



# Hunted by the Pack (Their Celestial Witch #1)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** The fearless alpha that hates my kind may be my only hope.

Without magic, I may be powerless, but this witch doesn't give up. Especially if my daughter's life depends on it.

Dirus Morales is a fierce opponent, but he made for a better ally. He just wants to do his job and go home. I want to earn two seats to go with him. Whatever the price may be.

If teaming up with the same wolf pack I was sent to exterminate will grant us freedom, I'll do it.

Can I trust the enemy of my enemy? Or will he let his pack feast upon my bones?

Start this dark, slow burn, slow building whychoose, wolf shifter, paranormal omegaverse romance adventure!

**Total Pages (Source):** 22

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:45 am*

## Chapter one

Astria Zielle

Being shrouded in darkness played tricks on the mind. Time blurred and blended when the sun couldn't show me the world was still spinning.

How long had it been? A day? A week? Maybe a month.

Maybe the world outside of the literal box I was trapped in ceased to exist, and I was doomed to stay in this stone prison forever.

No, that couldn't be true.

Kylie.

I fucked up. If the world ended, that meant she wouldn't suffer because of my actions, but there was no way the universe would give me that luxury. Not after what I did.

Was I hoping my baby was dead? Did I believe that would be better? Better than me in here, and her out there without me to protect her.

For however long I'd been in here, enough time had passed for me to lose a couple of marbles.

I dug my fingers into my left cheek, right where they branded me before tossing me

in here to rot. The searing pain throbbed hard enough to cut through the madness that was slowly sinking its claws deeper and deeper into my crumbling mind.

A lot of time had passed.

This wasn't my first time in the box, but I'd never struggled this hard to hang onto my sanity before. Funny how the brand they marked me with was what kept me anchored to the world.

My father would throw a toddler styled tantrum if he knew it was working to my benefit.

My fingers ran along the rough six walls that encapsulated me inside this hell. There were divots that lined perfectly with my raw fingertips.

Right, I'd spent the first couple of days trying to claw my way out.

The furred position was the most I could stretch out in the three-foot-by-three-foot cold space. What a girl would do to stretch her legs a bit. How long had it been since I moved? Too long.

The bones on my left side screamed in agony, especially my hip. Who knew how long I'd been spiraling? Not me.

I struggled to roll over to face the opposite direction. In the too tight space, it was all too easy to bonk my head on the low ceiling.

Bells rang in my ears, making me weak and dizzy. My stomach gurgled to remind me that I hadn't eaten since I'd been in here. I licked my lips, dreaming of potato stew, only to find there was no saliva left in my mouth to even wet my dry lips.

I reached for the cup I kept in the corner and couldn't even shake a drop of water out of it. My water rations hadn't been delivered in a while. At least, the best I could figure.

Why wouldn't I die already?

Fuck, don't start in on that again. Death would solve my problems, but not Kylie's. Get your shit together.

I made it a point to move every body part, however limited I was. Partly for something to do, but I'd seen women come out of the box without any strength, because they laid down and died here.

Think about Kylie laughing. Think about hugging her in your arms.

I laughed out loud, remembering how Kylie made me a flower crown before I came here. How proud she was when she finally learned how to keep it from falling apart. The most beautiful girl in the whole world.

The memory was an improvement over this dank concrete prison that reeked of every bodily fluid imaginable. I tried not to think about how most of it was probably mine, or the fact I was laying in it.

Maybe it was best that there wasn't any light in here. That way, I couldn't see the horrifying state I was in.

Would they ever let me, the feral bitch, out?

One lapse in judgment.

One second of blinding rage, and I ruined Kylie's life. I could only hope someone

would show some rare mercy to me and let me go home to her. Or that I would somehow wrangle enough fight together to do it on my own.

Stupid bitch, think next time.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:45 am*

### Chapter two

#### Dirus Morales

“Boss, there is a convoy on the ground.” The words from my second in command came through my headset. Sure enough, as I powered down the engines, a black car pulled in behind a line of men practicing their right to bear arms.

One scan of their forces showed me how undisciplined they were. “They sure look fancy in their perfect uniforms. Make sure to play nice with the little kids, pups.”

My guys chuckled as everyone prepared for the doors to open. I took the headset off and walked the short distance to the back.

“Move at your leisure. We don’t know who these people are or what their game is. They can sweat for a second. Trust no one. Say nothing. Keep your eyes open and alert.”

“Sir, yes, sir,” my team answered.

“What’s our mission?” I pointed to the new pup of the group, Lucero Rios.

Protect my team. Lead them through whatever fuckery we walked into. And make sure they always had someone stronger to lean into when shit got too deep.

At least that was my mission as the highest alpha here.

The pup didn't expect me to call him out like that, but he managed to get himself together in a split second. "To find the source of magic broadcasting to the Grandpack, sir."

I nodded my approval. "Let's get this shit done so we can go home. I'm going to be pissed off if I have to do more paperwork, because one of you stupid fuckers died."

My betas and lower alphas lined up single file. My second in command, Kadeem Wallace, smiled as he ran his check on the pups. "It's time to come up with a new pep talk, Morales."

"You know the drill once we open that door. Keep it to the business. Put your morals, your ethics, and who you are in the vault. After we leave, we'll drink, moan, and groan." I said mostly for the pup's benefit, since it was his first real mission. "I'll buy the booze."

My team whooped in agreement, but as soon as Wallace hit the button to open the door, they snapped into the facade of what we were trained to be. It was a state of mind that could take decades to perfect, and I was one of the best.

These people eyed my men with a healthy mixture of fear and hostility. More than one finger was itching toward their triggers. A deadly combination. A bunch of rabbits with guns.

Most of them were greener than my new pup. Only a handful of their men were fully trained and had experience. These people weren't like my wolves, who were born and raised to be soldiers.

Some prick got out of the back seat of the old car, donning a pristine white suit that didn't match the thick green forest behind him. When we circled above, the trees were pretty much all we could see.

This place wasn't developed enough for me to think this man was anyone other than their leader.

He gave a wide smile that was faker than the show of power he was putting on.

"Welcome. We are excited to have you on our island."

"Then why are so many guns pointed at us?" A warning growl rumbled in my chest. I didn't take well to people threatening my pups.

He waved his hands, and I watched the delayed reactions of the men putting their guns down, fumbling as they put them into the holsters. The general lost expressions in their eyes.

Were these men even soldiers? Or did they pull every blacksmith, farmer, and tanner here for the body count?

"Sorry, we don't get new arrivals often." It wasn't everyday I wanted to smack that smile off a grown man's face. He really was special.

"I imagine not." A pocket society holed away in a dimension of magic, invisible to the blind eye, in the middle of the Pacific ocean. They didn't want anyone sticking their nose into their perfect bubble around this lush island someone constructed.

Places like this existed because someone decided they didn't want to live by the rules society created. While I could appreciate that, in my experience, societies that went that far out of their way were hiding something gnarly.

Which skeleton was in their closet?

As if he heard my thoughts, Wallace whispered. "A hundred bucks says slavery."



“I’ll take that bet.” My third, Jonathan Nowak, smirked. “You’ve got at least four or five generations out of society. Their guns are from the eighteen hundreds. Slavery was acceptable in many places back then. Witchcraft.”

Nowak pointed to where some kind of reader was spiking on the new pup’s arm. My guess was there was a lot of magic here.

“Na?ve.” Lots of witches fled the hunts, but most of them blended well enough to hide. These guys didn’t.

“I’m not done.” Nowak put his finger up. “Blood or death magic.”

Even among witches, that wasn’t exactly smiled upon.

“Can you tell us what flavor of witches we’re dealing with, pup?”

“I’m getting readings all over the spectrum,” the pup whispered. “I assume a little of everything. I’ve got three hundred readings.”

“Distance on the thing?” I asked.

“Should cover the whole pocket.”

“So it’s probably a decent population count.” I lied and waited for his response. He had the makings of a team alpha. It was my job to teach him how to become that.

“That’s assuming everyone is a witch,” the pup disagreed with a frown. “Don’t want to build on faulty assumptions.”

Nowak chuckled and grabbed the pup by the cheek, like a proud great aunt. “Our pup is already getting so big. Don’t let Morales trick you into making a mistake.”

The pup yanked away, annoyed with Nowak's antics.

We watched the men sloppily part for their leader to wade through. When the man was finally in front of me, he held his hand out.

"Governor Quinn Gadson."

"Morales." I left it at that. With places like this, it was best to treat it like a one-night stand. Come with protection and no second names, so they can't stalk you later.

I already saw Nowak typing the name into his phone, ready to do just that, once we set up a way to connect to the internet.

Gadson noticed too. "Sorry, phones don't work here."

"Yeah, my girl's gonna have my ass," Nowak lied, locking the phone to hide what he was doing.

My men chuckled, knowing Nowak couldn't keep a woman to save his life. None of us could. There was only one woman we could commit to, and most of us hated her guts. The few who didn't simply didn't know any better yet.

All hail our omega.

"What can we do for you, gentlemen?" Gadson asked.

"We're low on supplies and happened upon you." The years of lying made the words come easy. "You surprised us. This island wasn't on the map."

"Come with me, and we'll get you set up." He walked to his car, and I followed. "Your men can walk with mine. Perhaps we can go comfortably."

I scratched my ear, signaling to remain non-violent until the enemy was openly hostile. Nowak and Wallace gave their subtle signals of understanding, and I climbed in the back seat of the run-down limo.

The first thing I noticed was the interior needed upholstering, then the man, who was clearly his second, sat across from us. This man had some real training. He was probably rusty too, but underneath there was actual skill.

So far, he was the only real threat. “I’m Captain Nikolai Zielle.”

His accent was English, with about twenty years of old America layered on top, but I didn’t point that out. Didn’t let him know that I suspected he was probably one of the pioneers that settled the West.

I nodded my acknowledgement to him.

Wallace was going to lose that bet. Nowak was right. Slavery wasn’t what made them go hide from the eye of civilized society.

The car struggled on the crude dirt road, which I suspected someone tried their damndest to even out, but failed. The car grinded on itself when the shocks bounced too hard.

“Perhaps we could talk you into staying. We haven’t had new residents in a while.”

That was one way of saying they needed new breeders to keep things from getting too inbred.

He wasn’t subtle at all. “Perhaps there are women on that plane of yours.”

“Nope. Just a bunch of cocks.” Not that I would tell this asshole if there was.

His interest in us staying plummeted right before my eyes. “Unfortunate.”

So women were rare. That was something wolves understood well enough. The only women we let into our hierarchy was an omega. A job only celestial witches filled, one of the rarest kinds of witch there was.

We cleared some trees and entered a large village hiding underneath the canopy, too obscured by the giant trees to see from the sky. Women saw the car and fled into the shadows, with the children clutched to their chests. Even from the car, I could smell the fear.

Not a good sign.

“How long have you been traveling?”

“A year.” Pretending I hadn’t taken off the ground less than twenty-four hours ago. It wasn’t a total lie. I hadn’t been home in about a year. “That’s a long time without a woman. Perhaps we can make sure your men are entertained tonight.”

“Doubtful.” Considering they were all hiding out of sight.

“Don’t mind them. They are simple women. Your plane probably startled them.”

“I’m sure,” I agreed to placate him, but this was his car, and there was no reason to think a foreigner was in it. They fled with a level of efficiency that showed how much of a joke his army really was.

The women were ten times more coordinated than the men ever would be.

The car stopped, and he gestured to the village. “Get what you need. Tell them to put it on my tab. If you stay the night, make sure you go to our gentleman’s club. It’s the

finest entertainment.”

“You’ve clearly never been to Las Vegas.”

Gadson laughed at my prodding joke. “Trust me. Experience what our island has to offer.”

I climbed out and let him drive away. I meandered around what appeared to be town central. The silence was carefully calculated. I pretended I couldn’t smell the women watching me from their hiding spots. That I couldn’t hear their even breathing and heartbeats. So many eyes were locked onto me, it was eerie.

I took a step, and every single one of them adjusted their position ever so slightly. Making damn sure I couldn’t see them. Their steps were so soft, I had to strain to hear them. If there weren’t so many of them moving in perfect harmony with me, I would have missed it.

I walked into the wood building next to my left and found a small shop with herbs on the wooden shelves.

A woman sat on a stool at the front of the shop, but she wasn’t near the register. It was almost like she was standing in time out. Her face had a nasty gash across her left eye that was in the last stages of healing.

“Ma’am.”

She cringed and balled up into herself. “Yes, Sir?.”

“He wasn’t talking to you.” A man came from around the corner to slap her across the face. I gritted my teeth to avoid snarling or growling. Focus on the mission.

“Sorry, Sir.” Tears misted her eyes, but she gritted her teeth. Despite the fact there was a clear outline of his hand left on her face, she never so much as whimpered.

The man hobbled over to me with a cane in his hand. “How can I help you?”

“Actually, I was talking to her,” I told him harshly.

“She’s stupid. She doesn’t know anything to be able to help you. My wife knows better than to speak out of turn.”

Fuck, it was gonna be one of these places.

“I’m looking for harcelon.” I pulled the only herb I knew right out of my ass.

“Never heard of it.”

His wife’s mouth twisted, and her eyes went to the corner of the store. I stomped over to where his wife’s glances were aimed and found glass jars clearly labeled; harcelon.

“Seems it’s right here.” I dropped the tiny jar on the counter. “Governor Gadson said to put it on his tab.”

“Oh, how did you find that? We don’t sell this.” The guy laughed.

I wanted to say it was because he’d never worked here a day of his life, but I didn’t. Only because all that would do was make him beat his wife harder. I already had too much blood and dirt on my hands. I didn’t intend to add any more innocent bystanders than absolutely necessary.

I grabbed the jar and slid it into my cargo pants pocket. “Thanks.”

As I left, I saw a little girl tucked under the shelf. She resembled the woman up front. They had the same blue, baby doll eyes and thick red curls. Figuring she didn't want to deal with her father, I kept walking like I didn't see her.

I stepped out, and a crowd of men had a screaming woman surrounded. They chuckled.

"She shoved me off of her. Who does she think she is?"

My men walked up, having finally made it into town, and their eyes watched the scene unfolding. The men attacking her ripped her clothes, and the other women watched from the shadows. The other men not involved went about their way, because it was an everyday occurrence.

She didn't fight them anymore. She knew it was a losing battle. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

The pup watched in complete horror and took a step forward, as if to do something.

"Hold, Rios."

"But, boss."

"Remember what the mission is. Do not interfere. You're going to have to get used to seeing some disgusting shit in this line of work, pup. The sooner you harden your heart the better."

Easier said than done, but if I couldn't at least pretend that the scene wasn't bothering me, I could never expect him to.

"Right in the middle of town," Wallace murmured to me. "Not some back alley

shrouded in darkness.”

“The herbalist’s husband backhanded her right in front of a paying customer.”

“Fucking hell,” Wallace grumbled, leading the pups away.

Rios turned to look back, but I grabbed his head and forced him to face forward.

“Don’t torture yourself by watching.”

The screaming upticked as the men laughed.

“We’re not in Kansas, pup.”

That was when rocks flew through the air. I whirled around to find the rocks flying from every shadow hiding in the nooks and crannies in this village. Then the women who threw them shot off into the woods.

The men chased the shadows, cussing and yelling.

The woman in the herb shop opened her door, waving the assaulted woman into her store. My best guess was to shuffle her out the back. They were the real meat and potatoes of this society, and they’d probably never talk to me.

Guess I was going to have to pry it out of the men.

Great.



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:45 am*

### Chapter three

Astria Zielle

An odd creaking made me freeze. What was that?

The wall opened up and a blinding white light burned my retinas. I covered my eyes and retreated the best I could, but all I did was hit my head again.

How ironic that the thing I'd been craving also caused me pain. That's what I deserved for daring to want something, I guess.

"Astria." The familiar cruel voice reminded me of bruising hands touching everywhere it wasn't wanted. The sound hurt more than the light. It boomed loud enough to bust my eardrums.

Antoine Bunson, I wanted to say, but my throat was so parched that the sounds didn't want to come out.

"Your father is willing to give you one last chance."

A chance? A way out of this box.

"What do I need to do?" Each syllable cracked, but I managed to get it out.

"Start with getting a shower. We need you looking... and smelling like a lady."

“Okay.” I moved toward his voice. Every limb struggled to shift out of its tight confinement. When I finally placed my bare foot down onto the cold concrete, pain shot up my leg until it gave out. I fumbled out of the box and hit the ground, barely catching myself on the stairs, before I bonked my head for a third time.

The slide of my fall was sure to add plenty of bruises to my growing collection, but my head didn’t need any more damage. I was dumb enough as it was.

Bunson clicked his tongue. “Come on. Crawl, bitch.”

Everything hurt, but I did as he demanded. Knowing that eventually all the creaks and cracking would work everything out. My numb toes stung as the blood flowed through them again.

“Faster, bitch.” The leather of a whip went across my bare back.

I bit my tongue hard enough to draw blood, forbidding myself to allow one smart ass remark to escape from inside my brain.

I just got out of that box. I wasn’t going to give anyone a reason to force me back in.

The whip snapped, and the tip hit between my thighs. Pain burned through my body and made my arms give out. I bit my tongue harder, so I wouldn’t give this asshole the satisfaction of my screaming. It was bad enough that tears dripped down my cheeks.

“Get up.” His booming yell made me flinch, and I hated myself for it. “The box did a number on you, didn’t it, baby? Where’s that smart fucking mouth now? Where are all those teeth that got you in trouble?”

Don’t say it. Keep your fucking mouth shut.

I climbed back into my crawling position, so that I could continue the long trek to where the showers of the prison were, on the other side of the building.

“You can do it, Astria,” a soft female voice told me. I lifted my head and found one of the local women in a prison cell. Our kids played together almost every day. “Keep going. For her.”

“Shut it.” Bunson snapped the whip in her direction, and she fled to the corner of her cell.

It gave me enough strength to keep going. I needed to get home to Kylie. I could do anything if I could get to her.

Every time I ran out of steam, another familiar female voice would speak up from the cages and remind me of my mission. My sisters never let me forget that our only purpose was to live long enough to protect our daughters from being picked from the vine too soon.

So that they may have as much peace as possible before this life becomes theirs.

If I gave up here in these halls, there was no one to protect her.

“You’re so strong,” another one spoke up. “Just a little further.”

“I thought I’d never have a chance to get that sweet pussy again. I thought for sure they’d throw away the key this time.” Bunson chuckled, kindly reminding me that even when I got to my destination, the misery wouldn’t end.

I’d clean up into something worth dirtying again. “For the record, if you try that shit you did to Peter, I’ll bust in that pretty face until you never look the same again. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Sir.”

This was my existence, after all.

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One day, I would learn how to keep my fucking mouth shut.

Too bad, I only decided to shut my mouth at the worst possible times.

For the thousandth time in my life, I was negotiating for my release from prison. Well, negotiation wasn't the right word. They had a task they needed to be done, and I wanted the cage gone.

We all knew the drill.

“I have someone who doesn't need to be here.” My father's disgusting grin made my stomach roil. The urge to puke all over the nice white pantsuit he always wore never ceased. Maybe some vomit would help make his outsides match his insides.

“Do you want me to kill them or fuck them?” We both knew I'd do it, so I could get back home to my daughter.

The bench I sat on, in his murder van, dug into my bare thighs, and his giant soldiers sat on each side of me, with a gun aimed at my head. The rage in their eyes told me that they only needed one reason to kill me, and that reason didn't even need to be good.

I guess they didn't appreciate the fact that I might find a way out of prison after the horrible crimes I committed against their brethren.

The red sparkling, barely there outfit they'd dressed me in made me think the island's only strip club was on the other side of the sliding metal door.

The stench of cum and blood in the vehicle didn't make it clear what was expected of me, though. I knew they wanted me to get the person's dick hard enough they would be careless and stupid.

The only question that mattered was what they wanted me to do with it afterward.

"We have a group of outsiders visiting our island. Kill the leader," my father answered as he picked at some invisible imperfection on his pant leg. "We need their alpha out of the way."

"Why?"

"The alpha holds the team together. The betas only follow orders."

"How do you recognize them on sight? What if there is more than one alpha?"

"Everyone knows a pack only has one alpha, Astria." He scoffed at me.

"Seems like a bad setup. So if that one alpha dies, the whole thing falls apart?"  
Idiotic. Then again, that was how they ran things here.

My father remained silent, refusing to give me any more information. I was lucky I got what I did.

I didn't ask for any more details than that. It would be a wasted effort. He gave me my task. It was up to me to figure out how to get the job done. "You got it, Daddy."

I made sure to make the word 'daddy' as sickly sweet as I could manage. Just in case,

the intended sarcasm somehow flew over his fat, ignorant head.

The men lowered their firearms, but one's finger twitched as he held back the urge to deal with my disrespect. I shoved my way out of the crowded van, since no one thought they needed to move.

When one of his meat heads smirked at me, I resisted the urge to punch him in the face. I was in enough trouble, best not make it worse.

"Can I at least have my magic back?" I tugged on the bulky, silver collar weighing down my neck.

