



Blood Brother Cursed

Author: *Lisa Daniels*

Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: I was always different,
Even from my loving father and brother.

I was a cat shifter who couldn't seem to control myself,
No matter how many times I got in trouble for exposing my abilities.
I was headstrong and impetuous,
While my brother was calm and kind.
After they died, I was alone, and I thought that was fine.
Until I encountered another shifter who shouldn't have existed.
A dragon shifter who was more withdrawn like me.
But his wasn't a choice.
Not really.
It was a curse.
The more he pushes me away, the closer I want to be to him.
What can I do to show him I don't care about the curse?
And will it cost my life to prove that I no longer want to live alone?

Author's Note: This series is a spin-off of the Small Town Sexton Brothers series.

This story is a steamy stand alone romance with an HEA intended for 18+

Total Pages (Source): 49

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:08 am

Prologue

A Final Farewell

Astrid stood on the side of the lake, the perfect skipping rock gripped tightly in her left hand. Her mind drifted back to the last time she saw her brother.

“No. You hold it like this.” Her brother’s tone had been firm, but his touch had been gentle as he took her hand. Then he laughed as he tried to adjust her grip, moving the stone from the palm of her hand to her fingers. “I don’t know how you manage to do things with the wrong hand. But I should be able to at least help you get the right grip.”

“It’s not wrong, Evan,” she had said and then said the first thing that came to mind. “You use the wrong hand.” Her defiant scowl at him had the dissatisfying effect of making him laugh.

He reached out and rubbed the top of her head, messing up her brownish-red hair and pulling a few strands out of the braid their father had struggled to fasten about an hour earlier.

“Hey!” She had protested, further messing up her hair by putting her hand on it and trying to flatten it. “Stop messing up my hair!”

“Sorry, little lady. I keep forgetting that you are getting too old for that kind of affection.” He put on a serious face and squatted down next to her. “Ok. Let’s try this again, and I’ll use my left hand too. But you have to promise to go easy on me.”

Six-year-old Astrid had twisted her mouth to the side, debating if she should allow herself to lose this precious chance. If her brother were to throw the rock with his left hand, she knew she had a shot at doing better. She felt confident that she could do it, and the idea of holding back was not something she wanted, not when she saw victory right in front of her.

“No!” she said definitely. Turning to face the water, the young Astrid lobbed the rock at the water. It went into a large arc, and once it reached the peak, the rock plummeted down, hitting the water with aplomb. Her brother smiled at her, and she looked down, too upset to hear what he had to say. He placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Hold on. I’ll get you another shot. That rock was too perfect to just let it rest at the bottom of the water.” He patted her shoulder and stood up. The shadow he cast over her moved forward as Evander walked the short distance to where the rock had hit the water; his pants rolled up to his thighs so they didn’t get wet.

“There are so many rocks here! Why are you getting that one? That rock doesn’t work!”

He reached down and picked up the offending item, then headed back to her, casually tossing the stone in his hand. Her brother was so relaxed and happy as he returned to her. Astrid couldn’t believe he was leaving soon. Once he reached her, Evander crouched beside her again.

“It’s never the rock’s fault, Astrid. It’s the person who threw the rock. See?” He dropped it, and the rock hit the coarse sand, creating an indentation that poorly mimicked what would happen when the rock hit the water.

“You just dropped it.”

“Exactly. I didn’t do anything except stop holding it, so the rock just dropped straight

into the ground.”

“Water is better.”

He sighed, but the smile still pulled at the corners of his lips. “Yes, we know that you prefer water. But not all of us can use it like you do.” Evander’s gentle green eyes looked toward the water, and for a moment, he was quiet. Astrid had shifted on her feet, recognizing when her brother was thinking. He always knew what to say after thinking.

“Look at the water out there,” he finally said, pointing to the small body of water slowly rippling away from the stream that fed into it.

His words felt a bit insulting. “What about the water?” She wasn’t really interested in a long talk about adult things – all Astrid wanted to do was to learn how to skip rocks before he returned to the military.

“When you aren’t focused on it, the water just sits there, right?”

“Yeah. I knowthat.”

“Well, when you want, you can make it dance.”

“But I don’t understand why you can’t make it dance. Shouldn’t you be able to?” It was a question she had asked many times before that day, but no one ever gave her a good answer.

This time was no different.

Evander looked at her and said, “Because I don’t know how. Just like you don’t know how to skip a rock.”

She looked down at her hands. “Do you want me to teach you?” Her fiery green eyes looked up at him as a gentle breeze moved her hair around her head like an angry reddish halo. In her mind, all her brother needed to do was to try, to focus. After all, that’s all she had to do.

He smiled, “Maybe you can try when I get back. For now, we should focus on teaching you how to skip rocks.” His expression shifted a little, “It’s an important lesson that every kid should learn.”

“Why?”

He grabbed another rock off the ground, stood up, and threw the new rock along the surface of the water. It skipped from the shallow end all the way to the small waterfall on the other side. His eyes looked down at her again. “Because by the time you master it, you’ve learned a lot of important lessons.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:08 am

Evander crouched down again, taking her left hand in his, and then he placed the wet rock into her tiny hand. “First, look at the shape of the rock and how smooth it is.”

Astrid moved it around in her hand and noticed that there was nothing sharp or that stuck out, but there were plenty of mostly smooth rocks around her. “So?”

“This is a nearly perfect skipping rock, and I’ve had it since I was slightly younger than you. Now, I’m giving it to you.”

Her eyes widened. “Do you mean you are giving me a gift before you go?”

He smiled softly at her. “Yes.”

“Then I don’t want to throw it. What if I skip it all the way to the waterfall like you? How can I get it back?”

“Like this,” he took the rock from her hand and stood up in one smooth motion. After he released it, the rock flew from his hand, and even from the other side of the water, Astrid could hear it hit the rocks on the other side of the waterfall. This time, it was more of a hard knock instead of a faint pinging sound.

“Hey!” She started to run after it.

“No, no, no, my impatient little Astrid.” He knelt on the ground and pulled her toward him. Her back was against his broad chest as he extended her arm as far as it would go. “Think about the water around it. Let it move the rock.”

“I can’t move rocks!”

“No, but you can control the water. Focus on that. Find the rock, then bring it back here. I’ll help you.”

She felt warmth run down her arm and knew that he was letting her borrow some of his powers. Not wanting to let him down, she stuck her tongue out the side of her mouth and focused on the rock. Her brother was making it vibrate just a little so that she could find it amongst everything else on the pond’s floor.

Her eyes were wide when she turned to look at him. “I feel it!”

“Very good.” He beamed at her, his eyes sparkling in the early afternoon sunshine. “Now, focus on the water around it. Pull it back.”

Scowling at the water like she was ready to challenge it, Astrid thought about the water. She could feel it unsettled by the moving rock. Try as she might, though, she couldn’t quite get it to move the rock.

After several minutes of focusing, she had only managed to get the rock to flip once. Her lower lip quivered. “I can’t bring it back.”

Wrapping an arm around her shoulder, Evander pulled her close. “It’s ok. That’s something you can work on until I come back.”

He kissed the top of her head, then stretched out his hand. As if thrown, the rock shot out of the water and landed in his hand. “Here you go. Take good care of this and we’ll practice some more then next time I’m on leave. Deal?”

“I don’t want you to go.”

“Believe me, kitten, I don’t want to go, but my job is making me.”

“Can’t you just leave and get a new job?”

“I wish I could, but not yet. My time is up soon enough, and I’ll come back for you and Dad. Until then, you keep being good. And practicing your skills.”

Not wanting him to see her cry, Astrid mumbled out an unenthusiastic, “Ok.”

“Promise you’ll be good for Dad? No more showing off at home?”

“But my friends loved playing in the water. We have a fun game. If I don’t move the water, we can’t play.”

“I know, kitten, but we have to keep our gifts hidden. It’s a special secret that you can only share with a very few people.”

“My friends are special people.” She didn’t like hiding things from her friends, especially since she had always had a hard time making them.

“They are. But your gift is only something you should share with family.”

“But that’s only you and Dad.”

He nodded. “That’s right. Maybe someday you’ll be able to share it with someone else. When you are old enough to think about marriage.” He made a face that she didn’t understand.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:08 am

“Blech!” Astrid’s expression was a combination of grossed out and horrified. “I don’t want to get married.”

He laughed. “Not right now. But maybe someday. And if you don’t want to get married, that’s fine, too. But I would really love for you to be happy, whatever you choose.”

“I just want to live with you and Dad. He said we could stay with him as long as we want.”

“Yes, he did.” Evander looked toward their house, even though it was nearly half a mile from where they were. “Let’s not talk serious right now. This is supposed to be our time for having fun.”

“Evander!”

Astrid looked at her brother as he stood up. “Coming, Dad!” He looked down at her, a sadness in his eyes. “Sorry, kitten, looks like we’ll have to do this when I come back.”

She wanted to argue, to force him to stay. The water in the pond began to ripple as her emotions grew.

Evander got back on her level. “None of that now. Dad needs us, and tomorrow, he’s going to need you even more, ok?”

She stuck out her lower lip but gave a curt nod. The last thing she wanted to do was

to make her big brother unhappy or, worse, to disappoint him.

“That’s my favorite girl.” He patted her shoulder. “I knew I could count on you. And I promise, when I come back, I’ll make more time to teach you all of the important lessons Dad taught me.”

Fighting the tears, Astrid’s mouth twisted to the side, and she rubbed her nose. Not trusting herself to say anything, she let him take her hand. They hadn’t gone too far when he silently picked her up and put her on his shoulders. Like magic, he was able to get her laughing just a few minutes later. By the time they reached home, she had almost forgotten that he was leaving the next day.

It’s the only promise you ever failed to uphold.

Her eyes were just as fierce nearly 20 years later, but her spirit was not the same. Looking out of the water, she held the rock in her hand, letting the weight settle for a second. Then, just as she had seen him do so many times before, she tossed the rock carefully in her hand. The rhythmic movement was somehow relaxing. It had been years since she had mastered skipping rocks, but she had learned on her own. Evander had been right about one thing though – she had learned a lot of important lessons long before she had become as adept at skipping rocks as her brother had been. A lot of those lessons she learned while trying to skip the rock, like patience, planning, and assessing.

The hardest lesson she learned was that life was unpredictable in more ways than she had considered. It had happened less than half a year after he had left. Evander had come home in a box, and she couldn’t quite understand why her father was letting them put her brother in the ground. Astrid started screaming and ran toward the casket as it was lowered. Her father stood by, his eyes glazed over as if he couldn’t hear or see anything.

After a minute of Astrid trying to stop the process, a distant relative in attendance had dragged her away from the funeral. Her younger self had screamed and shouted, her emotions going wild. Despite Astrid having only met the woman a couple of times, the distant relative was comfortable slapping the poor kid to silence her. It was the first time that an adult had dared to put their hands on Astrid, and the woman still wasn't done.

Even 20 years later, Astrid remembered looking up into those cold blue eyes as the woman shouted at her, berating the poor girl for not understanding the situation and for ruining her brother's peace. The water fountain behind her had reached toward the sky.

That's when Astrid's confusion turned to rage. Her brother would never have treated her like that – he would have taken her aside and explained things to her. But he wasn't there, even though he was.

As sprinklers started springing up around the cemetery, jets of water furiously soaking everyone around them, including the funeralgoers, Astrid twisted the water in the fountain. A lasso appeared, then it slid over the woman's head. The young girl tightened it, watching as the woman's angry eyes turned fearful. The redness in her face started to turn blue as Astrid changed the lasso to a hand. The woman's mouth was opening and closing as her feet were lifted off the ground.

“Astrid!”

The young girl lost her focus, her face whipping around to see her father wobbling on the wet grass and leaning on his cane. The shock and fear in his eyes still haunted her. The water splashed all over the ground, dropping the woman hard on her knees. It was as if the world had gone silent as she and her father simply looked at each other. His mouth was moving as he was holding out a hand to her, waving his finger to indicate she should come to him.

Afraid of what he would say and how much trouble she would be in, Astrid did the one thing she had promised her brother she would never do. She shifted in public.

Then she ran back to the pond where she had last seen her brother.

Astrid felt the coolness of the rock in her hand as she thought back over that day. The woman had no idea what had happened, and since no one had seen it, everyone thought some random stranger had tried to kill her at the funeral. The sprinklers were explained as a problem that had long needed to be fixed.

When her father had found her crying at the pond, he had sat down next to her on a rock. Awkwardly patting her back, he had told her that no one saw what she had done, so things might be ok. Or as ok as they could be without Evander sending money to them. Her father's disability checks weren't enough to cover more than the bare minimum.

And now even her father was dead. Cancer had finally finished the process that it had started nearly 25 years earlier.

Astrid closed her eyes. There was no reason to stay in the small southern town anymore. She had never fit in, anyway, especially since all of the friends she had when she was a teen and through her two years in college were now married and having children. That had never been something she had considered.

Her mind had always been focused on her brother. First, she tried to understand his death. When she was older, Astrid began to look into what had happened to him. The more she learned, the more sure she was that his death wasn't an accident.

And now that nothing was holding her to the little town, Astrid was going to find answers.

With a smile, she finally wound up and skipped the rock across the water. Once she heard the thunk of rock against rock, she motioned it back toward herself. The rock came skipping back to her, this time the water rippling out before the rock hit it, creating a path for it to return to the shore. She walked forward and picked it up once it reached the shore. While she could move the water, the rock was too heavy to launch in the air the way her brother had. He had controlled the rock – she controlled the water.

In her mind, Astrid heard her brother saying that she was cheating.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:08 am

With a smile, she replied, “So was the way you did it.”

In her mind, she heard the robust laugh from her childhood as she turned toward home. The air was already starting to feel oppressive despite it only being May. It seemed like the best indicator that it was time for her to leave the place where she had lived for most of her life.

Chapter 1

A Hot Meal and a Cold Reception

Despite a day’s worth of cleaning and unboxing, the house was still full of boxes. They were on the countertops, the couch, and all around the bed, which she had put together while the people brought the other furniture – and all of the boxes – into her new place. It was just a rental, and it was much smaller than the house she had lived in with her father.

Until the movers left, Astrid had not realized that the house was substantially smaller than her home back in Louisiana. Now that she was actually seeing just how little space she had, she knew she needed a solution because it was nearly impossible to walk around the place.

“Well, I guess that’s why I get for not seeing the place before signing the lease,” she muttered to no one. After a moment of staring at all of the work she had left, she muttered, “No, I’m not dealing with this right now.”

She marched back to her room and went to the box with her fall clothing. Putting on

some workout wear, the young woman headed out for a jog. She knew she would regret it later, but for now, she just wanted to feel carefree.

More importantly, she needed to learn about the small town on the Washington State peninsula. It was near the base where her brother had died. The place had probably changed a lot in 20 years, but as she set a steady pace, Astrid liked to imagine her brother jogging down the same road. Was he amazed by the very different world around him that first time? Or was he sad that his family was an entire continent away? In her mind, he was happy, enjoying the freedom just like she was.

As a freelance developer, she always had work, and it meant that she could work from anywhere. It also meant she kept her own hours, and that was essential to her current situation. Since she specialized in security, a lot of her work was done at odd hours so that it didn't affect normal operations. She hoped that she would be able to work her way into consulting on the military base – then, she would be able to hack their systems without raising suspicion.

She shoved all of that to the back of her mind as she made her way to the small downtown area. The day was clear, and the air was clean. It was so different from the humid air in the south at that time of year, and she felt a burst of energy. A new sense of freedom washed over her, giving Astrid a boost of confidence and interest in her surroundings. She decided to go through town and head to a beach about a mile from her home to enjoy the sensation while doing a bit of surveillance on the place where she would be living for a while.

She knew when she was nearing the beach because she was suddenly wishing she had worn jogging pants and a jacket. The breeze from the ocean was much cooler than she had expected, so she picked up her pace as she jogged along the shore in an effort to warm up a little. When she left the beach, Astrid felt that she was running out of steam. Fortunately, she had brought her slim wallet. While jogging through the town, she noticed a bakery, and if it was still open, she figured she would stop in for a

pastry and a drink. That would also give her a nice place to warm up.

When she reached the town, Astrid finally stopped jogging and started her cooldown walk, although even that was a little too fast as she was now shivering a little. The sidewalks were mostly empty, and she didn't have any trouble finding the bakery.

The smell of fresh bread, fruit, sweets, and chocolate hit her as soon as she opened the door. She smiled.

An older woman stood at the register, her mostly white hair carefully pulled back in a kerchief. She smiled, and the lines around her mouth formed deep grooves.

“Good afternoon, dear. I hate to rush you, but we'll be closing in 20 minutes.”

Astrid smiled back at her as she pulled a card out of her wallet. “Thanks for the warning. I'll be more than happy to take a few pastries off your hands before then. And do you serve any hot drinks?”

“Sure do, dear.” She pointed up to a menu above her head. “Although I strongly recommend the hot chocolate with an éclair. You lucked out; those usually sell out the fastest, but we have one left.”

“Do you make sandwiches because it's been a long day, and I need a bit more sustenance.”

“Here's what's left of our bagels. I can make you anything on the menu on a bagel.”

“That sounds amazing.” Astrid walked over to the case to select her bagel and to determine what to have on it. The smell of fresh salmon made at least that part easy. The toppings and condiments didn't really matter, so Astrid told the shopkeeper to surprise her. As the woman was preparing the sandwich, the young woman decided to

get dessert and a hot chocolate.

The older woman slid the plate of food over to her. “I’ll get that dessert ready for you. And if you need to stick around for a bit, I can start cleaning up while you’re still here.”

Just as Astrid was slipping into a seat, the door opened again. The older woman looked up and was about to let the new customer know that they were about to close. However, her tone shifted, and she sounded absolutely ecstatic. “Phoenix! I didn’t know you were back in town!”

Astrid looked up and watched the older woman hurry around the counter and toward the man who had just entered. She threw her arms around him, an impressive feat since he was nearly a foot taller than her. From the corner of the bakery, the young woman had a great view of the encounter as well as the young man apparently called Phoenix. He was tall with thick, short black hair. He had the bluest eyes she had ever seen, like the color of a lagoon she’d seen in films and TV. The easy smile on his lips reached his eyes for a moment, but quickly disappeared.

“I simply couldn’t stay away from you forever, Mable. My stomach simply wouldn’t allow it.”

The older woman laughed, then noticed another man standing behind him. “Oh, you’ve brought a friend. A boyfriend, perhaps?”

Astrid watched as the man behind Phoenix stared at the older woman. His curly blond hair framed his face in a way that seemed very ’90s to her, but it suited his young features. If not for his sharp gaze only partially hidden behind a pair of glasses, she would have thought he was a teenager. But there was something about his eyes that told her he was much older than he looked.

He was about to say something when his eyes moved over to Astrid.

Oh shit, the thought hit her as the other man's eyes fell upon her. They are shifters.

For the first time in two decades, she felt something bumping up against her mind. She knew exactly what that meant – one of them was trying to talk to her. Judging by the animated conversation between Phoenix and Mable, she figured it had to be the curly-haired guy.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:08 am

Her emotions spiked, causing the sprinklers to trigger. This distracted the other three people, giving Astrid time to slip out. She wasn't happy about leaving since she had had a bite of her sandwich – and wasting a perfectly cut piece of salmon was paramount to a crime in her eyes. Also, the hot chocolate came in a mug instead of a to-go cup, so she couldn't take that either. The entire meal was a loss, so she decided to do the only thing she really could do in the situation – run.

There was an emergency exit behind her, so Astrid bolted toward it. The sound of blaring alarms quickly became a distant noise as she ran toward a nearby park. She only slowed when she was in a heavily wooded area. After a quick scan to make sure there wasn't anyone close, she shifted. Her speckled patterns shrank and stretched as she set a new pace. Her large eyes noticed small movements as her tail kept her balanced when her paws hit stone. As an ocelot, the world looked and smelled much different.

Running into the national forest outside of town, Astrid considered the risks of returning home that night, and her initial assessment was that it wasn't a good idea.

It's not that much of a loss. I doubt I'll even be able to sleep without fearing that the boxes are going to fall on top of me and kill me in my sleep. It'll probably be more comfortable if I hole up out here for a while and consider how to handle the mess in the house.

She looked for a cave where she could curl up for the night but found that all of the ones that she thought would be the best were already taken. There was no point in kicking out the animals, particularly the families. She just needed a place for the night. By the smell of the caves, most of them had built homes there. While

disappointed, she understood. She had felt the blasts of cold along the beach, and the whole place was considerably colder than where she used to live, especially now that the sun was setting. Escaping the elements was a logical choice.

Although not ideal, she decided to make her way up a tree. Sleeping on a branch wasn't the best way to spend the next few hours, but Astrid wasn't about to leave a trail back to her place for the other shifters to follow.

I haven't met a shifter since Evander died. What were the odds that the day I move in here I end up running into...

"Hello?"

The voice was rich and deep, but it wasn't one she knew. Hoping that it was someone who had just gotten lost in the woods and was trying to find his group, Astrid stayed nearly motionless on the branch nearly 10 feet off the ground. The only thing she couldn't stop was her tail, which flicked hypnotically over the side of the branch. It had a black tip, so she hoped it wasn't too noticeable.

"I know you came out this way, and I want you to know that we won't hurt you."

That was probably the worst thing the guy could have said, and it immediately set Astrid on edge. However, she wasn't ready to give up her spot because any movement would give away her hiding place.

Please don't be a wolf or bear. Please don't be a wolf or bear.

