

6. Warm Welcome

He left just like that, leaving Astrea alone with his crew of rogues.

She couldn't fathom this. Was he serious? Was this the end for him? It had to be some sick rogue joke! They needed this union more than the South!

"Well, you heard the man." The guy with dreads chuckled. "Off you go then. Too bad this alliance thing didn't work out."

He didn't sound like he was sorry about it, though.

"Maybe next time!" the woman beside him sneered and left rst as if there was no more room for discussion. Others followed her. Only the man in the red suit stayed, watching her curiously with his hands in his pockets.

Astrea was speechless. Did they expect her to leave?

Every muscle in her body tensed. Was that why Joran let her go so easily on that mission, promising her freedom in return? Did he know that she didn't have a chance? Was it a test to see if she would try to run again?

Or was the intent to humiliate her? He wanted her to see that there was nothing for her in the East, taking her last hope away.

Of course, her plan was always to leave the continent. She didn't dream of living among rogues for long.

All that taken into consideration, that plan was becoming increasingly unrealistic by the minute.

She couldn't go back to her Teacher with nothing. He would make her stay by his side forever, and she would have to live with it, obeying him until the day she died. They'd made a deal. If she completed this mission, she would be free. If she did not... he would still own her. The collar snake on her neck would stay forever.

No! Nova growled inside her. We are not going back there. Not like that!

Agreed, Astrea sucked in a deep breath, trying to form a new plan in her head. Losing is not an option.

She turned on her heel and stared at the last remaining rogue.

"He is not serious," she stated with her brows furrowed, still hoping it was some kind of a sick joke.

"Oh, no, he is dead serious," the guy in red replied, wind whipping his long sleek hair as he observed her curiously with his amber eyes. He could promote shampoo on tv if he lived in a more civilised country. In fact, he stood out from the crowd here in his fancy fashionable suit, while his friends who'd left didn't seem to care much about their outts. "It was a miracle he agreed to talk to your leaders at all, let alone allowing you entry here. He hates strangers. And politics. And people in general. Especially Southerners. Although, who am I kidding? Fenrir doesn't like anyone!"

"What did Southerners do to him?" Astrea asked and almost immediately regretted it. These were rogues. A wolf had to be thrown out of their pack to become a rogue. None of them had anything good to say about the other kingdoms, especially the Southern Lycan Republic, which probably had the most brutal laws and was weeding out anyone deemed weak or unworthy.

"It's a long story," the man in red admitted, shrugging with his hands still in his pockets. Seeing him wearing a perfectly tailored suit in their surroundings was odd. Everyone else dressed much more casually. "Such a shame it was a very short alliance. I have prepared a feast for us. It would have been fun."

"One question," Astrea decided to interrupt his monologue, unable to keep up with the small talk. "How strict are you guys about the rules here?"

"Depends on who is asking and what rule we are breaking," the guy smirked at her, looking intrigued.

"Let's say I follow your king for a conversation now," she suggested innocently. "Will you and others try to stop me?"

She could take them down, of course, but she needed to know rst if there was a need to change into something more comfortable for the possible ght.

The rogue gawked at her for a moment before breaking into laughter that lled the space around them.

"You want to speak with Fenrir after he specially told you to leave?" He got out a small silk handkerchief and wiped the tears that formed in his eyes. Clearly a drama lover. "Be my guest, and no, no one will obstruct you. But we will watch the show. This guy hates being contradicted. No one dares to contact him. And he absolutely loathes when anyone enters his Tower. Even I don't dare to set foot in there uninvited."

"But—" Astrea halted as her lips curled into a sly grin, "it's not exactly prohibited, is it?"

"No, but—"

"Thanks!" She was in no mood to listen to anything that could potentially ruin her very reckless plan, so she ran up the stairs, determined to make herself heard.

"My name is Devoss, by the way! Devoss Kit," the guy shouted behind her back.

"Astrea Sade!" she repeated her name and waved at him dismissively, reaching the massive doors at the top. Sadly, they were locked, and she turned to give her new acquaintance a questioning stare, hoping that he could do something about it. It looked like he was invested in them having a conversation.

"Don't look at me," he lifted his arms defensively. "Fenrir is the only one with the key."

"You are not much help, Devoss." She rolled her eyes, noticing a window above her on the wall of the Tower. Not that far from the top of the stairs where she stood. Reachable. And also her last chance.

Take the shoes off rst, Nova muttered. We can't break our legs. We will need them to run far and fast if this doesn't work.

There will be nowhere to run if this doesn't work, Astrea summed their options up, throwing off her wine-red high heels.

Devoss watched how she gracefully jumped on the rails and walked them as if she was an acrobat from a circus, each movement trained to perfection.

One leap - and she grabbed the edge of the open window, desperately clinging to it and trying to lift herself up. She pulled her body up and moved most of her weight on to her elbows, now resting on the windowsill.

Taking a peek, Astrea saw a spacious minimalistic room that didn't resemble a king's chambers at all. A desk with stacks of papers and folders scattered all over it, a few old bookcases, a medium-sized dining table and a wooden carved chest by a passage that led to the next oor. Not the cosiest of places.