"Absolutely not."

A girl could hope.

The door slid open, and the crisp breeze filled my lungs. It was strange to take a breath that didn't stink of metal and agony. I slid the van door closed, not wanting their faces to ruin the beautiful night sky.

My collar sparked with electric volts. Convulsions painfully wracked through my bones. A warning of what was to come if I failed.

"Tick-tock, Astria." My father's voice was muffled from the other side, but I received his stupid little message all the same. "This is your last chance. Make it count."

I walked up to the back door, that was a few feet from where they dropped me off at and knocked loudly on the cool metal. The van pulled away as the door swung open, not waiting to see if I actually went inside.

They had no reason to think I'd run or try to escape. Where would I go?

A woman opened it, took one look at me, and let me in. I maneuvered through all the naked women. A friend of mine was doing her makeup, and I noticed a bruise on her collarbone.

“Let me help,” I told her.

“I didn’t think I’d ever see you again.” She eyed my face, but handed over her powder.

“You missed a spot.” I did a quick cover job over the bruise. The flashing lights would hide most of it. I could feel her eyes glued to the throbbing section of my cheek. “How bad is it?”

“You haven’t looked?”

I shook my head no. This was the first time I had access to a mirror, and now that it was here, I didn’t want to look at what they had done to my face.

“The brand is healing well. It shouldn’t be that noticeable soon.”

I nodded.

“I love you, Astria,” she told me.

“I love you.” I patted her head and went over to the owner of the joint. “Hey.”

“Not you again.” He groaned. “What now? You’re bad for business.”

“Ordered by Governor Gadson himself.”

“Fuck me.” He groaned again, taking note of the brand on my chin. “You get next. Be

ready in thirty seconds.”

Despite his moaning and groaning, he always put on the same song for me. A slow seductive beat about a woman sucking the life out of an unsuspecting man. Appropriate.

With easy practice, I walked onto the runway, keeping my pace slow and my hips swaying.

The group of outsiders were damn easy to spot. They stuck out like ten muscly thumbs that were certainly packing more than their surly attitudes.

Each one of them wore all black and had a critical expression. Like they were all trying to solve a difficult math equation, rather than looking at beautiful, scantily clad women.

I didn't go right for them. That would be too obvious. Instead, I jumped up and twirled around the stripper pole. All the other dancers gave them a wide berth, which was intriguing.

In our world, this was the safest a woman could get. Because if a man tried to take what he hadn't paid for, another man was gonna take it out of their hide. So why were the women speed walking away from this group of men?

And which one was the leader? Several of them carried oppressive energy.

It didn't take but two more twirls around the pole to figure it out. Most of them kept a blank facade, but at least their eyes moved around and appreciated their surroundings. But one's dark eyes were counting the future dead bodies that would litter the room.

After a few more tricks, I sauntered off the catwalk to make my way around the



room, watching that one.

As I got closer, his dark chocolate eyes pierced their targets deeper than a spear ever could. Any woman that dared to get close was chased off the moment his gaze laid on them.

I found someone to dance against, that gave me a good vantage point to watch my mark. The man was a terrifying specimen. He wasn't the biggest out of the group, but the air around him was dark and powerful.

The faintest pull in the center of my chest wanted to drag me right to him, but I fought the soft instinct easily enough.

His long black hair was pulled back from his sharp handsome face, into a ponytail at the base of his neck, and part of me wanted to run my hands through it. I'd never seen a man with long hair like that before.

"I've never had a feral before," the man behind me breathed, as I shook my ass in his lap.

"Could you handle one?" I teased playfully, ignoring the sting his slur left behind.

I meandered around the room giving dances until I could justify going all the way to the back where my target sat. I started with one of his minions to help garner some trust, giving a lap dance to ease the oncoming troubles I intended to cause.

The one on the end felt softer in comparison to the others. His dark blue eyes grew wide when I stopped in front of him. I unhooked my top. Eyes on me.

"Oh, come on," one of the men complained. "The pup gets everything."

“Maybe you should play nicer.” I shot that one a smile, and managed to get all the men, but my mark to chuckle. The asshole didn’t crack so much as a smile.

“I’ll play as nice as you want, baby girl.”

“Fucking liar,” another one of the men shot back, causing another round of laughs.

When enough of them were solely focused on me, I finally set my sights on my prize. I sunk to all fours, making sure to appear as subservient as possible.

When I passed the one who’d been complaining about my choice for my dance, he spoke, “Come on, sweetheart.”

“I heard you’re a liar.” I kept going to where my prey was watching me, still ready to strike. Which earned me another round of laughs and the guys teasing each other. Good. The men tossed green paper at me, but I ignored the odd behavior. It wasn’t the worst thing a man had thrown at me.

But their focus was locked where I wanted them; on my ass instead of their boss. My prey, however, simply narrowed his eyes on me, practically squinting to intimidate me with his stare. I’d dealt with men harder than him before.

I kneeled at his knees, running my hands up his legs in slow, easy movements. His eyebrow lifted, as if he couldn’t conceive a woman daring to touch him. Which was possible, even though I was certain he was handsome if he un-pinched his face, that is.

I pretended that I didn’t notice the daggers he was throwing at me and climbed into his lap. Powerful men were suspicious. As long as I didn’t cower and back down, though, they always relaxed in the end.

I was just stubborn and dumb enough to stand my ground.

How many men had I been sent after at this point? Countless. How many had resisted what I offered them? None.

Now that we were face to face, I took the chance to take in all his features. It was impossible to tell how old he was. I'd never met a man that showed his years. But one thing I'd learned was the older a man, the bigger a threat he was to the governor.

The red light flashing gave his skin an off hue, but I could tell he was multiple shades darker than my pale skin. Certainly, I hadn't been locked up long enough to lose that much color.

I gave into my previous desire and ran my hands through his soft, silky hair, scratching his scalp. Foreign men loved that shit.

His hands grabbed my hips, and I couldn't help but follow the corded muscles of his arms down to where he was guiding my movements. His cock finally poked through his thick, black cargo pants and rubbed against me.

Strange desire flooded over me, making my movements keep time with him. My core throbbed at the way he rubbed against me. I could only think of one time I ever wanted a man to touch me, so I guess this job was one for the records.

I draped my upper body over him, leisurely feeling him up and taking stock of the bumps that didn't belong. I'd bet my last gold coin he had weapons.

I leaned back, sliding my fingers beneath the open edges of his leather jacket until the cold, metal butt of a gun grazed my knuckles. Bingo.

His hands snatched my wrists into vise grips before I could move to grab anything.

He pulled me closer until my front was plastered to him and whispered in my ear.

“A woman as beautiful as you doesn’t have to try this fucking hard unless she’s trying to destroy you.”

I’d played this hand so many times, and no man had ever seen through me. My heart pounded hard enough to make my sternum complain.

There was only one move I could think of in this compromised position.

I headbutted him in the nose hard enough to make the chair fall backward. He released one of my wrists to punch me across the jaw with a force that made me see stars in the corner of my eyes. The only part of being hit that unnerved me was the sense that he wasn’t using his full force.

Unlucky for him, he wasn’t the first time a man had clocked me like that, and I doubted it would be the last. Unless he killed me.

I dodged the next punch with a moment to spare and returned that punch with every ounce of power I could muster. I even pictured his face as my father to help aid my efforts, aiming right for that nose I’d already broken, until my fist was covered in blood,

“Fuck,” he grunted, and the next thing I knew, air whipped around me as I flipped in the air, landing chest to the floor. The concrete was hard enough that I considered playing dead.

Suck it up, stupid bitch. Your baby needs you.

I rolled over, snatching the gun out of his jacket as he tried to recover. In a maneuver I couldn’t follow, he disarmed me in less than a second. The pistol scattered across

the floor, out of reach, and my arm stung from whatever he did to me.

“Need help, boss?” A deep chuckle vibrated behind me.

Shit! I needed to dispatch this guy before the others jumped me. He should have already been dead. That would have bought me enough disorientation to boogie out. Instead, we were a spectacle rolling on the floor.

He grabbed my throat and pinned me to the ground. I had to give it to the guy; He took my breath away. “I’ve got her. Check the area. She’s not alone.”

I grabbed a spilled beer bottle from nearby, where we knocked over a table and smashed it across his head. He wavered, but not enough to go down.

What the fuck was his skull made of? Titanium?

Since that didn’t work, I jabbed the broken end at his throat, but he caught my wrist in a tight, bruising hold with his free hand. I wasn’t nearly strong enough to overpower him in a battle of brute strength.

I punched at his face, but he leaned back out of reach. Annoyance twisted his mouth, but my hits weren’t landing how I wanted. My arms were much shorter than his.

Fine.

I grabbed his nipple through his strangely soft shirt and twisted it. There was a small victory in the yelp that I got out of him. The move caught him off guard, and he released my other arm.

So I stabbed him in the chest as hard as I could, forcing him to give me some space, while he dug the glass out of his body. I slid out from under him. This was not my

usual customer. I needed to get this back under control.

A fist landed in my gut. Pain crushed my insides and dropped me back to my knees. It was a good thing they hadn't fed me in a while. Otherwise, dinner would have been on the floor, along with all the blood and beer we spilled.

I recovered just in time to roll out from under his giant boot, as it came down to stamp me into a permanent part of the ground. I grabbed some of the shattered glass to slice the back of his knees, but his pants were made of some thick, heavy material that protected him.

Get creative, you stupid bitch.

I dug in the pocket at his thigh and found a knife. When I stabbed that into his leg, it pierced his protection and made purchase. I yanked on the blade as hard as I could.

He grabbed me by my hair, ripping me to my feet and throwing me like I was a rag doll. I flew onto the couch and landed against the back hard enough to flip it. I grabbed a cushion to use as a shield, when the same knife I'd been stabbing him with came down over me.

I kicked him in the knee, making his imposing body flop on me. I put my arms around his neck and kneed him over and over in the gut. Let's see how much he likes it.

I didn't care if he puked all over me as long as he went down. He picked me up and body slammed me to the concrete, but I held tight.

"Let go, you crazy bitch," he snarled like a wild animal.

He grabbed my knees, forcing them to spread, so one leg was on each side of him.

His upper body pinned me beneath him.

Well, my mouth landed me in prison. Might as well use it to get free.

I clamped my teeth on his neck until blood filled my mouth. I didn't let go, even when he managed to come up to his knees. It was impressive considering I was still firmly latched onto him, using my limbs like tentacles to keep him from escaping.

His fingers dug into my hair again. A growl rumbled in his chest and vibrated my body in a way that made me feel strange. He used a hand under my chin and his hold on my hair to pull me back. I made sure to take a hunk of him with me.

When we were eye to eye, I spat a chunk of his neck and his blood out, aiming right for him.

I could swear for a brief moment that a brilliant smile lit up his face. His perfect white teeth reflected the strobe lights. Not a cruel smile like Bunson or a creepy one like my father. It was one of pure amusement and excitement.

I blinked, and it was gone. The man's grim and mildly annoyed expression set in the place it had always been.

Maybe I imagined it. I had been hit in the head a lot. Who had fun being assassinated?

Maybe a crazy person.

The longer our little violent dance went on, the more I realized that the lack of rage was unnerving. It wasn't uncommon for a man to lose his shit on me and make me regret being so damn stubborn. But this guy was relatively calm, considering I'd been doing my best to murder him.

I acted like I was going to headbutt him again, and he was smart enough to dodge this time. But he hadn't realized that I never thought that would work a second time. I used his momentum to force him onto his back.

I managed to straddle his neck before he recovered. I squeezed my thighs together, hoping to apply enough force to his pressure point, to make him pass out once and for all. He'd be much deadlier if he would just go to sleep.

"I hope this was how you wanted to die." A peaceful slumber for him and freedom for me.

Something about that made the furthest edge of his lips twitch, as if he was fighting back the urge to laugh or smile. That didn't stop him from grabbing my thighs and prying them apart, though.

I worked leg muscles that I never knew I had to keep some semblance of a hold on him, but he managed enough wiggle room to keep from passing out.

Fuck this guy.

Fine!

I shifted my weight, opting to smother him with thighs and my lady bits. His hot breath directly on my center brought the terrifying prospect that I'd made a horrible decision to the forefront of my mind.

Before I could scramble away, jolts of lightning radiated from my collar. The jolts waved through my body until I flopped off of him and struggled to endure the onslaught.

I swallowed the cry of pain and gritted my teeth. The intensity and duration were a



clear message.

You failed, bitch.

Even though I knew it was useless, I yanked at the collar, but there was no give. Like always, fresh waves of sparks electrified my fingertips, zapping me of any strength.

A metallic clank let me know I was in danger, but the agony ripping through every nerve I had didn't let me dwell on it.

“Who are you working for?”

I saw a dancer hiding behind a plant across the way. I grunted some words out. “Kylie. Tell Elizabeth to get Kylie.”

If I died, I needed to know someone was taking care of her.

I finally looked up at the man standing over me with a gun pointed at my face. I'm sorry, Kylie. I tried.

He whirled to face the other direction with a groan. Red darts pierced his body one by one until his giant form flopped on top of me. His heavy weight made it even harder to pump any air into my lungs.

That was karma for trying to smother him, probably.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:45 am*

### Chapter four

#### Dirus Morales

Cold metal bit into my skin, rousing me from the drug induced nap I'd been taking. My eyesight blurred for a few moments before finally focusing properly. I shook off the leftover effects of whatever they dosed me with and rolled to my feet.

Their drugs were strong enough to take down a wolf, and that was nothing to sneeze at.

They shouldn't have been prepared for a metabolism that burned through any substances like it was candy.

I was in a cube made of dark gray bars that were close enough together that there was no way to squeeze through, but spaced enough to have a clear view of my surroundings. It was a giant cage in the center of a room with jail cells lining the surrounding walls.

Everything was stone gray. The only metal in here were the bars lining my cage. Wide eyes watched me with horrified expressions from their cells.

Probably had something to do with the balcony on the next floor with two men on each of the four sides, pointing guns at my cage.

"Hey!" I roared at the men above. The women in the cells around me whimpered and scrambled deeper into their cells until all I could see was eyes. Even the men up top

flinched.

“I want to speak to your governor. I don’t appreciate whatever game is being played here.”

“The governor isn’t taking visits at this time,” one man stuttered out.

“If he was smart, he would make time.”

I did another scan of my cell and found the stripper from last night sitting on the other side of the bars. The lights had hidden the sparkling gold of her eyes, but now they bore into me. I could almost swear they were scouring my soul, and some part of me reacted to that.

But I’d trained myself for hundreds of years not to let those gut reactions control me. Her being a tiny skinny thing wasn’t going to suddenly make me anything other than a man-eating wolf.

“You,” I growled, but she didn’t cower away. I had to respect the balls it took to stare me dead in the eyes. Most of my team couldn’t do that.

“You,” she answered with a steadier voice than the one with a gun and distance on his side.

I rushed over, picked her up by the throat, sliding my hand under that gaudy collar, and slammed her to the bars hard enough I was pretty sure I could use her as a xylophone mallet to play a song.

She choked as the pressure to her windpipe cut off her air, but she didn’t otherwise complain, even as her feet dangled a foot off the ground. This woman couldn’t be over five-feet-tall.

The women in the cages whimpered again. One even yelled, “Astria!”

“You said we were working for Kylie, right? Who is that?”

I turned her face with my index finger to get a good look at the brand burned along the line of her chin and cheek. A small row of symbols that weren’t any language I could identify.

The burn was healing, but was recently infected. It was going to be a nasty scar, if she lived long enough to get that far.

If they were hoping to ruin her beauty, it didn’t work. Her heart-shaped face was softened with high cheekbones and thick, kissable lips.

“She doesn’t work for anyone,” another woman spoke up on her behalf, half sobbing. “Let her go.”

“I thought you were smarter than this,” the stripper choked out.

“I thought you were smarter than to run your mouth when your life is in my hands.”

Her face turned purple as blood pooled in her pale cheeks. It was like she hadn’t gone out in the sun in her entire life.

“You only say that because you don’t know me very well.” She coughed as the lack of oxygen burned her lungs.

“Please!” a voice across the room begged. “The governor made her do it.”

That was the first bit of fear I’d seen in her eyes as they widened and jerked over to the voice.

The familiar sound of boots on the ground headed down the hall our way. I dropped the stripper and readied myself for a fight. She coughed and wheezed on the ground behind me, assuring me that she wasn't the threat to be worried about right now.

Instead of coming to our cube, they went to the cell where the voice had begged for her life, and pulled her out by her hair and she didn't even fight.

"What did you do?" the stripper got out between her ragged breaths, that probably felt like inhaling glass.

"I love you, Astria," the woman whispered as they dragged her out.

"I love you." Her scent flared, and for the first time, I could smell past metal and liquor.

Her scent stopped me in my tracks. She was bathed in star shine. My mouth watered as the smell wrapped around me. Before I could inhale again, the scent was gone.

With one last gasping breath, she recovered and went back to sitting how she was, cussing under her breath. So was I.

I turned back to her, watching as those golden eyes I'd dismissed earlier glared me right in the face. I fucked up.

"You're a witch." I'd never wanted to be wrong in my life, but my suspicions were solidified by the second.

She rolled her eyes and banged her head into the bars like she was kicking herself.

"Every person on this island is a witch."

“What kind of witch are you?”

She grit her teeth. “Doesn’t matter. It can’t hurt you.”

Nothing ever mattered more. “Celestial, right?”

“I’ve never heard of that kind of witch.”

These people probably didn’t have the name for it. They were rare and questioningly the most powerful witches to ever exist. “Your magic comes from the stars.”

She froze, but didn’t answer.

Celestial witches created werewolves from the lupus constellation. They were our omegas, and they sat at the very top of the hierarchy.

And I beat on her twice, I’d seen wolves get an instant death sentence for less. My open disdain for her kind wasn’t going to buy me any understanding.

Everyone knew I deemed the only other celestial witch a brat at best and a selfish snake at worst. She hid behind a mass of wolves because she could never survive on her own. I refused to acknowledge someone that weak as my superior.

Nadine ‘the golden’ smelled like a sickly sweet death. I didn’t know celestials could smell so fucking good. I wondered what was hiding her scent from me.

Either way, the bruising around her collar bone and face said I was fucked.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:45 am*

### Chapter five

#### Astria Zielle

The man sat across from me and stared like he was solving a difficult problem. Men.

His long black hair had fallen out of his ponytail and hung in curls that I couldn't help but be jealous of.

I couldn't think of one woman that had prettier hair than he did. Other than maybe my best friend, Elizabeth.

It added a softness that didn't belong against his sharp, masculine features. I bet he wore it back so he could look meaner. Or so it wasn't in the way when he killed someone. Either seemed plausible.

"Kill me or don't. Stop thinking so hard."

He chuckled. "Do you want me to kill you?"

The word 'yes' sat right on my tongue, but I didn't let the impulsive word win. Kylie. I failed my last chance. I had to get out of here. Dying wasn't an option. That said, I wasn't sure what was at this point.

"Not exactly." I leaned my head back on the bars. "But the odds aren't exactly in my favor."

“No, they aren’t,” he agreed.

“If you’re going to kill me, get on with it. No need to drag it out.”

If they’d given me my magic, I could have finished the job. Then I’d be out there with my baby. Instead, I was still in jail.

I stood up and the guards on the balcony followed me with their guns. I leaned on the bars as I stretched. Up top, eight feet above me, the bars were wider. Could I climb up and squeeze through? No, they’d kill me before I got an inch off the ground.

“Sit the fuck down, Astria,” Bunson’s gravelly voice warned from behind me.

“Give me a break. What am I going to do?” I wasn’t sure who that question was for. How could I get out of here?

“Now,” he yelled. “Or do you want to go back in the box?”

I put my hands up and slid back to my spot.

“You’re lucky I’m in a forgiving mood.” Bunson chuckled, and it rubbed everything inside me the wrong way. “Make sure you thank me for the room upgrade.”

“Thank you.” I wasn’t going to give him a reason to come in here. It was bad enough that this was right next to Bunson’s office and anyone would get a three-sixty view of what he did to me.

“Watch that smart ass mouth, bitch.” His boots clopped loudly on the stone floor, announcing that he was coming up behind me, but I didn’t turn to look at him. Giving him attention only made it worse.



“I appreciate your patience with me, sir. It’s more than I deserve.” My lips felt numb as I said the words, but it was better to eat some pride now than encourage him.

“I don’t need a reason, Astria.” His hand played with my hair through the bars. I didn’t move. Didn’t yank away. Even when the grip turned painful.

I ignored him well enough that eventually Bunson released me. “You boys know the rules. That door doesn’t open without me present. She’s dangerous.”

The door to his office closed again, and I let out the breath I didn’t realize I was holding. The burn in my chest reminded me that it couldn’t take much more abuse today.

“I thought the guards were for me,” my cellmate said.

“Nope.” I closed my eyes. I had to get out of here.

I didn’t think killing the man now would account for anything. They weren’t in the habit of accepting late work, and for whatever reason, they took us alive instead of killing us both when they had the chance.

“Why would they put us in the same cell?”

