down my face. “...I can’t lose him. I... I can’t endure any more pain. I’ve lived two lifetimes of it and I just want this to be over. I just want—argh.”

\*Breathe\*

I’d said enough

And I took a deep breath, calming myself.

This wasn’t going to help Aleric. If I was starting to crack this bad already then it would be near impossible to resist should Thea decide to start messing around in my head more.

But... was it even possible to fight her when it was already this difficult? My resolve was getting weaker every day the more anxious I became, the urge to just give in becoming too much. It was inevitable that I was going to snap like this soon. And maybe the next time would be worse.

I’m not strong enough. He’s going to die because of me.’

I couldn’t even tell if that was her or my own thoughts anymore. Either way, it was probably a bad sign.

“Aria... I’m sorry, I didn’t—.”

“Can we let it go, please?” I asked, wanting nothing more than to drop it before it had worse consequences. “I just want to focus on what we need to do next. She’ll be expecting me to—“

And the words cut short in my mouth as I realised something. Something that seemed so obvious.

The answer was simple.

...We just needed to give her what she wanted. To completely eliminate the chance of accidentally snapping by doing exactly what she expected of me.

It was time to just... give in.

My mind started to whirl with ideas as it all came together, letting me see exactly what we needed to do. How we could win.

...But it was risky. Incredibly so. Doing something like this was reckless and might not even work.

“Cai... I’ve changed my mind...,” I said  
distantly, thinking it through. “...I need you to call me heartless some more.”

And I’ve never seen someone look more confused.

—\*THWACK\*

I punched Sophie’s jaw with enough force to send her straight to the ground. Blood immediately beginning to ooze from her nose from the impact.

“Please...,” she whimpered feebly, trying to crawl away.

But I just revelled in the cries of my old attendant, enjoying every second. I’d dreamt of doing this for years, Dreamt of making her life miserable as retribution for her betrayal. And, based on how unphased she seemed today upon entering her cell, clearly killing Lucy hadn’t been enough.

‘She deserved this. She was a monster.’

‘Most importantly, she was the only link I had to Thea. Every second she wasted now was another second Aleric was kept captive.’

‘It was her fault.’

“Then tell me what I want to know,” I replied, though unable to hide my smile.

It was true

I wanted answers quickly... but that didn’t mean I couldn’t enjoy myself a little either.

“I—I already told you...,” she said, cowering. “I don’t know anything.”

And I kicked her in the ribs.

“Lying to me isn’t in your best interest,” I said, crouching down to her eye level. “Thea isn’t here. I am the only one you should be worried about. Prove yourself worthless and...”

I grabbed her throat, tightening my grip enough to make her start choking.

‘Maybe it wouldn’t be the worst thing if she didn’t tell me. Then I could...’

“Aria, stop!” I heard someone yell by the cell door.

“Don’t tell me what to do,” I bit back, never breaking eye contact with Sophie as I watched her struggle.

If she didn't want to help me find Thea, find Aleric, then I'd just take her to the brink of death. Give her a taste of fear.

'I am the only God here.'

"Aria!" Cai yelled again before dragging me away from Sophie. "Stop it."

"No!" I growled. "We agreed that this was what we needed to do! Why are you chickening out now?"

He pulled me up and forced me out the cell door, leaving Sophie on the ground to cradle her wounds.

"I said stop it! I didn't agree for you to kill people. Just let me handle it."

And he walked back into the cell, shutting the door in my face to keep me from following him inside.

"Cai! Let me in, dammit!" I yelled, pounding on the door.

But nothing that I proceeded to say nor do apparently made any difference as he remained in the room for several minutes. He was adamant about making me wait.

"Cai, I swear, if you don't let me in right now I'll —,"

And I almost toppled over the other side as the door then abruptly opened, Cai somehow catching me and pushing me back out to stop me from falling.

"You idiot, why didn't you just let me—,"

"Three hundred," he said, his face stern as he cut me off. "There are three hundred rogues located in a camp near the Silver Lake. Makes sense if those are the same rogues that were harassing us a few months ago. There is a large area of unclaimed land not far from the pack which Sophie said they were occupying."

I stopped to look at him, shocked by the revelation. "Three hundred rogues? That's insane. They'll have us outnumbered after we subtract the amount of people needing to stay behind to defend the Winter Mist."