Fenrir was standing next to the closed door, keeping one hand on it and using the other to cover his eyes.

"Excuse me!" Astrea nally managed to get in and sat on the edge of the window, placing one of her legs on top of the other to look as carefree as possible.

"What the—The rogue was stunned to see her in his room, but he quickly regained his composure, a low warning growl leaving his chest. "What do you think you are doing?"

"Trying to create an alliance between our two countries," she raised a brow at him. "An alliance you agreed to."

"A mistake," he retorted, pushing himself off the door and stalking towards her.

She didn't inch and held his gaze the whole time, being mesmerised by the unusual combination of his eye colour again certainly helped. Flames on ice. Something told her it was a testament to his character.

"Still an agreement that was made," Astrea remained rm, aware that he was taking her in now: her silvery-white curly locks barely reaching her shoulders, the thin red slip dress she intentionally wore underneath her leather jacket, her bare feet, her posture. He was studying her, and she did the same.

Fenrir looked like he was in his thirties, and now that she could take a closer look, she noticed scars on his chest and face. She passed her eyes over them so as not to stare, but she was trained to detect these things.

This man was a lycan. Lycans were one of the strongest shifters that existed... And someone managed to scar him. A little line crossed his nose and cheek, and another line was "decorating" his chin.

"The agreement I just cancelled," he reminded her dryly. "And that decision is nal."

That made her smile at him, unable to let it slide. "If you've proved anything right now, you've proven that your decisions are never nal."

Another growl and another warning. She couldn't afford any more of those, or he would personally throw her back into that helicopter, shipping her straight back to the Teacher.

"The more you speak, the more I am inclined not to change it again. Leave." He repeated the word he had told her before. As if her presence bothered him on a personal level. Which couldn't be the case.

"Look, I am here to help," she lied through her teeth, hopping off the windowsill. "I don't know what about me triggers you so much, but I assure you that I am the best of the best. My task is to ensure that this alliance goes smoothly, and it's all I want."

"If the South needs our help so much, and they had to be pretty desperate to ask, it will go smoothly with or without your presence." Fenrir looked at her as if she was a naïve child, which triggered her.

"The Southern Lycan Republic is ruled by the Alpha Convocation." She decided to give him a simple history lesson. "Which means that many Alphas decide and vote on the country's destiny. So, unless the majority votes to work with you, this alliance is not happening."

"I'll try to get over it somehow, Princess!" He exhaled a rumble of laughter that echoed through the walls.

Princess... She hated to be called that. He was pushing buttons that she didn't know she had.

"Oh, you'll be ne," Astrea lled her words with as much venom as she could, "but what about your people in that—I don't even dare to call that a city. It's a slum at best."

"We are rogues. We don't need much." Fenrir took a step forward, playing to intimidate her, but so did she. She was not new to this game of his and was probably. Only this time, her task wasn't to submit. In reality, it was unlikely that he would touch her or do anything to her. So, she was getting bolder.

"That's good because you sure as hell will not be getting any help from North or West. They are too good to deal with rogues and have too many problems of their own to send humanitarian aid here, which you so desperately need. Trust me, I've just returned from there."

"You've been to the North?" Something changed in his voice, but she still couldn't read his emotions. This rogue gave her little to work with, and she was an expert on facial expressions.

"I've been everywhere. I told you, I am the best." Astrea walked to the desk she noticed from the corner of her eye and threw her leather jacket on one of the chairs. "Let's negotiate."

"There is nothing to nego—" He stopped talking when she turned back to face him.

"What?" Her brows went up as she realised that, this time, he was staring at the snake tattoo on her neck. It was probably just her imagination, but his skin became a shade paler, jaw tightening.

"How did you get this?" he pointed at the serpent that thankfully did not move now.

"Oh, this?" she traced the ink with her ngers, not knowing how to respond to the question she wasn't prepared for. The tattoo was still fresh, and she tried not to think about it as much as she could. "I just got it in the spur of the moment."

That wasn't technically a lie.

"Who sent you?" Fenrir's voice sounded like metal, the air between them thickened, making it hard to breathe.

"The Southern Lycan Republic—"

"No, who sent you from the Republic?" His lips twitched from the pressure, and she instinctively knew she'd better not lie. Especially since her Teacher wanted their real names used this time.

"Joran Nathair," Astrea replied, expecting some kind of reaction, but even as minutes ew between them, none followed.

"Then, I guess you are welcome to stay," he said. "I will send someone to show you to your room."

The change was too sudden, but Astea didn't want to question her luck.

"Thank you, your Majesty—" she blurted out.

"Don't call me that." He shook his head. "Just Fenrir is ne."

"Great! Yeah... Sure." She tried not to grin too much. "And you can call me—"

"I am not going to be calling you anything. Just do your job and leave as soon as you are done," he said, locking his eyes with hers. Something was off, and she could feel it, but for now, this was what she needed.

After all, too much depended on this task.

She waited outside the Tower until the guy with dreads returned with a sour facial expression.

"I guess you stay," he grunted.

"I guess so." She tried really hard not to beam. She came so close to failure that this felt like a kind of victory now.

Right until Dreads pushed the door to her room open.

Astrea's eyes widened with shock...