

7. Busted

"You are not serious!" Astrea's head snapped to her companion, who only shrugged his shoulders to demonstrate that he didn't see any problem.

"This is the Rogue Kingdom. Not a ve-star hotel," Dreads reminded her, and she clenched her jaw tightly to avoid saying something she might regret.

The spartan conditions of the room were not a problem for her. The problem was that the room was tall and round, with no windows other than the glass ceiling. She was already suffocating here, and she hadn't even stepped inside.

This reminded her of the silver pit too much. The days she spent at its bottom would never be erased from her memory.

The white walls had no decorations except one dull, full-length mirror in a wooden frame. There was only a modest queen size bed and a desk with an empty clothes rack. No bathroom in sight.

"Where would I wash?" she raised a brow at her guide.

"The common bathroom is at the end of the corridor. When the hot water is gone, it's gone. And be aware that you can meet anyone there. Male, female—"

"Okay," she said calmly, knowing that this was either a test or an attempt to intimidate her. "Good to know."

If Dreads had any kind of reaction, he didn't let her see it or maybe he simply didn't care. Astrea had heard that once a wolf was banished from his or her pack, if a new pack didn't accept them, after a while they tended to grow indifferent to everything around them. This was why rogues were so dangerous. Over time, the human side was fading in them, letting their raw, feral desires and emotions take over. Less morals and remorse, more freedom to do whatever they wanted on a whim. If rogues wanted something and knew they could get it, they would. Even if they had to steal, kill or do other awful things.

Astrea didn't judge them, of course. She'd completed some very questionable missions in her life, including the one before this one. But she knew she had to be careful while living here.

"I guess I will see you around," Dreads turned on his heel, preparing to leave.

"Will my luggage be brought here?" she wondered while he didn't get far, but a derisive snort was her only response.

I guess that's a no, Nova chuckled.

Big scary rogues wouldn't carry our bags! Astrea chimed in, holding back a laugh. They sure scared us!

They have more in common with men of the Lycan Republic than they realise!

Astrea took a slow stroll back to where the helicopter landed an hour or so ago, and found her bags scattered across the space like unwanted garbage. Sighing, she gathered them together, soon realising she would need a few trips to get them all into her room. She came here with all sorts of things that could be required on her mission.

It did not escape her notice that some of the bags had clearly been opened while she was gone. The rogues probably wanted to check what she brought to their space, not being as careless as they pretended to be after all. However, they didn't know that the tiny crystal on the handle of each of the zippers changed colour when used. She left them blue, and now most of them were green.

Amateurs! Nova stated plainly, unimpressed.

Either that or they want us to know that they are watching, Astrea hummed as she got as many bags as she could nd. So far she had three cross-body bags on her with one backpack, two luggage on wheels with smaller bags attached to them. But still about the same remained.

"I'll help," she heard a male's voice and turned to see the blonde guy from before already picking some of her luggage up. He was pretty big, so she had no doubt he would be able to help her get everything in one go.

"Thanks," she smiled as sweetly as she could. "I'm sorry, I still don't know your name."

"Bastian," he replied without sparing her as much as a glance.

"Nice to meet you, Bastian," Astrea grinned at him, uttering her long lashes playfully just in case. "Is it Bash for short?"

"You don't need to know," he responded bluntly, and the smile on her face faded slightly. "You are here temporarily; the sooner you return to your natural habitat, the better."

She assessed his facial expression quickly, and absolutely nothing in him gave away his true emotions. As if he was trained better than her, although he looked relatively young. Did rogue life do that to him, or was there something else?

"Believe it or not, but that is exactly what I want, too," she giggled, throwing him off his game as he nally darted his sky-blue eyes at her. "If we all work hard and cooperate well, all this will end quickly and painlessly for everyone. I'll be gentle if you will."

Bastian stared at her, and she winked at him before walking away toward her room. He caught up with her only when she was already inside and dropped her bags with a thump as if to make a point, leaving abruptly.

Astrea poked her head out of her door frame to see him marching down the arched passage along the intricate white outside balcony rails that gave a view of the inner courtyard.

"Thank you, Bash!" she sang, and he stumbled at once. This was almost too easy.

She returned to the room and sighed, trying not to look up. She could work with this space.

Unpacking all her deadly toys, Astrea smirked to herself. Those rogues were amateurs in comparison. They could have checked her things, but it was unlikely they had noticed anything suspicious. After all, it was next to impossible to detect that some of her lipstick contained poison for different types of shifters. And that her hair accessories had thin sharp blades inside made of silver, copper and other metals. Her perfume was mixed with aconite, and some of her high heels had needles with venom or tranquilisers inside.