"I realise that. I'm just telling you what she told me though," he said.

And I sighed in frustration, turning away. This was going to be more difficult than I expected.

“Aria... I need to be honest. In my opinion, I think you should give up on trying to rescue Aleric. Or, at least attempting to do so anytime soon. It’s too dangerous. You know it is.”

This caught my attention again as I snapped back to him in disbelief.

‘He’s going to try and stop me. He doesn’t care if Aleric dies whilst we wait, safe in the pack.’

‘He’s an obstacle.

“Abandon me in this now and you’re dead to me, Cai,” I spat. “You’ll make yourself an enemy of this pack and to our kind. Aleric is integral to our survival. This is a war. \*Ust ag against \*her\* Who’s side are you on?”

“I’m on the side of sanity,” he said. “The side that doesn’t needlessly die for no good reason, especially when that results in only further problems. It’ll be my head at her feet the moment she’s done with you.”

“You’re a coward,” I yelled, grabbing his shirt. “Too scared to fight when so much is on the line.”

He immediately pushed me backwards but I held on. “No, Aria, I’m a survivor. If you’re so determined to get yourself killed then leave me out of it. I’ll get out of your way and leave the Winter Mist first thing tomorrow morning.”

‘He’s going to let me sacrifice myself to do the right thing whilst he cowers away in safety.’

Betraying me when I needed him most.’

“...Don’t ever come back,” I hissed and shoved him away.

And I instantly turned my back on him, swiftly leaving. I didn’t want to even look at him.

There were a lot of arrangements to be made for the upcoming battle. People to be notified, final strategies to be discussed. Now we knew where we were headed, it was time to put everything in motion.

Tomorrow, we went to war.

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Chapter Ninety–Nine

The rest of the day was extremely busy, to say the least. There was of course pushback, resistance, but in the end, I had the final say. There would be no debate on this. The battle to ensue was one that everyone was a part of, whether they realised it or not. It was time for them to pay the dividends they owed me. after everything I'd sacrificed for this pack. Even if that was with their lives.

...Because if we failed, they would be forced to pay that price anyway

By the time night time fell and I was lying awake in my bed, so many thoughts were consuming me. So much had happened in such a short amount of time. I felt exhausted.

And, as I slowly started to drift to sleep, finally enjoying a moment of calm respite... I slipped on the silver ring that had been hiding in my pocket.

...Now to hope it had worked.

"It's done," I called out into the dark.

And I felt as a presence immediately slipped through my bedroom door, walking over to lean on the opposite wall facing me. A shadow in the night now my senses were dimmed.

However, once they were closer, the moonlight streaming in from the bedroom window became enough to illuminate Cai's face.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

I sat up slowly and just shrugged. "As okay as can be expected. But I'm in control again, if that's what you mean... But are you okay? I didn't hurt you, did I? The shoving was probably a bit rough."

He laughed. "I've completely recovered since Thea was messing with me. You don't need to worry about that. I'm sure I could even kick your butt again in a fight, just like the old days."

And I smiled a little. I missed those days spent in school. Training with Cai and studying in the library with Myra.

Myra....

\*Breathe.\*

The worst thing I could do was think about her now. I was wearing the ring but that didn't mean I wanted to limit test its effectiveness. Too much was riding on this working. Thea needed to believe everything she was seeing from my perspective

Hopefully, after all this effort, she was under the assumption that I was currently fast asleep. Something! needed to keep that way.

"Are you ready for tomorrow?" he asked after I hadn't said anything for a while.

"...I think so. We'll head off first thing in the morning and should make it to their camp before midday." || then bit my lip, hesitating. "What about you? Are you...?"

"Don't worry about that. I've got it covered."

And I just nodded my head.

I didn't want to know the details of what he was planning just in case something accidentally slipped into my head. The last thing I wanted was for Thea to see something she shouldn't, jeopardising Cai to what could have been an avoidable danger.

The extent of my knowledge was that he'd used his ability on Sophie to gain information. It was invaluable in situations like this. A way to manipulate someone into wanting to please him. Part of my plan was that I'd mess her up first and make it easier for Cai to get through to her. He really did come in

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clutch, especially since I didn't want to waste my own strength on commanding her right now.

"Do you think Thea noticed?" he asked.