“I assume it was so you would kill me and save them the effort.”

“Then what about me?”

“No clue.” None of this made sense.

“Have you considered you were supposed to finish the job?”

“I considered it,” I answered honestly. “But since the benefit of killing you has expired, I don’t see a point.”

“You cut a deal with someone.” He studied the room. “What was worth my life?”

“You wouldn’t understand the answer.” Men never did. He would think it was just about saving my skin. Dying here would benefit me greatly, but it wouldn’t benefit Kylie.

“Try me.”

“You only care, so you can cut a deal of your own. With the perfect bargaining chip, of course.”

He smirked. The whites of his teeth stood in stark contrast against the deep bronze tone of his skin. It made it hard to look away from the pointed incisor that was ready to turn its next meal to shreds. The dark pools of his brown eyes reminded me of all the women who wouldn’t go near him.

He was a predator, and that aura oozed out of his pores.

“Fair enough.” The rumble of his voice set every survival instinct I had alive. Danger. Danger.

I pried my eyes away and searched for an escape. Instead, I found a load of men bringing in a screaming girl covered in blood. The girl was twelve now. Her father sold her a couple of weeks ago. I guess she wasn’t adjusting well.

I stared at the bars over the man’s head, letting the world fall away. If I died here, they would sell my daughter even sooner than they should. This would be her life.

I couldn't think about that if I wanted to function. So her screams went in one ear and out the other.

"Calm," I reminded her gently, but didn't dare to look at her. Right now, Kylie had about eight more years. How many would she lose if I couldn't get out of here? Three?

All of them.

My empty stomach twisted. No, that couldn't happen. My eyes landed on the man. Was there really no favor left to buy? If there was even a sliver of a possibility, didn't I owe it to Kylie to find out?

He watched the scene with eyes that unnerved me. Most men watched with mild curiosity or desire. Instead, he was numb, like so many of the older women I knew. It was an unavoidable part of life, and at some point, it stopped being horrifying.

If a person lived long enough to get to that point.

Most of us didn't.

"Kill me or don't. Stop thinking so hard," he said, without ever looking away from the scene before him.

"I guess it's complicated for both of us."

"Must be," he agreed solemnly. The first glimmer of sadness glossed his eyes, but he rubbed them and the emotion was gone. Was he feeling for a woman?

I blinked, and I realized the screaming had stopped. I finally glanced over at her tattered body. She went to get up.

“Stay down,” I told her. “Don’t move.”

She sobbed, but listened to me.

“Let them think they’ve won. If you get up too quickly, they’ll know they didn’t get all the fight out of you.”

“Okay.” The way her voice broke tore at me. They’d taken a good chunk out of her soul. “That’s not what you’d do.”

“Whatever you think I would do, do the opposite,” I told her. “Don’t be like me, baby girl.”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:45 am*

### Chapter six

#### Dirus Morales

This woman was the source. The beacon that managed to get our pack's attention. A growing power big enough, we decided to investigate it. Mission complete.

This woman wasn't carefully guarded like the celestial witch back home would be, though. She had the stomach of a hardened soldier who'd been to war too many times. In a way, that was probably true.

Best guess said she was eighteen or nineteen. Otherwise, we'd have recognized her magic sooner. We investigated anything that affected the stars, trying to find more omegas.

"What's today?" she asked softly, as if she were afraid of the answer.

I looked at my watch and realized that these idiots didn't think to take off my body. A sloppy mistake, since my men knew exactly where I was because of it. "The fifteenth?"

She chewed on her cheek. "Of September?"

"Yeah."

Her eyebrow quirked with annoyance.

“You asked a question. Now I get one.” I waited until her eyes flicked to me, acknowledging my demand. “Why was I targeted?”

She shrugged. “The governor is threatened by you.”

“Why?”

“Am I supposed to pretend that isn’t a dumb question?”

“Yes.”

“That’s the second question. So I get another one after this.” She waited until I nodded my agreement. “There are spiders in the woods that are huge. They spin giant silk, works of art that’s a pain to get off your skin and hair. These giant fangs on their face would make you think they were so poisonous, you’d die with one bite. They shake their webs and it looks like they’ll leap out and attack you.”

She stared me in my eyes, deep enough to think she could see my insides. “But they’ll run if you keep approaching.”

Well, that story took an interesting turn. “Is that your way of calling him a pussy?”

“I don’t understand how you are using that term, but he shakes his web a lot.”

Finally, someone with a competent bone in their body. “So he uses you to kill the other spiders that he’s scared of?”

“Depends on the occasion. My turn.” She shrugged. “Do you have food on you?”

“No.”

“It was a stretch, anyway.” She blew air out of her cheeks dramatically. Her skin was tight to her bones. She probably did need food. I’d toss a protein bar at her in a heartbeat, but they were smart enough to at least clear out my cargo pants. “A girl can dream.”

“Remember that deal you mentioned? Maybe we can figure out a way to help each other.”

She stared at the wall behind me. “What do you want? Pussy? Ass? My mouth? Some special menu item? What gift should I be grateful for in return?”

This woman was so numb to the harsh words leaving her pretty lips.

“I want information. And I’ll grant one seat of passage to get the fuck out of here.” My words made her pause. Like the poor thing couldn’t possibly conceive what I was saying. “I’m offering freedom.”

“You expect the rest, right?”

Fuck, these people were wrecked. “None of my men or me will touch you if you don’t want it. I’ll even sweeten the deal, and make sure no one else does either.”

Nevermind the fact that as an alpha I couldn’t allow anyone to touch her, anyway. She didn’t need to know that, though.

She rolled her eyes as if the deal was too good to be true. “Give me a second seat and I’ll do anything you want.”

Easy. “Deal.”

I approached her, and she stared up at me with those dead tired eyes that fucked with

every wolf instinct I had. She was ready for me to take what I wanted from her, and I hated that. Celestials weren't supposed to think that wolves would hurt them. We were the lap dogs at her feet.

What the hell was I even thinking? I didn't believe in that shit.

I put my hand out for her to shake. She jerked as if she was ready to dodge an attack, but then realized my hand stayed where it was. I gritted my teeth, so that I wouldn't outwardly react to how skittish she was.

She stared at my hand with confusion.

"You shake it," I explained.

"Your cock?" One eyebrow went up.

"If I wanted you to shake my cock, I would have put it out there." Which honestly wasn't the best thing to say, all things considered. But it seemed to work for her, since she just scrunched her face and hesitantly grabbed my index finger, then shook it like she was trying to get a spider out of a shirt.

A laugh burst from my chest before I could control it, and she yanked her hand back as if I burned her.

"Let's try again." I kept my hand where it was. She grabbed my fingers, but I grabbed her hand, putting it in the proper place, and shook her hand instead.

"What's that mean?"

"That we both agree to the deal, and promise to uphold our ends of the bargain."



“Okay,” she answered softly, as if I disarmed her.

“My name is Dirus Morales.”

“I’m Astria.”

Crying and laughing echoed down the halls and I went to sit back where I was.

“What’s all that noise?”

“What noise?”

“The screaming. The laughing.”

“Bedtime rounds.”

This place was brutal. Even by my standards. Boots squeaking on the floor made both of us look up. She grabbed a metal spike that I assumed she jimmied out at some point while we were talking and palmed it like a pro.

A couple of drunk men stopped in front of the doors to our cage, and one pointed at her. “I want that one.”

“Whoa there.” A soldier laughed, clapping his hand on his shoulder like a proud father would. “Maybe start with the smaller fish. You know what she’s in here for. Bunson gave explicit orders that her door doesn’t open without him present.”

Right. Because she was already prepared to fuck someone up. The bigger part of me wanted them to let that younger generation come in and learn a lesson he soon wouldn’t forget. Go ahead and let Darwin do his thing on these pions.

But it was also the perfect opportunity to show her I meant what I offered her.

The door creaked open and that dumbass young blood walked in, with his eyes locked on her. She held her ground and didn't move.

His belt jingled, and I came up behind him, grabbing the pen from his pocket, stabbing him in the throat. The pen snapped, but not before arterial spray blew across the bars and her. I turned to face the rest of the men, but they slammed the bar doors back shut before I could do anything else.

I tossed the dead body off to the side of the cage.

They scrambled off, and she used her tattered white shirt to wipe the excess blood off her face. She wasn't too concerned with the fact she was still soaked in blood. I assumed it wasn't the first or last time.

"The jugular is messy."

"It's fast and effective." I grinned at her. "But I do appreciate your way." A wolf could happily tell the moon he had died between an omega's thighs.

"You're going to need to prove you aren't a threat to their way of life if you want to get out of here." She shot a pointed look at the dead body pooling blood on the floor.

"Wise advice. Any suggestions that don't include raping and abusing women?"

"Raping?"

She wasn't serious. "Sex where a party, usually the woman, is not consenting."

"Consenting?"

Fuck my— "Permission."

“Women can give permission?”

I rubbed my eyes. The longer I stayed here, the worse it got. It was a train wreck that just kept going. I’d need at least a week to get my head on straight after I left this place. “Yes.”

“That’s not a thing here.”

“I’m getting that.” I groaned.

She pulled her tank-top a few inches down to show me the clear brand on her breast.

“The mark of the bitch. We’re property. You don’t ask for permission to use property.”

“Noted.” That was exactly the kind of information I needed. And my stunt obviously earned me enough trust for her to say that.

“So women get assaulted here in the prison.”

“You don’t understand.” She shook her head, sending her straight, raven hair flying around her.

“Explain it then.”

“You’re the only man here not wearing the standard issue.”

“I should have guessed that. Surely there is something that is considered a crime for a man to do. Fuck someone else’s wife.”

“That’s her fault,” she answered.

“Steal someone’s kid.”

“The men don’t care about their children until they are old enough to be sold. Non-issue.”

“Theft of property.” Since we liked to call things property.

“Stealing has never been a problem.”

“Desertion.”

“Where would they go?” She chuckled pitifully. “No one runs.”

So you’re born with a free pass or a life sentence. “Let’s change gears. What are the crimes that land women here?”

She pointed to the cells across the way. “She’s here because she told her husband no.” Her finger moved down the row. “She was caught reading. That one was eating too much.”

“I think I’ve got it.” I tilted my chin to her. “What about you? They made it sound like you committed some high crime.”

“I did.” Her fingers trailed along the ground. “Male mutilation. I’m the worst woman here.”

“Don’t say that,” a woman from a cell across the way said.

“At least on paper,” she amended to satisfy whoever spoke up to defend her from the shadows.

“Their paper. Not ours,” someone else said.

That managed to get a smile out of her. Hated by the men. Respected by the women.  
The perfect inside person.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:45 am*

### Chapter seven

#### Astria Zielle

The next morning, the sound of boots woke me. I jumped up with my weapon in hand as soldiers surrounded us.

Dirus stood and roared. I plastered my back to the cage. His body exploded in a blink of an eye into a huge black wolf. On all fours, he came up to my hip, and part of me wondered if I could ride him.

“A werewolf,” I whispered to myself. Where did his clothes go? Since they didn’t litter the cage floor.

Bunson opened the door. “Astria, none of your shit, or I’ll beat you until you can’t speak.”

The wolf’s growling crested. It should have been terrifying, yet I couldn’t conjure an ounce of fear. I knew he was a threat, but my instincts wouldn’t work right. For some stupid reason, I half felt safe.

Bunson’s blood-red eyes landed on the wolf. “The governor wants to parley.”

Dirus turned back into a man just as fast as he’d turned into an animal. If I’d blinked, I would have missed it. His clothes managed to survive the shifting.

How did that work? Did shifting hurt? Did he lose control of himself?

But I held all of those questions in.

“I’d love to have a discussion with him.” His growl remained steady, despite his human form. “She comes with me.”

“Absolutely not.” Bunson glared at me. “She stays in the cage where she can’t hurt anyone.”

Dirus snorted as if that were preposterous.

“The governor is your only ticket out of here,” I informed him. “I suggest playing by their rules.”

“Says the woman who never plays by our rules.” There was a session with Bunson in my near future. I could feel it in my bones.

“I like to think that’s what makes me an expert.”

“Astria.” Bunson’s mouth twisted. “Shut the fuck up.”

“I’ll be right back,” Dirus told me, and walked out of the cage with Bunson. I watched them walk down the hall where my father would be found in his office.

More likely than not, they’d make some deal that held more profit for Dirus than the one with me. He’d give Dirus his choice of women, wine, and a house. Turn him to the dark side.

Good thing I never put faith in the idea he could take me home. Otherwise, I might be disappointed.

It didn’t take ten minutes before Bunson stomped back into the room, eyeing me like

I shot his cat. Oh fuck. Guess that session was coming sooner rather than later.

I kept the weapon I managed to get my hands on and held it ready to do whatever I needed to do. Either my death sentence was here or Bunson was going to have his way with me, and either way that door would have to fucking open for that to happen.

I wasted one opportunity when Dirus turning into a wolf shocked me, but I wouldn't waste another.

The door swung open, and I stayed glued to my spot. I tried to steady my hands, but the murderous rage on Bunson's face tested my nerves. He was scary when he was dominating and psychotic. No one wanted to deal with him when there was murder in his eyes. Not even my father.

Now wasn't the time to get excited and sloppy.

"Mr. Morales." Bunson couldn't have shoved more disdain into those words if he tried. "Has asked for you."

I blinked up at him. "What?"

I didn't hear that right.

"Get up, Astria," Bunson yelled.

I put my weapon down, and Bunson's teeth snapped together hard enough I was convinced he broke some teeth. I willingly followed him out, but the pulsating aura of some unidentifiable emotion made my hair stand on end.

He tossed me into the icy prison shower, clothes and all. "Clean up. His majesty demands you be presentable."



“Okay.” I pulled my clothes off when he didn’t move to leave. I didn’t see a point in modesty. He’d probably seen parts of me my husband hadn’t.

His greedy eyes burned me even as I shivered under the slush pelting me. I rushed to get out, and before I had the water completely off, he slammed me into the porcelain tiles on the wall.

“You’re going to be mine, Astria. Don’t think for a second that you can escape me through him.”

“What do you mean? I’m already married.” That earned me another slam against the wall.

“That boy can’t control you and everyone knows it.” His voice darkened. “I will convince him to give you to me.”

Fear shook me to the core. As bad as my husband was, being married to Antoine Bunson was a death sentence. As evil as he was at work, everyone knew he was twenty times worse at home. Most women didn’t last a month. They quit giving him women, because there weren’t enough of us.

I spit in his face. It wasn’t bad enough that I had to endure him here? I refused to tolerate him at home. Let them kill me. Anything but him.

His punch hit me hard enough that I hit the ground and I couldn’t tell which way was up. Blood filled my mouth. My lips and jaw were taking a hell of a beating over the last couple of days.

“Bunson! The wolf demanded she be unharmed,” a guard reminded him quietly.

He ripped me up by my hair.

“You know you’re my favorite,” Bunson whispered in my ear, as his belt jingled behind me.

And I hated it.

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When Bunson finally dragged me into my father’s office. His tight grip on my arm reminded me how he felt about this. My fingers had gone numb between here and there.

“What the fuck is this?” Dirus pried me away from Bunson’s bruising grip. “I said unharmed. Not with bruises on her arms, blood on her face, and your cum all over her.”

A snarl ripped out of his chest, and Bunson’s lips twisted in the smile that made me want to run in the other direction.

“Remember what I said, Astria.”

Dirus stepped between us, blocking me with his giant body. As if he could shield me from Bunson’s gaze.

“I’m sure it’s her own fault. She never cooperates.” My father frowned at me. “She’s difficult.”

“I said unharmed. I didn’t give any exceptional circumstances, in which it would be acceptable for her to be brought to me in a different condition than what I left her in.” The growl in Dirus’s chest made me take a few steps away from him.

“When will you just behave?” My father asked me. Like I was the one making his life

harder than it needed to be.

I considered spitting in his face too, but I'd already had my shit wrecked. Without my magic and Bunson here, it wasn't worth it.

"I'm sorry. I'm a simple-minded woman. Takes me a long time to learn my lesson," I answered as slowly as possible, like my brain just couldn't do words. "I heard it's an inherited trait."

"Try to not fuck up this time," he growled at me, but compared to Dirus, the sound was a joke. "He has requested your assistance on a task. I told him how incorrigible you are, but you are the only person he'll work with."

"Your men don't touch her while she's with me. No ifs, ands, or buts," Dirus roared. "For all this shit talking about her, your men can't take a simple order themselves. Now take the fucking collar off."

"Trust me, boy. You don't want me to do that." My father snickered. "Not if you want her to cooperate."

"I'm not worried about it."

"The answer is no. She can be your tour guide, but the collar stays on. She's going to be buried in that collar. Just in case." My father pointed at me. "That's how dangerous she is."

"Fine." Dirus turned to face me and pointed to the door. "Lead the way, Astria."

I did as he asked and led him through security. I pretended I didn't notice the itchy fingers on the guards.

“You should be dead. Peter is never going to be the same because of you,” one finally said as they opened the last door.

Yeah, and his wife, my best friend, would never be the same because of him. But they didn’t give one damn about that. No one cared that she died three times and her own daughter had to bring her back, because she’s the only healer left on the island.

No one cared that her face was forever scarred to where she wasn’t recognizable anymore.

Keep your mouth shut, you stupid bitch.

Blood flooded my mouth as I bit my tongue. Now that I was out of the box, I remembered exactly why I did what I did. I was never remorseful for my actions, just that Kylie was impacted by them.

I felt eyes piercing me, and followed the feeling, until I was looking up into Dirus’s intense gaze. If he stared any harder, he’d have a front-row seat to my thoughts.

Now that was an idea nightmares were made from.

I pointed to the other side of the doors and kept walking so I couldn’t see his face. But those eyes still drilled into my back. The sensation was insane, like he was under my skin.

He didn’t speak until we were a comfortable distance away. “Is it safe to talk?”

“Never.”

He chuckled behind me. Funny how even his amusement sounded so serious. “The governor is your father.”

“Yep.”

“Who is he really? Name. Date of Birth. Social Security.”

“Quinn Gadson. Birthday is November eighteenth. I don’t know the year, but it’s a holiday.”

“Of course it is.” He snorted. “Pompous ass.”

“I’ve never heard of a social security...?”

“It’s an American thing. It’s basically your identification paper.”

“What’s American?”

The sound of his boots on the dirt behind me halted. “You don’t know anything about the outside world?”

“I understand it’s taught in the upper grade levels, but women are no longer allowed to receive education once they turn twelve or bleed. Whichever happens first.”

“What happens then? You’re married off?”

“Auctioned.”

“Like cattle.” He caught up with me easily with his long legs.

“I’d rather be cattle.” If he wanted honesty, I’d give it to him.

“I think I’d agree with you.” He nodded his understanding. “Not the kind of place to walk around without a cock. That’s for sure.” He nodded toward the prison. “Who is

that other guy?”

“Antoine Bunson,” I answered.

“He’s a cunt.” Dirus nodded to my clothes. “I notice most of the women wear a similar get up. Is it issued?”

“No. They hate it.” I eyed the buttons and layers I was wearing. We weren’t allowed to wear pants. These layered skirts with countless buttons and ties hid my hips and thighs. My button-down, long-sleeve, high-neck shirt covered a corset that was tied in and the overcoat covered my breasts.

“So why?” His eyes landed on me again. I couldn’t stand to look at him for more than a few moments. The eye contact was too much.

“It’s annoying to take off.”

“Compliant resistance. Smart.”

“I came up with it a couple of years ago. A lot of the women followed suit.” I shrugged. “Another problem I caused.”

“I hope you cause more before we take off from this cursed land.” He grabbed something in his pocket, and I put a solid hand over his wrist.

“It’s a handkerchief to wipe the blood off your face,” he told me calmly. “It’s the best I can offer you.”

I released him and he held the fabric out to me. I grabbed it and wiped my mouth.

“May I touch you to help?”

“No.” I shrank back, ready to be backhanded.

“Are you hurt anywhere else?”

My eyebrows scrunched together, and I found myself taken aback. I tried to remember if a man had ever asked me if I was hurt. I hurt everywhere. I always hurt everywhere. “I’m fine.”

He nodded at me and kept walking. “He’s looking for a de facto. Someone who projected to the outside world this place exists. Someone betrayed him and he wants to know who. Any ideas?”

“Not really. Women don’t have the knowledge for something like that. Men have no reason to do such a thing. Why would it matter if we were found by the outside world?”

“The amount of societal rules being broken here is going to get a reaction from someone. War will be on their doorstep sooner rather than later.”

“What rules?”

“Rape. Murder. Pedophilia. Slavery. Domestic Violence. Just to start.”

“These things aren’t acceptable outside of here?”

“In varying degrees. Everyone has their perspective on these things, but overall, no.”

“I see. Is there a land where none of these things exist at all?” If I was really going to get the chance to leave, that’s where I wanted to go.

“Not completely. But I tell you what, I’ll give you a list of the best places for a

woman and her plus one to go when we get out of here.”

I didn't want to let hope grow inside of me. If this was all a cruel trick, I didn't want any disappointment. If nothing else, I was out of the box, my cell, and even if I had this damn collar on I was breathing fresh air. Could I even dare to want more?