This had to do for now. The box with the most valuable equipment was dropped not far from here from the helicopter before they arrived at this place, and Astrea had the coordinates memorised. She would have to retrieve it in a day or two when they stopped watching her so closely.

It didn't look like they cared, but she still had to be careful. The rst night always had to be the quiet one.

So, after all the unpacking, Astrea decided to go to sleep. The instructions about the shower were clear to her, and she knew she'd better wake up around four or ve o'clock in the morning to avoid unwanted company.

She closed her eyes tightly in her bed but couldn't get rid of the unending suffocating feeling. Astrea could hear her own heart pumping and tried to breathe evenly to calm down and fall asleep. No matter how long she tried though, it wasn't really working, bringing her back to the months she spent in the pit.

Opening her eyes, she saw the stars, her only companion during her silver-lled neverending torture. She used to watch them, count them, and recognise the constellations as her only source of entertainment. They gave her peace in her most challenging moments, but today they called for action.

Don't do this, Nova warned her, knowing her too well. If anyone sees you tonight, they will always suspect you. We need to keep a low profile.

We do. If anyone sees me, I will tell the truth. I couldn't sleep. Astrea cut her off and stood up.

She looked at herself in the mirror and chose to stay in the provocative white lace slip she had carefully selected for the night. She didn't plan to meet anyone, but if an accident happened, her look would give her a few seconds to deal with it. Then she added a white magnolia hairpin to her hair and moved the desk to make it easier to jump and reach the glass ceiling. One of the parts of it was opened, and she got through it with ease, nding herself on the roof.

She scanned the other rooftops quickly with her shifter vision but found no one, to her relief. These rogues were too careless.

Reminds me of someone, Nova didn't give up.

Would you relax? I am not going on a big mission! It's just a quick, careful look around.

Astrea leapt nimbly from roof to roof, which, thankfully, were all too close to each other. This building was an odd one indeed. So different from the other parts of the former Moonrise Kingdom that was now broken into four parts – the Western Lycan Kingdom, the Northern Lycan Kingdom, the South Lycan Republic and ... the Perished Eastern Kingdom. The one that ceased to exist after an ongoing war between the four Lycan clans. Now it was a no man's land, and rogues from the whole continent ran here for safety. And now they wanted to create a kingdom of their own, making that infuriating Fenrir their king.

She noticed the re in the central inner courtyard laid with white tiles and stopped, hiding behind a dome decoration. It was too dark here, and she was sure they couldn't see her.

"Her a.ss is all right," someone said below, and she tried to see their faces. A group of rogues sat around a re pit with bottles of alcohol in their hands. Homemade alcohol, so it appeared.

She did not know the one talking but recognised Dreads and Bastian beside him. Devoss was there too, and so was the woman from earlier.

"This was exactly their plan," she rolled her eyes, taking a sip from her mug. She was the only one without a bottle. "Make you id.iots look at her a.s."

"Her L.i.t.s are also nice if that's any consolation to you, Kara," Dreads told her, and Astrea was surprised that he had noticed at all. He gave the impression of being repelled by her mere presence.

"Shut up!" Kara replied, not impressed by his remark at all.

"Why are you all so negative?" Devoss chuckled, leaning back in his seat and placing one of his ankles over his knee. "It's going to be fun! Finally, something interesting is happening here!"

"Yeah, a Southern spy! How fun!" Bash splashed the rest of his drink into the re, making the hungry ame rise in a fury.

They all got quiet, and for a moment there, Astrea wasn't sure why. Only then did she see a tall, dark shadow moving toward the group. A few rogues stood up at once; only the four she already knew remained in their respective places, unbothered by Fenrir's appearance. Which meant that they were his trusted inner circle.

He was still wearing the same dark shirt, nally buttoned adequately. The light of the ames drew his features, adding sharpness to his already majestic look. Once again, she had to admit that this man was impressive, and she grew up with a delty training her and an army of Firstborn shifters at hand. Yet... there was something about Fenrir that made her breathing hitch without her realising.

"So, we are really doing this," Dreads asked, not looking at his king. "Did the girl change your mind?"

"The girl has nothing to do with it," he responded, accepting a bottle from someone and opening it with a ick of his nger. "We continue with our plan."