I gave a small sigh. "I think so? I could feel her influence at the very least. With any luck, she now thinks I'm continuing this solo in a mad frenzy."

"And does that hurt? Her in your head like that?"

I paused, reluctantly thinking about it. The feeling of her presence inside that I despised so much.

Lit's like a burning in my mind. A flame that fuels me to move, justifying everything I do so it's hard for me to distinguish right from wrong. Makes me... not myself. I can see what I'm doing but, for the most part, I'm not driving it."

We were

both silent for a moment as neither of us knew what to say. But there was one thing that



was weighing on me, something I needed to mention now before tomorrow. Especially after seeing how easy it had been for me to let go earlier.

“Hey. if I completely lose it... if I start to hurt innocent people, I need you to promise me something.” I said, choosing my words carefully. “...I need you to stop me before it comes to that. Even if that means killing me and hiding my body from Thea.”

“Aria. No,” he said, frowning.

“But that is the risk we need to accept with this plan,” I calmly argued. “When I give in? When I completely let go in those moments...? It’s like the only thing I see is my own rage, my own goals, my own pain. No matter the cost of accomplishing it. Anyone who doubts my mission or methods is just the enemy: Collateral damage.”

“You’re going to be fine. We’re not going to have to resort to something that extreme.”

“But Cai...,” I started, my voice trailing off.

I’m probably not going to survive this until the end anyway, even if we do somehow defeat Thea.’

“What?”

I bit at the inside of my cheek. “...Nothing. Just um... thank you... and good luck tomorrow.”

There was no point telling him about my Selene theory. It wasn’t going to help us save Aleric or kill Thea. It was only going to add more unnecessary stress.

“Okay, well... be safe, Aria. I’ll see you soon for the celebration party,” was all he said before leaving.

And whilst I didn’t know what Cai was planning to do, I at least knew what came next for me, what was waiting for me tomorrow. Something I hated even the thought of, now I was in a sane state of mind.

Because tomorrow I’d be implementing the most important part of my plan. Yet it was also the most insane part.

An all-out attack on Thea that seemed completely irrational and erratic. ... The very thing she would be expecting from me.

## **A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 100**

## Chapter One Hundred

I sat atop a tree, looking down at those who would be fighting for our survival today.

Any minute now we'd be leaving, shifting and beginning our journey to the camp near the Silver Lake pack. With this many people, it was agreed that going on foot would be best, knowing that travelling via roads added more time and allowed for a predictable ambush.

And there was no denying we had many people. After the final count, we numbered around two hundred strong warriors ready for battle today.

... Ready for war.

I sighed, the wind gently catching in my hair as I stared at all of their faces. I wouldn't forget what they looked like this time. No, this time I sent our men to war, I would remember them all, committing their appearance to memory and fighting alongside them to the end.

On this day, I wasn't Ariadne Chrysalis, the former Luna of the Winter Mist. Always hiding behind my desk as I allowed our people to die without questions or guilt.

Today, I was Aria the Saintess, the Alpha of the Winter Mist. Someone willing to die as I weighed the risks and acknowledged the impact it held for, not only me, but all of the people before me as well.

Let this be the first and last war I ever see in this lifetime.

I was meant to be getting angry, to be emotionally charging in. The whole plan was hinging on that. Except this morning, I couldn't help but feel impossibly calm. Almost... serene. As if this was all inevitable. Truthfully, it felt somehow eerily familiar. I wonder why?

And with another moment of thought, it came to me. Acceptance. This was how I'd felt right before I'd been killed in my past life, when I'd placed my head upon the wooden stump willingly for my execution. The acknowledgement that I couldn't stop my death from occurring. It was as if my body knew today was probably my expiration date, without anything even being confirmed yet.

Perhaps this tranquillity was a good thing though. Thea needed to be within a certain distance to directly mess with me and she'd probably already left to make her own preparations at the camp. Now it seemed almost quiet inside. If anything, these were the last moments I'd have to myself before I'd need to resume my role. To become the person expected of me.

... But what I wouldn't give to just go back to the cabin in the woods.

I guess it all had to end someday. Would I be allowed to see Myra again inside the Abyss?

The warriors below then started to get restless, shuffling as their whispering became louder and louder. I could feel their anxiety and nerves radiating off them, making them more uneasy as every second passed.