The plea kept looping through her head as she listened to the stranger.

"Look, I know you are scared. Your kind always are. But that's how we can help you until you learn how to control your abilities."

Astrid narrowed her eyes. Why on earth did this guy think she needed help with her abilities as if she were some ignorant kid and he was superior to her.

Still, he continued talking to the air. “We’ve been working on establishing a foundation in the area to protect and help your kind. The office here isn’t quite off the ground yet, but we have a project manager who is really keen on helping more people like her. I know a lot of you come from broken homes and are ostracized for...”

Astrid felt her annoyance rising, and listening to him was only going to make things worse. Fortunately, he walked away from her. When his back was turned, she ran along the branch and leaped to the next tree, then scrambled down to the ground and bounded off toward the ocean. It was the one place she knew she would have a distinct advantage – she would just have to deal with the cold.

Sure enough, the noise and movement attracted his attention, and she could hear the man calling to her. To her surprise, Astrid had managed to come within a few minutes of the ocean after fleeing the town. The strong smell of the salt water was inviting as she raced toward it.

Despite the cold, she shifted and strode up to the water’s edge. With regret, she removed her shoes and placed them on some driftwood, then walked into the ocean. The water lapped at her ankles when she heard the man talking behind her.

“You don’t need to do that! I swear to you, we can help.”

Astrid turned around; her expression was one of disbelief. “What exactly do I not need to do?”

Standing at the edge of the woods was the taller man, the one the bakery woman had called Phoenix. He was holding his hands up, almost like he was trying to talk her down off a ledge. “You don’t need to walk into the ocean to drown yourself.”

Her eyebrows dropped, her eyes widened, and she scrunched up the left side of her face. “Drown myself?”

“Right. I promise you, if you come with us, we will give you a place to stay, safety, security, and food; whatever you need.”

“You are a lousy salesman,” she said.

This got a half smile. “Yeah, I know. This really isn’t my area of expertise.”

She pressed her lips together and nodded. “Clearly.”

“Despite my ineloquence, please don’t do it.”

“You mean, don’t kill myself?”

He looked at her for a moment, then said, “Yes?” Then he dropped his hands. “You aren’t trying to kill yourself, are you?”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:08 am

Astrid turned her back to the ocean, fully facing the man. Then she took several more steps back, regretting the rather childish gesture as the cold began to sink into her bones. The water was much colder than the water along the Atlantic and certainly the Gulf. Now it was soaking the bottom of her shorts and threatening to do the same to her butt. Still, she strove to keep the regret from her face as she finally stopped to see the man's reaction to her antics.

The man had walked toward her, his muscles taut as if he had decided she was doing exactly what he thought.

Holding her hands on her hips, Astrid slowly drew them up over her head. Behind her, two large pillars formed, and at the ends were fists. She made a gesture with her hands, sending the water racing toward the shore. It lapped up against her butt as the two pillars turned into high crests, causing her to shiver. Fortunately, he didn't notice because his wide eyes were watching the water barreling down on him. It was too late to do anything about it. All he could do was stand there and be soaked. As the waves reached the shore and moved up it a little before crashing down in an overlapping X, he just watched them.

Then he shifted.

When the water struck the sand, there was now a very wet and somewhat angry-looking black dragon who was very focused on her. His eyes were on her, and the blue was flashing like the new flames that had just sprung to life. He shook his massive body, throwing water off in all directions. When he stopped, he turned and breathed fire on his back and body. Even from her place in the ocean, she could see the water evaporate from his impressive scales.

Astrid mouthed the words that were repeating in her head. “Oh shit.”

Once dry, the dragon moved forward with some surprisingly smooth steps. Now it was her turn to stand there stunned, regretting trying to dominate someone she didn’t know.

Once the dragon reached the water’s edge, he shifted again. He didn’t stop walking, though. Phoenix kept walking toward her, looking... annoyed or angry? She wasn’t sure. His pants were getting wet, but he didn’t seem to give it a second thought.

When he was only a few feet away, the water just halfway up his calves, he leaned forward. His face was about two inches from hers as he said in a low voice. “Was that really necessary?”

She folded her arms over her chest, her thoughts under control. “Not all women are weak creatures who need saving.”

“I wasn’t offering you help because you’re a woman. I was offering it because you clearly have shifter blood. And in my experience, that means a less-than-amazing life, a host of unanswered questions, and a lot of mistrust among both men and women.”

“Well, your experience and mine clearly aren’t the same because I grew up with my family and they helped me foster my abilities. I don’t need saving, and I sure as hell don’t need your help.”

Phoenix held up his hands. “My mistake.” He reached a hand into his pocket and pulled out a very wet card. “You’ll have to excuse the state of my card since a rather hostile woman decided to douse me.”

She gave him a wry look, but the man was not deterred. “Since you don’t need help, perhaps you are in a position to offer help. We need more people who have a handle

on their abilities to help those who have not had the same kind of supportive family.”

Astrid looked at the card as she asked, “Who carries business cards in this day and age?”

“The kind of people who know better than to rely on technology.”

“Oh, please don’t tell me you are a Luddite.” She rolled her eyes, “People really need to realize tech isn’t going away and...”

With a heavy sigh, the shifter said, “Some of the women who come to us can take out technology, and since their abilities aren’t honed, he held up a hand to her.

“Uh-oh!” She wasn’t sure if he was being serious. “If that’s true, that’s... terrifying.”

He nodded. “Yes. That’s why we are trying to help them before things get really bad for them and the people around them. I mean, one woman blew up a facility with her abilities when she got really angry.”

“Like a nuclear explosion?”

First, he placed a hand over his mouth; then he shook his head. “Why in the world do you go to nuclear? And if that happened, don’t you think it would have been in the news?”

“Sorry, Phoenix, but I don’t know a hell of a lot about this stuff. My family was great but insular. Also, I just moved here from the other side of the country, so whatever passes for news here probably wasn’t more than a blip back home.”

He looked at her for a moment. “So...” Then he seemed to think better of it and shook his head again. “Well, you have my card. If you want to help, we would love to

have you.”

Aggravated by the guy’s attitude, she reached out and put the card in his pocket, her fingers brushing his chest. “I won’t be needing that.”

She then strode past him, not really caring if he followed her or found out where she lived. He was annoying – very annoying, but she did not think he was any kind of a threat despite the fact that he was literally a dragon. Once she was in the woods, Astrid finally let herself shiver. She turned and looked. When she didn’t see Phoenix, she shifted and ran back to the park.

By the time she got home, she was ready for a nice hot shower and a bit of leftovers. The boxes no longer bothered her after all of the unexpected excitement. When she lay down to sleep, she promised to stay home and figure out her home before going out again. The last thing she wanted to do was encounter either of those guys again.

I wonder if I can order groceries? If not, I guess I’ll need to figure out which places deliver.

With that thought going through her head, she quickly drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 2

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:08 am

Hot and Cold

A week passed with more than enough work to keep Astrid busy, giving her a reason not to leave the house. Unfortunately, it also meant she wasn't making any progress on what brought her to the town. Just figuring out which boxes she needed to keep took up the better part of four days, in addition to having a few work-related projects.

On the fifth day, she found a storage unit not too far from the house and hired a company to come the next day to move out everything she didn't need. Things went sideways, so the moving crew didn't end up coming until two days after she hired them. She spent those two days working since she didn't know that they had marked the wrong day until the end of the day they were supposed to arrive. They were fully booked the next day, so she had to wait. There were some choice words that she kept to herself because the last thing she wanted was to do something that drew attention to herself or to make enemies in the new town.

It was a mess. When it was finally over, Astrid decided she needed to escape the town to really get her mind off things. So, she packed a bag and headed to Seattle for a few days. If she encountered other shifters, it was highly unlikely they would be able to do anything in such a populated area. Between sounds and smells, it would be far harder to identify one another.

Unfortunately, she spent a good bit of her time away worrying about what would happen when she returned. What were the odds that she encountered two shifters on her first day in town? In all her time back on the East Coast, she hadn't encountered any other shifters outside of her brother's relatives, suggesting that this place likely had a much greater number of them. And they might not all be as willing to talk as

the last two were. Since she knew little about other shifter types, Astrid wasn't comfortable encountering them. She had read stories online about the different shifter types. Granted, those stories were just as likely to be made up as real, but she didn't want to find out the hard way that those stories were right. That made it that much harder to think about how she would deal with them when she returned.

Phoenix had even suggested as much by saying that they helped people like her. Astrid wasn't sure whether he meant shifters like her or not, though, since he focused on talking about her abilities, something that her dad said had come from him, not from her mother. She and her brother had gotten their shifting abilities from their mothers. Hopefully, that was something that remained a secret because they clearly already knew a lot more about the shifter world than her, giving them a huge advantage.

The only reason she might consider letting them know that she was a shifter was to learn what kind of shifter the other guy was. No one had ever said anything about dragon shifters, probably because dragons weren't real or they weren't supposed to be real. That was something Astrid really didn't want to think about because she had no idea what it meant in relation to his powers.

Since the other guy had stunning green eyes, Astrid couldn't help but feel that she had the same reaction to them that other people had to hers. It was a seemingly unnatural color, but it was tied to the type of shifter she was, and she thought it was likely the same for the other shifter.

It could mean that he was also a cat shifter, and if that were the case, she might finally have someone who could tell her more about her kind. She was the only cat shifter she knew; all of the other shifters she knew were deer. Once, Evander tried to explain to her why they were different, saying they had different mothers. This didn't make sense to her, though – she had never met either of them.

Her father finally explained it when she was in high school when she was working on a family tree.

When she asked, then insisted on hearing, he let out a heavy sigh that she could remember quite clearly a few years later, and it still made her feel guilty for having insisted. At that point, he had mostly lost the use of his legs, so bringing up the past seemed particularly cruel.

She was about to tell him to forget it when he started speaking. “Evander’s mother was the love of my life. The sweetest woman, and she was open about what she was.” He looked out the window. “Her big doe eyes and quiet demeanor made sense, although I didn’t believe her until she actually shifted in front of me.”

“Was that when you learned about shifters?”

“Yes. But I already knew about abilities, obviously.” He gave her a half smile, and she smiled back. He had been the one to train both her and her brother, although he had not passed his ability on to them – all three of them had unique abilities, yet he was able to teach Evander and Astrid how to use what was innate. “It’s more about your gut, and that’s something that most people don’t understand. Trust what you feel, and then learn to work with it, not against it.”

“Yes, I know, Dad. You’ve done a great job training us.”

“I hope so.” He looked down at his hands and Astrid reached out and held them in her own. They were so much older and frailer in his last few years. He squeezed her hand, then continued, “She died not long after he was born. Complications from giving birth. Raising your brother, I really didn’t have time for dating. He was in high school when I finally started to look for companionship.”

“That’s why there was such a big age gap.”

“You got it. Your mother and I didn’t get married. She wasn’t big on the idea of commitment. We were only together for a few months when she fell pregnant. She had no idea about Evander’s shifting ability, and I had no idea about hers. After you were born, she just left. I never heard from her, and with a teenager and a newborn, well, I didn’t have time to track her down.”

“Then you were diagnosed with cancer.” She didn’t want him to have to relive anymore of his past. Rising, she kissed his head. “Thanks, Dad. How about something to eat?”

“What about your project?”

“You gave me everything I need, so I’ll work on it later. For now, I could really use a hearty meal.”

He smiled at her. “I would kill for a nice burger.”

“You would have to. Unfortunately, we are fresh out of cows.”

They laughed as she pushed his wheelchair into the kitchen so they could talk while she made dinner. Her father had become a vegetarian because it was easier with her brother. And consequently, she had grown up not eating meat until she was in high school. Even though he was gone, they continued to refrain, mostly because it made them feel a little closer to him. Eventually, she started to eat fish, but Astrid had never wanted to consume any other kinds of animal. There was just something about fish she couldn’t help craving, even when she was young and was told they couldn’t because of Evander.

As painful as it had been for her father, Astrid was glad that he told her because, over the years, it helped her to better understand her brother, at least as far as his relationship with her.

What she didn't understand was why he hadn't taken advantage of the numerous scholarships he was offered for college – some very prestigious ones that would have covered everything – and joined the military. He was valedictorian, held most of the school sports records, and had been student body president. There were so many things he could have done, but he chose the military. It wasn't a matter of wanting to stay close to family because he had been shipped off to a different state for boot camp, and then sent abroad. Finally, he ended up on a base on the other coast.

Over the years, he had changed, although she hadn't really understood it at the time. But by the last time she saw him, she had realized why Evander had such a haunting look in his eyes. Her brother was many things, but a warrior wasn't one of them.

And that's a large part of the reason she had moved to someplace so far from where she grew up. She needed to find out what happened to him.

Returning from Seattle was bittersweet. She was diving into something she wanted to do for years, but it also brought up a lot of pain. That sensation was further complicated by her not knowing how to deal with all of the other shifters in town. Part of her wanted to reach out to them and find out if the other one was a cat shifter. The other part of her wanted to entirely avoid them. She was much more relaxed for having escaped for a while, but her mind was no more at ease than when she had left.

As soon as she walked into her new home, Astrid tensed. Her brother had left things behind, and she had gone through them over the years, but none of it hinted toward anything. All of the boxes with his belongings were in the second bedroom, but she wasn't yet ready to delve into them again. Astrid told herself that she needed more context for what he had left, avoiding thinking about how much it hurt to go through them. She really wasn't ready for the emotions it would dredge up.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:08 am

Her mind was set, so Astrid placed her bag in her bedroom then grabbed her computer bag and walked back out the door. After locking up, she pulled up the library's location on her phone. It was risky to be so exposed, but the thought of being trapped in a vehicle for any more time was just too much for her. She passed her vehicle and headed down the sidewalk toward the library.

Her mind was fully engaged in speculation about the area, even going back to what had happened with the movers. This was entirely unhelpful since it just agitated her.

With her thoughts swirling around so many topics, she barely noticed how quickly she was walking until she was standing out in front of her destination. She had managed to walk over a mile and a half in less than half an hour. That time should have been spent thinking about what she was going to research. Instead, it had just managed to further upset her. She tried to quiet her thoughts as her eyes traveled up to the words over the library: Ponderosa Public Library.

It was not the best place to look for the kind of sensitive information she thought she needed, but it was a start at least. The town would have a lot more information about the location than she could find online, so that was something that could have nuggets of information she could use.

The inside smelled a bit musky, but there was a lot more light, thanks to the large windows lining the walls and along half of the ceiling. Astrid's eyes were drawn to all of the greenery outside, and she figured that was exactly why the place seemed to be made of windows.

Bet this place is creepy when it's cloudy. With all of that canopy, it's got to look very

oppressive and dark without sunlight streaming in through the window.

She looked over at the desk, where a young man with glasses sat working on a computer. That was obviously where she needed to start.

“Excuse me,” she said, using a lighter tone, hoping she was more disarming than her usual sour demeanor.

The guy looked up, his brown eyes taking her in. “Do you need help?”

“Yes. Do you have newspapers from the last hundred years or so?” Images from movies and shows flashed through her mind. “Please tell me you upgraded past microfiche.”

He gave her a look. “You aren’t from around here.”

She frowned, trying to detect if the guy was a shifter. There was nothing. “How did you know?”

“Besides your slight Southern accent, we upgraded back in the 20th century. Come on.” He got off of a tall stool and took her back to a small room near the back of the library.

Something felt off to her. “Why do you have little conference rooms?”

“There are three community colleges within easy driving distance, and they collaborate. We offer a place for students to do projects.”

“Oh.” She looked around at the place. “What about the guys from the base? Do they come here often?”

“I wouldn’t know. They don’t tend to wear their uniforms in town, so if they come to the library, they look just like everyone else.”

He pulled a chair out. “This is probably your best place to start. We have discs for the older stuff, but you can look at what’s in the cloud. All you need is your... you don’t have a card, do you?”

“No. Do I need one?”

“Yes. We’ve had some kids try to corrupt stuff over the years, so we make sure we can track users. Come here.” He sat down at a different computer. “I can create an account for you, and then you’ll be able to access the older information.”

It took a couple of minutes, but soon enough, Astrid was pouring through a lot of old newspaper articles. Every once in a while, she found something interesting, but they never went into depth. While today, that was understandable since a lot of papers copied each other, journalists 50 to 100 years ago had “integrity” and a desire to provide as much information as possible, so she expected them to be a lot more tenacious.

The more she reviewed, the more Astrid began to wonder if that was just one more thing that was built up as better without it actually being true. However, it could also be a sign that information was being intentionally omitted. She needed to find out if it was just sloppy writing or a sign of the reporting being censored. And if it was being censored, she had to find out why.

Pulling out her own laptop, Astrid began to note stories that seemed to be only partially told. She was so engrossed in what she was doing that she didn’t hear the door open. It was only when someone sat down beside her and giving her a fright that the young woman realized she wasn’t alone.

“Imagine running into you here.” The cool blue eyes shone, and her eyes were drawn down to the thin lips that covered some very white teeth.

“Are you stalking me, Phoenix?”

“I’ve encountered you twice in over a week. Is that what you consider stalking?”

She looked away. “I suppose not. But as you pointed out, it’s not exactly likely to encounter you here.”

He sighed and sat back, crossing his right leg over his left. “I’ve spent most of the last month here, including most of the days since I last saw you.” His eyes went to her screen. “Apparently, researching the same stuff that you are.”

She quickly turned the monitor off. “What makes you think that?”

“That’s where I started.” He pulled a strange-looking tablet out of his messenger bag. “I don’t know why it interests you, but I can help fill in some of the blanks.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:08 am

“And here I thought I was pretty clear that I don’t need your help.”

His smile turned into a smirk. “I’m quite sure you don’t need my help. But since I’ve already found answers to the questions you have right now, I figured I could save you days or weeks of time.” Then he uncrossed his legs and slipped the tablet back into its bag. “If you want to just fumble your way through for a while and find the answers a few months down the road,” he said, standing, “then I’m glad you have time on your hands.”

“Maybe I have time on my hands or maybe I don’t trust whatever you’re telling me.”

“Ah, you are researching the military base. All I can tell you then is to be careful.” He sat several desks away from her at another computer and began his own research.

Astrid looked at her computer, her lips pursed. She hadn’t told him about the military base or why she was there, but he had figured it out anyway. It was like he could read her mind with very little effort. That really bothered her. Her eyes moved over the article in front of her, something about a forest fire that wiped out a nearby town with too few details, but she simply couldn’t focus on what she was reading.

Finally, she asked. “How did you know?”

Phoenix didn’t say anything. Astrid looked at him, “Phoenix.” His head snapped up. “How did you know?”

His blue eyes bore into her. “How did I know what?”

“That I’m researching the base? Or was that just a guess?”

“I told you; I’m researching the same thing.”

“Why?”

He folded his arms over his chest. “I think I’m done trying to help you, considering all it has gotten me is rude responses. You know my name, my business, and why I’m here. If you want anything, it’s your turn to start making offers.”

Astrid’s eyes flashed, and she felt her lip tweak as she fought a strong desire to snarl at the man. “All I know is your first name.”

“That’s your fault. I tried to give you my business card.”

She blinked. “Ok. Well, I didn’t ask you to give me all of that information.”

“No, you didn’t. I offered it willingly. But you rather rudely turned down all of my offers so I see no need to further engage with you.”

“So, you will only help me if there are conditions.”

He held up his hands. “What conditions did I give you for my help?”

“Yourhelp?” She smirked. “I thought it was your ‘organization,’” she said, using air quotes, “that was going to help me.”

Phoenix placed his long, elegant fingers on his chin. “My family owns the company, and I’m the one in charge of it.”

A thin smile crossed her face, “I thought you said a woman was in charge of it?”

“I told you she is a project manager. She lives in this area and is in charge of a project we are working on here. I run the business internationally.” He quickly looked away and started typing.

“Oh.” Astrid wasn’t sure what else to say, so she asked, “May I have one of those cards?”

“No.” Phoenix didn’t bother to look at her.

“You were willing to give me one last week.”

With his fingers still flying over the keyboard, he simply said, “I was.”

“And now you won’t.”

“Correct.”

His lack of interest and apparent shift in demeanor really bothered her. Turning to fully face him, she asked, “Will you help me?”

“No.”

“What if I need it?”

“You don’t.”

“Perhaps we could work together.”

His eyes flicked over, and she thought she saw something clear pass over his irises from the side. “I fail to see that you have anything to offer.”

Feeling the hair on her neck starting to stand up, Astrid leaned forward. “If you want to know my name, it’s Astrid Lynnox. I’m a freelancer, and my sole purpose for being up here is to find out what happened to my brother.”

It was as if her words flipped a switch. His fingers stopped, and Phoenix turned his head slowly to look at her. His eyes moved over her, assessing her. Finally, he turned his whole body to face her. Placing his elbows on his knees, he asked, “What are you offering me for my help?”

“I thought that you were willing to help those in need.”

“You made it clear that that doesn’t apply to you.”

Frustrated, she growled as she dug her nails into her hands. “Why have you done a full 180? Is this some kind of reverse psychology?”

“You’ve been nothing but rude, starting with soaking Mabel’s café – I paid for repairs since no one is likely to believe that you did that on purpose.”

Astrid's mouth felt dry. "What makes you think I did it on purpose?"

The withering look he gave her made Astrid incredibly uncomfortable. As she squirmed a little in her seat, he said, "You literally sent columns of water at me with fists at the end of them. There's no chance that the sprinklers going off at that moment was an accident."

"Your boyfriend looked at me and tried to get into my head. I had to do something before... before you guys noticed me."