Could I get my baby girl out of here before she suffered my fate?



### Chapter eight

Dirus Morales

By the time we made it to the village, I was famished. “Food.”

She led me to a restaurant and sat across from me. The waitress placed a menu in front of me and walked off. Odd, but it wasn’t uncommon for men to order for women. A place like this reeked of deeply rooted misogyny.

“What do you want to drink?”

She blinked as if she were taken aback. A light flush spread across her cheeks. “Can I have water?”

She was asking me for permission to have fucking water. This job couldn’t be over fast enough. There was only one problem.

Where there was one celestial witch, there was usually more. A witch’s affinity was pretty tightly bound to their familial lines. Protocol required me to search the pocket before I left. Since the blood was undoubtedly crossed over, that meant everyone was suspect. I couldn’t leave any omegas behind.

“Of course.” A growl built in my chest, startling the server walking back. I gave the server our drink order and a group of rowdy men came in. The women all noted every move the men made.

Astria didn't even move her eyes, but I knew she was tracking them.

They walked past us to go to the corner booth, and one hung back to tell me, "Watch out man, that one is feral. She bit a man's cock off a few weeks ago."

She was in prison for mutilation, but that wasn't anywhere near what I thought she did. I figured it was something stupid that the men were blowing out of proportion, because their prey dared to retaliate. Before I could control it, a deep laugh busted out of me. But her body language was tight and on alert.

"Is that true?"

She didn't miss a beat. "He stuck it in my mouth."

I laughed louder. I didn't think I'd laughed like this since I was five-years-old. Before I became an orphan. "You heard the lady. Don't stick it in her mouth, and you don't have to worry about anything."

They murmured and glared at me. "Traitor."

"That's not blending in," she scolded me. "We talked about this."

"That's the most hilarious thing I've ever heard in my life. I wish I could have seen it." These assholes needed to be humbled.

"You're a strange man." She shook her head in disbelief. "I violated one of your kind."

"Suffer no delusions. Having a cock doesn't make me one of them. They aren't my kind." I nodded to the pissants, whispering in terror because this tiny woman had the gall to stick up for herself. "I'm not scared of you. I'll punt you across this diner."

“Then why didn’t you just punt me a couple of nights ago?”

She was the exact opposite of what a celestial witch was supposed to be.

And I liked that about her. She wasn’t a prim and proper princess dressed in gold and unable to stand on her own two feet. No, she was nothing like the Celestial back home.

“Fair enough.” I grinned. “What do you want to eat?”

I shocked her again and her mouth fell open. “I’m allowed to order too?”

“Shut your trap or you’ll catch flies.”

Her mouth snapped shut hard enough that her teeth clinked. She opened her tote bag and riffled through it. Her lips twisted as if she was thinking about something. “Nothing.”

She hadn’t been fed in the two days that I knew of. Hell, one of the two things she asked about was food.

I grabbed her purse and held her back with one hand when she tried to come at me. I saw the coin bag she’d been looking through.

“Why don’t you want to eat?”

The men across the way all stared at us, so I gave her the bag back, so that she’d sit down and they wouldn’t pass out.

“I haven’t been home in almost a month. I’m sure my husband found the money I was hiding for groceries and blew it all.”

“Husband?” It was stupid to stutter. She’d already said all women were sold at age twelve. But for some reason, I was sure that as a celestial witch, she was exempt. Omegas were too precious to sell to a single man, much less one of these idiots.

But this wasn’t back home, where being a celestial was a golden ticket.

She nodded. “My baby needs this. Not me.”

She hadn’t eaten in days, and she was worried about a baby. She herself was a baby. In another world she would never have a want go unmet, let alone a need.

Suspicion tugged at my mind. How the girl in the prison affected her more than anything else that had happened. How she disassociated from the young girl being ‘broken in’.

“Is that who the second seat is for? Your daughter,” I asked quietly. She nodded slowly. “Okay.”

I tried to ignore the protective instincts clawing up my throat. To roar that I would protect her and her daughter for anyone. I did it all the time. I wasn’t in the habit of giving these witches what they wanted. But my eyes couldn’t help but go over her thin frame. She had plenty of money to give into her body’s needs, but she refused to take care of another.

Like an omega was supposed to do. And an alpha was supposed to protect them. This wasn’t right.

“What can I get for you?” The waitress didn’t spare Astria a glance, assuming she wasn’t eating.

“One of everything,” I told her, and she scurried off.

“Do werewolves have high calorie requirements? I read somewhere that the heavy increase in metabolism—” She stopped talking when the men shot her a glare. She never looked at them, but she felt it.

Because she was the victim, no matter what they said about how she was hostile and violent. Dangerous. She was exactly what they made her into, and they couldn’t handle it. All she was doing was trying to survive.

“That’s why you’re such a sorry excuse for a woman. What business do you have reading books?” one of the morons in the corner said.

She gave a resigned sigh.

“That’s why she’s been marked,” another man commented

She shook her hair as if to hide the still raw brand running along her left jaw. I assumed it was her proverbial scarlet A.

“Why would she need to know that?” the last one agreed.

“What does the brand mean?” I asked her.

Her tense shoulders tightened further, but she held her head and looked me in the eye to answer. “Feral. It’s so that other men are warned about how volatile I am.”

Yeah, she’s the volatile one.

“I assume it’s an uncommon brand.”

“I’m the only one who currently wears it.”

“Yes. Wolves require a lot of calories to be at full capacity.”

She smiled, but it was sad. “Sorry. It was wrong of me to ask.”

“No. It wasn’t,” I answered loudly. Shaming women for curiosity and seeking knowledge made it easier to control people who don’t know any better. It was a specific control tactic.

Plates poured out of the kitchen.

“Eat something.” I pushed a couple of plates to her. “I need you strong.”

She shook her head no. “It’s fine.”

“It’s not fine. Eat.”

She picked at a plate, but I watched how much she ate. “More.”

“I don’t need more. It’ll go straight to my hips.”

“Good.” She needed meat on her bones. The instinct to hand feed her became unbearable.

She sighed. “I don’t need another battle to fight.”

I stopped stuffing my face long enough to level my gaze at her. “Do you know why they want you to think that?”

“It keeps us weakened.”

“Very good. It’s also because they are marrying children, and are annoyed that their

child brides get older, bear babies, and start looking and acting like women when they age. I'm not in the habit of listening to pedophiles, and neither should you." I slid another plate to her. "Right now, you're under my 'control', right? I need a woman. Not a child. Tell them you were taking orders."

She started actually eating, and I was satisfied once she ate a couple of plates worth of food. She picked slowly in a practiced way. Like she'd been starved countless times, and she knew how to pace herself. It had been much longer than two days.

"How long has it been?" I asked.

"A few weeks."

I assumed she wasn't eating great beforehand. She didn't have the proper fat on her to sustain that long of a period. If she wasn't a celestial witch, she'd probably be dead.

I sat back when I was done and watched her eat. It satisfied my inner instincts to provide for the omega, and I didn't think I'd ever felt that before. Then again, my omega didn't need me. She had droves of wolves looking out for her. She never needed anything from me but blood to spill.

A growl of approval rumbled in my chest, despite my best attempt to squash it. She startled and visibly fought the instinct to toss the fork to the side. Instead, she stared me down.

The waitresses behind the counter stopped and watched in alarm. They were waiting for me to strike her. I leaned back and made a show of lifting my hands above my head. Astria's fingers tightened on the fork, ready to use it as a weapon if she needed to. But the other women scurried out of the room with yelps.

Her eyes narrowed on me and stayed locked as I finished the movement to put my

hands behind my head. The whole interaction told me a lot.

“Your husband hates you.”

“You’ve met him?”

“Maybe.” But it was clear the goal here was to break women of their wills. Turn them into perfect housewives that would obey. A goal he hadn’t succeeded with, probably not for a lack of trying.

Funny thing was, that was what I liked about her. I hoped I would get the chance to kill that fucker before we left.

“I’m done.”

“No, you aren’t,” I disagreed. “Take your time. We have things to talk about, anyway. We should start on this bullshit task.”

“You think that it’s fake?” She asked, but her tone said she did too.

“I think he tried to kill me outright, and when he had me in a jail cell with dozens of guns pointing at the cage, he changed his mind.”

“I think that was more of a trap for me than you. My own special brand of a death sentence.”

“That doesn’t make much sense. A public execution, something gruesome, would help keep the other women from getting out of line.”

“They’ve tried.” She blinked. “I think at this point, if anything can get rid of me, they would be happy.”



“They’ve tried?” I lifted an eyebrow.

“Yeah. Several times. Something always goes wrong.”

“Be more specific.”

“The execution machines always malfunction.” She shrugged. “Guillotine stops just above my head. The axe shatters on my neck. They think my magic does it. That’s why I’m never allowed to take the collar off. They think my magic is seeping out to protect me.”

“You don’t think so.”

“When my magic tries to work, it shocks me harder. It didn’t happen during any of those times. But it’s possible some of my sisters covered me, not that anyone would dare to say the words out loud.”

“So you think they were hoping I could kill you?”

“It goes along with why you would be in my cell.”

“And they weren’t happy when we didn’t resort to violence.”

That would make sense.

She snorted. “We?”

“I was just encouraging honesty.” I grinned at her.

She smiled in return, amused by my words. “I guess you’re right.”

“Where should we start looking for this traitor?”

“The women would most likely know. We’re always in the shadows watching, and we tell each other everything. If one knows, we all do.”

“But not you.”

“I was in the box.”

I didn’t know what the box was, but it didn’t take a genius to take a healthy guess. Isolation and starvation, at the least, who knew what else at the worst? The question I should have asked sat on the tip of my tongue, but a part of me didn’t want a play-by-play.

I needed to keep my cool and complete the mission. Too many people were counting on me to keep a level head. I’d get pissed off after all my people were taken care of. Maybe I’d ask her then.

Maybe.

“So, how do we get them to talk?”

“ We don’t.” She glanced at the sun through the window. “At three, most of the women take their kids to the park. I can go see what gossip I’ve missed.”

Two hours. That gave me time to meet up with my team and get some surveillance set up. She was right. The women would never tell me anything, but they also wouldn’t suspect I’ve got eyes and ears in the park.

“Sounds good.”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:45 am*

### Chapter nine

#### Astria Zielle

Outside of the place I was forced to call home, I took a deep breath and prepared myself for what I would find.

I opened the door and scanned inside the destroyed house. Liquor bottles and trash littered the living room. That wasn't too surprising. I tip-toed into the house, but it was useless.

He was sitting on the couch.

"Astria."

I looked at the ground, so I wouldn't anger him. He stood up and stomped over to me. I hardened my heart with every step, ready for a fight.

He grabbed my throat. "You stupid bitch, you're an embarrassment. How do I control the men if it's perfectly clear I can't control my wife?"

"I don't know."

He threw me across the room into the china cabinet, and glass rained down on me. I tucked my face down to protect my eyes and allowed myself to dream about getting Kylie out of here until he was done doing whatever he wanted. If Dirus could really get her out of here, everything would be worth it.

When I didn't move, he left the house.

I took mental stock of the pain and decided nothing was bad enough to fuss about. With shaky legs, I climbed to my feet and went to the coat closet, moving the loose panel to find her hiding in the darkness.

Her golden eyes blinked at me, tears trickling down her cheeks. "You're home."

I dropped to my knees and squeezed her too hard to my chest. She was here in my arms again. I'd made it back to her. I held in the sobs of relief.

When I released her, I searched her for any bruises. She was a mess, still in the clothes I'd left her in, and her hair was a rat's nest. But she was perfect, as always.

"I'm hungry, Mommy," she complained.

"Okay, baby." I hugged her to me again, happy that she seemed to be in one piece. I fed and bathed her before I walked her to the park and went to stand in the circle of women guarding the play area while she ran to the jungle gym.

"Hi, Kylie!" All the other women waved.

As I approached them, they took a collective breath. But it was Elizabeth who spoke.

"Thank goodness she's okay. I couldn't find her when I broke in last night."

"I had to make a new hide space. Nikolai found the old one."

"You hid her so well, I couldn't find it." She smiled.

"She ran out of the food." I sighed. "Days ago."

“That’s the longest stretch you’ve ever been gone for.” Elizabeth frowned at me. “I wasn’t sure they’d let you come back. He was home, wasn’t he?”

I nodded.

“How bad was it?”

“Not as bad as it could have been.” I snorted.

“What hurts?” Elizabeth asked.

“Everything. Between Bunson and Nik, I don’t think any part of me escaped.” Not to mention my rounds with Dirus.

“Not to mention your time in the box before that,” Elizabeth tacked on.

“Just another day in paradise, right?” I rolled my shoulders as the throbbing tensed between them.

“Let me see.” She pulled the back of my top coat to look down. Her whimper said it was worse than I thought. And she would have only seen my shoulders. She dug into her pockets and handed me a couple of vials. “This one will help you heal and the other will take away the pain.”

I downed them and she took the vials back, hiding the evidence like she never had them. Then she looked down at my back again. “Better.”

“Mommy, watch!” Kylie’s sweet voice sang as she did the monkey bars.

“Good job, baby,” I answered excitedly. She was doomed to pay for my mistakes. Not anymore. If there was a chance to get out of here, I was fucking taking it. “Any

new gossip?”

“A team of foreigners are on the island. One came into my shop and got Peter in a twist. You should have seen him trying to pretend like he knows anything about my herbs.”

“Oh yeah?”

“The man looked mean. Permanent scowl and he growled. But you should have seen Peter piss himself when he insinuated that Peter was stupid. It was glorious.”

If that didn’t sound like Dirus, I didn’t know what did. “How are the other men dealing with it?”

Elizabeth pointed to the bruises on her neck that were in the last stages of healing. “I made him look like an idiot.”

“How dare you,” I tsked at her sarcastically.

She quirked her eyebrow in annoyance. “Why’d they let you out?”

“I was supposed to kill the growly one.”

“Supposed to? You failed?” She smirked at me. “Someone was finally too smart for your stripper routine.”

“It’s a good routine.” I squeaked. “I usually get some grocery money out of it too.”

She laughed.

“I’m working with the tools they let me have. Okay?” I rolled my eyes at her. “I’d

rather have magic. Or anything remotely useful.”

“They can’t risk losing control of you.” Elizabeth finally quit laughing. “Nikolai has been in rare form. You got lucky you could walk away. His mistress couldn’t. She’s in the hospital right now.”

“He’s exactly how he’s always been. He just doesn’t have me to take it out on, so she’s getting the brunt of it. If she wants him so badly, she can have all of him.”

The women laughed at that, but then I remembered what Bunson said. That he was going to try to convince Nikolai to give me to him. Nik would take her over me any day. She was what he wanted. He only kept me for my name, my power, and his pride.

“She’ll die if she marries him. I think this whole episode has already proven that.” Elizabeth shook her head in disapproval. “Only the gods know why she’s sticking her nose in with him. Shameful anyway.”

“He won’t marry her. It won’t benefit him politically.” I disagreed. “Good for her. Bad for someone else.”

“Why are we talking as if another wife is a possibility on the table?” Elizabeth frowned.

“Because it is.”

“He’s talking about giving you away?” She gasped. “To who?”

“Bunson kindly informed me that he’s been asking for me.”

Fear coated my best friend’s face. “You can’t let that happen, Astria.”

“And do what? Take myself out on my terms?” I asked her. “What about Kylie?”

“Every time that man touches you, you come home different.”

“It’s fine.”

“Don’t.” She waved me off. “Sell that shit somewhere else.”

“I can’t think about it. Sobbing in a corner isn’t going to solve my problems.”

“He’ll finally break you.”

“I mean it, Elizabeth.” I squashed the fear trying to well through me. “I’m running out of gas. I have to save my last bit of energy for something productive.”

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“I don’t know.”

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“Anyone fucking with the shield towers?” Come on. Give me something.

“Why would they?”

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I watched my Kylie and Elizabeth’s Everlynn play together. They were three years apart, but they were still thick as thieves.

“I assume you’re asking all of these questions because you still have a job to do for the governor.”

“Yeah.”

“Pack her a bag and bring her to me before you piss your husband off again. We’re lucky he didn’t find her while you were gone.”

A giant weight of relief lifted off of me. “Thank you.”

“Anytime. You know that,” Elizabeth said as her blue eyes smiled at me. One eye struggled to stay open where the giant scar was. Her husband did a real number on her. “Besides, we both know you’re in this position because of me...”

“Don’t be dumb. You don’t control what I do.”

“You wouldn’t have done it if I wasn’t laid up in an infirmary bed. You would have just taken it and moved on with your life.”

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“I love you.” I hated how sad her eyes were. The guilt that creased her forehead. She put up her pinky, and I hooked mine through it.

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When she yelled, gold magic flew from her hand in a flurry of stars, tripping a wide eyed Everlynn.

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“Oh no!” Elizabeth gasped.

My worst nightmare came true.

I scanned the area, looking for anyone who might have seen the display of magic. Of course, in the distance toward the road, a man stopped in his tracks to stare at her. I stepped between her and his blatant stare.

“Hey! Did you hear about what I did? That’s the daughter of a feral,” I yelled over at him. “And she’ll be twice as feral as I am. I’ll make sure of that.”

It didn’t matter. It was in his eyes. He wanted the power my daughter could offer him or his son. My heart pounded in my chest. The information would spread like wildfire before the day was out.

“Look, Mommy!” Kylie clapped her hands together with glee. “My magic is like yours.”

And all I wanted to do was sob in her name.

“Yeah.” I smiled and tried to put on a brave face, but my voice broke. I’m sorry. “That’s fantastic.”

I covered my mouth with my hand, so she couldn’t see my expression.

“I’m gonna be just like you.”

Over my dead fucking body. Outside of the place I was forced to call home, I took a deep breath and prepared myself for what I would find.

I opened the door and scanned inside the destroyed house. Liquor bottles and trash littered the living room. That wasn't too surprising. I tip-toed into the house, but it was useless.

He was sitting on the couch.

"Astria."

I looked at the ground, so I wouldn't anger him. He stood up and stomped over to me. I hardened my heart with every step, ready for a fight.

He grabbed my throat. "You stupid bitch, you're an embarrassment. How do I control the men if it's perfectly clear I can't control my wife?"

"I don't know."

He threw me across the room into the china cabinet, and glass rained down on me. I tucked my face down to protect my eyes and allowed myself to dream about getting Kylie out of here until he was done doing whatever he wanted. If Dirus could really get her out of here, everything would be worth it.

When I didn't move, he left the house.

I took mental stock of the pain and decided nothing was bad enough to fuss about. With shaky legs, I climbed to my feet and went to the coat closet, moving the loose panel to find her hiding in the darkness.

Her golden eyes blinked at me, tears trickling down her cheeks. "You're home."

I dropped to my knees and squeezed her too hard to my chest. She was here in my arms again. I'd made it back to her. I held in the sobs of relief.

When I released her, I searched her for any bruises. She was a mess, still in the clothes I'd left her in, and her hair was a rat's nest. But she was perfect, as always.

"I'm hungry, Mommy," she complained.

"Okay, baby." I hugged her to me again, happy that she seemed to be in one piece. I fed and bathed her before I walked her to the park and went to stand in the circle of women guarding the play area while she ran to the jungle gym.

"Hi, Kylie!" All the other women waved.

As I approached them, they took a collective breath. But it was Elizabeth who spoke.

"Thank goodness she's okay. I couldn't find her when I broke in last night."

"I had to make a new hide space. Nikolai found the old one."

"You hid her so well, I couldn't find it." She smiled.

"She ran out of the food." I sighed. "Days ago."

"That's the longest stretch you've ever been gone for." Elizabeth frowned at me. "I wasn't sure they'd let you come back. He was home, wasn't he?"

I nodded.

"How bad was it?"

"Not as bad as it could have been." I snorted.

"What hurts?" Elizabeth asked.

“Everything. Between Bunson and Nik, I don’t think any part of me escaped.” Not to mention my rounds with Dirus.

“Not to mention your time in the box before that,” Elizabeth tacked on.

“Just another day in paradise, right?” I rolled my shoulders as the throbbing tensed between them.

“Let me see.” She pulled the back of my top coat to look down. Her whimper said it was worse than I thought. And she would have only seen my shoulders. She dug into her pockets and handed me a couple of vials. “This one will help you heal and the other will take away the pain.”

I downed them and she took the vials back, hiding the evidence like she never had them. Then she looked down at my back again. “Better.”

“Mommy, watch!” Kylie’s sweet voice sang as she did the monkey bars.

“Good job, baby,” I answered excitedly. She was doomed to pay for my mistakes. Not anymore. If there was a chance to get out of here, I was fucking taking it. “Any new gossip?”

“A team of foreigners are on the island. One came into my shop and got Peter in a twist. You should have seen him trying to pretend like he knows anything about my herbs.”

“Oh yeah?”

“The man looked mean. Permanent scowl and he growled. But you should have seen Peter piss himself when he insinuated that Peter was stupid. It was glorious.”