But it was their glances of skepticism that were the hardest to ignore. Many of them didn't want me as an Alpha, I knew that. Aleric had always been the poster child for what a strong Alpha looked like, groomed since birth to fit that role. I was merely a usurper to some, a Luna who didn't know her place. Stealing the role by invoking Selene's name and authority. Locking Aleric away had surely not secured me any favour either. But regardless of their personal feelings, we needed to band together today if we wanted to survive.

Suddenly, Alexander appeared then at the bottom of my tree, looking up at me expectantly.

I knew what this meant.

...It was time.

I quickly jumped down to meet him and he nodded his acknowledgment.

"Oliver has everything here under control?" I asked.

Brayden's father, Gamma Oliver, was the only ranked member we had that possessed enough experience to be trusted with the pack in our absence. It was true that I'd prefer him on the battlefield, but I needed someone at home to protect our most vulnerable whilst we were gone. This left me with Alexander and Brayden as my right-hand people to help coordinate.

"Everything is prepared," he confirmed. "We're ready to leave on your order."

Well, I guess we should get this over with.

"Everyone!" I then shouted to the crowd, stepping towards them.

Silence immediately fell as they all turned to look at me, holding mixed expressions.

"I'm sure many of you are nervous or maybe even conflicted about what we're doing today," I started, meeting a few eyes. "...And I don't blame you. But there isn't any reason to fear what is ahead for us. Help me and I promise to help you as much as physically can."

Judging just by their reactions

alone, I could tell many of them still didn't believe me, and I quietly sighed.

"I know some of you are probably wishing Aleric and I's positions were swapped," I continued. "Make no mistake, I'm entirely aware that some of you don't like me. I know I'm not perfect. However, today I'm not asking for you to 'like' me, but I am asking for something that is going to be far more difficult than any rogue you will face."

I paused to gauge their response, proceeding only once I felt they were still following.

"...I'm asking for your trust," I said. "Trust that I'm sending you out there today with only good intentions, committing fully to live and die by your side. We're fighting to save Aleric, to retrieve back someone who the majority of you know personally. Despite your individual feelings towards me, it's imperative that we don't lose focus on the purpose for why we're fighting today. Because you're not fighting for me. Today, we go to war to save one of our own, one of our fellow pack members... we're fighting for our future."

Let them interpret that last part how they will. All that mattered was they remained focused on what needed to be done. And, with a few howls and cheers, I was pleased to see my words had gotten through to at least some of them.

With one last look towards Brayden and Alexander, I gave the final nod for everyone to shift into their wolves.

...And into the woods we went, beginning our journey.

Whilst we ran, I carried several supplies and clothes in a bag for when we arrived. The three of us ranked, and several other chosen warriors, would be fighting on two legs in order to coordinate the numbers, separating into different units that communicated with each other. With any luck though, the fighting itself would be minimal.

... So long as everything went to plan.

As we travelled, I focused on what I needed to do. To prepare myself and delve into that negative emotion Thea would be expecting. Festering in the thoughts she would be imparting into me.

I'm going to kill her today. I swear by it.'

It took a few hours before we arrived, a howl being sent into the air by one of our scouting wolves in front to alert us. They were the most familiar with these lands so their knowledge here was crucial.

Un ahead. I could see a clearing opening up into a large field. This would be the furthest we'd go for now.

Currently, we were still obscured by the woods but I could smell that these lands were occupied by *many* more people. Hundreds of rogues if Sophie's words were to be believed. I could even faintly make out the sound of their people if I focused enough.

... They were waiting for us.

Aleric would be here somewhere. I just needed to get to him.

Would Thea be standing with the fodder she sent for slaughter? Or would I need to dig her out of the dirt like the worm she was?

I quickly shifted back and started changing into my clothes. They were specifically designed with both agility and protection in mind and I was pleased with the result. I could feel the small protective padding in key areas but none of which would slow me down in any way.

And as for weaponry...?

I pulled out three silver daggers, my original dagger Thea had once taken, a standard one from the armoury... and a new one I'd had specially made for today. Each was then strapped to my body. One on my thigh, another by my hip, and the last by my shin. Areas I could refer to for quick access if needed.

"Are you sure about this?" Alexander asked, coming up behind me.