One of his eyebrows rose. "First, as soon as I walked into the place, I smelled you. Second, the moment Elliot's eyes landed on you, contact was made. Third, you still didn't care enough about a poor, innocent woman to actually help despite the fact that you did serious damage to her place of business. Given all of these experiences and your continued rudeness, you seem to be far more of a liability than an asset."

She gave him a sly smile, "So much for you being in this to help people. Your mask is slipping."

He leaned forward a little. "As you pointed out, I'm not good at sales, and since you are clearly one of those women who isn't helpless and doesn't need saving, I have no business with you."

"Ah, so you aren't actually interested in helping if there's nothing in it for you. It's just a business that you have to coldly manage."

He let out a heavy sigh, then stood up and headed toward the door.

"Where are you going?" Astrid stood up and followed him out the now-open door. "Hey, Phoenix, you..."

Several people turned and began to hush her as she left the room. Phoenix looked back at her, then ushered Astrid back into the room. His voice was a low hiss as he said, “Go back to your computer and do whatever it is you are doing. You do not need me, and I have people who can actually benefit from my support.”

He left the room, leaving Astrid staring at the door, wondering why she was suddenly so interested in his help.

Perhaps because he actually seemed to be interested in helping, and I couldn’t see any reason why he should. Why do I even care that he’s suddenly not interested in answering my questions? I’m not here to be saved or to make connections. All I need is to find out what happened to Evander.

She sat down, ignoring the fact that the shifter had just walked off without any of his stuff. Not her problem. After pulling her headphones out of her bag, Astrid played some background music and became engrossed in her research. She didn’t even notice when he returned as she switched between the library computer and her own. When she felt that she needed a bit more, Astrid pulled out a much older, cheaper computer and set it on the opposite side of her work laptop. Her head was on a swivel as she looked between the three computers.

While looking over a couple of older articles, Astrid noticed a few discrepancies in the stories, even two written by the same author.

She leaned forward to look at a picture when something touched the desk near her, startling her. She jolted back, her knee hitting one of her computers. Phoenix reacted quickly, catching the device before it toppled to the floor.

“Sorry,” he said, repositioning it on the desk slightly farther from the edge. Then he shifted the bag on his shoulder and headed toward the door.

Astrid moved the computer back to where it had been before she had knocked it. When she did, something fell to the floor. Not sure why he bothered to approach her just to startle her and leave, Astrid looked back at the door as she leaned over to pick up whatever had fallen. It was a piece of paper with some notes on it. She flipped it over and saw that there were notes on the back, and there was still something on the floor. Leaning over again, she picked up his card. It was clearly one of the ones that had been in his pocket when she had hit him with oceanwater. Unable to help it, she smiled and put the card in the side pocket of her bag. Then she read the note, which ended with something she could not have expected...

While I hope this helps you, you should reconsider what you are doing. If you continue, you must be far more careful. There are several organizations that use people like you, and they will quickly learn that you will not be missed.

Gritting her teeth, Astrid looked at the door.

Is that a threat or a warning?

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:08 am

As much as she hated to do it, she knew that she needed to contact him. She pulled out her phone and retrieved the card. She squeezed her eyes shut.

Please, don't let this be a horrible mistake.

With that, she entered the phone number on the card and typed out a quick question.

What makes you think I'm alone?

She placed the phone on the desk and stared at it for a few minutes. When he didn't immediately respond, Astrid decided to try to focus on her work.

When it finally buzzed, Astrid stopped working and grabbed her phone.

How about I buy you dinner, and we can talk?

Astrid moved her fingers over the letters without tapping on them as she thought about the offer.

I'm not interested in anything that could be considered a date.

The response was quick.

Don't worry. My personal life isn't something I'm interested in sharing with you. This is for work.

Astrid raised her eyebrows. There was a lot she wanted to say. Then she thought

about what he had said and reconsidered saying anything that might be considered rude.

I'll buy. Where do you want to meet?

Don't be ridiculous. I'm buying, and I've no preference.

I don't know this area.

Ah, I hadn't thought of that. Meet me here, but I insist on paying. And don't worry, I know it's not a date, and you don't owe me anything for paying.

An address accompanied the message.

When?

Name a time.

Are you still here?

Yes. Meet you outside?

Astrid took a deep breath, hoping that she wasn't making a huge mistake. After packing up, she logged out of the library computer and headed out of the library.

Chapter 3

A Messy Meeting

The light hit her hard when she walked outside, causing Astrid to put a hand over her eyes.

“Why is it so bright?”

“The sun’s setting. Come on. There’s something you need to know if you are going to keep going.”

Astrid fell in step beside him. “Is it within walking distance?”

“No. I’ll drive.”

“You know that women are told not to get into cars with men they don’t know. Isn’t this place known for having a ton of serial killers?”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:08 am

Phoenix turned and looked at her with concern on his face. “If you want to walk, it might be closer to bedtime when we get there.”

“That didn’t answer my question. Besides, can’t you fly there? Because, I mean, you have wings.”

He started rubbing the area beside his eye. “I realize you have very limited knowledge of the shifter world, but we aren’t supposed to go running around in our other forms, at least not in highly populated areas. That was very poor judgment on my part last week, and I do apologize. I found it difficult not to take your actions as anything other than a display of power. Shifting was the quickest way to shut that down. At least, I thought it was. Shifting in public is a horrible idea, and it will result in us getting hunted again. And even if that were not the case, asking a shifter to carry you is quite rude.”

He looked over at her, the annoyance clear on his face. “So, if you could, please be more reasonable. I’ll drive us there. And if you need to feel safer with me because you fear I might be dangerous in this form, you should be able to use the liquid in my vehicle to interrupt my driving. There’s no gasoline, but there are plenty of other liquids required to keep it running. Or if you are particularly vindictive, you can probably manipulate the water in my body since we are over 70 percent water in this form.”

Astrid stopped. “You think I can... Is that even possible?”

He stopped a couple of steps ahead of her. “And here you thought I couldn’t teach you anything about your abilities. Come on. If you have to be suspicious, do it on the

way because I'm getting hungry.”

She fell in step beside him, not sure what to say. All that she could focus on was the thought of controlling people with her powers – it was so distasteful. “Have you known someone who was able to control people?”

Phoenix unlocked the car and opened the passenger door. “Get in, and we’ll talk.”

Finally, she did as she was told without asking more questions. They rode in silence for a while before she finally asked, “So, what did you want to talk about?”

He didn’t immediately respond, so she looked over at him. It seemed unlikely that he didn’t hear her, leaving her to think that he was just considering his answer. After a bit, she decided just to ignore the question and looked out of the window.

Finally, he said, “The military is working with one of the organizations using people like you. As far as we’ve been able to find, none of them realize that men may also have abilities. Good for them, bad for you and other women. Anyway, you’re being here is incredibly dangerous.”

“I’m not going to go blowing up the base or flooding it or anything. I just want to find out what happened to my brother since he was supposed to be safe. He managed not to die on multiple deployments, only to die on a base far from home. I’m not a threat to the base.”

In her mind, Astrid knew that wasn’t entirely true, depending on what she found out about her brother.

“I meant it’s dangerous for you, not for them. As powerful as your ability is, there are many that are far more potent and dangerous, yet they managed to be manipulated and captured.”

“Even with an entire ocean nearby?” She smiled as she looked over at him. “I’m pretty sure I can protect myself.”

His eyes darted over for a second, but he didn’t smile. “Elliott’s sister-in-law can see the future. With that kind of power, she can outplay nearly everyone, yet she was trapped by the Mora family for nearly a decade.”

Astrid’s eyes turned into saucers. “Like a psychic? Are psychics actually real?”

That finally got a chuckle out of him. “No. Those are humans scamming people out of money. She can see the many ways things can work out to choose the right path for the result she wants. It’s a rare ability that is thankfully not likely to happen again for a long time, and there’s no chance that she’ll fall back into the hands of people who will misuse her abilities. So, fortunately, that power is safe and sound.”

Against her better judgment, Astrid found herself wanting to learn more. “How can you be so sure?”

“Because she’s married the eldest Sexton, Elliott’s brother.”

“Is your business protecting them then?”

He snorted. “They don’t need my family’s protection. They’ve been here longer than the country’s been around.”

“What?” Astrid looked at him incredulously. “That can’t be true. People didn’t come out this way until after 1776.”

“There were a lot of people already living here long before Europeans and their descendants started trekking out this way. And shifters have a very long tradition of looking for places far from most cultures and civilizations. The Sextons are a very old

family, and they created what's essentially a safe haven for people like you out here. About a millennia after they arrived, anyway. There wasn't much need for them to offer protection before there was a population to protect."

"So... you aren't a Sexton then?"

"No. My family's only been in the area a few decades. Well, working from out of here is probably a better way of describing it. My family moved us around a bit over the years, but we ended up here where my brothers and I finished high school. I left after graduation and only returned more recently. My family made a deal with the Sextons since shifters don't tend to like having each other in their territories."

"What kind of deal?"

He looked over at her, then sighed. "The Sextons' parents died when they were still fairly young. Or at least Elliott was still young. The eldest brother, Cooper, raised him and the rest of the brood."

"How many Sextons are there?"

"There are eight brothers. Most of them are married or mated now. I think Elliott's the only one who's still single."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:08 am

“Well, he has you,” she offered, thinking that might help.

“My parents made a deal with the Sextons to help protect their town until they were old enough to manage without my parents. In exchange, my parents were able to find some relief from the persecution they faced back in Europe.”

“Oh. So, your family are refugees?”

He paused. “Sort of. Anyway, I spent a lot of time with the brothers. Well, not really Cooper and Elliott, but the rest of them. I think Cooper’s desire to help was strong even back then because I don’t think they really needed us. They were always a lively bunch, and I loved spending time with them. We became blood brothers when we were old enough to make that choice. Unfortunately, as soon as I felt like I belonged, my parents put me in charge of their company and sent me away.”

She looked at her hands, not sure if he needed comfort or any words of kindness. “It must have been hard.”

“It was bound to happen.”

Astrid glanced over at him. “You sound resigned.”

“Maybe. Any other questions?”

Drumming her fingers on her knee, Astrid wasn’t sure where to start. “I have many. But like you said, I should probably offer you something in exchange. So,” she closed her eyes and tried to tamp down her emotions.

“We are here.” The car stopped, and he opened his door. She looked over, not sure if his sudden interruption of her thoughts was intentional or if there was something else. Then her door opened. “Oh, thank you,” she said, a little confused by the gesture.

Phoenix’s voice was lower as he said, “We can keep talking if we get a seat outside. Will you be able to handle the cooler air?”

Astrid got out of the car and then stopped to gauge her comfort. “It’s a bit chilly. Sorry. I’m just really not used to it being this cool at this time of year.”

“I know what you mean. Louisiana is decidedly warmer and more humid.”

She froze. “I never told you I was from Louisiana.”

“You didn’t have to. The accent is a bit of a giveaway.”

“Is it?”

He smiled at her. “There’s more to it than that, but yeah. I’ve worked with a few people from the state, and no one else sounds like you guys.”

Astrid rubbed her forehead. “I guess we can’t hear our own accents. Man, that’s a bit disappointing.”

“At least it’s a very pleasant, melodic accent.”

Astrid pursed her lips, not sure how to take the compliment. Of course, it wasn’t something anyone back home said – they probably didn’t hear it either. “So, what do you recommend here? Oh, and I should probably warn you that I’m a pescatarian.”

“They have a couple of amazing fish dishes. Personally, I prefer the baked salmon

with twice-stuffed potato and asparagus.”

Her mouth started to water. “Ok, now that sounds like a good dinner. Is it expensive?”

“That’s irrelevant. I’m paying, remember?”

“I don’t want your boyfriend to think that you are cheating on him.”

Phoenix sighed and dropped his head back. “Do you want me to invite him?”

“Will I feel like a third wheel?”

Phoenix bit the sides of his cheek, then said, “No. I can guarantee you that is not even remotely close to the emotions you will feel. Besides, he’ll be far more interested in you than me.”

Her eyebrows went up as he opened the door for her. “Are you jealous because of that?”

There was a low snorting sound as she walked past him. “Not in the least.” He came up behind her as she stopped at the host desk. “Table for three outside, please.”

“It’s a bit cool outside. Are you sure you don’t want to sit near the fire?”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:08 am

The winning smile Phoenix gave the hostess caused her to go a little pink. “I spent enough time in Alaska and Russia to not be bothered by a bit of breeze.”

The hostess giggled. “Ok, sir. Follow me, and I’ll take you to a table that has a bit of protection against the breeze. You maybe used to it, but I hope you feel that we are a bit warmer and friendlier than the places where you’ve been.”

Astrid got the impression that the hostess moved her hips a little more as she led them to a table. She looked over at Phoenix, who seemed oblivious to the hostess’ attempts to get his interest. She turned around and tried to ask him a few personal questions, totally ignoring Astrid as they walked toward a table. His responses were pleasant and as detailed as was necessary, which seemed to encourage the young woman. When they reached the table, the hostess reached out and put her hand on his bicep.

“Here’s your—oh, my. You must work out.”

He looked over at her with a smile as he took a small step away from the hostess. “When I get the time. Thank you very much.” Phoenix then moved over and pulled a chair out for Astrid. “Where were we?”

Astrid looked at the hostess, who glared at her, then turned and flounced away. Shaking her head, the young woman sat down, and then she felt Phoenix easily push the chair under the table.

He sat down and looked at her. “I think we were talking about family.”

“Um, yes, you were telling me about your family and the Sextons.”

“Oh, um, yes, you asked if I had any more questions, but I can’t think of any. So, in the spirit of being more transparent,” she took a deep breath, “I suppose I should tell you a bit about my family.”

“If you aren’t comfortable because of where we are, then...”

“No. You invited me out to talk, and I agreed to it. I don’t know exactly why you are researching this particular region, but you’ve said enough that I can hazard a guess.”

Phoenix threaded his fingers together and rested his chin on them, but he simply looked at her. Feeling a little uncomfortable, Astrid shifted a little in her seat, “Since you said that the military is working with shady organizations, and you said we are researching the same thing, I guess you are trying to find out exactly what’s happening on the base nearby.”

He nodded a little. “That is a very good guess.”

She tilted her head a little. “Is it an accurate one?”

“It has a lot of merit and is... at least partially correct.”

“Well, that’s vague. But I also understand you’ve given me a lot more than...”

Suddenly, someone walked around the table. “I hope this is something – Oh.” The cold green eyes looked down on her, blinking a few times, the only part of the young face that indicated a sharp intellect. “It’s the woman who set off the sprinklers. And here I thought you told me that I was to leave this one alone.”

Phoenix stood up, then held out his hand toward her. “This is Astrid. Astrid, this is Elliott Sexton.”

“Astrid.” He looked at her. “She doesn’t have a last name?”

She was about to say something, but Phoenix spoke up, “Not one you need to know at the moment.”

This got sharp looks from both Astrid and Elliott, but Phoenix ignored it and sat back down. Finally, Elliott took a seat, but he never took his eyes off of her. He leaned forward a little. “So, you can control water? How much water? And to what level?”

“She is self-taught, Elliott, so she doesn’t have answers.”

“I would say that’s a shame, but we would both know I’m lying. Would you mind if I observed you for a few days?”

Astrid’s eyes widened as her nostrils flared. “Why would you want to do that?”

“Elliott has been deeply fascinated by people with powers because usually shifter abilities are more limited. Not all of us, of course, but for the most part, it’s an ability to shift and heal. Victor is definitely a different sort on that one.”

Elliott scoffed. “Victor’s a weird one on all fronts.”

“Who is Victor?” Astrid was looking between the two, starting to feel very much like a third wheel.

Elliott sniffed. “One of my many brothers. Nice enough guy, but not a normal shifter. I mean, acidic blood is not normal and really not safe.”

“Wait, are you kidding? Acid blood?” Astrid was starting to think they were making fun of her. At least, she hoped that compared to the alternative.

Phoenix looked at her and nodded. “No, he does have acidic blood. There’s a lot that’s special about him, but he’s a great guy. Very different from his twin. Good kids.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:08 am

Elliott let out a humph. “You aren’t much older than they are.”

Phoenix looked at him askance. “I’m older than Cooper.”

Elliott frowned. “Really? I thought... There’s quite an age difference between you and your brothers.”

“Indeed.”

Astrid watched them for a minute. “Ok, how do you not know how old he is?” she asked, pointing at Phoenix.

Elliott looked over at him. “I only started getting to know him a few months ago when there was an... incident up in Canada. I worked with one of his brothers and then ended up getting roped into this mess.”

Phoenix laughed. “You make it sound like you weren’t interested.”

For a second, a smile flashed over the cherubic-looking face. “Well, I didn’t say I wasn’t interested.”

“The number of women you get to harass – sorry, the number of women you get to try to observe was too much of a draw.”

Astrid looked between the two men. “You guys aren’t together.”

Phoenix looked over at her. Elliott said, “He’s not my type.”

This made Phoenix laugh. Astrid looked between the two of them. “How is that funny?”

“It’s not.” Elliott frowned. “Just because you are cursed doesn’t mean that you can go around laughing at the misfortunes of others.”

Phoenix’s smile faded. “I suppose you are right. Carrying the curse Gavin passed onto you is more than enough to earn you pity.”

“Oh – shut up,” Elliott said, flopping back in his seat.

A waitress came up to the table, and Phoenix ordered for the three of them. After she left, he looked at Elliott. “I’m sorry.”

He sniffed again, almost looking like he was pouting.

Astrid looked between the two of them. “So, curses are real?”

Elliott looked up at her, his interest a bit muted. “Yes.”

“And Phoenix is cursed?”

Elliott nodded as Phoenix just looked down. Neither of them offered any answers, so Astrid asked, “What kind of curse?”

Elliott’s eyes darted over, but when Phoenix still wouldn’t look up, he said. “No one can get close to him.”

“Or what?”

“They die.”

Astrid sat back. “How is that possible? Doesn’t that mean... I mean, he runs a company.”

“He’s not...”

“That’s quite enough.” Phoenix’s voice was low but cut through the conversation. “We aren’t here to talk grudges, curses, and personal business. This is supposed to be about the organization and getting to the root of the problem here. So, unless you want me to start talking about Alina,” he finally looked up at Elliott, “or Evander,” his gaze turned to Astrid, “I recommend we stay focused.”

Astrid felt her stomach drop, and she was about to say something when Elliott gripped the table. “There’s nothing to say about Alina.” He looked angry.

“Yes, Elliott, there’s a lot to say about Alina. But you keep your mouth shut about me, and I’ll keep my mouth shut about you.”

“I don’t have to help you.”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:08 am

“No, you don’t. And as I told you when you showed up and begged me to let you, I don’t need you here. So, if that is your threat, you are free to leave. But don’t expect me to keep your family updated. You all lost the right to updates about a decade ago, and this was meant to be an olive branch after what you did to help Nolan.”

Elliott looked at the table, his jaw clenched and his knuckles white.

“Whose Alina?” Astrid asked, her voice soft because she knew it was a question she shouldn’t ask.

“Don’t worry about it, Astrid. Just focus on why we are here so that I don’t end up saying things that I will only marginally regret.”

Elliott was now looking at her, his eyes flashing behind his glasses. “No. It’s a good question. Just like it’s a good question to ask who Evander is.”

It was Astrid’s turn to feel anger. She looked at Phoenix, who was looking at her without any particular expression. He gave off the impression that he was just waiting to see what she would say.

Her nostrils flared once, but Astrid then looked at Elliott. “Evander’s my brother. He died two decades ago while serving in the military.”

Elliott sat back. “I’m – I’m sorry to hear that. So that’s why you are here.”

She nodded but then looked at Phoenix. “The problem is that I never told him that.”

Chapter 4

A Little Too Much

Elliott just sighed. “He knows a lot about everyone. Unlike most shifters, he’s also got abilities beyond shifting and healing.”

“So... it’s not normal for someone to be both a shifter and to have some kind of gift?”

Phoenix looked at her with his passive expression, but Elliott said, “No. Not usually. Some types of animals are more prone to it, like cats and wolves, but that’s more to do with their lifestyles.”

Trying to look surprised, Astrid asked, “What do you mean?”

“Well,” Elliot cocked his head and looked up, “wolves are very pack-driven.” He looked at her. “They have abilities that help to make that bond very tight. The alphas are able to communicate without being anywhere close to other shifters. This one alpha contacted a cat up in space and helped get him home safely. And cats, well, they tend to mate with anything. It creates a world of problems, too.”

Phoenix’s eyes flicked over to Elliott and then back to Astrid as if looking for a reaction. Astrid tried to keep her focus on Elliott. “What do you mean they mate with anything?”

“Shifters tend to stick with their own kind. Bears with bears, wolves with wolves, that kind of thing. And when they don’t, you get a real mixed bag of possibilities. Dragons are the most...” he moved a hand around in a circle. “Potent is probably the best word. But only a handful of families have women who can shift into dragons. I think I know of a dozen throughout all of our history – and I only learned about one

of those recently.”

Phoenix coughed into his hand, and Astrid looked at him, suspecting that he was covering for a laugh, but she quickly looked back to Elliott. He seemed to be incredibly knowledgeable, and unlike Phoenix, he wasn't asking for anything in return.

Initially, Phoenix didn't want anything either. Then again, he seems to already know a lot without me saying a damn thing.

“Anyway, dragon women tend to marry humans because, for a long time, they were shunned for not being powerful. Unless they had a very useful power, then they were married off to improve the family's standing.”