If that didn't sound like Dirus, I didn't know what did. "How are the other men dealing with it?"

Elizabeth pointed to the bruises on her neck that were in the last stages of healing. "I made him look like an idiot."

"How dare you," I tsked at her sarcastically.

She quirked her eyebrow in annoyance. "Why'd they let you out?"

"I was supposed to kill the growly one."

"Supposed to? You failed?" She smirked at me. "Someone was finally too smart for your stripper routine."

"It's a good routine." I squeaked. "I usually get some grocery money out of it too."

She laughed.

"I'm working with the tools they let me have. Okay?" I rolled my eyes at her. "I'd rather have magic. Or anything remotely useful."

"They can't risk losing control of you." Elizabeth finally quit laughing. "Nikolai has been in rare form. You got lucky you could walk away. His mistress couldn't. She's in the hospital right now."

"He's exactly how he's always been. He just doesn't have me to take it out on, so she's getting the brunt of it. If she wants him so badly, she can have all of him."

The women laughed at that, but then I remembered what Bunson said. That he was going to try to convince Nikolai to give me to him. Nik would take her over me any

day. She was what he wanted. He only kept me for my name, my power, and his pride.

“She’ll die if she marries him. I think this whole episode has already proven that.” Elizabeth shook her head in disapproval. “Only the gods know why she’s sticking her nose in with him. Shameful anyway.”

“He won’t marry her. It won’t benefit him politically.” I disagreed. “Good for her. Bad for someone else.”

“Why are we talking as if another wife is a possibility on the table?” Elizabeth frowned.

“Because it is.”

“He’s talking about giving you away?” She gasped. “To who?”

“Bunson kindly informed me that he’s been asking for me.”

Fear coated my best friend’s face. “You can’t let that happen, Astria.”

“And do what? Take myself out on my terms?” I asked her. “What about Kylie?”

“Every time that man touches you, you come home different.”

“It’s fine.”

“Don’t.” She waved me off. “Sell that shit somewhere else.”

“I can’t think about it. Sobbing in a corner isn’t going to solve my problems.”



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### Chapter ten

Dirus Morales

“Two celestial witches. We hit the fucking jackpot, didn’t we?” one of my men, Robert Pierce, whistled with the binoculars in his hands. “Do you see her face? It means something different here.”

“It means the exact same thing.” Powerful and rare. Men loved powerful and rare things. Back home, they were treasured and clutched close so no one could hurt our rare queens. In a place where they bid on wives, that prospect would be terrifying. The wolves back home would lose their fucking gourd if they knew this was happening to their deities.

“They’re so casual about everything,” Pierce noted.

I remembered her words from the prison the night before. “It’s just Wednesday for them. They’ve become numb to it. ”

“So they aren’t so different from us. Walking around pretending we don’t see garbage we hate and trekking through it.”

“At least we get a day off,” I said. Pierce’s blue eyes slid to me with irritation creasing around his eyes, making him appear somewhat closer to his real age. I shrugged. “Every once in a while.”

She put her baby on her hip and headed down the street. We followed along, as I

listened to the headphone in my ear projecting the mic I'd tagged her with.

"Hey, Astria," a man called out to her.

"Fuck off," she snarled at him like she was rabid.

The woman was smart. Don't touch, she's crazy. Definitely don't touch crazy's baby. Another man tried to walk up to her, and she barked at him. A laugh built deep in my belly.

"Are you smiling, boss?" Pierce asked. He'd been working with me for thirty years. "Someone pinch me."

"The nutsack on this woman."

He chuckled along with me. She disappeared into the shadows, but I still had sound on her. From what I could tell, she lived in the cul-de-sac on the opposite street.

"I've lost visual," Pierce told me.

"Wait." Sure enough, shadows moved down the street five minutes later and darted into another house. "She's keeping people off her trail."

"Who?"

"Take your pick. The weirdo watching her kid. Her husband. Anyone her father might have following her." She went around in the seemingly sloppiest way, but I knew there was a method to her madness.

"Do we follow?"

“Let the rats run through her maze. We’re gonna meet her at the cheese.”

We went to the giant willow tree we agreed to meet at. She came from behind us a few minutes later, coming from the opposite direction.

Her eyes landed on Pierce first, and her hands went into her pockets. No doubt palming a blade.

“He’s one of mine.” I spoke up, getting her attention. But the words didn’t matter so much. She was willing to do what I wanted to get out of here. That didn’t mean she trusted anyone here.

Smart girl.

And yet it infuriated me that she didn’t.

“I like this one. She’s smart.”

I’d been thinking the same thing, but it annoyed me that he said it out loud. Because if I was her, all I would hear is there was a reason to question us. I glared at him until he gave a nervous chuckle.

“If he touches you without permission, I’ll shoot him in the temple,” I promised her.

Sweat gathered at his hairline, and every muscle in his body tensed, ready for me to attack. “Sorry, boss.”

I’d promised her that no one would touch her. So far I’d failed twice. Failure didn’t sit well with me. I didn’t think I needed to follow them in the prison or her into the house.

Listening to her piece of shit husband beat on her was hard to stomach. I held my place by pure force of will, knowing that attacking their captain wouldn't end well.

Leave her alone for five fucking minutes and another monster descended. No wonder she didn't trust us.

"Please follow us. My team has set up a base in my absence. It's away from prying eyes."

"Please? I don't think I've ever heard a man utter that word."

And I hated that. Every instinct inside me wanted to hunt the men on this island until they were extinct. Then all the women could cohabit in peace for the rest of their days.

This woman was fucking with my head.

Women were treated poorly all over the world. And while I never approved, I didn't believe they deserved blanket permission and forgiveness like my people did. This woman just crawled under my skin and wouldn't get out.

She followed us deep into the forest, but she kept to the shadows. Her footsteps were almost silent. I didn't think she even realized she was doing it.

"So, it's the cave underneath the waterfall? The women know where you are."

"Should I be worried?"

"Naw. No one tells the men anything. They don't even know that cave exists."

"But all the women do?"



“Yeah,” she answered lamely.

“What happened?”

“About ten years ago, there was a... cleansing.” She said cleansing with enough venom to put a grown man down. “They took all the older women and killed everyone off. Our mothers sent us to hide there.”

“Why?”

“The men said the breeding stock was of poor quality. But that doesn’t make sense. They didn’t go out and get new women, it’s just the next generation.” Her voice came from the trees.

“But I looked up the statistics for my mother’s generation wondering that same thing. The vitality of my mother’s generation was unmatched. The survival rate for our women had never been higher, and I’m certain that is a factor. Women don’t see thirty often. My mother was thirty-two. And the several years before that had the lowest birth rate.”

“That’s why the male to female ratio is so unbalanced?” Pierce asked.

“It’s a huge factor. Fifty percent of us were killed in one swoop. We haven’t recovered yet.”

Unwise move to kill all your child bearing age women. Something drastic must have happened.

We held open the foliage hiding the cave. She entered when I gestured for her too, but she took a handful of steps in and the easy relaxation she had outside was gone.

She back peddled in seconds, running right into me.

She whirled around, and her blade went through the air with a whistle. I blocked with my arm, forcing her dagger to stop inches away from my chest. I grabbed her neck, and her heartbeat pounded the blood through her veins like a hummingbird.

“Sheath your blade.”

My eyes darted around the little base camp we built, trying to see from her perspective. Lots of equipment. A couple of canvas tents. Nine perfectly trained soldiers waited with wide, eager eyes, ready for the omega I found.

With Pierce and me coming up behind her and trapping her in.

I tightened my hand on the sides of her throat, keeping the pressure off her windpipe, and guided her back out of the cave. Her heart slowed as we entered the green foliage of the forest.

“Take a deep breath.” I released her and put my hands up in the air. “No one is going to attack you.”

For a long moment, she stared at me with eyes that were ready to run. But when she finally took that deep breath, they settled into resignation. Ready to do what it takes.

“I didn’t think that through.” It was pure instinct. Keep the celestial between the wolves, and the alpha takes the back.

“The next time you or your men surround me like that—” There wasn’t a point in letting her finish that threat. If she wanted things a certain way, that’s how she would have it.

“Done.”

She flinched like I slapped her. “Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

“I don’t trust you.”

“I know.” I was keenly aware of how little faith she had in me. “I should have calculated for that.”

Her gold eyes glowed as if her magic was trying to activate, but that collar around her throat sparked, tampering it down.

“I have a guy that can remove that.”

“If it wasn’t on, I would have caused a lot of damage a few moments ago.”

“I’m probably more knowledgeable about what you are capable of than you are.”

“I doubt that,” she disagreed solemnly. Maybe she was right. I’d seen it in the books, but our celestial was guarded so closely and she never wielded their magic like the books said they could. This unprotected witch most certainly used her magic more than ours did.

“I’ll have it taken off, so that you are capable of functioning to your highest capacity,” I told her again.

“Why?”

What a sad question. It was normal to see in my men. Trust no one.

Everyone wants to kill you.

But her. Fuck, it hurt. Why did it hurt?

I wanted to go back in time and protect her the way she was meant to be. What the fuck was wrong with me?

“Because you’re useless to me fighting with your nuts chopped off.” And there would be a fight at some point. No doubt about that.

She nodded and sat on a tree stump nearby. I should’ve gone to comfort her, but I had no idea how to do that. I wasn’t even sure why I wanted to.

“What the fuck was that, Morales?” Pierce whispered, following me back into the cave.

“I don’t know.”

“Since when are you so... gentle?” That was a good question.

I wasn’t a gentle person. I didn’t spend my life clawing and fighting for respect to give anyone that illusion. The fact that it was so obvious would only put her in more danger.

I snarled at him, pressing my dominance over him, until he was kneeling on the ground. “Am I being clear?”

“Crystal.”

I gave one last snarl before walking deeper in. “Pup, go get her magic absorber off.”

“Yes, sir.” Rios eyed Pierce on the ground, but didn’t say anything.

“If you make her run off, I’m holding you personally accountable.”

He walked past Pierce without sparing him another glance. “Yes, Sir”

Pierce sneered, but Rios kept walking, unbothered.

“Do we have any information about this missing ‘engineer’?” I asked.

“Not yet, boss,” Nowak answered. “He’s vanished.”

“We’re in a pocket full of people who know nothing about the outside world. How is that possible?”

“Your guess is as good as mine, boss.”

“I assume he is in charge of infrastructure here.”

“Not at all.” Nowak’s shoulders tensed up. “When you were in their prison, Wallace had me breaking in. I found the engineer’s old office.”

I walked up behind him and he pulled out the pictures of all the engineering this man had done. He built the collar Astria was wearing and countless torture devices.

Rage clawed out my chest, threatening to burst and explode in the whole room. If she was marked as feral, it was fair that she was forced to endure a majority, if not every single one of these devices. These were used to break their women of any identity or will, and since they hadn’t managed to come up with something to do that for her, I could do nothing but visualize her in these devices.

Some of these were older. I'd seen them used before. But others were downright diabolical. She should be dead. No wonder the men here thought her magic was making her invincible.

"Boss," Wallace called out to me.

All my men were on their hands and knees, but him. I'd send out waves of dominance without realizing.

Wallace stood too close to me to be strictly respectful. Lucky for him, we'd been friends since we were kids at the pack orphanage. Otherwise, I might have killed him.

Nowak kneeled in front of me, leaving his neck exposed in submission. His dominance was strong enough to at least keep him upright, but he didn't dare give the illusion that anyone other than me was the head alpha.

"She's your omega. You've chosen her," Wallace whispered.

The words were annoying, but I'd already been suspicious.

I pressed my lips together, still glaring at the photos. Every moment that passed, I became more reactive to her. That was a problem, considering I was supposed to be the rock that held everyone in place.

"I haven't chosen anything," I admitted softly to him. Only him. The only person I truly trusted. The only person who wouldn't use my wavering loyalties against me.

"Yes you have. Your stubborn fat head just hasn't caught up yet." He narrowed his brown eyes at me. "Release them."

I popped my neck and swallowed the hot ball lodged in my throat, along with the

urge to shift and violently protect the one I was meant to keep safe.

No. She's not your omega.

The oppressive energy I released into the room must have lessened, because my men hopped up to their feet like a bunch of helium-filled balloons.

“What about Captain Zielle?” I asked.

“Astria Zielle is Captain Nikolai Zielle's current wife. She is wife number five. He was a part of a very competitive bid for Astria due to 'the unique' onset of magic that was expected to provide the husband with control over inconceivable amounts of power. She was sold to him for a fortune at the age of eleven.”

“They were so excited they didn't even wait until she was of... 'age'.” Wallace's mouth twisted up until his fangs were bared. He used air quotes.

“No. And they wanted to do biddings well before,” Nowak noted. “He is the right-hand man for the governor and does all his dirty work. There was a scandal that it was believed that Captain Zielle didn't actually win the bid, but that it was rigged.”

I knew there was more to it, based on Nowak's grin. “Out with it.”

“The supposed snubbed winner was none other than the engineer.”

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:45 am*

### Chapter eleven

Astria Zielle

“Hello, my lady,” a voice called out.

I glanced up from the ground to find a man walking my way. He reminded me of Dirus, but his skin was a bit lighter and his hair was cut close to his head. Something in his dark blue eyes said he was younger than Dirus, too. The way he approached reminded me of someone trying to not startle a wild stallion.

“Morales sent me to get the dampener off of you.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll need to touch you.”

“Okay.”

They always did.

He gathered my hair in his hands, and I mentally prepared for him to yank it out of the way. Instead, his fingers carefully moved all the strands over my shoulder. Even the way he tucked away the wisps that escaped was soft.

“Let’s take a look.”



I froze, unfamiliar with the touch, and an overwhelming cloud of uncertainty loomed over me. He wasn't being violent in the slightest, but that would turn sooner rather than later.

He hummed as he studied the device. His knuckles grazed the skin at the base of my neck and sent goosebumps down my spine. I waited for him to drag or yank me as he tilted my neck around to get a better look at the device.

"Let me know if you need a break from me manhandling you." His voice was kind. I'd never heard a man speak so softly.

He wasn't even manhandling me. His touches were comforting and yet terrifying, because I had no idea how to respond. It was uncharted territory.

"I'm fine," I whispered, suddenly unsure of how to act.

"You don't sound fine, my lady."

"I'm not used to men being so close to me." It wasn't exactly a lie. I wasn't used to men being so close and gentle. Dirus confused me, but this man, I didn't even know what to do with.

The man finally touched the device, and electricity transferred onto him. He yanked his hand back, grunted, and I cringed. Now he would lose his patience. The soldiers would get hurt by removing the collar and punish me for it. Never caring that I didn't ask for this device.

"Is the charge constant?" he asked, touching my neck again as if to double test my skin for a current.

"Yes."

He opened his toolbox to the side and put thick gloves on his hands, then pulled a metal pick thing out.

“I don’t recommend putting any metal up to this.” I cringed, knowing it would earn me a backhand.

He walked over to me, holding the pointy end. I grabbed the hard handle. He crouched in front of me. He reached between my hands to rub his finger along the weird handle. “It’s insulated rubber with a non conducting metal. I don’t understand.”

“It won’t make the spark travel.”

I handed it back to him, and he went behind me again. One gloved hand held the side of my neck. I stiffened, ready to take a round of electrocution. He shushed me like one would soothe a baby.

His tool twisted in my peripheral, pushing me harder into his other hand.

“I’m sorry, my lady.”

“It’s okay.” I wasn’t sure why he was apologizing to me. Last time someone took this off, they shocked me and ripped a huge chunk of hair out. A bit of swaying wasn’t going to hurt me.

He squatted in front of me and I lifted my chin so he had better access. I eyed the tool. It was easier to appreciate him when I couldn’t see the long stabby thing pointed at me.

How many times had I mouthed off and the person working on me decided to teach my neck a quick lesson?

The collar sparked hotter across my neck. “My lady. If you attempt to activate your magic, you’ll hurt both of us.”

I closed my eyes instead, hoping that decision wouldn’t be the one that killed me. He was right. If that collar activated, we’d both regret it.

“What’s your name?” I tried instead.

“Lucero Rios. What’s yours?”

“I suspect you already know my name.” I smashed my lips together, realizing too late that he might find that to be too honest.

“Polite conversation, my lady.” He chuckled.

“If I tell you, you have to quit calling me ‘my lady’.”

I could almost see him smiling behind my eyelids. His mirth washed over me like a calming wave. “Deal.”

“Astria.”

“I don’t get a last name?” The teasing in his voice assured me he wasn’t too offended.

“My last name has no meaning to me.”

“Fair enough.” The metal of the collar slid off my neck and clanked on the ground.

“Nice to meet you, Astria.”

Magic poured through my being, and it was like taking a deep breath after being choked; relief and painful. The same feeling of too much air coming in your lungs

and windpipe as they remember how to act right. But at the same time, the panic I didn't know I felt subsided.

My hand went up to my throat, and it was strange to have all that weight gone. A literal ton off my shoulders.

“Thank you, Lucero.”

A growl vibrated deep in his chest as he inhaled so deep I was sure he'd smell dinner being cooked in the village. His teeth snapped shut as if he were controlling the volume as much as possible.

I couldn't even be worried about that. For the first time in years, a piece of me that was missing was back.

His growling came to an abrupt stop as hot tears trickled down my face.

“How long have you been wearing it?”

“Three years.” I finally opened my eyes. He kneeled back before me and took his tool to the bulky part of the collar. He opened the box on the back. Piece by piece, he pulled metal out of it until he removed the crystal core.

“This looks important.”

“It makes spells triple effective.”

“Like a conductor?”

I stared at him, feeling stupid. Dirus already got agitated because I didn't understand the words he used.

“A conductor is a material that helps transmit heat, electricity, or, in this case, magic to make it more powerful.” He turned the open box of the collar toward me. “Power originates here. I assume this is what dampened the magic.” He pointed to the wires that went to where the crystal had been.

“And the crystal was able to circulate the rest of the collar.”

He pulled the tiny dark blue stone that he identified as the power source. He studied it for a moment with curiosity that I understood. “It’s hot.”

“It attacks magic with lightning. It’s why no one goes to the back end of the island. The area is full of them.” I wasn’t even sure how the engineer survived getting one. “It senses me. One isn’t particularly dangerous. It’s the fact so many are together that kills people.”

He tucked the stone in his back pocket, and took the rest of the collar apart, then handed me all the other pieces. “I’ll dispose of the power source.”

This giant collar that held me captive in my skin for years was now scrap metal in my hands.

“Get rid of the rest of how you see fit.”

“Why did you do that?”

“So you know it can’t be used against you anymore.”

Without the engineer, my father couldn’t make another one. I stared at him and tried to make sense of my jumbled thoughts. No man had ever shown me such thoughtfulness before.

“Thank you.” It was all I could manage out. My heart filled with gratitude that was foreign. “What do I owe you for this?”

Whatever he wanted, I’d give it to him.

His easy smile soothed raw places inside me I didn’t even know existed.

“Nothing, Astria.”

“Nothing?” Certainly the biggest gift anyone had even given me would cost me dearly. “I’d give you almost anything.”

His smile stayed in place, but his eyes took on a painful edge. He slowly reached up to my chin, giving me plenty of time to jerk away, but I stayed. Gentle fingers tilted my chin up as he studied my neck.

He stuck his hand in the tool box and pulled out a first aid kit. “May I?”

“Is it bad?”

“Do you not feel the pain?” he said as his mouth twisted with grim understanding.

“No.”

He put on a pair of gloves and spread some kind of gel on my neck. I winced at the sudden sting, but it cooled quick enough.

“I know. I’m sorry,” he whispered. His face crumpled with concern. He wrapped a bandage around my neck. “Now that the wound is exposed to the elements, I don’t want it to get infected. It’s amazing that hasn’t already happened.”

I winced when his finger grazed my chin, and he even took the time to medicate and bandage that wound, too. “And I owe you nothing for any of this?”

“No. Not a damn thing.” His words were a solemn vow.

“Are you sure? I can handle the payment.” What if he grew resentful, and just took what he’d wanted all along?

“My payment is the gratitude in your eyes.” He stood up, with his tool box in hand. Even leaning over me, there was a gentleness to him. His hand came down, and I knew I should flinch. What if he hit me? Don’t just sit there like an idiot.

No. Not him. How did I know that?

His hand soothed my hair. I watched the tense muscles of his broad back as he returned to the cave where the rest of the men were. He was angry. He wanted to hurt something. Why didn’t he hurt me?

Was what Dirus said true?

Were these men really a different breed from the ones I’d spent my whole life knowing?

### Chapter twelve

Dirus Morales

Rios took longer than I expected. The pup was brilliant with tech. He could build and dismantle things in a moment. It was one of the few reasons I allowed the green pup on my team.

I stood hidden in the cave opening, making sure he didn't upset her or have issues with the task.

Instead, I found him moving slowly and deliberately, careful not to startle our vicious rabbit. She eyed him with confusion and curiosity.

When the collar fell off her neck, her scent poured out of her. So it was the collar hiding what she was. Some of the pups growled with excitement.

Her presence as an omega was solid now that we could smell the stars on her.