"You wanted to throw her out rst," Bash reminded him.

"And should have," Kara interjected. "I don't like her."

"You don't like anyone," Devoss's laughter rumbled through the courtyard.

"And for good reason!" The woman seemed annoyed. "She reminds me of someone—"

Now, that was interesting.

"Enough!" Fenrir growled, making everyone go silent. "The South wants to use us, and we want to use the South. It's all there is, and the girl is just a bridge between us. Nothing more, nothing less."

"If you say so, my King!" Kara lled the last word with venom, and Astrea wondered if there was another kind of relationship between the two.

However, Fenrir sat far away from her, and she seemed ne with it. This was something for Astrea to explore in the future.

She had to go back. It was getting too dangerous.

Aware of the dangers of being noticed, she got to another rooftop, but Fenrir's words were not leaving her mind for some reason.

He was right, of course. She was here to use him, and obviously, they wanted to use her connections to the South to their advantage. It was normal, and she couldn't understand why it bothered her.

Oh, no, Astrea, Nova sounded worried in her mind. Return to our room. Enough for today.

But it was too late because Astrea suddenly realised Fenrir was busy. He wasn't in his suite. He was drinking outside with his friends, and that gave her an opportunity she wasn't sure she would have again.

Return. To. Our. Room. You are not prepared! Nova insisted, and Astrea had to shut it down.

I'll just take one little peek, she assured her wolf, changing direction.

It was her luck that most of the windows in this fortress were open despite the low night temperatures. The window at the top of Fenrir's tower wasn't an exception, and after a bit of climbing, she was able to reach it. She carefully opened the unlocked shutters and closed them when she got in, nding herself in a different room from the one she visited earlier today. It was the Rogue King's bedroom.

How unfortunate, Nova hissed. Now, let's go back.

The massive old-fashioned bed had a transparent canopy, and the sheets were colourful, with a distinctive masculine pattern.

Just one more minute, Astrea found a desk with piles and piles of papers.

She wondered what those could be? Rogues didn't have a government in the traditional sense of the word. What were all these documents for?

She had to be careful not to touch anything to avoid leaving any traces around, but she noticed a few odd maps at the top of the pile. A letter written in a language she didn't recognise made her furrow her brows.

Strange... All of this was so strange! She tried to memorise what she could, but she knew she'd have to get back here with a camera and be better prepared next time.

The sound of footsteps approaching the door alerted her, surprising her at the same time. Was Fenrir back so soon? She thought that he would drink for longer. Or was she the one who lost track of time?

Astrea charged for the window, thankful she had no shoes on. That made her movements soundless.

Her ngers reached the wooden shutters carved with intricate ancient eastern patterns, which was when a real shock hit her. The shutters were locked!

She tried them again and again, but nothing worked, and panic started to ood her brain. He was almost at the door!

This couldn't be real! They were open when she got here! What happened?

She could break the damn shutters, of course, but this would alert the rogue and give her away.

Cornered, Astrea did the only thing that came to her mind now and sid behind a heavy curtain.

Great, Nova scoffed. Now you are invisible, my dear!

Shut up! Astrea bit her lip, almost drawing blood. In no way was this a good hiding place. Maybe she should have gone to the bathroom.

On the other hand, he would denitely go there sooner or later, and who knew if it had any windows to try and escape through.

This is why you should have stayed in your room! Nova really wasn't helpful now.

The door burst open, and Fenrir walked in, running one hand through his shiny dark hair. Astrea only saw a glimpse of him through the slit of the curtains, trying his not to breathe and to mask her scent. The technique she was taught by the Teacher personally. It worked like a charm in the past, and she prayed for it not to fail her today.

The rogue still had a bottle in his hand, and he brought it to his lips, taking a few greedy gulps and then throwing it to the replace. He then went to it, leaning over the mantelpiece as if he was extremely tired. Flames appeared out of nowhere, a crackling re suddenly burst out of the wood, illuminating the room with dancing shadows.

Did he have matches there? Astrea wondered.

Like that is our biggest problem now! Nova returned her to reality. The reality where she was trapped with the King of Rogues after her very unwise attempt to spy on him.

Astrea tried to think calmly. At least he looked drunk. His senses should be blunted. Maybe he would fall asleep fast or go to his bathroom and she could run in the meantime. She still couldn't believe the stupid shutters malfunctioned.

"How long are you going to stand there, Astrea?" Fenrir asked, his eyes still on the wildre in front of him.