“What?” Astrid looked mortified.

Elliott shrugged. “My family wasn't like that. I only learned that was what it was like after finally leaving home. Personally, I can't imagine what it would be like to have such a heartless family, but apparently, they are still around. As Coop always says, just because someone isn't powerful doesn't mean that person isn't capable. The number of amazing women I've met while traveling has shown me why Cooper has always been so protective of them.”

A soft smile shone in his eyes, and he looked sweet. “When I'm finally ready to settle down, I hope that I can be half the shifter he is.”

Phoenix leaned forward, “You aren't going to return to Sexton?”

Elliott turned a little, then shook his head. “It would be unwise.”

“Even if...” Phoenix narrowed his eyes.

Elliott's expression hardened. "Even if what?"

Phoenix exhaled hard but didn't fill in the gaps.

Astrid brushed some hair out of her face, "I'm sure you can be even better than Cooper. I mean, the fact that you can appreciate what he's done and have a desire to emulate him says a lot of good things about you."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:09 am

Elliott shook his head. “At best, I’ll be a cheap imitation. He does good things because he’s a good person.”

When she went to open her mouth, a hand tapped her knee. Astrid looked over at Phoenix, who was watching Elliott passively. He gave a barely perceptible shake of his head. Annoyed, she decided not to delve further. The guys weren’t together, but it was obvious that there was some sort of history between them. Or between their families.

Finally, Elliott looked over at Phoenix. “So, you invited me here for some kind of therapy or group discussion? Because if that’s the case, I have other things to do.”

“I invited you here because she has questions, and I think you are a much better source for answers.”

“You are trying to flatter me.”

Phoenix laughed. “When have I ever flattered anyone?”

This got a partial smile from Elliott. “That’s... a fair point. I don’t think you see any reason to flatter people. It’s a tool I’ve only recently learned to wield. And, if I’m being honest, I feel that I’ve undergone some real growth over the years – or perhaps it’s statistics – but it’s nice to know that there are some more cold, calculating shifters out there.”

“Call it a result of the curse.”

Elliott pursed his lips, but his expression gave Astrid the impression that he was actually feeling sorry for Phoenix. The two looked at each other for a while, then Elliott finally turned to her. “Now that you are situated, I suppose you and I have some things to discuss.”

Astrid gestured toward Phoenix. “The three of us.”

To her surprise, Phoenix stood up and dropped a lot of cash on the table. “I think this is the point where I can leave you two to talk. You have my number, Ms. Lynnox. If you want to contact me to learn more, I’ll try to work you into my schedule.” He turned to Elliott. “Good luck, Elliott.”

“I don’t need luck,” he sniffed.

Astrid reached out and grabbed Phoenix’s hand. “Wait. How did you know about Evander?”

Elliott turned to look at him, too. Phoenix pulled his hand away and closed his eyes. “I knew him.”

He didn’t wait to hear her response, not that it mattered much. It took her a while to recover. When she finally processed what he had said, it was too late to ask anything else. Astrid turned and looked at Elliott just as the waiter returned with the food.

The waiter looked at Phoenix’s retreating back. Astrid noticed that the hostess tried to stop him, but he simply brushed her off. The waiter then asked, “Is he coming back? Should I box up his food?”

Elliott looked at the extra plate of fish. “Yes, please.”

The waiter quickly disappeared.

Once they were alone, Astrid immediately started questioning the person who had remained. “Did you know?”

Elliott shrugged. “Two decades ago, I pretty much lived as a hermit at my brother’s house. I have nearly no knowledge of his life during that time, and even less of an idea about the world at large from back then.”

“You... were a hermit?”

“I preferred to just study science. It was only when Cooper brought home Alina that I started really taking an interest in the outside world.”

“Why?”

He looked away. “Personal reasons.”

Astrid could feel the hurt in his voice, so she decided to drop that topic. “So, what have you done since leaving?”

“Mostly researched people like you.”

“What do you mean people like me?” It was an honest question, and she surprisingly didn’t feel any offense at his words.

“People with abilities. It means you have dragon blood. And it means your brother probably had some abilities as well.”

“Yes. Yes, he did. We got it from my father’s side, and our abilities were similar.”

“You don’t mean that he could manipulate water.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:09 am

Her eyebrows went up. “You sound certain.”

“Elemental families usually have similar abilities, but with different elements.”

“Oh.” She looked at him. “You’ve met other... elementals?”

“Yes, a few. And I’ve studied the history of that particular ability since it is the easiest to research. You guys usually aren’t particularly dangerous unless you get really angry. I’ve found it ironic that the people who control fire tend to be the most mellow, though. That was rather unexpected.”

Astrid considered this. “They tend to have more problems, though.”

Elliott’s expression shifted a little, and he leaned forward. “Your brother could manipulate fire?”

“No, my father. My brother was able to manipulate rocks and, as he put it, the ground.” She smiled at the memory, but it quickly faded. “My father got cancer and died, but like you said, he was far more mellow than I am. Can’t say that he was calmer than my brother, though. Then again, my brother was a deer shifter, so it’s not like he was going to be really angry anyway.” The words were out of her mouth before she really thought about them, and she regretted it almost immediately.

Oh, that’s great. Just give him the only potential advantage you had.

This really got Elliott’s attention. “Your brother was a shifter, and he had abilities?”

Astrid pressed her lips closed, but she soon relaxed them. Elliott was definitely different, and there was a chance he would be able to help her in a way that no one else could.

Please be a cat shifter.

He watched her expectantly, and then he asked, “Does that mean you are also a deer shifter?”

She slowly shook her head. “No. I – we had different mothers. Dad didn’t know that he had shifter blood, but he knew that he had abilities. His first wife told him a bit about the shifter world, and she knew why he had abilities. I don’t really know how they found out about each other’s abilities, though. Anyone who could have told me is dead.” She looked at her hands, hoping she wasn’t making a mistake. “Because he could manipulate fire – man, the things he used to do with it. I mean, camping was a lot more exciting.” Her mind traveled back. “I really miss him.”

“Your father died?”

Astrid blinked a couple of times. “Yes. About two months ago. He fought cancer for about a quarter of a century before he finally gave up. I think he was just waiting for me to be able to take care of myself so that I wouldn’t be turned over to other family members. My brother died about 20 years ago. And his mother died after childbirth. When I was little, though, Dad, Evan, and I would have little competitions at home. I wasn’t very old, so I had to get really creative to compete with them.”

Elliott cocked his head to the side, and a slight smile crossed his lips. “As someone with water abilities, you are the one with the temper.”

Astrid narrowed her eyes at him, but then laughed. “I guess you really have done your research.”

“It makes sense. The oceans are brutal places, and you get the worst weather with rain.”

“I like the rain.”

“I do, too. But storms are when you get lightning strikes and tornadoes. And that’s not even touching on the hurricanes, which, you know, start over larger bodies of water.”

Astrid exhaled hard. “Tell me about it. Evander used to talk about what happened after Hurricane Katrina.”

Elliott looked at her. “You don’t remember it?”

“Um, no. I wasn’t old enough to know any of that. Apparently, we lived near New Orleans, and it was just after my father’s diagnosis. My brother took leave after the diagnosis, and it ended up being for a year. First, he was going to help Dad with treatments, then he was helping us flee from the hurricane. Well, flee may not be the right word. We had a few houses, but they preferred New Orleans.” She sighed. “If my brother hadn’t taken that year off, he would have reached the end of his time in the military before he died.”

“I’m really sorry.” Elliot’s voice was soft. “I’ve never lost anyone close to me. Well, not anyone I can remember since I was young when my parents died. I haven’t had to grieve for anyone the way you did. I don’t know how I would handle it. Actually,” he gritted his teeth and breathed out of them, “yes, I do.”

“Well, not much you can do about the cancer.”

“Oh no, I mean about your brother. You clearly know that he didn’t die a natural death, and knowing the way these organizations operate, well, I know exactly what I

would do if they harmed anyone I cared about.”

Astrid smiled. “And what is that?”

“I’d kill them.” There was no humor or sarcasm in his voice. If not for his sweet-looking face, she might have thought he was serious judging by his tone.

“Oh, I would love to do that, but it’s easier said than done.”

He shrugged.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:09 am

There wasn't much more to say on that topic, and she wasn't sure that trying to would be particularly helpful. Instead, she was ready to voice something that she had been thinking about since that first encounter. She started to talk a couple of times, but Astrid found it difficult to voice something she had been taught not to discuss. Elliott just watched her, his eyes occasionally blinking as if he were waiting for whatever it was, she wanted to say.

She squeezed her eyes shut and said quickly, "I think we may be the same kind of shifter."

When she opened her eyes a little, Elliott was looking at her like she had lost her mind. "I can assure you we aren't. Lynnox is a dragon shifter family name, but the family does not have a history of producing female dragons."

"I... know that. My father couldn't shift anyway, which... I guess that means he came from a woman who got kicked out of her family for not being powerful."

Elliott looked a little uncomfortable. "Elementals aren't usually particularly powerful. I mean, they are easier to counter than someone who can walk through walls or read minds."

Astrid put her hands on the table and leaned forward. "Holy halibut! People can do that?"

Elliott was startled by her reaction, but he soon was looking at her with humor. "Yeah. That's one of the reasons the whole abilities thing has been so exciting. There are just so many of them, and they are incredibly varied. Even I've found it nearly

impossible to predict the extent to which they can be used. By comparison, elemental powers are pretty well-known and understood.”

She sat back a little hard. “I always thought that what I could do was so cool. Now I just feel cheated. It’s incredibly strange to hear that because, for my whole life, I’ve been told to hide it. That it’s not something anyone else can do.”

Elliott smiled at her, “Well, not when you consider humans. There are far more of them than us. So, yeah, it’s not something to openly discuss. However, when you are around shifters, you aren’t going to get that much attention unless people want the weather manipulated or some round theaters created.”

Astrid closed her eyes. “Now, it is so bizarre to hear that these powers are just... blasé to everyone else.”

“Well, it means people aren’t going to expect you to do stuff like some kind of jester.”

After considering that for a moment, she said, “I guess that’s nice. Although I don’t think I’d mind. When I was little, I used to make water spouts around the yard so I and my friends could run through it.”

“You enjoyed that?”

“On a summer day when it’s over 100 degrees before you factor in humidity, yeah. It felt really good.”

He squinted a little, then his eyes widened. “Ah, Fahrenheit.”

“Yes, Fahrenheit. Why would I use anything else?”

He pushed his glasses up, “Not scientifically minded then. To your point, yes, I can see that. He pursed his lips. “But I do have a question for you.”

“Did you just insult me?”

His eyes moved around them. “How is that an insult?”

“I don’t know. Just from the way you said it, that I’m not scientific.”

“It wasn’t meant to be. I’ve just spent most of my life using metric, so it takes a few minutes to process.”

“Oh. Ok. Sorry, I had people make fun of me growing up.” She shook her head. “What’s the question?”

“What kind of shifter are you?”

Her heart dropped. “Um, I think I’m the same type as you.”

“Why?”

Even as she said it, the idea sounded ridiculous. “Because we have similarly colored eyes?”

Elliott placed his elbow on the table and rested his head on his hand, his eyes taking her in. “Eye color isn’t usually an indicator of type.”

“Oh.” Feeling foolish, she waved her hands. “Never mind then.” Refusing to look at him, she started eating.

“Are you going to tell me what kind of shifter you think I am?”

“If you aren’t the same kind as me, I don’t know what you are.” Suddenly, she felt his gaze on her. Looking up, she saw an intensity that was far beyond anything she was used to – and it wasn’t the kind of interest that indicated that he found her attractive. She moved around a bit. “Please don’t look at me like that.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:09 am

“Apologies.” He looked away for a moment. “It’s a habit.” When he looked at her again, Elliott’s gaze wasn’t nearly so intense. “So, your father found two different shifter women and had children with them, producing children who could shift and had abilities. Now, that is not something that happens often.”

“I don’t know what to tell you.”

“Ah,” he sat back and nodded. “You’re a cat shifter. Interesting.”

“What? How did you...” She cleared his throat and narrowed her eyes as Elliott maintained eye contact. “What makes you say that?”

“You mean besides the fact that you just confirmed it?”

“Dammit,” she muttered. “Yeah, before I confirmed it.”

“Just a few tells. Over the last few years, I spent a lot of time with cat shifters. Perhaps a little too much time.” The last part was said a little under his breath. “And a lot of them are from the south like you.”

This came as a shock. “What? Really? I – I never encountered any.”

“If it helps, they are usually based out of Florida and the nearby states. I don’t know any from Louisiana. Do you know where your mother was from?”

“I never met her.”

“Oh.” He looked down and tapped his fingers on the table. “Again, if it helps, that’s not entirely uncommon with cat shifters. They tend to be restless and far too unconcerned with most things.”

She scowled. “Are you saying that you think I don’t take things seriously?”

“I haven’t observed you, so I couldn’t say. Just some of your mannerisms are reminiscent of some other shifters I’ve met.”

“Oh.” Astrid looked to the side, watching the wind blowing in the breeze. Her mind was racing. Elliott wasn’t a cat shifter, but he knew plenty of them. “Do you...?” She flinched. “Never mind.”

It almost seemed like he was trying to guess what she was thinking. Elliott offered her a little bit of hope. “You aren’t likely to encounter many of your kind up here. Cat shifters don’t usually come this far north, at least not to live. They don’t tend to like the rain. Then again, that wouldn’t be a problem for you.” He gave her a faint smile.

Something that Phoenix had said earlier finally caught her attention. “Wait, Phoenix said that he’s older than you and someone else. But you are older than his brothers. They must be really young.”

His eyebrow rose. “I dare say they are a bit older than you.”

She waved a fork with a bit of salmon on it. “I’m almost 30. I just look young.”

“Yeah, and his brothers are both older than you.”

Astrid nearly spit out her fish; then she started to choke on it. Hammering on her chest, she caught her breath. “You’re older than me?”

He blinked. “We age slower than any other type of shifter.”

“What kind of shifter are you?”

“I already told you.”

“What? No, you didn’t.”

“Yes, I did. I’m the same kind of shifter as Phoenix despite the different eye color.”

He then started eating as she sat there processing that information.

“Are there a lot of dragon shifters?”

“We are among the rarest, probably because we live a long time, and there are a rare number of women since they were treated so badly over the millennia.”

“You know, I’ve never encountered any shifters outside of this town, and on my first day, I encounter two of the rarest type.”

He nodded as he swallowed a mouthful of food. “That’s because of the military base. We have to get rid of the problem there before anyone else gets hurt. They’ve realized over the years that there’s a higher population of people with abilities up here, so they keep popping up around here.”

That’s when something else that Phoenix said started to bother her. “Did you know Evander?”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:09 am

“No,” Elliott looked down, suddenly very interested in his food.

“But Phoenix did?”

“Apparently so, yes.”

“Do you know if they were close?”

There was concern in his voice when he said, “They had to have been.” There was something that sounded like resistance or a warning in his tone.

Astrid looked down at her food, suddenly not feeling particularly hungry. “What makes you think they had to be close?”

“Because of the curse.”

Her head whipped up. “What do you mean, the curse?”

Elliott sighed, then put his fork down. He waved for a waiter and asked for boxes for the food.

After the waiter left, he looked at Astrid and said, “Because your brother is dead. That means that Phoenix and your brother were probably close. That’s why he left. He doesn’t want to talk about it.”

Astrid looked at her food, not hearing anything else he had to say.

The food was boxed up, but she was too consumed by her own thoughts to notice. At some point, she became aware that Elliott was staring at her.

Without a thought, she stood up and ran to the edge of the deck. For the second time in her life, she shifted in public, then ran off toward the small body of water. Once she reached it, Astrid dove into the water and fled from prying eyes. In the comfort of the water, she began to cry, her body moving with the flow of the water.

Chapter 5

A Rash Decision

Not sure if Elliott was following her, Astrid refused to come up for air. She didn't have gills, but she was able to use the water to pull air toward her. It wasn't exactly comfortable, but it was better than having to face someone while she was trying to process what she just learned.

The farther she went, the more questions Astrid had about what Phoenix knew about her brother. How much had he known about her that first time when he approached her? Was he trying to use her to learn more for his company? Did he feel guilty about what happened to her and her brother?

It was only when she reached home that Astrid realized she had left all of her stuff in Phoenix's car. She stood on the stoop, staring at her door, trying to figure out what to do. One of those computers had a lot of sensitive information on it.

He had to know that when he left without me, he still had my stuff. Was that a part of his plan? Get me to leave my stuff in his car, then leave me with Elliott so that he could see what I know? If not, why did he leave like he did? More importantly, how am I –

She stepped up onto the porch while she thought about what she should do. Some movement beside her side caught her attention. She hadn't yet set up the furniture. Yet, there it was. The table and chairs neatly arranged, and a few rocking chairs with a table between them. Hidden on one of the chairs pushed under the table was her bag.

Well... shit. He knows where I live.

She pinched the bridge of her nose.

I don't know how I'm supposed to feel about that.

Her immediate thoughts were again to attribute ulterior motives to him returning her stuff. But even though he wasn't exactly the most open person, Astrid couldn't point to anything Phoenix had done that would indicate that he was doing anything to benefit himself. He had been in the area for longer, had more time to research things, and probably had a lot more resources. Astrid couldn't imagine one thing that he needed her for.

A lifetime of mistrust because of some horrible experiences as a child. Maybe I should stop acting like he's trying to use me in some way and just accept that there are some people out there who just care.

She exhaled loudly. "That's going to be a tall order."

Pulling out her phone, she messaged him.

Thank you for returning my stuff. And thank you for your help. Let me know what you need from me, and I'll see what I can do.

PS: Please apologize to Elliott for me.

After shoving the phone back into her pocket, Astrid picked up her bags and went inside. She headed back to her office and set up the devices to start trying to piece together what she had found with some of the information that her brother had left for her.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:09 am

Hours passed as she got lost in her research. Sometime after midnight, Astrid felt a little stiff. Sitting up, she pushed her shoulders back, enjoying the stretch in her spine. She let out a little groan, then decided to stand up.

Even though she had only just started her research, the cat shifter felt certain that there were many pieces of the puzzle on the base. She had always known that was the case, but with some of the information she had found, Astrid felt she was starting to get an idea of what kind of information she needed.

Once on her feet, she started to pace. Pacing turned into going outside for air. And being outside in the stillness of night, her attention was drawn in the direction of the base.

It's a Sunday night. I'll bet that there aren't that many people on base, and given the time, they are probably not particularly alert. If I can just sneak on the base and find a few files on my brother, I'll probably be able to make a lot more progress.

Even as she was convincing herself to go, Astrid knew that running off to the base was a bad idea. There was a lot of reconnaissance that needed to be done, and she had a decent plan for how to start infiltrating the place. However, it had been two decades, and now she was so close to learning more.

First, she locked the house, telling herself that she was just going for a walk. Soon, she was jogging down the road. When she reached the woods, Astrid shifted and bolted in the direction of the base. It was several miles away, but in her heightened emotional state, she didn't notice as she kept a comfortable pace.

Eventually, she encountered some wire with some warning signs. Knowing it was better to stay in her current form, Astrid began looking at the trees. There were plenty of them on her side of the fence, but the other side seemed to be largely tree-free. She started trotting down the fence looking for ways onto the base. It could be through the trees or a hole under the fence – either one was fine by her. Although she definitely preferred to go over the fence than under it.

Eventually, she found a place with some sickly looking trees on the opposite side. Climbing up the tree closest to thin trees, Astrid wiggled her speckled body as she prepared to launch herself across the open air. Her muscles bunched, and she focused on the closest tree.

Finally, she darted forward, her paws shaking the branch, then jumped gracefully into the air.

She hit the tree hard, and the poor, spindly thing simply couldn't take it. As the tree toppled, Astrid dug her nails into the bark, bracing for the impact with the ground. She then jumped seconds before it hit. With her adrenaline pumping, the young shifter raced off onto the base with no idea where anything was.

That's when she started to regret her rash decision. She had no idea where to go, let alone where the important buildings were. The only benefit she had was in the fact that she wasn't obviously a threat—at least not to the information. If a person were to encounter her, they might shoot. Ocelots weren't particularly big, but they were clearly larger than a house cat.

She listened for people and headed toward the place where the voices were coming from. She had no idea how long she was on the grounds when she noticed the barracks. Her shoulders relaxed a little. She had studied the layout a bit when she was younger, so she figured that she at least had an idea of where to go now that she had a point of reference.

The grey light of dawn was starting to turn the world around her a very dull color when she finally reached a place that she thought might have some relevant information. Astrid looked toward the fencing, debating if she should just go home. It was nearly 6 a.m., and she could hear the sounds of people starting to wake and get moving on their day.

You are so close. If you can just verify that it's the right place, you can head home and come back in a few days.

Shifting into her human form, Astrid moved around the side of a long admin building. When she reached the door, she realized that there was a lot more planning required before she could find anything. The door had controls on it, and without a badge, she wouldn't be able to enter.

"What are you doing here?" a voice suddenly said.

Chapter 6

An Honest Request

Astrid turned around and came face to face with two uniformed soldiers. They both had holsters with guns, and they were looking at her with suspicion. One had sandy brown hair cropped short and stood slightly taller than her. The other had black hair, also cropped short, but it had a clear curl to it. He was considerably taller and more intimidating.

"Oh, I'm just—"

"She's with me." The voice startled the three of them, and Astrid's mouth nearly fell open as she watched Phoenix come strolling up to them with a few other soldiers.