Nowak and Wallace snarled and growled deeper in the cave. Some of the pups couldn't handle the sudden onslaught of an omega's presence. Most of them had probably never smelled a celestial before, and Astria smelled like a drug specially made for us.

I heard yips and whines that told me Wallace and Nowak had to snap at least two wolves back in line.



I stayed ready to teach Rios a lesson if he let his wolfish impulses win out over reason. I was surprised he managed to hold himself together. She insisted she pay him in some way.

When he patted her head, she didn't even flinch. He managed to build some semblance of fragile trust.

Now just to build on that.

He came into the mouth of the cave and found me. Surprise lit up his eyes, but he didn't jump out of his skin the way most of my men would.

"Boss."

"Good job, pup."

I watched her reevaluating her knowledge of how the world worked. The pup opened the door. Now we had a foothold to wrench it open. No doubt the door would be as heavy as her baggage, but wolves were strong. It may take time and lots of effort. But it was possible now.

The words made him recoil back, as if a superior had never said that to him before. Which couldn't be true. He was top of his class in the academy. Several teams were fighting over him.

My longtime rival and dependable ally, William Swanson, almost got him before I put my request in. I hope Swanson appreciated the robbery, probably not. I grinned, thinking about how chapped his ass was over it. Fuck.

I walked out, not wasting time for him to respond. I waited until her eyes moved from Rios's back to me to speak. "We think the engineer is behind this. He's a known

rogue and your people haven't been able to find him."

"Then why is the job to find the source of a leak and not to search for Matthias?"

"That's a good question, and I'm sure we'll figure it out the deeper we dig."

"Why are you even going along with this? If you can leave, just leave. Don't stay here."

"Because I've got a job to do, and it will be easier to do with the governor, unconcerned with my presence."

A second celestial witch was already located. We needed to make sure there weren't more. "Does anyone else have magic like yours?"

"No," she lied expertly, but she couldn't quite hide the tension in her shoulders.

"Someone other than your daughter."

She swallowed harshly and lifted her head back to meet my gaze with golden eyes that twinkled like stars, despite how serious she was; ready to challenge me.

"Anyone else? You promised information." I didn't dare move. No doubt I'd initiate her attack mode if I did. "I don't care that you tried to protect your daughter. I just need to know if there are any others."

"No," she finally answered, but then tilted her head to the side. "Well..."

"Yes?"

"You and your men have similar magic, but it's..." She visibly struggled to find an

appropriate word. “Not active.”

“Because wolves were created by celestial magic. It’s what gives us our abilities.” It was why celestial witches were the highest priority. They were the closest things we had to a goddess.

Her curiosity disarmed her, but she didn’t ask any of the thousands of questions swimming in her eyes.

“I want you to pick up your daughter and bring her here instead of wherever you left her. In the event we need to flee, we don’t need to make a pit stop for her,” I told her. “I can escort you.”

“No. We will have fewer eyes on us if I go alone.”

I gestured for her to leave, and Wallace poked his head out, sensing that I needed him. That wolf was so in tune with me, it wasn’t funny. I yanked my head for us to follow.

“Nowack, you’re in charge,” Wallace said softly.

“Yes, Sir.” I heard from the depths.

We followed at a large enough distance to not bring any attention to ourselves.

She danced around the potential threats like a master of her craft.

“Boss, you know she won’t be safe in the Grandpack either. At least here she knows the enemy,” Wallace spoke up softly.

No. The Grandpack would be dangerous. Our current celestial didn’t share the

spotlight, and anytime another celestial appeared, they conveniently died sooner rather than later. Before they could even have a pack declared for them.

I'd been suspicious of Nadine the Golden for some time.

"I know." But I also couldn't leave her here.

A few more turns and from our vantage point on the rooftops, we realized she was surrounded. Six men were slowly converging in a circle around her. We called it a kill box, and she was right in the center of it.

I signaled for Wallace to get on the other side of the path she chose, and I jumped down off the house roof we'd been following her on, to land in the shadows behind her.

She knew she wasn't safe. She kept to the shadows, trying to not be seen, but the men were already hunting her like a pack. The one in front of her stepped toward her, and she back tracked into the one coming from behind.

He was quick to try to capture her, but Wallace was already breathing down his neck.

Wallace didn't say a thing. He was a humongous motherfucker that towered over everything, including me. All Wallace had to do was narrow his eyes, and the men ran in the other direction.

For a moment, Astria stood there slowly tilting her head back as she acknowledged the giant in front of her. She trembled as she craned her head all the way back until she could see his face.

"Shit," she squeaked under her breath, but it wasn't quiet enough to keep us from hearing it. She barely stood to his chest.

Wallace was six-foot-ten, and I hadn't met many who were bigger than him. Even when we were kids, he towered over everyone. Add in the thick bulges of muscles covering him and there weren't many who didn't cower before him.

Her hands slid into her skirt pockets, and I knew she was ready to fight. Even when a shiver of terror traveled down her spine. She was so fucking brave.

"I'm sorry to startle you, my lady," Wallace apologized in a soft voice he reserved for women and children. He smiled to make her more comfortable. "I'm Kadeem Wallace, Morales's second in command."

She backed away, still unnerved, but didn't become violent.

"I'm behind you," I warned her, hoping to avoid a rerun of earlier. I skirted to the side, so she wouldn't feel trapped. "We're ensuring your safe passage."

Wallace pressed himself against one of the wooden houses so he wasn't blocking her either. She eyed him like a snake and put as much space as she could between them to pass. To be fair, Wallace could reach out and snatch her up without taking a single step.

"Thank you, Sir." When she went around the corner, we climbed back up to the roofs.

"I wasn't the guy to bring for this," Wallace told me. "The poor thing was terrified."

"She's always terrified." She was usually better at hiding it.

"The pup would have been a better option. She wouldn't have been ready to piss herself if it was him."

"I trust him to calm her. I trust you to protect her." I chuckled. "Don't get too cocky

fucker, she was ready to fight you with every ounce of her soul.”

His deep laugh was softened as he controlled his volume. But that booming laugh of his had been a comfort to me since we were children. Something about him laughing always soothed the edges.

Like when the headmaster of our orphanage beat us with a bamboo rod until we couldn’t sit for two weeks. He laughed and made some stupid joke, and that carried us and his brother, Elijah, through the pain of our punishment.

Then he risked his life to get us something to eat when they tried to starve us after. Wallace was the big brother I never had and the best friend I could have ever asked for.

“She’s a fighter. I respect that.” He nodded his agreement as we followed her to the house where she’d stashed her kid. She snuck into the back door with a key that was hidden in a giant plant.

“If anyone had a chance of surviving at the Grandpack, it’s her.”

“But.”

His disapproval was its own entity, and it’s always pricked at my skin before he ever even showed it to me. “She doesn’t need another fight. She needs to heal.”

“So what, leave them here?”

“No. But we need a plan to protect her once we get there. Don’t get cocky, fucker.” He spit my own words back at me, and if it was anyone else, I’d dominate them until they kissed the floor.

“I’ll fight for her.”

“Think, Dirus.” His dark eyes landed on me. “You’re one man.” Then he shook his head. “Well, two at least.”

Even when his eyes were daggers and there was a whispered ‘fucking moron’ at my back, I knew he had my six. If I left the Grandpack to protect this omega, he’d be right there with me.

“If you’re taking the lead here, you have to do it right. The same way you would do a job. She’s had enough impulsive, shitty leadership. Don’t make her suffer anymore idiotic dick swinging.”

“When we leave, we’ll make an emergency stop at one of our drop points, and I’ll take the time to think it through. I’m not going to save her from the pan and toss her into the fire.”

“I understand why you’ve picked her. She’s everything you admire in a person, without the pressure of being compelled to challenge it.” He smiled at me. “Definitely better than Nadine. I’d take her any day too.”

“I haven’t chosen her,” I reminded him.

“I heard you the first time, asshole.”

“You are testing my last nerve today, Kadeem.” As if he cared about that. He was only here listening to me because he wanted to be. Not because I had any power over him. “She’s been in there for too long.”

I pulled out my binoculars from the pocket of my cargo pants and looked through the window. The husband was up and moving around. She was stuck behind the couch,

waiting for an opening to escape.

I went to the front door and knocked on it. He opened it, and his eyes grew wide, especially when he noticed Wallace behind me. It was always hilarious to watch a grown man tip his head all the way back, just to try to see his face. He swallowed harshly.

“Yes?”

“Sorry, sir, I know it’s late, but I’m desperate for more of that herb I bought from you. It’s for the governor.”

When Astria heard my voice, she tip-toed across the room toward the back door.

The man blubbered, trying to get his thoughts reorganized. “If it’s for the governor, it’s no problem at all.”

“Good.”

The door creaked when she tried to open it, and I snarled to hide the sound. The man leaped out of his skin. I hit my fist against my chest. “Sorry about that.”

“Elizabeth,” he yelled without turning back. His wife came out of the kitchen. I looked over the scar on her face more thoroughly than when I was in the shop. Astria was stripping me of my ability to compartmentalize, and I was seeing things I willfully ignored.

They branded Astria, but this woman was cut over and over again. Deep repetitive gouges like whoever did it never wanted her to have a face again. The other side of her face gave me a guess of what she looked like before.



I eyed the cane the man used. This was who Astria mutilated. I was willing to bet a thousand bucks he was the one who did that to the kind woman. A woman willing to hide and care for a kid that wasn't hers for her friend.

Her bright blue eyes were human. She was a person. One that didn't deserve that.

Before I left, I should murder every man here. But I needed orders to do something like that. Otherwise, there would be more than a spanking waiting for me back home.

Fuck. Fuck. Stuff the morals and ethics in the back of your head. Like you always tell the pups, Morales.

"He needs more of that stuff. I don't know where you found it, but find more."

She rolled her eyes behind his back before she remembered me there and blushed. "I'll get it."

He didn't hear the rest that she grumbled under her breath. "From the garden, where I grew it."

She opened the back door, and they all slipped out.

"He'll pay extra for the inconvenience." The names on my list of people to kill if an opportunity presented itself grew again.

## Page 13

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### Chapter thirteen

Astria Zielle

Kylie played where the sand of the beach met the forest, collecting flowers. I pulled the pieces of the collar out of my skirt pocket. I stared out at the ocean, watching the moonlight reflect off the waves.

“Throw it out, Mama,” she told me.

When I threw this collar out into the ocean, my life as I knew it was over. What was in store for the future? What kind of world was really out there?

“I will.”

Still, my fingers tightened on the pieces of metal. Why was this so hard?

Let go .

My stomach twisted in my gut. The swirls of fear gripped me in its hold as tears trickled down my cheeks.

Cast the past out.

“Back home,” Dirus’s voice made me jump out of my skin as he suddenly appeared beside me. I hated the yelp that managed to escape from me. “They say women will often go back to an abusive or toxic relationship. Don’t do something stupid.”

I wiped my tears away, hopefully before he could see them. But I suspected he saw right through me.

“I’m not going back.” That wasn’t an option.

“You want to.”

“I don’t want to.”

He crossed his arms, making his huge biceps look even bigger. “Explain it to me. Why are you still holding that?”

“I don’t know anything about being free.” Such a strange concept. “I know how to be collared.”

His eyes softened as he studied me.

“Will you do it?” I held the pieces out to him.

“No,” he answered without hesitation. “Being free is going to suck. It will be confusing, new, and scary. You’ll fuck up and make mistakes. You will get hurt.”

I sighed. That’s what I suspected. That’s why I was clinging to the remnants of an old sense of understanding.

“If I rip that out of your hands like I want to and stomp it until it’s nothing more than shards of what was, then I take away your choice. Just like they did.”

“I’m asking you to.”

“Make your decision with your whole chest and stand by it.” He said it like he was

quoting someone older and wiser. He stared off in the distance like he was remembering the person who said it to him, too. “That means you have to do the hard shit.”

I turned to look at my Kylie. I kept my eyes on her and threw a piece into the ocean as hard as I could. I even put some of my magic behind it.

Fear grabbed me in a chokehold, but I ignored the feeling. Like I had a million times before.

One by one, I sent the pieces flying until there was nothing left. With each piece in the ocean, it was easier and easier. I was lighter by the time my hands were empty.

I took in a deep breath and was surprised I felt steadier than I had in a long time. I could take my chance on the unknown. I’d survived this place. I could survive another world too.

His hand moved in my peripheral, and I jerked out of his way. I turned, ready for a fight, but his hand just moved at a slow, measured pace toward my face.

My heart pounded in my chest, but I let his rough fingers come in contact with my cheek. The pad of this thumb wiped away the remnants of the tears that had fallen before.

“I can help carry the rest.” The words came out like a vow. My stomach fluttered with a strange feeling that made me jittery as his dark eyes sucked me into a vortex I didn’t even care to get out of. “You just needed to know what you were willing to fight for.”

I stood there like a startled deer: wide eyed and frozen. Unsure of what to do or what I wanted, but unable to break the intense contact.

It couldn't have been that long, but I felt like I'd been trapped in his gaze for hours. Like time had stopped and was floating around my insides.

He moved closer to me, and I realized his lips were coming in toward mine. I jolted back away from him, the spell broken.

"I'm sorry." His voice was full of gravel.

"What are you doing?" Something about the whole situation made me want to run and get closer to him at the same time. I didn't understand the feeling at all, but running was quickly winning the race.

He closed his eyes, and the hand that was hanging in the air after my retreat dropped.

"Being a cock happy pup."

I didn't understand most of that, but the word cock had me taking a few more steps back.

### Chapter fourteen

Dirus Morales

She was looking at me like I was one of them, and it fucked with everything inside me. She was shocked I would do such a thing, and that little bit of trust I gained with her was right out the fucking window.

“I’m not going to hurt you.” I put my hands up to show her I meant no harm. “Wolves say that to describe someone being impulsive.”

“You said–”

“I meant what I said,” I growled, pissed that I allowed things to get back to here. “I’m not going to do anything you don’t want me to.”

“You’re growling at me.”

“I’m growling at myself, not you.” I took a deep breath and smothered the rumble in my chest the best I could. I’d stop breathing if that undid the damage I did.

“What were you doing?”

A strange blend of a scoff, laugh, and a snarl ripped through me. “I was kissing you.”

Her eyebrows went up and her eyes grew wide. “What?”

“A man’s never kissed you?”

She frowned. “No. It serves no purpose.”

“You kiss the kid, right?”

Her eyebrows tensed at the comparison. “It’s affection for someone I care about. Men don’t kiss.”

Right, because they don’t care about the women. You don’t kiss property.

“I care about you.” More and more by the second. This woman. “Can I show you?”

I waited while the confusion ping-ponged over her face, going back and forth. I didn’t dare move. If I wanted to come out of this communication fumble, I knew not to take one step.

“You are so strange. Why would you care about me?”

“I don’t know,” I said, honestly. “I hate the only other celestial witch I know, and I’m not one to give a shit about someone’s tears.”

The honesty, as blunt as it was, made her shoulders relax. I took a measured step closer, watching for any signs she would grab her baby to disappear into the woods. When I was sure she was steady, I slid closer.

“I think I like that you’re fucked up too,” I admitted when I was less than a step away from her.

This time, I aimed my lips at her forehead. Not letting my cock take the lead again. She jolted, but didn’t bolt. Her fingers grabbed my shirt, like she would push me

away.

I was shocked when she relaxed into it, even going so far as to press her forehead deeper into me.

I grabbed the sides of her head to deepen it. Something so strangely intimate about it. Have I ever kissed a woman on the forehead before? I didn't think that I did. That would be too intense for a man who didn't commit to anything other than his pack.

It was so innocent, but part of me realized how huge it was for two people who'd never truly connected to someone of the opposite sex.

Her arms wrapped around my waist to hold me close, and a broken place inside me quivered. The feeling terrified me. This tiny woman couldn't hold shattered pieces of me. She deserved more than an orphaned mutt who spent his life covered in blood.

Still, I tucked her head under my chin.

"This is weird," she said in a whisper.

"Yeah, it is." But I didn't let her go.

Who was I kidding? It was too fucking late.

I'd seen the stars under every sky there was, but they absolutely radiated above her. Like she powered them instead of the other way around.

A soft light that didn't shy away from the dirty nature of the darkness.

My Starshine.



I was so fucked.

### Chapter fifteen

Astria Zielle

We sat next to the little fire the men made for Kylie and me while we were gone. They were kind enough to stick us in a corner, close to the exit, away from the hoopla of all the men shuffling around.

Every time I adjusted my weight, I felt countless eyes snap to me. Like they were ready to give them commands or something.

The only person close by was Kadeem Wallace on the other side, watching for any intruders. He was still like a statue, and Kylie stared at him, entranced by the sight.

She whispered to me. "I can't even see him breathing."

"If you keep staring like that, he's gonna come alive and bite you," I warned her.

"You're silly, Mommy." She waved me off. "You won't let anyone bite me."

Her faith in me was endless and undeserved. One day, my protection would run out. "It's still rude, baby."

Kadeem whipped his head around and snapped his teeth with a playful smile. He even winked at her.

Kylie smothered her squeal of delight beneath her hands. She jumped to her feet. I

tried to grab her hand, but her four-year-old energy zipped her over to him, with the flower wreath she was making, before I could get a hold of her.

“Sorry for being rude,” she whispered behind her hand. “I thought you might have died.”

His deep booming laugh echoed in the cave, and every internal alarm shrieked that I needed to get Kylie out of there. Too much attention would be on her. “I’m still kicking, tiny witch.”

He was easily the biggest man I’d ever seen, both in height and pure muscle. I didn’t have the tiniest hope of keeping him off her. He was built like a brick wall. The only thing keeping me from shrieking like a madwoman was Dirus’s promise and the foreign kindness in Kadeem’s brown eyes.

“Good. You’re nice and I like you.” Kylie smiled. I’d never seen her go up and talk to a man. She didn’t even speak in her own father’s presence. “Can you teach me how to do that?”

“I will one day.”

“Really!” Her eyes sparkled in delight. “Thank you. Thank you.” She leaped around in barely contained excitement. “My name is Ilie.”

“Kadeem.”

“Okay, Eem. You gotta pinky swear.” She put up her pinky for him. His hand dwarfed hers as his giant finger threatened to chokehold hers.

“I swear.”

“Yay!” she cheered. “Now that we are friends. I want you to wear this friendship wreath. So you don’t forget me.”

“I doubt I would.” But he leaned down for her to put the flower crown on his head all the same.

My heart fluttered in my chest and I didn’t understand the feeling bouncing around in my tummy once again. It reminded me of Dirus and me at the shoreline. I shook my head to get my mind away from that weird train of thought.

Kylie hummed as she adjusted it until she was satisfied with how it sat on his head. “I’ll get more flowers tomorrow and make a better one.”

“I appreciate that.”

“Do you know the constellations?” She pointed to where his eyes flicked down the tunnel again. “I can show you.”

His smile was gentle as she pointed to the sky she could probably see and talked about her favorite ones. “Delphi is my favorite star in the whole wide world.”

Dirus came to sit beside me. “You have that look like you want to pick out his curtains.”

“I don’t understand your words.” I didn’t look away from the scene across the cave.

“I guess you wouldn’t.” Dirus chuckled to himself. “I meant that a lot of women love a man who is good with kids.”

“I’ve never seen one before.” I waited for him to be inappropriate, but it didn’t happen.

“And you’re already fawning over it.”

“Fawning?”

“Making goo-goo eyes.”

My mouth twisted as I tried to decipher what he was saying, but his explanations just confused me more. I didn’t want to risk making him mad.

“Oh.”

“You’re lost. Aren’t you?”

“Yeah,” I whispered.

“Let’s try that again. What are you thinking?”

“She’s never said a single word to her father. To any man ever. And she’s over there playing with him like it’s the most natural thing in the world.”

“Wallace has that energy about him,” Dirus told me. “He’s great at making kids feel safe and scaring the piss out of men.”

“I see that.”

“Is that all?”

“What would her life be like if she had a man like him as a father?”

“I’m biased, but I think any child in the world would benefit with him as their father.”  
He chuckled. “But maybe you are also wondering what if he was your husband?”

“She would be so much happier.”

“What about you?”

The question gave me pause as I realized what he was asking me. “I don’t know. I don’t even know what that would look like.”

Would he give me kisses on the forehead like Dirus did?

“I could tell you.” He paused, and I finally pried my eyes away from Kadeem and Kylie. “You would never live in fear or hunger again. You would be loved and protected.”

That sounded insane. “Are you offering me, Kadeem?”

He laughed at that. “Not exactly. But I’m sure Wallace wouldn’t mind.”

Kadeem didn’t answer, but he smirked at Dirus for a second before focusing back on Kylie’s expert star tour.

“You need to focus on you and Kylie. I respect that.” Dirus smiled at me. “But I want you to know what life with wolves would give you.”

“What price does all of that come with?”

“There would never be a price, Starshine.” His voice turned to gravel.

“Nothing in this world is free.”

“That’s true enough. But costs aren’t always what you think.” His eyes grew into the deadly serious expression I was used to him having. “Sometimes, the only thing you

need to do is to be yourself and do what's natural for you."

