

## Chapter 11

Astrea walked leisurely down the stalls of the market, paying close attention to everything there and trying to memorise anything that could be of use to her and her Teacher. However, she quickly had to admit that there wasn't much... Worn clothes, old gadgets, questionable-looking food and broken old furniture - these were the offerings at the rogues' market.

This so-called city was barely surviving.

Precisely what she and her Teacher expected.

Rogues by the book. Just the way everyone imagined them, and this was something that didn't sit right with her.

Because Fenrir and his crew were anything but typical.

If they were forming a kingdom, surely there had to be people who strived for more than this... And she didn't see any of them here.

"Anything you are interested to see here in particular?" She didn't even notice that Fenrir was walking so closely behind her now, and when he leaned down to whisper the words, his breath was like a cool breeze to her skin in the heat of the day. It took all her willpower not to close her eyes and relax into his massive chest, especially after what had happened in the car on the way here.

Whatever that was.

"Just show me everything." She turned to face him, mainly to demonstrate that he didn't intimidate her, and that the car ride didn't affect her in the slightest.

"That is everything," he chuckled, removing his sunglasses and waving his hand around. "Or did you expect anything else?"

He was testing her, taunting her.

"No, Fenrir, this is exactly what I expected." She raised a brow at him and met his gaze. "You have failed to surprise me so far."

"Really?" The corners of his lips tilted upwards and she knew it was a mistake to say that. "So, our wild ride wasn't enough of a surprise? I am taking notes here, Astrea."

"So am I!" She raised her chin deantly.

"I see I have to step up my game," he smirked at her.

"You have no idea!" she huffed in annoyance. "Tell me, Fenrir, how is it that your palace just had all that amazing food while your people live like this? Where does it come from, and why is the distribution so unfair?"

"What can I say, Astrea," the amused expression was gone from his face in an instant, "We are rogues, and it's the survival of the fittest here."

It was a reasonable response. For a rogue, of course. The island and the Southern Republic were different.

And yet something was off. She could feel it with her gut and her intuition had never failed her so far.

"Do you realise that what was on your table today could feed a few families here?" she snapped at him, all playfulness gone from both of them as they glared at one another.

"And do you realise that we had an important guest dining with us?" he reminded her of her own presence.

"So, it's my fault now?" She couldn't believe he was implying that.

"No, apparently, I am just a bad ruler," Fenrir scoffed, accentuating the last word.

"Your words, not mine." Astrea raised a brow and turned on her heel, picking up speed and trying to lose him, so as not to say anything else she might regret later.

She had already gone too far as it was.

You are such a diplomat, Nova added fuel to the fire as always.

Learning from the annoying voice in my head! Astrea didn't ignore her wolf's little jab.

She looked completely out of place in her surroundings as she walked down the streets in her stupid expensive white outfit. She knew it. It wouldn't have been a bad idea to change before they left the fortress, but it was too late for that now. Fenrir was influencing her in the worst of ways, and she was making one mistake after another.

Astrea could feel his presence close to her but didn't let him know. Of course, he wouldn't let her wander around alone, but the less he knew of her and her training, the better. She had to gain back control.

They walked in silence for a bit, and Astrea darted into one of the narrow streets, Fenrir following closely behind, both not saying a word to each other even now.

This wasn't how she was supposed to behave with him. Her mission required otherwise, but... he threw her off her balance so easily. She needed a break.

A shabby house on a narrow street with a little girl standing right next to the entrance attracted Astrea's attention, and she found herself walking over there without even realising it. It was the first child she had seen here. A child that, for some reason, was made a rogue. Something that should have never happened in any pack or cove or wherever she came from.

And yet here they were...

"Hi sweetie," Astrea tried to smile at the girl, and the latter looked at her with bright blue eyes. For a rogue, she was pretty clean and well-dressed in jeans and a pink hoodie. The girl also had no instincts that could save her life in a place like this.

"Hi," the child whispered, a curious gaze travelling up and down the stranger.

"Emma?" Astrea heard a female's voice from inside the house and saw a woman rushing out, holding another little girl by her hand. The second girl looked identical to the first, with curly dark locks and hazelnut eyes, wearing almost the same clothes. The only difference was a stain on her hoodie.

Twins. When raising just one child in this "city" was probably challenging enough, this mother had twins to care for.

The girl in front of Astrea didn't know how to react, but her mother quickly pulled her behind her by her wrist, eyeing the she-wolf in front of her suspiciously. Astrea could tell by the look alone that this woman would get her to death for her girl if she had to.

"I mean no harm." Astrea lifted both her hands to demonstrate her intentions. "I am just--"

"You are not from here," the woman interrupted her, hostility evident in her tone.

"No, I am not. I am a guest--"

"You'd better leave!" The mother wasn't interested in listening to her. "Emma! Ava! Inside!"

"I was just--"

"You are a disaster waiting to happen!" The woman shook her head of shiny black hair and prepared to close the door on her, the two girls darting scared gazes between both adults.