One of the soldiers who had been giving her a dirty look relaxed. “Mr. Woodward. We didn’t realize you were coming this way.”

The other soldier spoke up. “She’s not wearing the approved uniform, and it doesn’t look like she has a badge.”

Phoenix’s eyes moved over to her. “Ashley, I told you that you needed to wait. Here’s your badge. Go back to the truck,” he turned and pointed near the gate leaving from the base. “We need to have a serious discussion about you flaunting your role. And here’s your badge, which must have fallen off on the way here.” He held out a hand with a badge.

Astrid took it and looked at the false name but very real image of her. Her eyes looked up at Phoenix. “Thank you, sir.”

The taller soldier asked, “And what is her role?”

“Miss Hargrove here is a security expert, and sometimes she gets it in her head that she needs to test security before briefings.”

One of the soldiers snorted. “She’s a little too enthusiastic for her own good.” He turned and looked at her. “This isn’t some self-important corporation that takes these things lightly. Had Mr. Woodward not turned up, you could have found yourself in serious trouble.”

Astrid nodded. “Understood.” Without looking back, she strode off in the direction that Phoenix had indicated. When she reached it, Astrid was once again at a loss. She had no idea what the name of his company was, so she had no idea which truck was his. There were far too many trucks of different types for her to be able to guess.

Phoenix and his escort appeared just as she was starting to question what she should

do. “Ok, Miss Hargrove, we need to head back since this breach is going to require some paperwork and explanation.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:09 am

“Good luck, sir,” one of the soldiers offered.

Phoenix reached her but didn’t say anything as she fell in step beside him. Something about his demeanor told Astrid to keep her mouth shut. He unlocked a truck with a W in a circle, and that’s when it clicked.

Phoenix opened her door, and Astrid couldn’t have felt more foolish as she slid into the seat. He closed the door, then walked around and got into the driver’s seat. They remained silent as Phoenix drove off the base.

It was disappearing in the side mirror when he finally spoke. “You really messed up my day.”

Astrid’s initial reaction was to point out that she didn’t ask for his help. However, she knew that was entirely the wrong reaction. “I’m very sorry, Phoenix. And thank you.”

He looked over at her. “Well, I couldn’t just let you get taken. As I told you, they are working with people who use women like you. If they get their hands on you, you will loathe the rest of your short life.”

“What do you mean by my short life?”

“They push women to use their abilities until they die.”

Astrid balled up her hands. “What do they get out of it?”

“The Mora family used Alina to grow their company and to successfully start their

illegal operations. After they fell—"

"Because they killed her?"

"No, because she escaped. She's Cooper Sexton's wife."

"S ... why would talking about her bother Elliott?"

"Not my story to tell. Anyway, the Mora family lost her, their work was exposed, and some of their competitors tried to pick up where they left off. Granted, they weren't the only family working on it, but they were the ones with the most influence and worst disregard for their test subjects to the point where their facility was destroyed."

"Oh, she was the one who saw the future. Ok. Right. I can see how that would be helpful. But how would anyone use my abilities to control water?"

He gave her an incredulous look, then turned back to watch the road. "As I pointed out, people are made mostly of water. You already have a pretty good understanding of how to manipulate water that isn't in a human container, and you can control small areas of the ocean. Do you really need me to point out how that can be dangerous? And the fact that we did just leave a military base?"

Astrid thought about it for a moment. "You think they might weaponize my abilities against other people? Like, on a battle level?"

"They would do it in a heartbeat. And their preference would be that it's your last heartbeat so that they don't get caught for using you for experiments."

Astrid sank down in her seat, causing the badge she had attached to her pants to poke her. She pulled it away from her, glancing at it. Then she looked at it again. "Why did I think that this was an actual badge?" She pulled the badge up, the lanyard stretching

as she did. All that she had was a blank badge, no image or words.

“You aren’t the only person with abilities.”

She stared at the blank badge, then looked at him. “What did you do?”

“Power of suggestion. I can make people see what I want them to see. When we reached you, the soldiers thought you were dressed like a lab tech, not some woman roaming the base.”

“You changed my outfit?”

“I changed how they perceived your outfit. It would have been a lot harder to explain a woman roaming around in civilian clothing trying to enter a classified area.”

“Oh.” There were so many questions going through her head. None of them seemed to matter in that moment. “I’m really sorry, Phoenix. Thanks again. And thanks for taking my stuff home. Do I want to know how you figured out where I lived?”

“I did my research.”

“You mean you looked me up? Exactly how deep did that go?”

“Don’t worry, I didn’t do a background check or anything. Just some basic info, like where you live and what you do for a living.”

She took a deep breath. “Was it necessary?”

“I thought so. And you’ve already benefited from it.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:09 am

“How would you feel if I did that to you?”

“You are in security, Astrid. The fact that you haven’t yet is a bit disheartening.”

She started tapping her hand on her leg. “I didn’t know your last name.”

“You were too busy trying not to encounter us, which I can understand. What I don’t understand is how you can be so reckless. What was your plan going in there?”

“I didn’t have one. What was yours? And why did they know you?”

“I told you we are working on a branch of my organization here.”

“I thought that it was supposed to save people like me.”

“That’s what we do behind the scenes. If you want to run a successful international business, you have to have services or products that people want. And that gives me a great cover for the things that are important to my family.”

Astrid sat back, her eyes watching the world around them. They were near her house.

“You bought me dinner. How about I return the favor by making you breakfast?”

“That’s not a good idea.”

“Because of the curse?”

“Yes.”

Astrid looked over at him. “Do you think I’m cursed?”

He pulled into the driveway but didn’t immediately respond. “Here you go. Have a good day, and please, be much more careful. It was incredibly fortunate and very unlikely that I would have been onsite when you were. That kind of luck is not going to hold.” He got out of the car and started walking around the car, but Astrid didn’t wait. She opened the door before he reached her side.

“I can open my own door.”

He held up his hands, then returned to his side of the car. Before Phoenix got into it, she asked, “Do you think I’m cursed?”

His blue eyes were pained as he looked at her. “No, you would know if you were.”

“My mother left when—”

He shook his head. “Not now.”

“What do you mean, not now?”

The way he glanced around them made it clear. Phoenix did not want to discuss it out in the open. He then got into the driver’s seat.

Astrid turned around, holding her door open. “What do you know about what happened to Evander? Please.”

She noticed his knuckles turning white on the steering wheel, and his strong jaw was tight. “I... I don’t have the answers you need.”

“What about the answers I want?”

Phoenix looked over at her. “I don’t think I’m the best person to talk about your brother.”

“Do you feel responsible for his death?”

He stiffened, then looked away. “I don’t see how that’s relevant, and I really do have things I need to do today.”

Astrid got back into the passenger seat. “I know I have been pretty horrible to you, and I am sorry. But the fact is you knew my brother.” She bit her lip. “I don’t have anyone else I can talk to about him.”

Phoenix finally looked over at her. “Spending time with me is a terrible idea.”

“I’m not worried about any curse.”

“Neither was your brother.”

Astrid paused, trying to figure out the right thing to say. Then she gave him a half smile. “Well, if it makes you feel any better, no one’s going to miss me since everyone I care for is already dead.”

Phoenix’s eyes bore into her, and he looked like there was something he wanted to say. Finally, he hung his head and let go of the steering wheel. “What are you offering for breakfast?”

Astrid felt a thrill go through her. “How about scrambled eggs with grits and some soy bacon?”

He closed his door. “Soy bacon?”

“Yeah. Dad and I decided to be mostly vegetarian because of Evan. Fish is my one weakness.” She closed the car door, beaming as she led him up to the door.

“That sounds like torture.”

“Ah, they’ve gotten a lot better about making the food taste like more than soy.”

“It couldn’t possibly taste as good as the real thing.”

“Ah, an avid carnivore.”

This got a slight chuckle. “Well, yes, that should be expected.”

Astrid stopped with her key near the door, and then she looked back at him, not quite understanding how that would be expected.

His head moved a little as he mouthed the word “Dragon.”

“Oh! Right. Well, that isn’t always a determining factor, is it?” She unlocked the door and pushed it wide open. “After you.”

“I’m not entering a home before a lady.”

“I’ve never been accused of being a lady.”

“I’m glad to be your first.” He smiled, but before she could think about the innuendo, he held out his hand. “After you.”

“Ok, if you insist.” She entered, then stepped to the side. “Welcome to my home.”

“Why thank you, Ms. Lynnox. I appreciate your hospitality.”

“You’ve been the first person to express concern since my father died. It’s probably time to stop being so defensive,” she replied as she closed and locked the door. “Make yourself at home, at least within reason.” She smiled at him, then started walking down the hall.

Then, for the first time in what felt like forever, she shifted in front of someone intentionally. Her tail twitched restlessly behind her as she tried to stride confidently toward the kitchen. Phoenix said something behind her, but Astrid’s heart was in her throat, and she was feeling far too self-conscious to make out what he said.

Chapter 7

Some of the Pieces

By the time Phoenix walked into the kitchen, Astrid had shifted back into her human form and was removing items from the fridge. His tone was amused when he said, “I didn’t expect you to show off.”

She looked over her shoulder while putting the eggs on the counter. “I was just returning the favor. I just chose a more appropriate and private environment.”

“At least you have some sense when it comes to shifting. Although,” he tilted his head to the side, “it certainly explains why you were able to get away so easily. I have to admit, of all the cat shifters I’ve met, finding an ocelot is a first for me. It’s not exactly normal this far north.”

She stopped moving around the kitchen and looked at him. Elliott wasn’t the only person who could help her. “You know a lot of cat shifters?”

“Yes, they are one of the most common types of shifters, and they are the ones who are most likely to leave their birthplaces.”

“I’ve never known any.”

Phoenix just looked at her before asking, “Wasn’t your mother a cat shifter?”

“Apparently, yes.”

“You don’t know?”

“I never knew my mother, so I only have what Dad and Evan told me about her. She was gone before my first birthday.”

The room fell silent for a bit, except for the sounds of her moving around the kitchen and preparing food. Finally, he asked, “Is it something you want to talk about?”

Astrid kept her head down and worked as she pondered the question. Phoenix waited, allowing her time to think. “I’m not sure. It’s not something that I’ve really considered. I was too young to have developed a more mature opinion,” she turned and looked at him. “Mostly, I just asked why she left and cried when I didn’t get an answer that I could understand.”

She resumed working on their breakfast. “I didn’t talk to my dad about it since he had enough to worry about after Evan died. At this point, I’m not sure what good would come from talking about it. She ran off without any explanation. I don’t know how talking about it with anyone besides her would help. And I’m not even sure that I want to talk to her.”

“If you want, I could find her for you.”

She looked over at him. “Why?”

He shrugged. “It would give you a chance to learn more about her and yourself. Or

you can just take on the information and file it away.”

She leaned against the counter as the food cooked. “You know, in all of my time working in cybersecurity, I never even considered looking for her.”

He gave her a soft smile. “That’s probably your answer then.”

After a moment of reflection, Astrid stood up. “Yeah. I think that’s probably... right.”

“But If you do want to talk about it at some point, I’m here for now.”

“So, you are planning on leaving?”

“It’s inevitable, given my job, but once I get this problem resolved, there will be thousands of others that need my attention.”

“Are you saying that you are neglecting thousands of problems to fix this one?”

“Against the wishes of everyone I know, yes.”

“It’s been twenty years since Evan died. Why did you wait until now to start looking into it?”

“My stepmother convinced my father that it was more profitable to be used elsewhere.”

Her head whipped around, and she looked at him. “Your stepmother?”

“Yes. My mother died when I was a few years old, so I don’t really remember her.”

“I’m so sorry – wait, you remember her?”

“Yes. I have a much better memory than most, thanks to my mother’s genetics. I got a lot from her, most of it good.”

“And the curse?”

His cool blue eyes held her gaze. “That’s from my dad, a calculated move on his part. He married my mother because her family was powerful and important in their community of polar bear shifters.”

“Really?” She was surprised by this, but he confirmed it by nodding. “You can’t shift into a dragon or a polar bear, can you?”

He laughed. “No, no. Shifters only have two forms, although I would certainly rather have been a bear because I wouldn’t have to deal with the curse.”

“It’s tied to you being a dragon shifter?”

“Yes, it’s a very calculated move on my father’s part.” His tone had changed, and he sounded bitter.

“How so?”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:09 am

“I was told when my mother died that it was my fault. My father never bothered to bond with me, ensuring that I would never feel close to him. Naturally, he had a built-in way of turning me against him.”

“How?”

“I was five when he told me he was the reason I was cursed and that no one wanted to get close. He made sure to marry a really horrible woman years later and had my brothers. I don’t think they know that we are only half-siblings. And they think I’m younger than I am.”

“Because you couldn’t get close to them.”

He nodded.

“Do they know about the curse?”

He shook his head. “There was no point in telling them. I was always the aloof older brother who was too busy working to spend time with them.”

For the first time in a long time, Astrid felt that someone actually had it worse than she did. She plated the food, then brought it over to the table.

“Oh, shoot! I forgot about drinks. What would you like? Juice? Coffee? Tea?”

“Tap water’s fine.”

“That doesn’t seem right.”

“I can taste the food better if I’m not mixing it was flavors from the drink.”

“I guess that’s one way to look at it. Are you sure, though?”

“Yes, you said they have improved the bacon, so I want to see if that’s true.”

Astrid got him his water, then poured herself some juice. They sat and ate in silence, except for the sounds of their utensils pinging and scraping against their plates. When Phoenix finished, he gave his critique of the meal.

“It was good. The way you make eggs is very different from anything I’ve had before.”

“How so?”

“My dad taught me, and he’s from Louisiana, so I’m guessing that his way was inspired by the region.”

“It’s possible. I’ve never actually been there.”

“You’ve never been to Louisiana?”

He shook his head. “No, dragons don’t tend to do well in those climates.”

“What? Really? I mean, because I thought lizards would do much better in warmer places.”

“Lizards, yes. But,” he said, smiling at her, “dragons are able to breathe fire, so getting cold really isn’t an issue. Staying cool can be.”

“Oh, yeah. I’m sorry. I didn’t even think of that.”

“Did you even know that dragons were real before you saw me shift?”

“Um, no,” she said and smiled. “I thought they were fake.”

“You’ve done a great job learning how to manage your powers, but you clearly need to learn a lot about the shifter world.”

“As funny as it sounds, I think you’re right.”

“How is that funny?”

“Between my dad, Evan, and me, we have three different types of shifter blood, but we really didn’t know that much about it. Most of what my dad knew was from his first wife, Evan’s mom. But I don’t think they were together for more than a few years, and I don’t know when they found out about each other’s abilities. And my mom wasn’t any help since he didn’t know she was a shifter until she had me. I’m not sure why it finally came out then.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:09 am

Phoenix reached out and placed his hand palm down on the table. “I dare say your father was probably in the room when you were born, and it became obvious.”

“Why would it matter?”

“Because, Astrid, we are all born in our natural form.”

After a pause, she said, “I came out as a cat?”

“Yes.”

“Does that mean that my mother had to shift first?”

“No, women stay in their human form to give birth most of the time. But infants always make it obvious if they have shifting abilities right from the beginning. No one has to teach you how to shift.”

Astrid said, “I never really thought about that. My dad kept me home for the longest time because I shifted a lot when I was young. It was only when Evan made me promise not to shift around other people that I stopped.”

“So, Evan convinced you not to shift in public?”

“Yes, the fear of disappointing him made me keep that promise. I really loved my brother.”

While maintaining eye contact, Phoenix nodded. “He was very charismatic and easy

to get along with.”

“I still miss him.” It was the first time Astrid had voiced that feeling in a while. Suddenly, she started crying.

She was vaguely aware of the plates being moved, and then something was placed in her lap. Astrid looked down and saw that it was a handkerchief. He had taken their dishes and moved them to the sink to wash while she cried. He didn’t interrupt her as she just wept. But at one point, he came over and rubbed her back.

This brought her back to the present. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t invite you here for this,” Astrid snuffled. “Let me go get cleaned up.”

“Actually, I need to get going. Why don’t you get some sleep and try to recover and maybe reflect on your rather rash decisions.”

She smiled a little while wiping a tear away with the hankie. “I suppose I need to clean this now,” she said, holding it up to him.

“Keep it. I have plenty of others.” He patted her shoulder. “Have a good day, and let me know if you need help with anything.”

Phoenix was halfway to the door when she called out, “Can we get together again?”

“Sorry, Astrid. But from here on out, it has to be work only. I’m not going to be the reason why both you and your brother died.”

Even though he confirmed what she had thought, Astrid wasn’t sure how to respond. A part of her was angry. He clearly knew about the curse when he befriended her brother, but he did it anyway. At the same time, she knew what her brother was like. Unlike her, he was gregarious, and everyone loved him. Astrid was combative and

temperamental. Evan was mellow and level-headed. Phoenix had left by the time she could think of something to say.

Exhaustion hit her hard. Dragging herself to the bathroom, Astrid made quick work of removing the grime from the last twenty-four hours. As soon as she reached her bed, she collapsed and slept for over ten hours. Her dreams were peaceful and included a pair of soft, clear blue eyes.

Chapter 8

A Day of Annoyance and Visitors

For a couple of weeks, Astrid would text Phoenix several times during the day. He had started sending her the information he had on the area, and it took her several weeks to process it all. At the same time, she started a large project for a tech startup company. Over time, and as that project seemed to be going smoothly, she had more time to focus on her personal project.

Astrid researched the area and the military base, supplementing what Phoenix had found with new information. When she found something she thought was helpful, she'd send it over a secure connection she had established with him so they could swap information.

After emailing him, she would text him, initially to let him know that there was something for him to review, but over time, she started checking up on him. Astrid asked how he was doing, if he had gotten enough sleep, and if he wanted to talk to decompress. Occasionally, he would call her later in the day; although the talks never lasted long, they did become more frequent.

This went on for a few months, and Astrid looked forward to chatting with him. It was a nice contrast to the tech project, and it was nice to have someone she could talk

to, even if only by text most of the time.

She learned that he was working out of town most of that time, and Astrid wasn't particularly interested in getting to know other people in town. She simply didn't know whom she could trust. The only place where she might be able to return was the bakery, but her shame at what she had done and how Phoenix had cleaned up after her made her reluctant to go back.

It was easier for her to live a secluded life than to actually get out and interact with people who might be working with whoever was behind her brother's death. Apart from the teams she was working with on the tech project, Phoenix was the only person she talked to in a meaningful way over several months.

He started to open up a bit to her, but overall, Phoenix remained guarded. As September rolled around, she hoped he would start feeling more comfortable about opening up.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:09 am

One morning while eating breakfast, Astrid pulled out her phone and texted him.

Are you back in town? If so, would you like to meet up? I've been cooped up and could use a little human interaction. If you know somewhere safe, we could talk about the latest information I've found. Or I can make us dinner, and we could talk in the relative safety of my home.

At first, she hoped he would respond quickly, given it was early in the day. She tried to give him time so that they could text for a while before she started working. When she finished eating, Astrid knew he wasn't going to answer. Not quite ready to settle into her work, she decided to try to water the dead grass outside her home. It had bothered her when it was mostly brown when she moved in back in May. Now, not even the weeds were green.

Astrid went outside and tried to turn on the sprinklers. The landlord had said back in May that the grass would probably come back once the rain started. Astrid looked at the brown yard and felt a sense of discomfort. She suspected that the reason the landlord told her not to worry about the grass was that he didn't want to have to fix the broken sprinkler system. Looking up and down the street, Astrid was annoyed that her yard was the only one that wasn't a lustrous green.

I'm not going to be that house on the street.

She bent down to look like she was fixing something in case anyone was watching. Placing her hand on the ground, she tapped into the water system. Seconds later, water was shooting across the yard. Astrid stood and folded her arms over her chest, watching the water moving in beautiful arcs that created small rainbows all across her

yard. Satisfied that her yard would start coming back to life sooner, she headed inside. Once back indoors, she pulled out her phone to see if Phoenix had responded.

Nothing.

Knowing that his delayed response meant he probably wouldn't respond for a while, she turned her attention to the work she was loathe to do. The smooth sailing had ended at the beginning of August, as managers started trying to get their way before the project ended, and that meant getting pulled into a plethora of pointless meetings where the managers would argue. Of course she was invited as the security expert, but they never listened to her during the meetings.

After three hours of hearing them bicker about what to do, the group decided to take a break. Grateful for a chance to escape, she stood up and stretched. Then, after deciding that she felt too stiff and restless to stay inside, Astrid decided to go for a jog to get some fresh air.

Such a waste of money, she thought. Pay for an expert, then ignore their recommendations.

Stretching her legs, she tried to get her head in a better space.

She shoved her earphones into her ears, still feeling a bit bothered by the managers and their quarrels. When she pulled out her phone, she saw a text from Phoenix. Everything else was forgotten as she read his reply.

I can't meet up, but I did find something interesting. I'll send it over later.

It wasn't what she wanted to read, but she was even more disappointed than she had expected. Instead of responding, she turned up her music and headed outside. As she walked down the driveway, Astrid stopped the water spraying out of the broken

sprinklers; then, she ran at a comfortable pace.

Just like that first day, she tried to think about what the place would have looked like to her brother. Every so often, she imagined Phoenix and Evander jogging together. It was one more thing she needed to ask him.

When she finally returned home, she returned to her desk. As the managers returned from the break and started arguing in the chat room, Astrid sighed and turned her attention to a more pressing problem.

