

5. Leave

The day Astrea had to leave for the East approached quickly. Not that she minded that. She couldn't wait to escape this place.

Joran met her at the helicopter, which also reminded her of the past. He always used to send her off when she left and greet her when she returned. The privilege he only extended to her. The only time he didn't do it was when they dragged her to that pit...

"Do it quick and come back home," he said, hands in the pockets of his trousers.

"I will come back for my freedom," she reminded him of the main reason she would be returning, and his jaw twitched. At the same time, the snake on her neck wriggled slightly. She was never getting used to that.

"A deal is a deal," the Serpent smiled, but it did not reach his eyes. "As long as the mission is done and you come back safely, I am happy. I have a surprise for you, by the way."

The last words made Astrea tense, but then she saw Niki walking out of the nearest building in her black battle training uniform, and her lips parted.

"I knew you would like it." Joran leaned down to her and whispered, lips almost brushing over her earlobe. "You have one minute. Her Ascension is today, and she is kind of in a hurry."

Niki ran into her arms, and nally, Astrea could hug her ward, air whipping their hair as they allowed themselves a moment of weakness. However, she also had to be aware of time. So many things had to be said, but they had to be extra careful not to create new troubles.

"I am so glad you are alright!" Niki mumbled through tears, knowing they couldn't speak louder. "And your hair is shorter! Looks so cool!"

"Listen to me very carefully," Astrea whispered. "You need to survive the Ascension, and when you do that, wait for me to come back. When I do, we are both going to leave this wretched place. I promise."

She could feel Niki's body go stiff in her arms and noticed her eyes widening slightly.

"Stay safe and trust no one," she added, and it was exactly the time when Joran cleared his throat, which meant that they had to part again.

"Good luck on your mission," Niki offered a weak smile. It was probably the worst time to mess with her head, but there were no better options.

The helicopter's blades started spinning. It was ocially time to go.

"We will wait for you right here," Joran placed a hand on Niki's shoulder, and it made Astrea's stomach churn. He knew exactly what he was doing - ensuring she did come back.

However, there was nothing she could do about it now. Her mission was waiting, and with that came the risks to her own life.

"Mission rst," Nova reminded her via their mind link, her voice was soothing and reassuring. "We deal with one problem at a time."

"As always," Astrea took her seat in the helicopter and put her headphones on as she prepared for a long ight. There were ways to make her work in the East short and successful, and she was mentally going through them on her way there. Nova had nally recovered from everything now and could advise her properly again.

"We are almost there!" the pilot told her dryly through headphones, and she recognised one of the werebears who had captured her during her escape attempt. This wasn't a good sign, but she tried not to show her displeasure.

Yes, she probably killed his friends during her runaway attempt. However, that could probably be said about many others, too. Other than Niki, she had no friends there.

To distract herself, she decided to look down and saw the Eastern border that was easily recognisable by the forest she once fought in and the desert that kissed it softly with its golden sands, a mix hard to nd anywhere else in the world.

Astrea remembered how she saw a magnicent black creature somewhere around here. Now it was hard to know for sure if it wasn't just the product of her imagination or something that really existed. Just the memory of it made her heart beat faster.

The scenery changed again, and the rst thing that drew Astrea's attention were the abandoned towns. There were so many of them... Life and happiness left this kingdom a while ago. This was something that made it so attractive to the rogues now - there were no packs here, no Alphas to serve or fear.

No one wanted these lands, and the rogues were the ones to claim them.

Soon they reached another city, but this one had signs of life in it. Not too impressive, not like the buzzing polished cities of the Republic. Not like the comfortable West or cosy old-fashioned North. Astrea noticed people on the streets, shops were open, and old cars travelled the worn roads.

Gods, was this what she had to work with? The Republic would laugh at them when they saw them.

They landed next to a very spacious long mansion that was nestled in the middle of a dry mountain, the building probably serving as some kind of a fortress for protection. From here, you could see the city below and would know in advance if it was attacked.

Whoever lived here tried to preserve it the best they could, but it clearly had seen some life and needed a lot of work. The light columns and arches looked slightly shabby, which, in Astrea's opinion, only gave them more charm.

A small delegation of four people was waiting for her at the designated landing spot. The rogues were eager to meet the Southern Lycan Republic representative, and Astrea straightened her silk midi dress, preparing to make the rst impression. She knew very well that those counted the most. It would be especially crucial with rogues as they would have to test her since they clearly had assumptions about her.

When the blades stopped spinning, a massive man with long black hair in dreads and a large scar crossing the brown skin on his cheek opened the door, eyes widening when he saw her.

"A girl?" he didn't even try to hide his lack of excitement and the disappointment in his bright blue eyes. "The Republic has sent us a girl?"

"As an adult, I am referred to as a woman," Astrea tilted her head, giving him a small but friendly smile. "You were in desperate need of an advisor and PR professional, and...well, here I am. You will not nd anyone better."