"It looks like you're still struggling to believe that concept yourself. How could you expect me to accept it?"

His piercing eyes jerked up to me, and it hit me how honest I was being. I waited for him to punish me for my disrespect, but all he did was stare at the ground. He nodded before getting up to walk away.

A bad feeling swirled in my stomach. I'd done it now. My baby was here with all these men that he commanded.

"Eh, Wallace. I'm here to relieve you," the man I recalled Dirus calling Pierce said. As he approached, Kylie fled back over to me to sit in my lap.

Maybe Kadeem really did have magic energy over children. I wrapped my arms around her. When it was clear Pierce wasn't going to follow her, she spoke, "I made something for you?"

"Oh?"

"I made it by accident while I was talking to, Eem."

"Kadeem." I pronounced it clearly.

She tried, fumbled on the K and D, and still settled on, "Eem."

"You'll get it."

She waved it off and held up a gold chain link necklace. I frowned. A few moments ago, all she had was flowers. I leaned in to study it. It wasn't metal. The links

vibrated and glimmered like they were alive. “Are these... stars?”

She moved her hold to show me the constellation acting as a pendant.

“The chained maiden?”

“I was looking at her and wishing you would never be locked in chains again. And it formed in my hands.” She eyed my wrapped throat. “Maybe if you wear it, it will protect you.”

Tears pricked at my eyes as I grabbed it. “Thank you, baby. You are so thoughtful.”

I draped it over her neck.

She pouted at the necklace around her neck. “Mommy, it’s for you.”

“Do me a huge favor and hold on to it for me so I don’t lose it.” I twisted the pendant so it sat properly against her chest.

If it could protect someone from chains, maybe she’d never have to wear any at all.

Please. I’d bare all her chains. Just let her be free.

“Mommy.” She gasped.

I opened my eyes, not realizing I’d closed them. The pendant radiated brighter than before.

Protect her at all costs.



### Chapter sixteen

#### Dirus Morales

I laid on my cot staring at the ceiling, unable to sleep. I wasn't sure if it was caused by the way I'd already failed to protect Astria and not trusting my men to not upset her, or if it was the memory of her arms around me making me feel empty. Both fought for my attention.

One eye and ear stayed on the two celestial witches sleeping across the room. And the other set ran me through the wringer.

She was right. I fought every instinct I had about her since we met. I'd fought the raging need to declare for her with every word out of my mouth. How could I expect her to understand that all she needed to do was be herself?

What if I did declare for her? Could I leave the Grandpack where I'd climbed my way from orphaned mutt to highly respected captain and join her non-existent pack? What would the two elder wolves, who taught me how to be a man, think if I did something so impulsive?

Rios walked up. "Hey, boss."

"What is it, pup?" I never took my eyes off her sleeping form. I should have given her my cot. She would have been more comfortable. It was a shame that I let two omegas sleep on a pallet.

There was the conundrum again.

He didn't comment on the fact I was staring at Astria and her child. "I think I picked up a radio signal. I went up top and it was hidden by the hills. But it's there. They are right. Someone is broadcasting."

"What's it say?"

"That's the weird part. It's clicking sounds, but it's not morse or anything."

"Let's go."

"Should I wake up Astria?"

Yes, we needed her information. No, she hadn't slept well. Every time someone rolled over, she jumped awake and clutched her baby to her.

Another mental battle.

"No." I finally let instinct win. Probably, we couldn't get out of here without her waking up, anyway. I whistled and all my men popped up, ready to roll in minutes.

I wrote a note and placed it beside her. She hadn't moved an inch, even as I loomed over her. Even as my wolves scrambled about the room. I wasn't dumb enough to think that she suddenly thought she was safe. She was exhausted.

Someone needed to stay with her. We were already at a disadvantage and outnumbered. We needed everybody.

"Nowak." I straightened up and turned to face my men.

“Yes, sir.” My third in command lowered his voice to match mine. I hadn’t even realized I was whispering until then.

“Stay and watch after the celestials.”

“Yes, Sir.” He nodded.

“I trust you know what will happen if you fail to do that.”

He smirked. “I’m not new.”

His eyes went over to her, and I didn’t miss the softness there. I’m sure there was something similar in mine. This woman was going to dig her hooks into everyone here. Whoever she didn’t trap, the kid would.

Across the cave, Wallace wore that damn flower necklace the girl had made for him. Marshmallow bastard probably forgot about her tying it around his neck when it wouldn’t stay on his giant head.

I tugged on my collar, and his eyes went wide as he remembered, and carefully took it off, trying his damndest to keep it intact.

“Perhaps I could set up some cameras.” Rios dug in his bag.

“You have limited battery, right?”

The pup’s eyes went over to the two celestials. He nodded.

“Save it for an emergency.” I’d feel stupid for wasting the battery if we needed to be extracted for some reason and I couldn’t get a call to the men who made me look like I was the pup.

“Roll out.”

Everyone followed my lead, stepping as silent as possible to not be heard.

Nausea nagged me the whole way to the source of the transmission. The further away from her we went, the more I wanted to turn back and bring her with me. I couldn't win, even when I let my instincts do what they wanted.

We came up on a small radio tower deep in the woods hours later. The facility was well hidden and far away from the village. We studied it from the ridges.

“Anyone got anything?” I asked over the walkie.

“No one is here. From the outside, it looks abandoned.”

“Enter,” I commanded and I could see my men busting down the door through my scope. Ready to cover their six if they needed to retreat.

“Clear,” echoed over and over as my men searched the facility.

Those of us covering up top came down and entered the building. Rios looked at the rocks littering the ground. “Astria said these attack magic. That's how the collar worked. Someone didn't want any witches coming here.”

“Everyone here is a witch,” I repeated Astria's words from before. “Except us.”

We walked in and found a small workshop. Drawings were all over the walls. Torture devices of every kind. Some I recognized from the engineer's portfolio and others were new.

On the desk was a bunch of drawings more brutal than all the others. On top was a

letter.

“As the engineer, we demand devices that will better modify the behavior of the feral woman that refuses to obey orders,” Wallace read out loud. So the higher ups were demanding an increase in brutality.

“We’ve been to a lot of fucked up places, boss.” Pierce studied the walls. “But this place is its own breed.”

“As the star witch ages, she becomes increasingly combative and hostile. Her magic is still growing, and the dampener collar is becoming less effective by the day. She must be tamed before we are completely unable to control her. Despite our best hope, Captain Zielle has been unable to complete this task. I don’t care what you have to do. Make her comply,” Wallace finished.

“All this to control one woman.” Rios rolled his eyes. I was glad the notion was so ridiculous to him.

“That one woman is going to destroy their way of life. Think about the politics, pup.” Wallace smiled at him. “What happens when she fully wields her magic? Omegas are natural leaders. What woman here wouldn’t follow a leader that would protect them?”

“I thought that was just with wolves.” The pup cocked his head, curious about this new fact.

“The old wolves talk about how celestial witches were magnets for people from all walks of life,” Kadeem told him. Ah yes. Raj Ahmed would come to the orphanage and tell us grand stories about the celestials from his time.

That their soft nurturing side and fiercely protective loyal side were a magnet for

anyone needing guidance. That they soothed the rough edges of even the most violent alpha.

I stared at the pictures, swallowing the rock lodged in my throat. “They’ll kill her and that baby before they let that happen.”

Cause that’s what I would do.

“We have to get them out of here,” Rios spoke up. “We are bound by the stars to protect them.”

“I know.” But as Wallace already pointed out, going home with her wasn’t what was best either. Astria didn’t need to go into a whole new world full of brand new threats. She’d trust no one if we took her there.

“It looks like his signal isn’t broadcasting to anyone. It’s making one of their illusion shields malfunction. The sound waves were designed to interfere with the magic, making this pocket invisible.” Rios studied the mechanism.

“Why?” Wallace asked.

I grabbed an old tattered book from his desk; *The History of Celestials and the Lupus Constellation*. “So we would find her.”

He knew we’d be attracted to her magic and come check it out. We were supposed to come save her.

“There’s a tape.” Wallace popped it into the VCR. I wanted to laugh at the outdated technology. That was probably high tech for them. I followed the cord to a small generator in the back.

A man with blond hair and blue eyes came onto the screen. He was covered with tattoos and the brand of the bitch was red and infected on his chest, ruining some of his ink. “If everything has gone according to plan, you should be a pack of wolves and not the pricks that run this place. My name is Matthius Kovac. I’m known as The Engineer. By the time you have arrived, I assure you I am long gone, so don’t bother looking for me. Whether it was by death or plan, searching will only be a waste of your precious time.”

“Last week, Astria Zielle committed a high crime. When I tried to release her from the box, the escape failed and we were both caught. With any luck, you have already met her. No doubt they need her to deal with you. Otherwise, she’s still in the box at the prison. Hopefully.”

He stared off in the distance, like he wasn’t so sure she’d make it long enough.

“ I’ve lost my post, so my mediocre safeguards won’t protect her anymore. I’ve dismantled all my work, hoping to buy you time. No doubt they will need to come up with something that makes a statement, so the other women never think of questioning them again. Once you find this, remove her from the island at once. Astria and Kylie Zielle are in extreme danger. Take caution. They would rather burn this place to the ground than allow her to leave.”

The tape cut off, and the silence in the room was deafening. Every wolf stood ready for their orders.

“He was in love with her,” Wallace noted softly, but in the silence he might as well have shouted.

I nodded my head. He tried to buy her, but the game was rigged. And we couldn’t find any other attempts to purchase a wife since.

“I’d say more than that,” Pierce said, flipping the corkboard next to the desk. There were drawings of her pinned all over it. He seemed to like her best when she was smiling at her baby.

I agreed with him. It was when she shined the brightest. The engineer was obsessed with the celestial witch.

“Uh, guys,” Rios spoke up, squatting to the floor to pick up a pin. “Isn’t this for Nadine’s men?”

He held it up and sure enough, it was the silhouette of a wolf howling at the golden moon. The insignia was one of Nadine’s personal guards.

Our pack had already been here to investigate. But they hadn’t extracted Astria or Kylie, and they sent in a second team, even though they already knew what was here.

I thought back to our arrival. Some of the men were surprised, but the ones with higher power weren’t. The governor was barely phased.

This whole ‘job’ was a trap.



## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:45 am*

### Chapter seventeen

Astria Zielle

My eyes popped open, and I only found one man walking around the cave.

“Good morning!” The man waved when he realized I was watching him. “I’m Jonathan Nowak, third in command. Are you hungry?”

I shook my head.

“If you change your mind, the spread is set up on that table. Doesn’t taste the best, but it fills you up.” He carried on doing one thing or another.

“Where is Dirus?” As I said that, my hand landed on a note from said man.

“Morales went to check out a signal that was partially blocked by the hills. I haven’t gotten a hold of him in a couple hours, so I guess the walkies are either out of range or also blocked. Don’t fret, darlin’, he’ll be back soon,” Jonathan said, not realizing I was reading the note that confirmed his words.

Jonathan radiated warm familiar magic that felt like a dog trying to cuddle up to keep me warm. Whatever magic the wolves possessed was comfortable. But to my back, a chill trickled down my spine like a promise of death and dread.

If that warm magic came from all the wolves like I suspected, it was no wonder they masked the icky magic oozing from the south. Now that there was only one wolf,

everything was painfully obvious.

“There is something outside.” Before anything else could leave my mouth, his gun was unholstered, and he stalked toward the door. “I don’t think it’s in immediate proximity.”

I jumped up to follow.

“Please stay here, my lady.” His friendly demeanor changed into that of a predator on the hunt.

I still followed. Once we were outside, his eyes scanned the forest. I pointed over toward where I knew an old military post was about a mile away. It hadn’t been manned for three generations before my time, but it was the only thing in that direction.

“Magic. A lot of it. I’ve never felt anything like it.”

“It wasn’t there last night?” A frown twisted his handsome face.

“I didn’t realize it last night, but all the wolves were smothering the area. I don’t think I could see past the field of everyone’s aura,” I said. “I noticed now, because the magic was a stark contrast to you.”

He clicked a device mounted on his shoulder. “Morales?”

His mouth twisted deeper as seconds ticked by without a response. He took a subtle step between me and the direction I’d pointed out, putting his back to me.

“Wallace?” A soft growl built in his chest. “Okay, here’s the plan, my lady—”

“I’ll go check it out.” I went around him and toward the source.

“Please don’t.” The man whined. For whatever reason, it struck me as funny that he was whimpering like a puppy.

He grabbed my arm, and I whirled on my heel. He dropped his hand like I burned him. I stared at him until I was sure he wouldn’t try to grab me again, then carried on.

“Morales?” His voice was a lot more desperate this time. “My lady, please return to safety with your child.”

I ignored him and kept walking.

“I’m one man. I can only protect one of you if you are separated.”

“So protect her.”

“Morales.” he growled into his device again.

“I hear you, Nowak,” Dirus finally answered.

But I kept walking, letting the voices fade to the background. The magic was like a homing beacon of death, and it was easy to follow the invisible trail. The only real challenge was that the forest was dense, because no one really went this way.

Until I came up on the post. The broken fencing had been replaced with high fences lined with stars. Star magic.

The once training yard was filled with strange people that didn’t look right.

I crouched in the bushes when I heard the boots of soldiers moving around. The

people in the fence snarled like wild animals. Their skin was ash gray, and I was able to see through their flesh in some places. Their clothes had seen better days and were just dirty tatters of what the garments once were.

A lot of them were gnawing on the fencing, their broken and jagged teeth made tiny dents in the magic coating the metal. A crazy thought rattled through me that the moment that magic gave out, nothing would hold them in.

“They’re chewing on this shit again!” a soldier said, using a cattle prod on a creature. But they didn’t react. “I’ve used everything in my fucking arsenal, Zielle. This isn’t working.”

“Something’s had them worked up since yesterday.”

Their solid pale eyes would glow gold whenever they bit into the fencing, and a little more life would fill them.

My heart pounded in my chest. They were eating celestial magic, and they’d been upset since yesterday. My best guess was when my collar came off.

I noticed that more and more were moving in my direction, getting more vicious.

Because they can sense you. Move, stupid bitch.

Nikolai came around, and I carefully crept back. Making sure not to brush anything that would give away my position. He watched them for a moment, then smirked. “Astria.”

That tone. I swallowed the whimper. Last time he used that tone, he broke my hand.

“I know you’re out there. I demand you reveal yourself.” He followed me into the

forest. He was uncomfortably close. One wrong move and he'd see me. "Bitch, don't make me have to deal with you the hard way."

If he caught me without my collar, he'd kill me instantly. He was the one who demanded it never be taken off of me.

"Answer me, bitch."

I backed into legs, and I would have screamed if the soothing warm aura didn't wash over me like a security blanket. I smothered my fear in my hands.

"I hope you aren't talking to me," Dirus spoke up.

Relief wrapped me up nice and tight.

"Sorry. I'm looking for my wife. Not you."

"You speak to your wife like that?" Judgment laced Dirus's voice.

Nikolai chuckled in that way he did right before he punched me in the face, and I clenched Dirus's pant leg in warning.

"Go ahead. I'm not your wife. I'll put a fucking hole in your body." The growl rumbling deep in his chest terrified and excited me. I liked that in an assbackward way he was protecting me. Not that it made any sense.

Leaves ruffled as Nikolai stomped off, and Dirus grabbed me by my pits and hauled me up like I weighed nothing, keeping me in front of him to block me from sight.

"Someone made them fencing out of celestial magic, and I didn't do it." I barely breathed. "I haven't had access to my magic in years."

“I know,” he snarled, and I jumped out of my skin. “It’s not you. We need to move.”

“What are those things?” What ate magic like that? I’d never heard of such a creature.

“Their trump card.”

He threaded his hands through mine and went into a run. I struggled to keep up with his long legs, but even though I didn’t know what a trump card was, I knew we were in danger.

Howling filled the air and made goosebumps crawl down my arms. “They’ve released their dogs.”

How many times had these things hunted me down when I tried to run away in the beginning? “They know my scent.”

“Let them come.” He morphed into a giant black wolf and shoved me down in time for one of these dogs to leap at me. I rolled over and put up a gold shield behind him as he grabbed the first dog by the neck and shook until he wasn’t moving anymore.

I created golden energy that shaped itself into arrows and let the shield down, killing it and another coming up behind it. Dirus lurched behind me, protecting my back as I guarded his.

Two tried to pincer him in, but with a wave of my arms, my magic shot both of them in the throats. He leaped at another coming up behind us until there were no more.

I counted them out. “That’s all of them.”

“These mutts usually aren’t violent. They are familiars.”

“They are my father’s.” As an animal witch, it didn’t take much for him to control all manner of beast. “He starves them.”

He grabbed my hand in a tight hold, as if he was afraid someone would rip me out of his grasp, and a low growl rumbled in his throat again.

“Extract the little celestial. The area is not safe,” he said into the device the wolves seemed to communicate with. “If her father or anyone else comes at you, kill them.”

“Heard,” a voice answered on the other side.

He sniffed the air and adjusted our path. I didn’t bother confirming that we were going the right way. Seemed like he knew exactly where we were headed.

When we finally broke through the trees, there was a line of his men with guns pointed at us. I came to a screeching stop, but Dirus yanked me forward. “These are our men. Don’t you dare stop.”

“Sorry, my lady. Just protecting your back.” Nowak smiled, but still kept his stern eyes on the forest.

Boots followed and surrounded us, and for once, it wasn’t the cause of my panic. My eyes scanned the area, and there was something glaringly missing; half the men and my baby. “Where’s Kylie?”

“Wallace and a team are moving her to the plane.”

“I know where another plane is. Tell them to go.”

He stopped and jerked his eyes to me. “You’re giving me permission to allow my men to leave with your daughter?”

“They have no intention of letting me leave. I can have peace knowing she escaped.”

He breathed heavily.

“Please.”

“I’ve done countless extractions out of war zones. And I’ve never lost my charge.”

“And I have failed to escape from these people countless times. I know them. Getting me out will be almost impossible, but she is getting out if it kills me.”

“Your death isn’t an option.” A snarl ripped out of his chest.

“Yes it is,” I disagreed. “For her, it is. She is the only one out of the two of us that matters.”

He glared at me. “That simply isn’t true.”

“Yes.” My voice broke. “It is.”

He shook his body like he was bottling an unknown rage and scoffed at me. “You don’t understand. We will protect her with every ounce of our ability, but there are other dangers out there. She will need protection that only you can give her once we get out of here.”

“Please.” I got on my knees. Whatever was happening, she couldn’t be a part of it. “I’ll do anything. I’ll give you anything. Please!”

Anything was worth her not walking in my footsteps here.

Jonathan and Lucero stepped toward me and whimpered. Jonathan lifted a hand as if



to touch me, but he didn't.

"You will never kneel before a man and beg again," Dirus snarled. "It will be done."  
He grabbed the communication device. "Is the plane prepped?"

"Yep, boss."

I grabbed the thing from him. "Kadeem?"

"Yeah?" Confusion laced his deep voice.

"Get my daughter out of here. And protect her at all costs. Don't wait for us."

There was a long pause. "Yes, my lady." Gunfire exploded in the background. "We'll leave as soon as we're clear."

### Chapter eighteen

Dirus Morales

We ran to provide the other team support.

“Fastest way is right through town. But they’ll definitely notice us.” Astria tried to run ahead, but my men kept a circle around her, preventing her from leaving us behind.

“Let them. We have to provide back up as soon as possible.” I had to assume they needed it, since no one had answered me in some time and we hadn’t seen the plane take off yet.

I couldn’t handle her begging me. She was an omega. She was not to beg a wolf for anything. All she needed to do was command it.

Part of me hoped that we’d get there and everything was clear, so we could bail out, but I knew Wallace. If it was clear, he would have already followed her orders.

I understood why she wanted things done this way. Strategically, she’d be my target. Her daughter probably wouldn’t remember this place. But Astria would.

I’d lose sleep thinking about her coming back if I was them. No, I wouldn’t. I’d cut her down where she stood to make sure she never came back to haunt me. She was right. They weren’t going to let her just leave.

We entered town, and it was eerily quiet. Not a single soul was on the streets. I studied the shadows, looking for anyone who was lurking about, but not a damn soul was here.

“Something is wrong.” The panic in her voice rang loudly in the silence.

“High alert, men,” I told them. “What would make this happen?”

She took a deep breath. “I haven’t seen it like this since the cleansing. But if one woman fled, the rest would follow.”

Awful shrieking filled the air. Not of women and children. No, this sound grated against the core of what I was made of and made me want to instinctively pull away. This wasn’t my first rodeo with these fuckers.

“Star-eaters.”

They would eat anything really, but they were named after their favorite meal. I eyed my celestial witch and my wolves made from celestial magic. It was my job to make sure I got everyone to safety.

If I didn’t, I failed as the alpha.

“Tight formation, watch your brother’s six,” I commanded, putting every ounce of alpha aura into the order, so they knew that I was here to take care of them. “Shifting gets their attention fast. Don’t use your wolf form unless they are on us.”