She stared at Phoenix's message, debating how to respond. It was clear he was going to try to keep his distance from her because he was afraid that his curse would kill her. The logical part of her wanted to dismiss it. Then again, the logical part of her was still having trouble accepting that dragons were real, so she knew that reality wasn't nearly as cut and dry as logic made it seem.

Turning to the one place she always went when she wasn't sure what to do, Astrid opened Tor and started researching curses. There was a lot of nonsense and claims that she easily dismissed.

Every once in a while, she had to interact with the managers as they sniped, bickered, and argued with each other. Since she knew they weren't going to listen to her, Astrid was only partially aware of what they were asking. She had already sent her recommendations in an email to all of them and their superiors. Eventually, after the managers wasted enough time and money, they would undoubtedly end up doing as she suggested.

An hour and a half passed before she gave up on finding anything real about curses online. Most of the dark web covered the same kind of junk that could be found on the normal internet, except it tended to focus on how to curse others, not on how to break them. And none of the information seemed credible.

Lightly tapping on her keyboard, Astrid considered what to do. Finally, she started researching Elliott Sexton. They hadn't talked since their dinner, but every once in a while, he would come up in the conversations with Phoenix. It was possible that he knew more about the curse or at least had an idea as to where to start looking for ways to break it.

Getting his information proved to be much harder than she expected. Eventually, she gave up trying to find him – he had no online footprint. She started researching other numbers for the family. When she came across a website that listed Sheriff Cooper Sexton, Astrid felt certain she had someone who might be able to help her.

Picking up the phone, she dialed the number.

“Sexton Sheriff’s Department. Cooper speaking.”

“Um, this is Astrid Lynnox. I don’t know if Elliott’s mentioned me, but I was wondering how to get in touch with him.”

There was a heavy sigh, and Cooper must have covered the mouthpiece. She heard him talking, but she couldn’t make out the words. When he returned to the phone, Cooper sounded less than friendly. “What do you want with him?”

“I ran into him and Phoenix Woodward in Ponderosa.”

There was concern in his voice as the sheriff responded, “Elliott’s spending time with Phoenix? That – I don’t – Alina hasn’t mentioned anything about this. Are they getting close?”

Astrid was astonished by the response. After the way Elliott had talked him up, she expected better of Cooper. Feeling offended on Phoenix’s part, she replied, “They are working together because of something that happened in Canada. Elliott offered his

help to Phoenix, who initially turned him down. So don't blame Phoenix for your brother's choices."

There was silence. "Do you have any idea how he affected my family?"

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:09 am

“I know that he blames himself for my brother’s death. We all make choices, so if you want to blame someone for Elliott’s choices, blame Elliott!”

She hung up before he could respond. She felt angry on Phoenix’s behalf, considering how lonely his life must have been. At least she’d had her father – until recently. It didn’t sound like Phoenix ever had anyone for long.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of someone knocking on her door. Unsure who would be visiting, she got up and headed toward the door. She looked through the peephole but didn’t see anyone. Then they knocked again, this time at her back door.

Frowning, she shifted and padded her way to the kitchen. She looked up through the vertical blinds and the glass of the back door. Standing next to the door was the man she was trying to contact with.

Stepping back, she shifted, then opened the door. “Elliott! How did you figure out where I live?”

“I texted Phoenix since I know you two have been talking. You may want to listen to him there and be careful. May I come in?”

Astrid folded her arms across her chest. “You know, I just chewed out your brother for talking like that about Phoenix. I’m not above doing the same to you.”

“Apologies. If you want to throw your life away, that’s not my business. May I come in?”

“No,” she said and stood in the doorway, blocking him. “I just talked to Cooper. How did you get here so fast?”

“I flew. Judging from his tone, I was under the impression that this was an emergency. Glad to hear it isn’t.” He then turned to leave.

“How can the curse be broken?”

Elliott stopped walking. She could see him ball up his hands a few times. “If we knew that, we would have done it already.”

“Do you know anything about the curse besides the fact that it might kill you?”

“No. I’ve heard of about a half dozen people who have died because they got close to Phoenix. No, I didn’t know any of them personally. I’m sorry that I can’t help you further. Good luck.”

Then, he just walked away, disappearing into the woods behind her place.

Astrid was at a loss as to what to do. Elliott hadn’t seemed particularly warm, but she hadn’t thought of him as being this cold either. When she saw something move across the sky in the distance, the cat shifter knew it was Elliott.

Maybe I shouldn’t have been so short with him. He came here with no warning and without talking to me. Was he concerned?

Guilt began to set in, and that’s when she realized that she hadn’t gotten what she needed – Elliott’s contact information. Letting out a frustrated grunt, she pulled out her phone again. Calling Cooper after hanging up on him didn’t seem like the wisest idea, and she doubted that Elliott would return even if she did.

That really only left one option.

She rubbed her forehead, not really wanting to reach out to Phoenix again. After all, texting him was what had gotten all of this started.

I don't really have much of a choice.

Putting aside her annoyance, mostly at herself, she responded to Phoenix's last response.

Please tell Elliott I'm sorry and really appreciate him stopping by to help. His concern is touching.

The response was almost immediate.

What happened? Are you ok?

Astrid looked at the message, unsure why he would be concerned.

Yeah, I'm fine. Just didn't have his contact information and had some questions for him. Unfortunately, it's been a trying day, and I took it out on him. So please, let him know I'm sorry.

There was no response. Feeling like she had just wasted most of her afternoon, Astrid returned to her desk. She flopped down and slouched against the back of the chair. Her eyes followed the continuous argument going on in the chat.

"How in the world do these people end up in their positions?" she muttered as she swiveled around in her seat, very displeased by the direction her day had taken. "Maybe I should just go ahead and hack the base. At least that can get me somewhere that actually matters."

As she continued to consider her options, there was another knock at her door. Astrid wondered if Elliott had returned because she had apologized. Deciding she wasn't needed on the chat any longer, she messaged the managers.

Page 31

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:09 am

Sorry, guys, but I need to get going. Send me a message about what you decide, and I'll get started on it tonight."

She hit send, knowing that they wouldn't bother. A few wished her a good evening.

At least they're nice about it,she thought as she logged out for the day.

She was halfway down the hallway when the knock came again, and it was the front door this time. She didn't bother to look through the peephole before opening it.

"Thanks, Elliott. I—" She stopped as soon as she realized it wasn't Elliott standing in front of her. Instead, it was three men dressed in suits, wearing sunglasses and looking menacing. Before she said anything, the one in the middle held something up and pulled the trigger.

Astrid looked down to see something sticking out of her chest. When she looked up, the world turned fuzzy. Taking a step back, the cat shifter shut and locked the door.

Then she passed out.

Chapter 9

Either You Or No One

"Come on, Astrid, wake up."

Astrid felt something warm on her shoulders, then something warm on her neck, as if

taking her pulse. The voice was familiar, but she was having a hard time placing it. Something about it sounded desperate. However, she was having trouble focusing because there was a strange tingling sensation across her limbs and a concerning pain in her chest. Then her body jolted, almost like she was being hit with something electrical or experiencing a seizure.

That's not right.

Her mind was trying to make sense of the problem. When she was young and stuck her finger in a socket, the same thing happened. Her brother and father had been beside themselves with worry, and she had spent a couple of days under close surveillance. They never took her to the hospital, and while they never told her why, Astrid felt certain it was because she was a shifter. Instead, they monitored and cared for her until she was back to normal.

Something warm slid under her back. The spasms stopped, and her body felt more relaxed. The man let out a sigh as her body stilled and her breathing stabilized. She caught the scent of lavender and leather. Turning her head, she breathed in a little deeper, and a slight smile formed at the edges of her mouth.

As she settled down, he whispered. "Just be ok, and I swear, I won't contact you again. I'll leave you what I have and will stay away from here. Just wake up. Please, wake up." She felt something touch her forehead, and a warmth spread out from there.

Groggily opening her eyes, she saw a pair of shiny blue eyes framed by some very prominent cheekbones and some gorgeous black hair. Something flashed through her mind, so she looked down at her chest. The little clamps and wires were gone. "Did they... Tase me?"

Instead of an answer, the man pulled her into a hug. "Thank you. I could not have

lived with myself if I caused your death, too.”

Astrid rubbed her tongue against the roof of her mouth, tasting metal. She started shivering. “I don’t think they used anything deadly. They just shot me with a Taser or something. I remember the prongs sticking out of my shirt and the wires going back toward the man.” She moved a bit, but her arms felt like jelly. “My body isn’t quite working properly. Is that normal?”

The man set her down carefully, and she realized that she was in an unfamiliar bed. Looking around, Astrid tried to think about what led up to her being shot.

As she tried to process everything, the man stood up and moved away from the bed. “I believe it is normal for humans, but I’m not sure about shifters. There’s a good chance they did something to alter the charge, something that would enhance it to make sure you weren’t able to resist it. I’m running some tests now to see if there was anything else because your response suggested it wasn’t just electrical. I mean you...” He turned and looked at her and placed his hand on his chin as if thinking.

Astrid looked away, feeling some heat spreading across her neck. “I’m sorry, I’m having a hard time remembering who you are.”

When he didn’t immediately respond, she looked up at him. The man was just looking at her, concern in his eyes. “I mean, you look familiar, but I don’t... I can’t quite place you.”

“Do you remember what happened? Did you hit your head?”

“I...” Astrid tried to think back, but what stuck out was the wires and the three men.

The man walked over and started feeling the back of her head. “Ah, yes. You have quite a knot on the back of your head. I’m sorry, I didn’t realize that. Hold on.” He

closed his beautiful blue eyes and placed his hand over the back of her head. It hurt for a second, but Astrid realized that as it warmed, the pain dissipated.

“Oh. You’ve been healing me.”

He opened his eyes and gave her a weak smile. “I’m sure you could have done that yourself, but I think that the current in your body is going to make healing a little more difficult.”

“Yeah... that sounds right. I managed to get myself electrocuted when I was little by playing with an outlet with my fingernails.” She usually would stop there, but since this guy was able to heal her, she kept going. “I was in my other form, so you know, claws really, not fingernails.” She feebly held up a hand and wiggled her fingers.

The smile widened, but there was still sadness in his eyes. “You shifted into your cat form to play, and you were trying to play with the outlet?”

She showed her teeth and wrinkled up her nose. “Yeah. My dad would have been furious if he hadn’t been so afraid that I was going to die.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:09 am

“I’ll bet. That would be terrifying.” He pulled his hand back and bit his lip.

“What are you thinking?”

“Since you can control water... I’m wondering if that’s why you are having a different sort of reaction. I’m still going to have Elliott finish the tests to see if there was anything else, but it’s possible it’s an adverse reaction to direct electrical currents. I know that they use different ways of... disabling women with abilities, but this seems like a very different kind of reaction than what we’ve seen or heard about.”

“Do you mean kind of like an allergic reaction?”

He looked thoughtful. “Kind of. Yeah. It’s a somewhat encouraging sign since they don’t have enough understanding of your kind to know what works. It’s entirely concerning, though, since it means women with abilities are at greater risk since they can be harmed or killed when these malicious miscreants attack.”

“So... you think there are people after women with abilities?”

The man looked at her, clearly assessing how much to tell her. “Yes. My organization knows that women like you are targeted. They don’t seem to know about shifters, so they were not expecting your incredibly quick response to being Tased. But they figured out where you lived and that you have abilities. Do you know how they were able to figure that out?”

Astrid closed her eyes and thought back. “It wasn’t because of you, if that’s what

you're thinking."

"Exactly what are you remembering to make you say that?"

She opened one eye and looked at him. "I heard you blaming yourself." Closing the eye, she said a bit defiantly. "I don't know why you think that at the moment, but I think it's ridiculous. The reason they found me was because of myself."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I don't know, but it sounds right."

"That's not my experience. Now that you are doing better, I've got someone coming with test results in a bit. I'll leave him with you to—"

"I don't want to be left with someone else."

"It's not your choice."

"I can just up and leave."

"That would put you at much greater risk. Especially since you are not fully recovered."

"Well, that won't be your problem if you decide to leave."

He shook his head and turned around. "Don't be difficult, Astrid."

"I don't want to spend time with Elliott."

The man looked over his shoulder. "So, you remember Elliott?"

She looked up at the ceiling. “Yeah, he stopped by after I... called his brother.”

“Which one?”

Astrid turned her head and looked at the man. “Cooper. I don’t remember why. Wait – I was trying to get in touch with Elliott.”

“There you go. You can talk to him later.”

She frowned. “I don’t think I need to. He wasn’t able to help me.”

“What did you need?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Then how do you know he wasn’t helpful?”

“Because he was here for a few minutes, then just left.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:09 am

“You told me to apologize to him for you.”

“Ah.”

“Do you know why?”

“Not yet. Wait,” She tried to sit up. “If not Elliott, who is supposed to come help me?”

“Another cat shifter named Levi. I figured it would be more beneficial to you to learn more about similar cats. Although, he’s not even remotely normal.”

She cleared her throat. “How is he different?”

“He’s kind of like you. But his ability is...” the guy licked his lips, “much more dangerous.”

“And you think he should take care of me?”

“I think he will do a much better job than anyone else who can help right now.”

Her mind was telling her that it should be a perfect opportunity to actually talk to someone who might be able to tell her more about cat shifters. The problem was that she didn’t want him taking care of her. “I don’t know this person. I’m not comfortable being with someone unfamiliar to me while I’m in a vulnerable state.”

“Then you shouldn’t want me around either since you don’t remember me.”

“You’ve healed me, and clearly, you took care of me after when I was unconscious.” She pursed her lips. “What happened to the three men at my doorstep?”

“They won’t be bothering you anymore.”

“What did you do?”

“I took care of them.”

“Are they dead or just out of the way?”

He gave her a half smile, and for a second, there was a twinkle in his eye. “They aren’t dead, but I’m pretty sure they wish they were.”

“Oh, no. What did you do?”

“Let’s just say they won’t be getting out of a criminal asylum until they are in pine boxes.”

Wobbling, she pushed herself up into a sitting position. “You drove them insane?”

He shrugged. “I don’t like killing, and they didn’t deserve to be free. So, I made sure they won’t be going after any other women.”

“I... how did you do that?”

He scratched his head, a shy look on his face. “It’s an extension of my ability. Or perhaps a... more extreme use of my ability.” Rubbing a hand over his mouth, he was considering if he should say more.

“Spit it out, shifter. What are you not telling me?”

His tongue flicked out and wrapped around his lower lip before disappearing into his mouth. Finally, he said, “That’s why I was able to tell you that you could control the water in a person’s body. My ability has some similar uses, but for the mind instead of water.”

Her eyes widened, and Astrid leaned forward, her body shaking.

“Whoa,” he said, coming toward her. “Don’t hurt yourself.”

“Is that... I mean, can you...” Astrid was having trouble collecting her thoughts, which seemed to be flowing like a river around a large rock. “Did you do something to my mind?”

He let out a sigh. “No, I didn’t do anything to your mind. The altered or missing memories are because of the injury. Don’t worry, it won’t last.”

She bit her lip and stared at him. “I don’t want someone else taking care of me. I feel that it needs to be you.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:09 am

He took a few steps toward the door. “That’s neither a good idea nor a possibility.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m needed elsewhere.”

“You haven’t been in town in a while, but you came back. Why?”

“It was a mistake.”

“So, you regret saving me?”

“No! I...” he pursed his lips, torn between giving more details and staying silent. “I know that being near you is a bad idea.”

She thought about that for a moment.

When the man walked toward the door, Astrid spoke up. “Please don’t leave me.”

“Astrid, I can’t stay here with you.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m starting to get attached, and that is decidedly a bad thing for you.”

“I don’t care. I may not remember you, but I feel comfortable around you, and that’s not something I’ve experienced with anyone besides my dad since Evan died.” She

rubbed her lips together as she collected her thoughts. “That isn’t normal for me. And I don’t want to lose that while I’m vulnerable.”

He withdrew his hand from the doorknob. “Ok, I’ll stay with you.” Astrid smiled, her body relaxing a little on the bed. “But we can’t talk, and you can’t ask me any more questions. We’ll just—”

Astrid’s eyes widened, and she sat up. “I know why I wanted to talk to Elliott.” He fell silent. “I want to break the curse.”

“Oh, no,” he said, then placed his back against the door and slid down to the floor.

“What’s wrong?”

He stared at the floor. “That was the last thing your brother said to me.”

Chapter 10

Getting Comfortable Together

The silence stretched out as she stared at him, and he stared at nothing. Bunching the blanket up in her fist, Astrid asked, “What did you say?”

“I said that that was the last thing your brother said to me.”

“No,” she said and shook her head. “I got that. I mean, how did you respond to him?”

He just shook his head.

Astrid swung her legs over the bed, which seemed to distract him from what he was thinking.

“Please, stay in bed. Your body hasn’t fully recovered. Don’t push it right now.”

Even before he said it, she knew he was right. Her heart was beating a little too quickly, and the room was spinning a bit. She placed one hand on her chest and the other hand on the bed to steady herself. The man didn’t move to help her.

“How long will it take?” she asked, looking over at him.

“How long did it take when you got hurt as a child? Because that’s probably one of the best indicators.”

“Oh, weeks, I think, actually.” She tilted her head to the side as she thought about it. “I think it was about six weeks. I was a child. Time did not move the same back then.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:09 am

He nodded but didn't look at her. "It definitely did. I don't suppose there are any medical records to verify your claim."

"No, there definitely aren't. Dad and Evan took care of me."

He flinched at her brother's name.

"Look, I know that you believe that knowing you kills people and that a lot of people around you have bought into it, but there's no evidence of that."

"My whole life is evidence of that. I was trying to help the Sextons' father when he died. He was a good man. That's why my family came out here, thinking they could use my connection to the family to build up their reputation. It worked, but after the Sextons learned about my curse and connection with their father, they refused to have anything to do with me."

Astrid let out a growl. "The more I hear about the Sextons, the less I like them."

"They are good guys who've already lost a lot. I don't blame them at all."

"Well, I do, so they can suck it." She pushed off the bed and pitched forward, anger propelling her off the bed and gravity pulling her toward the floor.

The man moved impossibly quickly, catching her before she hit the floor. "Astrid, you have got to stop pushing yourself. Notice your heart. If you keep up this ill-considered activity, it's going to get you killed."

“It’s good that you can admit it would be my fault.”

He scoffed, then lifted her and placed her carefully back on the bed. Astrid watched his back as he moved to the other side of the room. Her thoughts went in circles as she tried to remember his name—everything else about him seemed to have returned except that one detail.

Then, an idea came to her.

“Take me home.”

“It’s not safe for you there now, so no. I won’t return you for another round of electrocution.”

“No, I mean my home in Louisiana.”

“Nowthat sounds like a good idea.” He pulled out his phone and started typing on it. “I’ll set you up with a flight in a day or two, and in the meantime, I’ll work to stabilize you. You’ll just need to remain as calm as you can.”

“No, I don’t mean to stay. I mean to do research.”

He looked up at her. “I don’t follow you.”

“Well, you’ll have to because I’m not letting you do anything to heal me until I look into how to undo the curse.”

With a heavy groan, he dropped his head back. “We aren’t having this argument.”

“That’s right.” She felt her heart beating far too quickly as she got upset. “We aren’t. You are going to take me there to do some research. I can’t imagine a better place to

look into it than a place where voodoo is still practiced.”

He just looked at her. “My curse wasn’t a voodoo curse.”

“My dad couldn’t control water, yet here I am, able to manipulate it.”

“You know that’s not the same thing.”

“No, I don’t. All of you have this set way of thinking. You are so boxed into certain ways of looking at things that you fail to see real solutions.”

“Astrid, I’m really not comfortable with you—”

“I don’t want to hear it. If you want me to relax, you will have to just deal with your disappointment that I’m helping you, whether you like it or not.”

“I can’t stand the idea of you dying. Do you not understand that?” There was clear pain in his voice.

“And I can’t stand the idea of you living a life completely cut off from everyone. I mean, I lived a pretty isolated life, but at least I always had my dad. Yours ensured you were cursed so he could profit. No, I’m sorry, but I’m not going to just let this go.”

Her heart was beating so rapidly that she was starting to have trouble breathing, but Astrid wasn’t about to let that stop her. As she started turning a bright red, she pointed a finger at him. “Either you stay and help, or you leave and feel guilty for the rest of your life.”

“Please, Astrid, calm down.”

“Not until you—have to swear—you will help me.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Then, I can’t lie down and relax.”

His voice was raised as he asked, “How can you be so stubborn and dismissive?”

“Apparently, as easily as you can be about yourself.”

“Fine! Fine!” He threw up his hands. “I’ll stay with you, but I’m not letting you out of my sight.”

She looked at him. “Really? You aren’t going to fight me on it?”

He shook his head.

“Ok, great,” she said and smiled, her green eyes shining in her victory. “Now, we need to go to Louisiana and—”

“No. We aren’t leaving here. Something happened, and they found you. Have you used your abilities recently?”

Astrid sat back and tried to remember. “I think so... The dead grass—yes, I used my abilities to circumvent the broken sprinkler system.”

The man dropped his head into the palm of his hand. “You gave yourself away to make your yard look better?”

“Hey, I didn’t know that was a possibility.”

He looked up at her. “Evander used to worry about how you never listened and kept using your powers, so I know you were warned a long time ago not to do anything to expose them. And both Elliott and I have been warning you since you got here that women like you keep getting taken.”

Feeling sheepish, Astrid sank down on the bed a little. “Ok. I probably should have put that together. I think I was just preoccupied with everything else.”