And I nodded. "I want nothing more than to see Thea finally pay today. Locking me up wouldn't even be enough to stop me right now."

'I wonder what the blood of a Goddess does to the dirt. Or does it become as meaningless as her existence upon exit? How will it feel for her to die by a mortal's hand?'

I started walking towards the clearing, several eyes watching me as I moved. "Tell everyone to stand back until I give the order. I want to make it very clear that no one is to intervene, regardless of how much danger they think I might be in."

I could feel his conflict as he walked with me, but he accepted my instructions nevertheless,

"This is far enough," I said to him, implying he shouldn't follow me any further. "...I'm going in."

And I turned to face the battlefield.

...Are you listening to me, Thea? Do you feel how much hatred I hold for you? See how far I'm willing to go just to kill you?'

I started walking into the open clearing, immediately seeing as the opposite side started to move. Almost as if a wave of wolf bodies came out of the trees to greet me.

There really was a significant amount of them. Possibly a hundred or so more than even Sophie told us.

'Will you be too scared to face me today? I came all this way to finally finish this. Winner takes all.

...Surely, you're not afraid of a child, are you?'

More and more rogue wolves came out from the trees, slowly making their way towards me, but I didn't remotely falter or slow down. I kept walking to them with my head held high.

'Think of how easy it will be to track down Cai once you retrieve your foresight back, Thea. Though be sure to tell the weasel that I'll be making his afterlife more unpleasant than the Abyss for abandoning me.'

I'd been purposely preparing myself for this. Refusing to engage in anything that might weaken me so I could divert all of my attention to this very moment.

...They just needed to come a little closer.

However, abruptly, they then stopped further than I would have liked, clearly unnerved by my lonesome

self-standing against an entire army; now four or five hundred strong.

"What are you so scared of?" I yelled out to the few that were in earshot. "Aren't your orders to retrieve my body for your 'witch?'"

They looked between each other apprehensively, weighing up what to do, before one finally came forward. The largest of the wolves near the front, clearly one of their best fighters if their size and confidence was anything to go by.

...And they charged towards me.

I saw as they went in for a fast lunge, almost feeling insulted that they would think that would actually work, and easily side-stepped them as I dodged the attack. Only I didn't leave it at just that.

No, without missing a beat, I drew the dagger at my hip... and instantly embedded it into the side of their throat as they moved past me, going in for a swift kill. I only pulled it back out to clean the blade against my clothes. It had been far too easy.

Unfortunately for them, I'd moved too quick for them to even react, their gross underestimation of me proving lethal. And whilst I'd expected someone to approach me in this manner, I hadn't expected them to be that\* careless.

So much for them looking like a competent fighter.

Their death had served a purpose though; one I was pleased to see had worked. The rogues all started to advance on me again, now seeing that I meant business and wouldn't be taken down easily.

...And I took a deep breath, watching their approach carefully as every step they took reminded me of my mission.

'What I did today, I was doing for me... for Aleric...'

...For Myra... for C—..

Just a few more steps. It was almost time.

...For my parents who couldn't return home..

...For the people I hurt whilst Thea controlled me.'

So close now. I could feel myself begin to shake from adrenaline.

...For the future of those who will be here after I am gone.'

**\*NOW\***

I quickly closed the last few feet, making me within lunging range of their front line, and squared my body

up to prepare.

It was now or never.

I took one last deep breath and....

“SUBMIT AND KNEEL BEFORE ME!”

I screamed the order out into the air at the top of my lungs so loudly that I was sure majority of their numbers had to have heard it. They needed to have.

I'd poured all of my emotion into the command, feeding it every ounce of energy I had inside to make it work. This was a crucial part of my plan today that I needed to successfully execute.

... The plan to even the numbers.

And I wasn't disappointed with the results.

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וודק!! וס ירסי:

Line after line, after line, I saw as many of the rogues began to fall to their knees in submission, unable to deny the authority carried within my order. It was one that held the weight of a Saintess, carrying a piece of Selen as invoked her power. This was my right as was given by the Goddess who rebirthed our kind.

Those closest to me were completely helpless and buckled under the pressure, as was to be expected. I assumed they would be the most disposable members of their army, the ones Thea wouldn't have bothered to put much time or effort into recruiting. But those that were positioned further out were harder to influence.