"He won't be happy about this," the guy muttered, but she ignored it and got out on her own since it didn't look like he was going to offer her his hand.

"Who is he?" she asked bluntly as the guy scratched the back of his neck, watching her intently.

"The King," he responded unenthusiastically and still didn't introduce himself. But she could nd his name out later.

"Oh, I'm sure we'll gure something out," she beamed. The King would just have to deal with her presence.

Astrea went in the direction of the other people waiting and tried to gure out which one of them was the king. If any.

There were two more men and a woman with light brown hair, which was limiting her options. However, none of them was giving her any royal vibes. Rogues did not like to listen to anyone, so their leader had to possess at least some kind of Alpha aura. One of the men was wearing a bright red suit, his long hair tied in a man-bun at the back of his head. He was the only one who eyed her curiously, but it was very unlikely that rogues would obey him.

"A girl?" the other woman raised her brow as she assessed Astrea, offering her a look of disdain in the end.

"Aren't you, as well?" the Southerner taunted, reciprocating the facial expression she received and a younger guy with dark blonde hair snorted at that.

This wasn't going exactly how she expected. The rogues were the ones who needed the Republic more. Not the other way around. Yet they behaved as if she was an eyesore.

"I beg to differ!" the other woman rolled her eyes, folding her arms across her chest.

"Well, we've got what we've got," the youngest man stated plainly. "Let's go!"

None of them said another word to her as all of them simply turned on their heels and started walking. Astrea tried to keep up with their large, powerful steps in her high heels, but not too much. The weaker they thought she was, the better. They wouldn't take her as seriously as they should, and that could, potentially, give her more freedom to lurk around in the future.

"Excuse me, where are we going?" she asked after a while. This palace was long, and the inner square seemed never to end! Were they giving her a tour?

"To meet Fenrir," the man with the scar and dreads answered as if it had to mean something to her.

"Fenrir?" she chuckled. "As in the ancient wolf god?"

"As in the King of the East!" the woman snapped. Something told Astrea that she didn't like her much. Her hair was braided in a warrior style that looked intricate and overly complicated but also... was probably there untouched for days.

"I see," Astrea forced an excited smile anyway. "That's wonderful! The sooner we meet, the sooner we can start working together!"

And there was much work to be done if they had to look presentable for the snobs of the Republic to sign the alliance. These four were typical rogues. Okay, three of them were. She wasn't sure about the Red Suit yet. All that taken into consideration, they still denitely did not have the look Joran wanted them to have at their next meeting.

Their group arrived at the bottom of a long set of stairs leading to what looked like a closed high tower.

No one said another word to Astrea and she wasn't sure if it was a good idea to start small talk now.

"Don't," Nova chuckled in her head. "They clearly prefer actions to words and they will be time for that."

Astrea realised that they all were talking via their mind link, and she probably knew the topic anyway. Now she had to wait for the King, who was hopefully about to make an appearance. The wait, however, turned out to be a bit too long, and she was getting frustrated, although nothing on her face showed it.

The doors at the top of the stairs slammed open without warning, and she saw the most gorgeous man she had ever laid her eyes on freeze as their gazes locked. Astrea did not expect him to be this way, feel this way... waves and waves of raw power rippling from him, lling everything around them.

His eyes were a strange mix of blue and red. As if ames of re were burning in the centre of an iceberg. His dark brown hair was reaching his shoulders, and a carefully trimmed beard framed his masculine face with strong perfect features. The man was exceptionally tall, even for a shifter, with muscles bulging through his black unbuttoned shirt, which also gave a glimpse of his chiselled abs. The Rogue King, and she had no doubt that it was him, was made to sin, and even Astrea swallowed, realising where her thoughts went.

Damn, that wolf looked good.

Moreover, he stared at her as if she was a drop of rain in the middle of the incandescent desert, eyes travelling up and down her small frame, throat bobbing with some emotion he could not express. There was desire and longing, and it all felt oddly familiar, throwing her off her game.

He reminded her of someone, but at the moment, her brain couldn't fathom if they had met before. She didn't think so because... she would have denitely remembered him.

"Fenri-" One of the men started speaking and then coughed. "I mean, my King. This is the representative from the Southern Lycan Republic. Erm-"

She was tempted not to ll the awkward pause. After all, none of them bothered to ask her name. And it was fun to watch them suffer for it now.

However, she was on a mission here. The mission that required her to be friendly.

"Astrea Sade," she gave the King her brightest and sweetest smile. "It's my pleasure to work with you. I am sure we-"

"No!" he cut her off, eyes not leaving her for a second. "Consider the request cancelled and go back."

Her lips parted, already dry in this insanely hot climate, and she had to lick them before she spoke, making the King growl in response.

"Excuse me, your majesty," she said as politely as possible. "I came here to assist you and your- country with the new alliance."

"Tell them to send someone else then!" he cut her off and, turning away, left where he came from.