For the first time since she woke, the guy laughed. “Jump first, assess later.”

“Don’t make fun of the patient,” she said and pulled a sheet up to hide from the embarrassment she felt at that moment. “Is it possible to get my work stuff? Because the project doesn’t have much longer, and I can’t afford to be offline for a day.”

“Um, I don’t think that is a good idea.”

“Why?”

He let out a long sigh. “Because they trashed the place after I got you out safely. Your devices are destroyed.”

Astrid turned away, her mind working quickly. When she looked at him, she had an idea. “Do you have devices I can borrow?”

“Sure. But, um, I’m pretty sure they’ll notice the changes.”

“What do you mean?”

“Elliott has upgraded most of my devices, and I’m now completely reliant on a few things he’s designed.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s a geek, for lack of a better term. He builds tech all the time, just out of boredom. It’s very obvious when you start to use it, and it makes it difficult to return to the old stuff.”

She shrugged. “If I give you the money, could you get me a few devices?”

“I can send someone to get them for you, sure.”

“Ah, right. You aren’t letting me out of your sight.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:09 am

“Nope. People have never died in front of me, so at this point, I’m really not willing to risk something happening.”

Things were quiet as he pulled out the strange-looking tablet. Astrid tried to get a better look at it as he worked on it. When he finished and walked over to her, she asked, “Can I try it?”

“I’m serious; it will be hard to use other devices.”

“You seem certain.”

He smiled, “I thought I was high-tech until I met Elliott, and I used to build secret networks for a few companion organizations. So, yeah, I can honestly say it’s pretty much impossible to use human tech after using what Elliott has designed.”

She narrowed her eyes and tried to hide a smile. “Is that why you still have business cards?”

He sat in a chair next to her, his head moving back and forth. “No, like I told you, that’s for safety. Although, I’m not sure how much his equipment would be bothered by electrical pulses and the like.”

“Oh, right, the explosion.”

“Yeah, the explosion. Anyway, the stuff will be here this evening. And I told Levi he can just call you when we get your new phone.”

“Wait, what happened to my phone?”

“It was on your person when they shocked you, and it didn’t survive the aftermath.”

Her eyes widened. “What do you mean?”

“The hallway is pretty charred. I’ll make sure to have it fixed so that you don’t lose money for it.”

“Wait, I have to go back at some point. Otherwise, where am I supposed to live?”

“I’m not sure right now, but we can consider that later. Right now, we need to get the shock out of your system.”

“And figure out how to break the curse,” Astrid said insistently.

He turned to look at her, a defeated smile on his face. “If you insist. But I can’t go to Louisiana.”

“Why?”

“Because I have to work.”

“But how am I supposed to do the research if I don’t go?”

He thought for a moment; then he started tapping on his tablet. Once he finished, he handed it to her. “I’m warning you; this is going to ruin things for you.”

She giggled. “I think it’ll be fine.”

Looking at the screen, Astrid started to understand a bit about what he meant. It

looked more like she could just walk through the screen. Her eyes went up to the man who was watching her. Unable to help it, she tapped the screen with her finger. “It almost looks like I’m there.”

“I know. It’s not quite the same as being there, but you can get around virtually. You can see what’s in books and stuff by touching them onscreen. I have no idea how he did that, but apparently, he’s been using that for a couple of decades for his research. I also think he’s working on a headset, but it’s not a priority, considering.”

“Considering what?”

He smiled. “It only takes us about 45 minutes to get around the world. If we want to go somewhere, we just go.”

“Well, that’s very... handy.”

“We still have to be careful not to be seen.”

Astrid turned her head to the side. “What about planes and governments?”

“We don’t worry about them. Most of us can either cloak or fly too high to be noticed.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:09 am

Astrid thought about that for a few moments. “You don’t really need any other abilities, huh?”

“No, dragon shifters really don’t. It’s kind of a nice bonus.”

Astrid settled into working on the tablet, and it didn’t take long for her to understand the warning. Going back to her old devices was going to be very much a downgrade.

She quickly moved around a few of the streets and got information from a few promising books, which she was able to copy.

Over an hour later, she put the tablet down and looked over at the man who was watching her passively. “Well, I don’t think I’ll be trying to do anything on a regular computer again.”

“You were warned.”

“I guess I should have listened.”

“It doesn’t sound like listening has ever been your strong suit.”

She laughed. “No. I’ve been told that most of my life, and I’m pretty set in my ways.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Oh,” Astrid said and stopped to consider it. “My heart is still beating a little fast, and my legs and arms feel a bit tingly still.”

He stood up. “Ok, let me work on you again.”

She smiled and leaned back against the pillows. “Are you going to fix me?”

“You don’t need fixing, just a little healing.”

When he put his hands on her, Astrid felt warmth spread down her body, but she didn’t think that it was just because of the healing power he was channeling into her body.

Chapter 11

Ill-Advised

When she woke the next morning, Astrid turned to see someone typing away with his back turned toward her. She watched him hunched over, his attention focused on what he was doing. Throwing the covers off, she tried to move her legs, but they felt heavy.

He turned around and moved over to her. “Whoa, whoa. Let me heal you before you try to get up.”

He approached her, and when he put a hand on her forehead, she started feeling better.

“Hmm, that feels so nice,” Astrid said and closed her eyes.

“That’s because you are healing.”

“It feels like the tingling is disappearing, and my chest feels less tight.”

The warmth stopped flowing through her and settled. “What pain?”

Astrid pointed to the area over her heart. “Right here, it feels like a knot of pain. It lessens when you start this process.”

He looked down at her, something clearly going through his mind. Finally, he held out one hand. “Do you mind?”

“Mind what?”

His free hand indicated where she had said the pain was. Astrid looked down at her chest. “Oh,” she looked up at him, “will that lessen it even more?”

“It should make it go away.”

“Really?”

He nodded.

Astrid smiled at him. “Go ahead then. If you can take the pain away, I’m not going to say no.”

Gingerly, he put his hand on her chest, and his cheeks began to flush pink. Astrid watched him try to look anywhere else as the warmth spread in her chest, not all of it because of the healing.

“Ah,” she murmured.

He looked at her. She noticed that the tips of his ears were reddish as he asked, “What?”

“Phoenix.”

She watched as red spots began to run up his neck, but he didn’t say anything in response.

Since he wasn’t talking, Astrid said, “I don’t know why I forgot that. Your name isn’t exactly common.”

“You were concussed, and that affected your brain. You remember now because your brain is now mostly healed.”

“That’s a good thing, right?”

“It should be, yes.” He looked away, the red still moving slowly up his neck.

Astrid reached up and put her hand over his. “What’s wrong, Phoenix?”

“It’s been a long time since I’ve... never mind.”

“Don’t do that.”

“Believe me, it’s best that I not open my mouth.”

“It’s been a long time since you what?”

“Nothing, Astrid. Don’t worry about it.”

“But I am worried about it.” Her heart beat a little faster, but not because of what had happened to her.

“It’s not something worth discussing.” He seemed to be unable to look at her.

Astrid thought back to her childhood, and while it was far from perfect, she always felt supported. “One time, I got in a fight with some kids after school. I had to go downtown to get stuff to help Dad since he wasn’t able to leave home by that point. I ran into some other high school kids, and you probably know how horrible they can be.”

He offered a weak smile.

Astrid began tapping a finger on his hand. “One of the guys dating one of the girls I was fighting decided to join in. He was a big guy, like 6-foot-5 big. He was a member of the football team, he was already guaranteed a place at Notre Dame, and he was on track to get into the NFL. His parents wanted him to get a degree, too; that way, he

wouldn't spend all of the family fortune once he took over his father's company."

"I think I understand the kind of guy you are talking about."

"Yeah, well, you know how we are a lot stronger than humans, so I was really holding back while taking on four girls who decided to jump me. When it became clear they weren't going to take me down, he decided to step in to 'protect his woman.'

"The first punch to the side of my head took me by surprise, but I shook it off. At that point, I didn't really see what everyone else was doing, and I think a couple of the guys were upset because I remember some people yelling at him. Of course, that could have been strangers since we were downtown. Well, I just reacted and did not hold back at all. He went down hard.

"He woke up a few days later in the hospital, and the story of what happened was circulating. But of course, it wasn't the actual story, just one that wouldn't damage his and his family's pride. No cops were called because what guy like that would admit to being KO'd by a girl? It helped that no one was able to accept what they saw. Some people in the area had seen him punch me, so he couldn't say that the attack was unprovoked.

"So, the story became that I reacted by turning around and scaring him by attacking with my fingernails." She held up her nails, which were fairly short.

Phoenix smiled. "They look scary."

"Yeah, well, I used to chew them, so they look better than they used to. Anyway, they all agreed that he was startled, stepped back, tripped over the curb, and then hit his head on it. That explained the huge bruise on the side of his face—although it was on the wrong side from where his head actually hit the pavement. His family paid for the

things that the other kids broke in an effort to keep me from pressing charges—there were too many people who saw what had happened to claim I started anything.”

“Sounds like you had it rough growing up.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:09 am

“I never really thought so because I had my dad. Of course, he was not nearly so kind after the incident. I had to do a lot of extra chores because things could have gone much differently. As you said, I’m fairly temperamental, and it was infinitely worse when I was young. He told me that I had to learn how to fight with words instead of actions, which got me into hacking. That’s a whole different kettle of fish. But the surprising thing was that the guy did a complete one-eighty afterward. He dumped his girlfriend and spent the rest of the school year trying to get me to date him.”

Phoenix looked down at her, then started laughing. “He wanted a woman who could dominate him, huh?”

Astrid laughed. “I think so. But he’d punched me in the head, so there was no chance I would ever say yes. His parents were so distraught that he was getting hung up on the weirdo with the dying dad, so they transferred him for the rest of high school.”

Phoenix shook his head. “I’ll bet you have a lot of stories about your past.”

“I really do.” She smiled up at him as the warmth continued to spread through her. “And I would love to share them with you.”

He tapped a finger on her chest. “You just don’t learn, do you?” Then, he pulled his hand away. “That’s probably enough for now.”

Disappointment moved through her, so Astrid sat up a bit. “It already feels a little tighter now that you aren’t touching me.”

“It’s still working its way through your system. Eventually, it’ll be expelled, and

you'll feel much better."

Astrid reached up and took his hand. "You know what really baffles me?"

Phoenix looked down at their hands. "The fact that you seem to love being reckless?"

"No, it's how comfortable I feel around you. I've never felt that way with people who weren't related to me, probably because I haven't tried to get close to anyone in a long time."

"It's very poor judgment on your part."

"I think it's because I can understand how isolated you feel. Sure, I had a couple of people in my corner when I was young, but I never had a real connection with people outside of my family. Perhaps because I had too much to do at home, or perhaps because I never felt like I belonged. Granted, I'm a shifter, and I didn't belong." She smiled.

Phoenix sat on the bed next to her. "I get what you are saying. And I'm sure that now that you know you can feel something with other people, you'll be able to make those connections."

Astrid slowly shook her head. "No, I don't think so. I'm too temperamental. I belong in the shadows, hacking away at a computer and pouncing on my prey." She smiled and bit down on her bottom lip.

Phoenix sighed. "You really refuse to listen. Is there no way I can convince you not to pursue any kind of relationship with me?"

Astrid moved forward a little, pulling her legs up to move closer to him. His eyes followed her movements. She picked up his hand and placed it back over her heart,

and the warmth began to spread through her again. Leaning forward, she kept her eyes on him as she kissed the side of his mouth.

“Bad answer,” he murmured as he put his other hand under her chin. He tilted her head back a little, then kissed her. Astrid dropped his hand and wrapped her arms around his neck as she pressed her body against his. Phoenix’s hands were hesitant as he moved them to her hips.

Moving fast, Astrid got in his lap and straddled him as she deepened the kiss. When she pulled away, she muttered, “I’ve never wanted to do that before.”

“Never?” He asked, looking up at her with a mixture of confusion, pain, and lust.

She shook her head. The way his smile brightened half his face was imprinted on her memory as he said, “Me, neither.”

He lifted her up and dropped her on the bed. Astrid had her legs wrapped around him and pulled him down on top of her. The way his cool blue eyes looked down at her, the cat shifter thought she knew exactly what he was thinking.

“If you tell me this is a bad idea, I’m going to violently disagree with you.” As she said it, Astrid let her claws out just enough to dig into his back.

His eyes shone, but whatever resolve he had didn’t last. Phoenix lowered himself and began to kiss her neck. She expected that he would ask if she was sure or try to persuade her that it was a bad idea. His apparent enthusiasm was intoxicating.

She pulled at his shirt as she let her body act on its own. When his shirt was removed, she saw that Phoenix had several deep scars on his body, and she froze. He just watched as she reached up and touched the one across his chest.

“What happened?”

“My father deepened the curse when he felt we could use more power. It was after that when the Sextons’ father died.”

Astrid looked at the marks; there were more than a dozen. Several questions ran through her mind, but the cat shifter didn’t want to ask them in case it would make him stop. Instead, she pushed her hips into his and moved up to kiss down the scar. Phoenix closed his eyes and moaned, his arms flexing as he held up both his weight and hers.

“I want you,” she murmured. Then she placed a finger over his lips. “Just for tonight.”

His eyes looked darker, as if a shadow passed over them, but Phoenix nodded. He lay her down again, stripping her as he did. First, her shirt, then her bra, with a bit of help. Soon, she was naked beneath him. Slowly, he removed the rest of his clothing. Then, threading his fingers through hers, Phoenix stretched her arms over her head and moved her legs apart with his own. While kissing her neck, she leaned back to give him more access as her hips started pushing against his. Finally, he kissed her mouth, his tongue moving slowly between her lips as he moved his shaft slowly against her opening. He brushed against her, stroking her and teasing her until she pulled her mouth away and let out a frustrated groan.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:09 am

“What’s the rush?” he asked near her ear.

“I just want you, and I’m not a patient person.”

Phoenix looked down at her and he held her hands tightly as his head pressed between her lips. There was a surge through her body at the sensation of him moving against her; then she threw her head back as she stiffened. Phoenix moved slowly, sliding just his tip in and out of her as she orgasmed.

As soon as she could speak, she looked at him. “More, please.”

He began to slowly work further into her, his hands never letting go of hers as she felt every inch of him against and inside her. She could feel his muscles tighten as she came again, but she wasn’t sure how to give him the same kind of release. After coming down, she started trying to work her muscles, squeezing him as he slid out, and when he let out a guttural moan, she knew it was working.

She finally looked up at him, his blue eyes reflecting the light and darkness of the room. They held the gaze as he began to speed up, his movements more urgent and less controlled. Focusing on him, she moved her hips and muscles to match his pace and tilted her lower body to take him in deeper. Their movements were in sync as she felt him stiffen inside her. Astrid pulled him down to kiss him as he finally released inside of her. Her body responded by tightening against him, and they held each other through the experience.

“More,” he growled in her ear as he finally released her hands, sliding his own down her back and grabbing her hips. He pulled her up so that she was resting against the

headboard. This time, he was not slow as he began to move inside of her.

Astrid dropped her head back, allowing her breast to bounce as he pounded into her. The way he was looking at her and touching her body made the cat shifter feel wild. She began to match his frenetic energy with her own.

Even as they felt the bed give out under them, she hoped that the night would never end.

Chapter 12

A Bit Panicked

When Astrid woke, her body ached, especially her lower body and upper legs. There was something hard and warm wrapped around her, and it took her a moment of staring at a muscular arm to remember the previous night.

As soon as she did, the cat shifter started kissing the arm. This got a soft moan and the faint smell of lavender and leather. Then she felt something harden at her back. Pushing her hips back, she began to stroke the hardness. The arm tightened around her.

With a smile, she turned to face Phoenix as her hand slid down his perfectly sculpted body, finally reaching the growing shaft. He began to respond without opening his eyes, his mouth covering hers. Then Phoenix pushed her body against the floor as he picked up where they left off.

A while later, sweaty and disheveled, Astrid lay on top of him, kissing his face. “I want to wake up like this every morning.”

It was as if a light bulb went off in his mind. Phoenix looked up at her, panic clear in

his eyes. He quickly moved out from under her. “No, no, no, no. This can’t have happened. I can’t – I can’t—”

Astrid placed a hand on his arm as he was putting on his pants. “It’s ok, Phoenix. Nothing happened to me, see?” She pulled away, showing him her naked body.

“I can’t cause your death, Astrid. I couldn’t live with myself.”

She took his hand. “If anything, I’ve never felt better than I do right now. My body isn’t tingling—well,” she moved her free hand, “not like it was after the shock. The pain in my chest is gone. If anything, it feels like you completely healed me.”

“It’s temporary.”

“How do you know? Have you healed people before the last time you said goodbye?”

“Well, no, but—”

“How about this? You said that people don’t die in front of you. What if I don’t leave your side until we break the curse?”

“What if there is no way to break the curse? Eventually, you’ll get sick of me, and then—”

She made a dismissive sound. “If anything, you’ll get sick of me. And if that’s the case, we won’t be close anymore, right?”

He gave her a wry look. “That’s no how it works.”

“You can’t know for sure, can you?”

He sat down on the broken bed, “You don’t understand, Astrid.”

“You think I don’t understand how it feels for everyone close to me to die?”

“I’m much older than you, and I’ve lost more people.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:09 am

“Ok, I lost my father and my brother, so I’m not going to hold any stock in you saying that quantity is more than quality of relationships. I’ve never been close to anyone else, so—” She threw her hands out to emphasize how she felt.

“And I’m sorry for that, but I—”

“Phoenix.” She moved over to him and took one of his hands, then sat back on her heels. “I’m scared, too. It may not be a curse exactly, but I understand how much it hurts and how it’s easier to believe that being alone is better than losing someone.”

“Then you should know it’s not worth it.”

“No, I don’t know that. And I don’t feel that anymore. When I met you, you upset me and pissed me off. I hated the fact that you wanted to help because I didn’t think you could help me. You very quickly proved me wrong. Now, I want to help you.”

He looked up at her. “I don’t want to get you killed.”

“So,” she shrugged, “just stay with me until we figure something out.”

“There’s no guarantee that will keep you safe.”

“Are you kidding me? I have a dragon shifter who can control other people’s minds. I honestly don’t think that I could be in better hands.” She moved forward between his thighs and wrapped her arms around him. “Please don’t leave me. I don’t want to be alone anymore.”

She felt his body relax, and then he wrapped her up in his arms and pulled her into his lap. He then rested his head in the crook of her neck and nuzzled her. At first, Astrid giggled because it tickled, but his smell soon made her relax, and she began to kiss the top of his head. For a while, they just held each other.

His voice sounded sad as he said, “You still have work to do, don’t you?”

“I don’t have any equipment.”

He pulled away and looked up at her. “It’s probably outside. Why don’t you get dressed, and we’ll go get it.”

Astrid slipped a robe over her lithe body, and as soon as she was covered, he lifted her into his arms. He carried her out of the room and into a huge hallway with high ceilings. Astrid started paying attention to the place, and she finally asked, “Where are we?”

“One of my homes. It’s built not too far from the base, but they don’t know it. The place is kind of like a bunker since it’s underground.”

“So, how do you get stuff here?”

“I run a big company. Did you never... never mind.”

“No, don’t start that again,” she said and squeezed his shoulder but quickly became distracted. “Holy cow, you are solid. That is some very... I hope I’ve always got a front-row seat to this show.”

He laughed. “Well, until we figure out this curse, I—” Phoenix stopped. “They’re getting ready to move. Something’s up.”

“What do you mean? Who’s getting ready to move?”

“The people who attacked you. The facility is preparing to deploy a small group off base, and that means that they probably have found someone else.”

“How can you know that?”

Phoenix didn’t respond as he turned and ran back down the hallway. He placed her down carefully. “Get dressed. We have to go.”

“Go? What do you mean?”

“In that last set of notes you sent me yesterday, there was something that matched what Evander said the last time I saw him.”

“I thought he talked about the curse.”

“No, the whole reason that we were meeting. I’ll explain while you dress.” Astrid was perplexed but did as he said. Phoenix finished dressing as he explained, “I met your brother when he was jogging around town. He bumped into me, and I gave him a snarky response. He gave me such a sincere apology that I felt bad. He wanted to buy me a coffee or something because he had caused me to drop my breakfast on the pavement, and I knew I shouldn’t, but I accepted. I could tell he was a shifter, and he wasn’t from the area.”

“How could you tell?”

“His accent was much thicker than yours.” He gave her a wistful smile as he said it. “I figured it would be one coffee, then he would be on his way, but we chatted a bit after leaving the bakery.”

“The same one where I met you?”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:09 am

“The same one where you doused me, Elliott, and Mabel, yes. Anyway, he could tell I was a shifter but didn’t mention it until we got close to the forests. Then he started telling me about some shady things going on at the military base. He wasn’t sure what they were doing, but he knew that it involved people with abilities.”

“Wait, I thought you said that that’s something that companies have been trying to exploit more recently?”

“No, companies and the military have been trying to weaponize abilities for at least a millennium. It’s only recently that they’ve moved into experiments that destroy the people with abilities. Somewhere along the way, they’ve lost their minds because by destroying people with abilities, they destroy the abilities. They can’t be harvested.”

“That should be obvious.”

“Fools never learn. Anyway, your brother went out trying to figure out what they were doing to people who ‘graduated’ from the program. The next thing I knew, he was dead.”

“Do you think they knew about his abilities?”

“I doubt it. Humans don’t seem to realize it isn’t just women, so they probably never even considered that he could be capable of anything beyond being a soldier. And they didn’t think he was particularly good at that.”