"She is with me!" Fenrir stopped the door from closing with his hand, and for a moment, the woman looked like she was about to kick him in self-defence. Her eyes travelled all over him, and Astrea noticed her lips parting in shock when her eyes lingered on the Rogue King's scars and then shot to the bead bracelets on his wrist. Something Astrea had never paid attention to before, taking it for just a part of Fenrir's look.

Now she started to question their presence. The Rogue King wasn't into fashion, and he was unlikely to follow some trend, even if they had any here. Did the bracelets mean something? No one else here had them, although she hadn't been looking for them specially.

"It's you--" the woman whispered, and Fenrir nodded in response.

"Astrea, could you give us a minute alone, please?" his tone suggested that it wasn't a request. It was an order.

She hesitated at first but soon realised she didn't mind leaving. She couldn't do anything for the family today anyway, and if there was a chance that Fenrir would help them somehow instead, she would gladly accept it.

So, she walked away, immersed in her own thoughts. Seeing the twins made her remember things she thought she had already forgotten.

She had a twin once too. She had a family.

And they all were taken away from her on one fateful night.

Astrea wasn't sure anymore she even remembered the events correctly. Still... some of the details were etched into her memory forever.

Their car drove in the middle of the woods in the evening when it was turned upside down all of a sudden, making the world around them spin. Astrea remembered the screams of her sister, Stella, her fraternal twin who still resembled her so much.

She remembered the monsters that attacked them, breaking the window and dragging the man in the driver's seat out first. Probably her father... she couldn't remember anymore.

Only the seatbelt held her in place and her older brother, Brian, cut the straps with his claws for both her and Stella despite being seriously injured, shouting at them to run for their lives.

She remembered the fear that seized her body, preventing her from moving when it was time to leave. Brian shifted to try and protect them, but two huge dark beasts tore him apart before her eyes, ending his young life.

The sisters laced their fingers together as if this was going to help them, and then they ran. Ran, ran, ran.

Their matching white dresses were like beacons for the monsters, making them easy to spot in the darkness. Stella, too, had one shoe on after the accident and was separating behind when they got to her, only breaking the twins' hold on each other and separating them. Astrea turned to see where her sister was, only to find her twin already falling dead to the ground. Stella's dress, no longer white... She wanted to cry and scream, but for some reason, she couldn't. The dark beasts' glowing eyes watched her, their snarls letting her know she was next.

There was no way out.

She was taking step after step back until she stumbled and fell down a small slope she didn't notice, rolling all the way down to the roots of a tall old tree. Covered in scratches and bruises, she desperately crawled in between the massive roots, trying to hide. Only to see those roots crushed in a few moments, chips flying in her face.

A piercing pain in her thigh, and she was dragged for her inevitable demise.

The monster who got her decided to take its time with her and enjoy this last kill of the night.

She hadn't even had her first shift yet to have a fighting chance. There was no way to defend herself, and when the claws sliced her abdomen, there was nothing she could do but cry out as the immense pain rippled through her small body.

A guttural scream left her chest, and by some miracle, the monster was pulled away from her before she realised what was happening.

The blood was gushing from her wounds, and she felt so scared and lonely when someone's warm hands touched her skin, amber glowing eyes locking with hers.

"I've got you, little one," the Teacher said in a reassuring tone. "I am here now, and no one is going to hurt you."

Astrea didn't notice how far she managed to get on her own. She got a harsh comeback to reality when someone grabbed her wrist and pulled her into one of the dark alleys, covering her mouth with their palm at the same time.

"Easy there!" the unfamiliar man cooed into her ear as if that was supposed to calm her down.

This was, however, interesting. Just the distraction she needed to avoid drowning in her own thoughts and memories.

She was curious to see where this was going. Was this man alone, or did he have an accomplice? Were they going to commit a crime or maybe they were trying to warn her? If it was indeed a crime, how well organised was it? After all, she needed to know everything - the good and the bad.

He tried to throw her on the ground when he decided it was a quick scan, but Astrea knew how to nod balance fast, so she remained standing, taking a swift look at her surroundings.

A dead end. Two on the left, and two are blocking the way out, Nova confirmed what Astrea had already known.

It was a trap.

"There is no need to get hurt," one of the four men told her as they were surrounding her. That gang looked like proper rogues, with all the dirt and bad intentions in their eyes. They were proper criminals whom Astrea wouldn't be too sorry to kill.

"We haven't seen a pretty bird like you since we got here," the one who looked like their leader informed her with a chuckle, supported by his crew at once.

"We just want to have some fun," another one gave her an appraising look full of lust that made her cringe.

"Boys," Astrea's lips curled involuntarily. "Why didn't you just say so? I was actually looking to have some fun myself."

Her response startled them but not to the point of sending them running for the hills. Enough to stall them so they did nothing as she elegantly shook off her white longline jacket and carefully placed it on top of some boxes, stretching her neck in the process.

Moon Goddess, she needed this now.

The four of them started to close in on her slowly, and she graced them with her most dazzling smile. "Gentlemen, shall we?"