Either from being out of hearing range or too manipulated by Thea's own command, the bulk of the remaining army was now only two hundred or so strong, less than half of their original total force. For what it was worth though, it had still been a success.

...And I immediately fell to the ground from exhaustion, trying to catch my breath.

Growling and barking started from the remaining rogues surrounding me, wasting no time in charging at me. I'd anticipated for a moment of confusion as they took in what had just occurred, but clearly, they were smarter than I'd given them credit for.

It seemed there was no time for even the smallest of breaks.

Shakily, I got back to my feet and held my ground, confident that if I was dying today, it wasn't going to be by the hand of a rogue.

But before I could make my first move, suddenly a hand was on my shoulder pausing me.



Alexander.

...And a wave of our own warriors suddenly swarmed past me as they engaged in battle, swiftly starting to take down the remaining rogues.

"Are you okay?" he asked, never taking his eyes off the enemy in front of us.

I wiped away some blood dripping from my nose. "Don't worry about me."

It had

been a while since that had happened, usually occurring after I'd strained myself too much from my ability. Though I guess I'd never tried to command over four hundred pack-less wolves before.

Brayden then approached, his expression carefully analysing the battle happening around us.

"I need you both to go back to your units," I instructed, realising their presence here was only going to negatively impact us. "You don't need to protect me. I can still fight."

And they both nodded their heads, knowing better than to argue with me right now.

"Oh, and Brayden?" | quickly added before he could go.

He turned back to look at me attentively.

"Today is your day to prove me wrong," I said, meeting his gaze directly. "Prove to me that you are actually fit to become Gamma of this pack one day."

And he nodded his head once more, leaving to join his unit in battle.

Once gone, I stared at the remaining rogues still kneeling. I didn't have enough energy in me to order this many people again. If they were to remove themselves from this battle now, it would need to be of their own volition. They were more of a hindrance to the fighting than of any help in their current position, taking up too much room on the battleground.

But I did feel bad for them, if only a little bit. All the rogues I'd heard speak until now had mentioned that they found themselves on Thea's side due to the possibility of a new life. Just how bad was it being a

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rogue that they would open themselves up to such danger?

“For those of you who are here on the promise of salvation,” I said to the crowd kneeling, “I proposition to you a chance at sanctuary should you leave this battle now. If you wish to contribute to a society again, I can give you my word that you will have shelter and food, even if that’s not within the Winter Mist. What I offer to you today is the opportunity to redeem yourselves and build a new home with the assistance I can extend to you... Resources, guidance, an alliance. Things that even many established packs in this country would jump at the chance to receive from us.”

I could only imagine what crimes some of these people must have committed in their life. However, if they were desperate enough to die in order to escape their reality, then it had to be worth giving them a better deal to remove them from this battle. To better our odds of surviving today and eliminate any chance of Thea overriding my order.

...And not just that either, but I knew people could change. I had firsthand experience of that very fact.

“What you’ve been told is a lie,” I continued. “Handing me over to Thea will not give you what you desire, I promise you that. All it will accomplish is your own destruction. She is working against you, not with you. And not just the rogues, but all of us. Regardless of whether you hail from a pack or not, she is working towards the ultimate demise of our entire species. Even if you don’t wish to establish a new home, implore you to not find yourself on the wrong side of history here today. Leave... leave now before it’s too late.”

I saw as many of their faces showed confliction, unsure of whether to trust me, and I held my breath tentatively. Would it be enough?

But sure enough, one after another they slowly started to rise to their feet, walking away from the battle and into the woods. They made their choice.

I quietly exhaled in relief, my heart still racing.

Now that they had been taken care of, I looked up towards the fight happening further back. It seemed things were going smoothly with minimal casualties so far, but I knew that could easily change without warning.

Especially if...

And then my eyes caught it.

A figure standing to the side, shrouded in the shadows provided by the trees.

There was only one person it could be, one person who would be so casually standing back to watch what was happening without much concern.

t... Thea

Now the real battle begins.

I immediately moved to approach but, before I could even take two steps, I was abruptly stopped by her voice in my head, freezing me from moving even another inch.

Words that shook me to my core, filling me with cold dread.

The very thing I'd feared more than anything. .... Reckless of you to rush into war for a man already dead,' she whispered.