“I’m sure he was amazing! How can anyone talk about Evan like—”

Phoenix put a hand on her as she was getting more upset while struggling to put on a pair of pants. “Astrid, he wasn’t a fighter. He was amazing at most things, but Evander wasn’t a fighter.”

“No,” she said and stopped struggling. “He really wasn’t. I have no idea why he chose the military.”

“Evander told me that he’d had a fight with your father, and he joined out of anger.”

“That doesn’t seem like Evan.”

Phoenix smiled at her. “Oh, he had a temper. I think that he hid it from you pretty well. Or maybe I just saw a side of him that was a bit bitter after fighting and seeing people die. I know the things that were being done to women upset him, too. I’m pretty sure that was because he was afraid you would be found and dragged off. He talked about you a lot, you know.”

Astrid dropped the pants and walked over to Phoenix. Placing her head on his chest, she said, “I miss him. All of these years later, and I really miss him.”

Phoenix hugged her. “I do, too. And we always will.” He stepped away. “But right now, we need to get moving.”

Astrid looked at him, then nodded. “Right. Right. Hold on, I just need a few seconds to finish.” She sat on the ground and slid both pant legs up at the same time. “Do you know what happened to him?”

“He tried to enter one of the company’s facilities after hours. I don’t know exactly what happened—I’m a civilian who had no business with that project, so I wasn’t told anything. It was enough for me to know he was dead, and by the time I was done grieving for him, things had changed. The military covered up his death because they

didn't want to lose the potential. It did cause a serious rift between the military and the company, though, and it's really only in the last couple of years that they've tried to mend that relationship, I think because of the potential exposed by the Mora experiments. Until that happened, there really wasn't much of a threat since the military didn't trust the company."

Astrid felt her anger starting to bubble up, but she worked to keep it under control. The best thing to do was to act, not rage someplace far removed from the problem. "Ok. I'm dressed." In the back of her mind, she was thinking about work and how she needed to let them know, but Astrid quickly dismissed even opening her mouth about it. If she had to apologize, then she would—right now, what mattered was staying close to Phoenix.

He moved over, easily lifting her off the floor, then said something loudly to the room at large. There was a rumbling, and suddenly, the ceiling started to open above them. "Does the whole thing open?"

"It has to. This is part of the ring of fire. If there's an earthquake, I have to get out quickly."

"How on earth could you—"

Her question was quickly answered as Phoenix shifted into his dragon form. "Oh, right. That's handy."

The next thing she knew, he flew them out of the mostly destroyed room and into the sky.

Chapter 13

Avenging Angel

The feel of the wind against Astrid's body was terrifying, mostly because she had no control over what was happening. That had never happened before. Closing her eyes, she leaned forward on the broad back of the most splendid creature she'd ever seen and focused on the feel of him under her. His movements were smooth, and he didn't do anything that caused her discomfort, but Astrid couldn't ignore the fact that she was moving through the air with nothing between Phoenix and a long fall to her death.

When she felt him touch down on the ground, she was more than ready to get her feet back on land.

She wobbled a little, and Phoenix gripped her shoulders. "Are you ok? Are you having a bad reaction because of the electrical currents?"

"No, not at all. I'm feeling rather thankful to be on the ground."

He looked at her. "I wish I could offer to let you stay here and—"

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:09 am

“Oh no,” she stood up straight. I’ve no desire to stay put and let you go running into danger. I’m ready.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. What do you want to do?”

“Ok, I haven’t thought too much about it. I don’t want to kill people, so a mass hallucination would clear the place out.”

“What about any women they have taken for experiments?”

“They don’t have any.”

Astrid looked over at him. “How do you know?”

“They just started it up over the last year, and I’ve been monitoring them. I also regularly tap into the thoughts of the people in charge—I have to meet with them regularly for work—and no, they don’t know what I really do. Elliott’s been monitoring the comms I planted on them during the meetings. We heard when they found you without realizing it was you.”

Astrid thought back for a moment. “Is that why he responded immediately to me calling Cooper?”

“Probably, but I can’t get into his mind, so I couldn’t tell you what he’s thinking.”

“Your ability is really weird but incredibly useful.”

Phoenix was looking at the building when he said, “It always creeped my father out. My mom could do it, too, which was probably why he married her. She couldn’t read his mind; otherwise, she wouldn’t have married him.” He turned to face her, his cool blue eyes like a calm day before a storm. “Can you make it rain?”

“I... I can do more than that with an entire ocean nearby.”

“I’m not looking to flood the place.”

She smiled. “It could be a controlled flood.”

“What’s that?”

“Kind of like a controlled burn, but the point is to push out the people instead of culling the undergrowth.”

A wicked smile spread across his face, exposing his beautiful white teeth. “How does a tsunami sound?”

“Oh, no, I can’t bring that kind of water this far inland.”

“You don’t have to—I’ll take care of getting their attention with it, and you start flooding the building.”

“I knew there was something I really liked about you.” She bumped him with her shoulder, then turned to face the structure some ways in the distance. “We’ll need to move closer for me to keep from killing anyone.”

Phoenix whisked her off her feet and ran toward the facility. “Tell me when.”

She laughed, this time enjoying the feel of the wind on her face. “Here, here!” she cried when they were about a half mile from the place. A bit of disappointment filled her when he put her down. Astrid looked at him for a moment out of the corner of her eye before turning her attention to the facility. “You said that they were on the move. Have they left the facility?”

“No, they are still in there preparing. It sounds like they’ve located someone else, so intercepting them before they leave would be ideal.”

“You can’t trace them?”

He looked over at her. “I couldn’t. I was only able to get the big fish, and they don’t do anything that would get their hands dirty.” He folded his arms over his chest. “They’ll send in guys like the men you saw.”

“Ah, well, then we had best get moving.” Astrid inhaled and exhaled through her mouth as she focused on the facility. “You have ten minutes until the storm arrives.”

“That should be enough.” Phoenix stepped up beside Astrid.

For a second, she looked up at him, and then she slipped her hand into his. He turned to look at her, then squeezed her hand.

Allowing something in her to open, Astrid began to draw the water toward them. She could feel it churning and roiling as she made sure not to drag any living creatures along with what she was collecting. In the distance, the sounds of sirens began to fill the air with a horrific noise that she imagined had to be horrifying to the people who had no clue what was coming.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:09 am

Phoenix leaned over. “It’s got two underground levels, and they are starting to evac now. If you can flood them when everyone’s out, I can make sure the facility can’t be brought back to life again.”

She gave a simple nod but couldn’t speak without losing some of the collected water. Clearly, he had something in mind, and whatever it was, she wanted to see it instead of knowing beforehand.

People began racing out of the facility, their eyes going to the sky as if they expected to see something immediately. They were much too far away to hear what was being said, but from the postures, the growing crowd was restless.

A smile spread over her face as Astrid turned the water into what would look like a large wave on the ground. The people saw it a few seconds later, and that’s when they started pointing, and she heard their screams.

Phoenix whispered in her ear, “Now that’s quite impressive.”

She wanted to say something, but she couldn’t without causing a massive problem to the area underwater. Raising her hand, she made the water rise farther in the air, and even to her, it looked like a massive wave rolling over the land. People were scrambling away from the place as she brought the wave down hard. That’s where the similarities to a tsunami ended. The water should have washed people away, wiping out everything in its path. Instead, she directed it into every door, crack, and crevice, washing through the facility. The people outside were all on the ground, knocked over by the force. Some were injured, others were fine, but they were all scrambling into their cars. She smiled—that amount of water would do serious damage to their

vehicles.

The water rolled through the facility unchecked, destroying instruments and electronics. Astrid had never tried to hack the place, and now she wouldn't need to since she had a much more cathartic way of destroying the place. The image of her brother sneaking into the place passed through her mind. Seconds later, Phoenix squeezed her hand. "They are fleeing. Now it's time to really put on a show."

Astrid snapped back to the present; her mind no longer focused on controlling the water. "What did you have in mind?" Her voice was a little breathless, something that had never happened. Then again, she had never controlled that much water, so she was starting to learn just how far her boundaries reached.

The image of her brother again flitted through her mind, and she felt anger starting to well up in her. Her abilities were far from exhausted and people were standing around in the water she had brought forth.

Phoenix released her hand and put his hand on her hip. "No, Astrid. We aren't going to kill them."

She turned to look at him. As soon as she saw those cool blue eyes, the anger dissipated. "He died here."

"Yes, but he wouldn't want you to kill for him. That's not how you honor him."

"Then how are we going to make them pay? I thought we were going to destroy this place. Water damage isn't going to do that."

"No, but this will." He let go of her and walked away. Seconds later, he shifted into his gorgeous dragon form. Lowering his body, she could hear him breathing in.

That's when she realized what he was doing. She smiled as he exhaled a small blue orb. It flew toward the facility, striking the middle of the roof.

The place imploded. Astrid stood there watching the beauty of the roaring fire as it consumed the place.

"Are you sure no one died?"

Phoenix turned his long neck toward her and let out a huff. Then he shifted again. "Yeah, I'm sure. And they are all going to find it hard to justify what they were doing here when the government comes to question them."

"Why would the government care?"

"They only have the one contract with the military, and it was not easily won. They'll never get another contract again, especially since that facility was built by the military decades ago, and it was only on loan to them this time. The government took it back after Evander was killed. Now, well, let's just say word is going to spread."

"Do I want to know how you plan to do that?"

"No, keep your plausible deniability."

She laughed, then wrapped her arms around him. "Yeah, I don't want to know what kind of scary mind tricks you can do."

"Are you finally starting to fear me?"

She looked up at him, and she felt a comfortable warmth spread through her. "No, I don't need you giving me ideas because I might start asking you to do things for me. And I don't think you would turn me down." She stood up on her tiptoes and gave

him a kiss.

Phoenix wrapped his arms around her and rested his cheek on the top of her head. “I’m sorry you are stuck with me.”

Astrid slid a hand down and pinched his butt. “I think you got the raw end of the deal. Being stuck with me has got to be far more trying. Besides,” she slipped a hand down his pants and rested it on the top of his muscular butt, “I am looking forward to not being alone.”

He slid both of his hands down the back of her pants, pulling her into his body. “Me, too.”

For a few minutes, they remained like that, just enjoying a sense of peace.

Finally, Astrid pulled away a little and looked up at him. “I guess I should start returning the water.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:09 am

“It’ll find its way back to the ocean, and I don’t think the Pacific is going to miss it too much.”

She giggled. “I guess there’s plenty more where that came from.” She rubbed her face against his muscular chest, enjoying the feel of his body against hers. “But I should probably get it out of the facility and clean out the debris.”

“Will that take long because I kind of want to get you home.”

She giggled into him again. “Think of everything you want to do to me when we get there. By the time you finish coming up with a few fantasies, I’ll be done.”

He groaned. “I’ve been fantasizing about you for months now, Astrid. It’s torture.”

“Months?” She put her chin on the top of his chest, “You’ve been interested for months?”

He nodded, then leaned down and kissed her. “It was really difficult to keep away from you because I’ve felt a pull to you that is entirely new. When you wouldn’t leave me alone, it became impossible.”

She kissed his chin. “I’m all done.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Ironically, cleaning up the water is the easy part. I mostly let it do what it would but speed it along.”

“You are fascinating.” He nuzzled into her hair. “How do you want to get home?”

She sighed and gritted her teeth. “I guess flying is best, right?”

“Will you be ok?”

“Well, it’ll be my second time flying, so it should be easier, right?”

“I promise you will be safe. Just keep your eyes closed and consider what you want to do with me when we get back.”

“I’m thinking a blindfold.”

He reached down and pinched her butt. Astrid laughed as she felt his body shift. The next things she knew, they were in the air. This time, she kept her eyes shut and enjoyed the feel of his body under hers.

Afterword

Mending, Not Breaking

Several weeks passed, and Astrid was researching curses while Phoenix participated in his third teleconference. Having wrapped up her project the previous week, she had decided to take the rest of the year off to consider what to do. When she moved to the area, she had expected to take a few years to figure out what had happened to her brother, and she wasn’t sure if there would ever be closure. While she hadn’t learned the details of what happened, Astrid realized that Phoenix was probably right—she had an idea of what had happened. Getting into the details wouldn’t help her at all. His goal had been to protect women with abilities from being exploited, and, for now, the people he had targeted were gone. And it seemed nearly impossible for them to recover.

News had spread about an “accident” that had destroyed the facility. The military had withdrawn all support from the research, feeling that the company had even less understanding of the company’s function even two decades later. And based on a bit of hacking she had done, they were quite disturbed to learn about the kinds of experiments that were planned.

After twenty years of being angry at the military, she was glad to see that they weren’t quite as bad as she had thought. It was true that her brother had suffered in the military, but she suspected it was because it conflicted with his caring nature.

“What are you up to over there?”

Astrid looked up. “Just doing some research.”

He stood up, and she watched his muscular frame as he stretched. “Man, I really hate all of these meetings.”

“Well, maybe you can delegate that to someone else for a while. After all, you’ve been at it for a long time. Can’t you step down or something?”

“Not if I want to eventually remove my father from his position.”

“Ah, right; the long-term goal.”

He walked over to her. “Have you thought about what you want to do once you are rid of me?”

Astrid put the tablet to the side and stood up. “I haven’t given it any kind of thought.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:09 am

He reached over and brushed some stray hair out of her face, letting his fingers caress her skin. Astrid closed her eyes and held his hand in place with her own. “Eventually, you’ll want to live your own life.”

Breathing in his comforting scent, Astrid shook her head. “I don’t want to think of a life without you. Living alone makes me reckless.”

“Are you saying you need someone to keep you in check?”

She opened her eyes to see if he was serious. The soft smile on Phoenix’s face told her the answer. Turning and kissing the palm of his hand, she murmured, “I’m not the only one who needs to be kept in check.”

He chuckled. “You are right. But I have to be alone; you don’t.”

“Actually,” she released his hand and gave him a serious look, “I don’t think the curse works the way everyone thinks it does. I mean, people don’t die in front of you, so it’s not like you caused their deaths.”

He sighed and sat on the couch, and she cuddled next to him. Phoenix wrapped an arm around her. “I’m sorry I dragged you into this.”

“Just like my brother, I chose this. You aren’t responsible for people’s choices. And if you warn people ahead of time, before they get close, their deaths aren’t on you.”

“I could just refuse to get close to anyone.”

She tilted her head back and looked up at him. “Yeah, I did that, too. It didn’t work. And you clearly aren’t the kind of person who does well on his own.”

“What do you mean?”

“You may not be a good salesman, but it’s very obvious you are a caring person. You were kind to me, even though I was pretty horrible to you.”

“You were just rude.”

“Yeah, I can say from experience that most people wouldn’t have kept pushing to help. Even after you tried to shut me out, you gave me a way to contact you, not Elliott or the Sextons, but you.”

He stroked the palm of her hand with his thumb. “I think there was something recognizable in your eyes. It made it very hard to leave you alone. Then, you told me your name, and well, it’s not exactly common.”

Looking at their hands, Astrid said, “My brother continues to care for me.”

“In a way, yes.” He leaned over and kissed her head. “He tried to teach me how to skip rocks, but we never made it very far.”

She stared at their hands, and then she looked up at him. “He tried to teach you to skip rocks?”

“Yeah. He said he just wanted to get off base for a while, and he didn’t feel he could talk to anyone else. I never got the hang of it.”

“You stopped trying after he died.”

Phoenix nodded. "I felt guilty."

Astrid stood up and pulled him off the couch. "Come on."

"Where are we going?"

"To the lake."

"Don't you need to work?"

"Not at the moment. I haven't taken on any projects since the last disaster. I'm enjoying some downtime."

They held hands as they left through the back door of Phoenix's remote house. Astrid could have gone back to her home since the facility was gone, but Phoenix insisted they stay together, not that it bothered Astrid. And his places were so much nicer than hers. Besides, she wasn't sure how safe she would feel in her own home. The company had gone under, but it was clear that others were ready to try to pick up where they left off. After all, they had taken ideas from the Mora family disaster.

As they walked the quarter mile to the lake, Astrid decided to start asking some of the hard questions. "Do you remember what your father did when he deepened the curse?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:09 am

Phoenix squeezed her hand, and she got the impression that it was more of a nervous reaction. “Yes. He used to do it every few years.”

“Does he still do it?”

“I won’t allow it anymore.”

“You mean, you used to allow it?”

“Not exactly. He threatened to use my brothers if I didn’t give in to his demands. I don’t think my stepmother knew, but I’ve no doubt he would have managed it to get them closer to me without her realizing what was happening.”

“What happened?”

“They finally left home. I think, now, they have a much better relationship with my father, but I know they aren’t close. Like me, they are messed up in their own ways.”

“Are they cursed, too?”

“No. He was just a horrible father, and their mother spoiled them far too much. I don’t really know that much about them, but I do remember hearing about their antics on the rare occasions when I came to visit.”

“Ah, so he can’t use them anymore since they probably don’t trust him.”

“And there’s no one else he can use. Of course, now I have no reason to listen to him

or do what he wants, so I'm slowly working to push him out of the business."

"So, you have a long-term goal." She looked up at him with a sly smile.

"I do."

"Well, if you can remember what he did, we can go over those steps. If you can talk about it, it would help me to figure out what will help to remove the curse."

"So, you have a long-term goal?"

She bumped him, and he laughed. "And no, it's not because I want to leave you, Phoenix, before you say it. It's because I want you to see that I'm staying with you because I want to, not because of some curse." She gave his hand a couple of squeezes, "However, I'm not sure that you need to do anything."

"The curse is very real, Astrid."

"I'm not doubting it. It does sound far-fetched, but so does dragons being real. Deaths could be explained as being natural because they seem to be inevitable, which, based on my research, is exactly what the best curses do. That way people will distance themselves because either they believe in curses and don't want anything to do with the person, or they think the person is crazy."

"Sounds about right."

"However, what I've found is that the more powerful curses, like the one you have, have to be refreshed to continue to work, kind of like vaccines but in reverse."

Phoenix gave her a skeptical look. "You mean like a booster shot?"

“Kind of like that, yes. I’m not saying I’ll stop researching, but I think that the real way to stop the curse is to develop and mend relationships instead of keeping your distance.”

“That’s putting people’s lives at risk unnecessarily.”

“If the curse weakens over time, it becomes less of a risk to people. I don’t have any definite answers, and I’m not suggesting you go diving in head-first to try it. It’s just that I don’t think getting rid of the curse is quite the same as the way it was cast and maintained.”

“I will follow your lead, but please, don’t ask me to let you be the guinea pig to find out if you are right because I will not allow that.”

“If I can find a way to determine if the curse is gone, then I’ll let you know because I understand not wanting to lose someone close to you. It’s just something to think about.”

They walked in silence for the next few minutes until they reached the lake. Dipping into her pocket, Astrid pulled out the rock her brother had given her. She had picked it up when Phoenix had taken her back to the house to get her stuff, and she had kept it in her pocket ever since.

She took his hand and put the rock in it. “It’s time we picked up where you left off.”

He looked between her and the rock. “You know how to skip rocks?”

“Evan started teaching me the last time he was home. Before we left the pond, he told me that I was to keep learning until he came home to finish showing me. According to him, from the time he started until the time he learned how to do it well, he learned a lot of important life lessons.”

“And that’s exactly what you did.”

She nodded. “And now I want to finish what he started and teach you how to do it correctly.”

Phoenix closed his hand over the rock. “Your brother could control earth and rock.”

Astrid pursed her lips, trying to hide a smile, but she didn’t say anything.

He continued. “And you can control water.”

She nodded.

He rolled his eyes. “Knowing both of you fairly well, I have a feeling the lesson was to help you control your power, not to actually learn to skip rocks.”

“I’m pretty sure you are right.”

“I have nothing that can help me do it better.”

“But it’s something we all share. Isn’t that enough?”

He smiled, then held out the rock. “Ok, teach me.”

It was far more awkward trying to get his grip right, not only because he was right-handed but because Phoenix was considerably larger than her. As she tried to adjust his grip from behind his broad, muscular back, she laughed. “I see what my brother

meant. It's so much harder when you use the wrong hand."

He turned and looked at her. "I can use my left if that will help."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I'm ambidextrous." He moved the rock to the other hand.

"Well, I'll be damned." She looked up at him. "You know, you really are fascinating. Even if we do get rid of the curse, I don't think I want to leave you."

He smiled, then leaned down and kissed her forehead. "I feel the same way. I'm pretty sure that we are mates, which is why it was impossible to push you out of my life."

"I felt something like that, and I think you are right. That's why no matter how much you annoyed me in the beginning, I couldn't help but let you help me."

This got a chuckle out of him. "I'm flattered."

She wrapped her arms around his waist. "You should be. I didn't beat you up like the last couple of guys who were interested in me."

Laughing, he pried her arms off of him. "I thought you were going to give me a lesson. So, teacher, show me how it's done."

Astrid took the rock from his hand and skipped it easily across the pond. It disappeared for a minute, then came skipping back across the surface.

"Oh, I see how it is." He shook his head. Then, with a glint in his eye, Phoenix picked her up before the rock returned to the shore. It took all of her power not to drop the rock as he moved behind her and started to skim his hands over her hips and breasts.

When she was sure that the rock was safely on the banks of the lake, she turned and pounced on top of him, knocking him to the ground. He gripped her waist, pulling her to him. Once they hit the ground, he rolled over on top of her.

It was dark before she retrieved the rock and they returned to his house, leaving their clothing by the water as they walked back hand in hand.