Clicks rang in our circle as the guns came out and safeties were turned off. “Yes, Sir.”

“What’s the objective?” I asked to center my men, keeping the goal firmly in their

sights.

“Protect the omegas and get out alive, sir,” they all chanted with easy practice. At least everyone but the pup. He only mentioned protecting Astria.

“Nowak, tell the pup why he’s wrong?”

“Because if we die, you have to do more paperwork.” Nowak grinned. “And you hate paperwork.”

“Fucking A.”

No, I didn’t want to write down an essay long explanation about where I fucked up and cost my fellow wolf his life. Fuck that shit.

Astria stared off into the distance with wide eyes. I held my fist up so none of my men moved. “What’s wrong?”

Star-eaters poured out of the treeline on the other side, running right for us. From the direction the plane was parked in. There were countless numbers of them filling the street, eyeing us like we were dessert.

When she looked over her shoulder, I knew there was more coming from behind. Shit.

“Move.” I let the boom of the alpha command fill my chest. I fell back, taking my spot at the rear. My people were all in front of me and in my line of sight.

Nowak turned around and fired his rifle right over my shoulder, protecting my exposed back. Never stopping his backwards shuffle, and I didn’t miss the way he kept his shoulder to Astria’s back.

I could blame it on the emergent circumstances, but part of me wanted to preen that she knew Nowak would shield her. That she'd already wrapped Nowak around her tiny fingers.

Now the women and children screamed. They came out of the shadows like rabbits and ran. They must have sensed the danger in the air, but they would have been better off running far from here while they had the chance.

At least with a bunch of witches, we had a better probability of winning. Until I saw some of them throw weak spells that would never accomplish anything. The realization hit me that if they weren't allowed to be taught on anything else, why would they be educated on any built in weapons to protect themselves with?

Damn it. More innocent citizens to give some nice padding to the body count.

Astria placed her arms wide and hands open. A thick gold shield wrapped around our team. Star eaters ran head first into the shield and started biting the globe of magic. With one chomp, the shield cracked like glass.

"Shit." Nowak looked at the magic shield in awe. "She's the real deal."

That old wolf, Raj Ahmed, who used to tell us about how celestials were, would come tell us tales about how back in their day omegas would fight side by side with their pack. How it made packs fight three times harder, because they knew their omega would die if they didn't.

We always laughed it up and called bullshit, because Nadine the golden, could never risk a perfect gold hair on her head.

Wolves were not servants, he would tell us. The celestial we declared our devotion to were supposed to guard us just as fiercely. I might owe that old fucker some beers.

I never swore my declaration to Nadine. It wasn't required since there was only one pack. But it was frowned upon that at my high standing, I never formally took my spot.

Now, I knew why.

Because Astria was my omega.

There, I finally admitted it.

I stared at the back of her head as my breathing came in quick bursts. Priorities and plans shuffled around with a loud click in my mind as everything reorganized. I couldn't move. Even as more of those shattering sounds filled our bubble of safety she created.

It was like someone did a reboot on my brain, and all the programming was self correcting to where it was meant to be, after spending centuries forcing it to be different. Yet I was stuck on the stupid loading page, waiting to be able to do anything.

Nowak's pale blue eyes met mine and understanding filled him. Like he'd already experienced the exact same thing. He took over as I froze in place. "Steady and ready, pups."

Arrows made of magic rained down around us, but there were two more to take the place of every one that went down. They must have had multiple facilities full of these things, and they weren't a common breed.

A sharp splintering crack got me moving again. "Now!"

My men fired their rifles, gunning down any who approached us. We slowly pushed

our way forward, but the solid wall of bodies was no joke. If it wasn't for Astria, throwing a round of those star arrows out as we reloaded, we'd have been twenty kinds of dead by that point.

Her eyes turned to the sky, and she took a deep breath. "The wolf."

Strength filled me with a renewed force. She was funneling power into the magic that laid latent inside me. It would be a waste not to unleash the full potential. I and several others shifted in unison, apparently having the same idea as me. The only one who stayed in human form was Nowak.

I could hear better. My reflexes were sharper. The taste of blood on my tongue was stronger. Everything was heightened, and it made it easier to dispatch the mob of star eaters.

"Keep it moving!" Nowak yelled to the pups, keeping Astria's six properly covered. Killing anything that managed to escape the barrage of arrows and wolves. "Whoever kills the most eaters gets to take the first shower when we hit the real world again."

Nowak did as I taught him and kept the pep talks coming, while I busied my jaws with removing kneecaps and snapping necks. We finally made it to the other side and to the high ground right as the pups' exhaustion started really hitting them.

A piercing scream made Astria turn back, and she could finally see the bedlam below. Her eyes grew wide with horror as the horde was quickly destroying everything in their path.

Fires crackled as houses and businesses went up in smoke. Blood filled the streets. It was madness. Something told me the governor hadn't released them. He lost control over the situation.

“My sisters.” Astria took three steps to return. “The children.”

I leaped in front of her, blocking her, and used my nose to push her back.

“My lady,” Nowak spoke up gently. “Their best chance is for us to keep moving, and for your magic to lead them away. We’re tired and we can’t fight all of them.”

She nodded, and let him lead her up the next hill. Only for us to find Zielle sneering with his eyes locked on my celestial. “Found you.”

This powerful witch trembled before this piece of scum.

Our omega would tremble for no one.

Nowak shifted in a second, tracking the same movement I did. He snarled with the force of an alpha. One that was on par with me. Shit, was he going to be another high alpha in her pack?

That was a thought for another time. I ran for Zielle with Rios and Nowak at my heels.

We jumped, ready to complete one of the best group takedowns I’d ever seen in my life. He didn’t even move to defend himself. I hoped it would be the worst pain he ever felt. I snapped my jaws, ready to rip his throat out.

Like he was just a projection, I went through his entire body, came out the other side, and fell on top of Rios and Nowack when the same thing happened to them. Instead of a perfect kill, we were rolling across the ground with each other.

What the fuck happened?



Zielle turned on his heel, and that sneer turned into a menacing smirk. “That almost tickled.”

Another set of wolves nipped at his ankles, but not one tooth scratched him. He kicked his foot out, getting one of my confused betas good in the side.

It was rare, but witches who practiced matter magic were real. How could we ever hope to protect her from him if we couldn't touch him?

### Chapter nineteen

Astria Zielle

Nikolai Zielle the Untouchable.

That's what the men called him. They whispered tales about how before we settled this island; he took out any who opposed my father's leadership. They never said why the wars started, but based on what Dirus said, his way wasn't acceptable.

But that story never made sense to me, because if he was untouchable, why did we have to make our own land to live in? If there was anything this place taught me was the ones who were stronger made the rules.

That line of thought always gave me hope when I almost gave up.

Despite the nickname he won during the mainland wars, he wasn't completely untouchable.

Hell, even I managed to touch him a couple of times. That was when he made my father decree that my collar never be taken off.

He did that because I was a threat.

So we had some kind of chance. Right?

Could I leave myself completely vulnerable and trust these wolves to protect me?

Dirus growled and snarled, jumping at Nikolai to earn a backhand that forced him back. I took a deep, steadying breath. Okay. Yeah.

I put my left fist against my right palm. I'd made him stay solid a few times by accident. Maybe now I could do it on purpose. "The octant."

My eyes focused on the brightest star in the sky, just like I'd done the other times I managed to pull this off; Sirius.

The silver wolf, I recognized as Jonathan, tackled Nikolai to the ground. Nikolai's glare was an icy shot, stabbing at me, but I didn't dare look away from the star. A wolf slipped between my legs, and the growl that came from them would have been terrifying if I'd been his enemy.

Fire burned my veins from holding the spell. This was how I ended up losing. This spell took so much out of me, and if I tried to fight back I lost focus and the spell lifted.

But this time, I let the fire ravage my insides and the wolves fight for me. Even without his ability to be 'untouchable', Nik was a war captain long ago, and he wouldn't be an easy fight.

Fur flew around me, but I didn't dare so much as blink. The wolf between my legs jumped forward, managing to be graceful enough to not knock me over, and kept the fight back away from me.

I whimpered as the fire consumed everything inside of me. Don't give up. Hold on. Protect the wolves.

The pain grew unbearable as a plane flew across my field of vision. Kylie was going to be free.

Relief flooded me and I used that as an anchor to hold on to the spell. For her, I could burn. I could do anything.

“Shoot down the plane,” Nikolai said.

A missile blazed after the plane, and I redirected my spell from Nikolai to the missile, holding it in place. I cried out as the fire inside threatened to quarter me. This missile was bigger and stronger than Nikolai, and the magic blazed across my very soul. Deep down into the root of all I was, ripping me apart.

Wolves surrounded me as Nikolai rushed at me. The sound of a bullet ringing through the air and a yelp pulled at what little of me was left. But I didn't look to see which wolf had protected me. More gunfire, but the wolves kept him from touching me.

Finally, I managed to control the missile enough to make it U-turn back and return to where it came from.

“You stupid fucking bitch.”

A hit finally socked me in the temple, knocking me to the ground with two wolves. But my vision was so hazy, I wasn't even sure what color the wolves were.

Insane laughter bubbled up inside me. It was too late. He couldn't stop me now. “You don't win.”

“I should have killed you before you became a problem.” The distinct click of a gun couldn't make the laughter stop.

I watched the plane continue to fly through the air. “You should have.”

My eyes finally focused as the silver wolf beside me crawled to drape his giant body over me. His pained whimpers cut something deep inside me. His face and neck came over my head and face. Another wolf covered my lower half. A gunshot fired and Jonathan whimpered louder.

“It’s okay. He can kill me now,” I told Jonathan.

Kylie was free. With Kadeem, who would be a better father than I could have ever dared to hope for. If the way the wolves guarded me was any indication, she’d never know the fear I knew. The pain. She’d be free.

I could die as the chained maiden.

That was okay.

She was the only thing that ever mattered.

His pale blue eye slid to stare at me in disapproval, but he didn’t move a muscle. Amazing how a wolf could convey such emotion.

Was he really going to die here to protect me? Hot, thick fluid poured over me, and I knew he was losing a lot of blood.

Another missile blew across the sky, and everything moved slow enough for me to see the missile shred through the plane like wet paper.

“No!” I screamed loud enough to make my throat burn. “Kylie!”

Agony, like I’d never known before, tore my heart into similar pieces as the plane that was quickly barreling toward the earth. Can a soul shatter? I thought mine did.

Dying would have been better.

“This is your fault. You could have just done what you were supposed to do,” my husband’s voice bounced around my skull. He was right.

I didn’t have to paint targets on our backs by being difficult.

Jonathan nuzzled my face as if to comfort me. A horrid sound of despair filled the air, and it took me a long moment to realize it was my screaming.

“Too bad Bunson isn’t here.” Nik chuckled. “He’ll never believe I finally got a scream out of you. He’s out a hundred gold coins.”

Nik shouted as snarls came back to life. He’d been so distracted by me he hadn’t realized some of the wolves still had some fight left in them.

Jonathan’s whimpers took a tired edge I didn’t like. I took deep breaths and found the source of the blood gushing on both of us. The back of his neck. “I’m sorry.”

His snout continued to slowly rub against me. A stranger, and yet he was trying to hold me together, while his brain oozed out of his skull. Doing what he could to ease my suffering when I was sure the pain he experienced was unbearable.

I rubbed his ear, and his eyes closed. His movements slowed and his breathing finally stopped. Tears filled my eyes. “Jonathan?”

Why did another pang of pain and rage pierce through me like one more blade of failure? I barely knew him.

He died protecting me. Dirus was right. These wolves were nothing like the men I knew. And he deserved more than to die like that.

His body grew heavy, but I managed to carefully scoot him off of me. I protected his head as I placed him down on the ground. Only to find a white wolf still on my lower half, struggling to breathe. Blood stained his coat where at least half a dozen holes actively bled.

I removed him. He helped the best he could, and it made it easier. I rubbed my hands over his face. He needed medical assistance before he bled out. I couldn't be completely sure, but the stunning sapphire eyes made me think it was Lucero.

The man who'd been so tender with me when he removed my collar.

Kylie was most likely dead. Why should I get up now?

Because these wolves deserved a hundred and ten percent of the fight in me? Because they needed me to get Nik back under wraps?

No, how about because I fucking hated my husband with every fiber of my being?

Rage filled me as I stood.

I endured this man using my body how he wanted for seven fucking years. They tortured me. I was disfigured from all the scars hidden beneath my clothes. I lived in cages with bars and little windows alike. I cooked for him. I cleaned. I gave him a baby he never appreciated. I killed for him. I made money, so we could survive when he blew it on his mistress or the bar.

What did he ever do for me?

Gave me a baby girl that he took away to prove he was the man.

If he wanted to play games with me. We could fucking play games. There was

nothing left to lose. Burn it down. Destroy it all.

Countless giant gold meteors flew down from the sky. Everyone halted to stare in awe and mortification as they rained toward us.

“Look what you did. You set her loose.” Nikolai’s voice poured oil over my anger.

I lifted my left hand and used my fire to guide a few of the countless meteors toward him. The panic in his eyes made the inbound destruction worth it.

The earth shook beneath us as other meteors slammed into the island. Nik tried to flee, but he couldn’t outrun me. I was of the stars.

The white wolf braced my side when the shaking almost tossed me to my knees. He could barely stand on his feet and there he was, protecting me again.

Nikolai stumbled through the cluster of meteors, but he didn’t come out unscathed. “You fucking celestial bitches.”

Stars manifested around me in golden glimmers. I turned them into arrows and shot them at Nikolai.

He ran at me, and I put up a shield. He tried to phase through it, but our magics sparked against each other. “If you want to follow in your mother’s path, you’ll die in her footsteps, too.”

I didn’t let his words shock me. I was so small when she died. I didn’t remember a lot about her and my father forbade the island from speaking of her. All I could remember was us lying beneath the stars and her teaching me their names. I refused to let him take an advantage, by disarming me with her name.



“Maybe. But I’m taking you with me.” I let my magic flood out of me and rained stars down on him from above.

“Let your magic guide you.” I remembered my mother saying.

I released my shield and let my hands move through some gestures I didn’t know and had never seen before.

That wasn’t true.

I remembered my mother using it on Nikolai the night of the cleansing. She told me to run, so I didn’t know what happened after that.

I poured my magic into my hands.

“I don’t think so, bitch.” Nikolai panicked and ran toward me. Yep, he was scared.

Golden chains whipped out of the ground, and he dodged four before one got him around the neck. It yanked him back into the ground and more crawled out of the earth like vines to wrap around every piece of him.

He yelled. His magic ran over him in purple that disappeared as if something snuffed it out. My golden energy covered and dominated him. He squirmed and did his best to fight, but he was trapped.

“Fuck!” he yelled as the chains tightened until he couldn’t even move.

“The chained maiden.” I realized numbly. The gold chains absorbed his magic before it could leave his body. Cutting him off from his power, just like he did to me.

He shook as he stared at me with resolved defeat. Like he knew exactly what would

happen to him and he knew it was coming all along.

The chain around his throat tightened, and I could see the magic fading from his body. It made his skin turn ashen and dull, as if the chains were sucking his very life force away.

Some part of me understood that was exactly what I was doing.

“You look just like her,” he whispered. “Have I ever told you that?”

When he was drunk, he would go on about how much I looked like a woman he called Seren. I always assumed she was one of my ancestors or something.

“It’s like she came back to haunt us for what we did.” That was the most human thing he ever said to me, but it was far too late for that.

I tensed my hand into a fist, and the chains tightened hard enough that his face and hands turned purple. I kinda liked the way it made him gag.

“Breathe through your nose.”

Those kind words always helped me so much, after all.

The giant black wolf turned into Dirus. He fumbled on his two feet, and one hand put pressure on a wound on his side. Another one of my wolves was injured by this fucking monster.

My wolves? Where did that come from?

Nikolai clawed at the air, since that was the only body part he could still move. He probably wished he could pull the chains away from his throat. As if I would feel

inclined to give him that decency.

“Better yet, just choke.”

“Astria.” Dirus’s voice cut through the whooshing sound of my insides collapsing beyond repair. I looked back to the way he clutched his side. His chest heaved as he endured the pain. “Don’t.”

“What do you mean, don’t?” I let my magic squeeze my master harder. Loving the way his face contorted with agony. “Do you have any idea what I’ve put up with for seven years?”

“I don’t think I could ever understand that, Starshine.” He shook his head.

“All the blood we spilled, and he is where you draw the line?” My voice broke. Betrayal threaded through my bones. Why had I ever thought he was on my side? “You said if I wanted freedom, I had to take it.”

“Ten minutes ago, I’d let you do whatever you wanted.” His eyes grew sad. “But if you kill him because of your grief, it will change you.”

“He’s already changed me,” I yelled as tears streamed down my face. He ruined me as soon as he got his claws in me. They all had. “He doesn’t get to go free.”

“I never said he would.”

I waved my other hand, pushing Dirus away from me. I didn’t want to hear his calm, reasonable argument. His very existence fucked with my understanding of this world. I didn’t need the gruff man that treated me with decency. I needed the wolf that didn’t mind staining his teeth. If Dirus wasn’t on board anymore, he wasn’t my problem.

I raised my hand and let the stars fill the gaping holes he left behind. Until a giant arrow of stars hovered over my husband. I was ready to send it right through his face, so I'd never have to look at it again.

"I hate you," I told him.

"Stop!" Dirus's energy engulfed my back as he surrounded me in his presence. His fingers intertwined with mine as if he could restrain the magic that was manifesting from within me.

Magic quivered as if it was afraid of harming him. I was done being the person who looked out for others. What did that ever get me? It got you everything that mattered, a small voice said in the back of my head.

I twirled in his hold, aiming the arrow at him. When I faced him, he held my hand the same way. "You would betray me to save him?"

Why did that rub salt in an already wide open wound? I knew from the start he couldn't be trusted. I barely knew the man.

I surged the magic forward down between us to press against his chest. His shirt seared as the tip touched him.

"I don't give a fuck about what happens to him. He can drop dead."

"Then what are you doing?" I screeched.

"I'm saving you."

"There isn't anything left of me to save."

“This is your grief. If it was anything else, you would have killed him years ago,” he told me softly. “Twenty minutes ago, this fight was rational survival. I can’t let you kill him like this.”

“I haven’t earned that?”

“You’ve earned more than that. It’s not about earning it.” His calm voice soothed the edges that sliced every iota of my being. “It’s about making sure you can live with yourself afterwards. I’m protecting those last little pieces of who you are they haven’t touched yet.”

“There is nothing left.” My voice broke.

“The woman who unionized all the women to work together. The one who stood up for her friend, no matter the price. The one who was willing to give a monster a chance to show her another way.” His brown eyes locked me in and I couldn’t look away. “You aren’t angry. You’re in pain.”

Hot tears rolled down my cheeks. “If I don’t fight, I don’t know what to do.”

“It’s time to break, Starshine.” His fingers tightened on mine. “You can’t carry anymore. You’ve been strong long enough.”

His words flipped a switch inside me, and before his mouth was shut, a sob ripped through. My knees crumpled, unable to hold me anymore. Every muscle refused to work anymore. I couldn’t see past the flood of water in my eyes.

The pain wrecked through me like nothing I’d ever experienced. I’d been shot, tased, stabbed, punched, kicked, and tortured. But nothing could ever compare to the pain obliterating me.

I wrapped my arms around my middle to hold my insides together and curled into myself. Everything I'd pushed aside shoved its way to the forefront of my mind. All the things I said were fine and moved past. I should have known they'd use her against me.

They knew she was my everything. I was lucky they didn't kill her sooner.

Nik chuckled. "It took six years, but I got tears and screams all in the same day. You stupid bitch. I did win."

A single gun fired, and I managed to look up from my position to find Nik thumping on the ground with blood gushing out of the open hole in his face. I tilted my head back to see where Dirus hovered over me, putting his gun back in its holster.

"You didn't think I would allow him to survive, did you?" Dirus answered my unspoken question. "I'm not going to let you spend your life looking over your shoulder for him."

I blinked at him. Too many emotions stormed inside me to know what to say or think about any of this. All I knew was I was more lost and confused than I'd ever been.

He reached down to cup my face and wipe the mess of tears away. "We need to see if there are any survivors. Can you walk, or do I need to carry you?"

"She might be alive."

His lips pressed together. "Don't get your hopes up, but it's possible."

Keep going.

For her.

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*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:45 am*

### Chapter twenty

#### Dirus Morales

I followed Rios's GPS reader. Pierce hauled Rios forward. The pup's face was unnaturally pale. He'd lost a lot of blood. "Pup, what did I say about dying?"

"You don't like the paperwork," he answered weakly, and tried harder to hold more of his own weight.

"That's right," I told him. Out of my half of the team, we were the only three left. The weight of my failure to protect them sat on my chest, but I didn't have time to brood over it. If I wanted to keep who we had left alive, I couldn't let sorrow win. I would drink the good stuff back home and ruminate over how everything went to shit later.

Right now, I was still the acting alpha of the leftovers of this pack, and they needed me.

I grabbed my walkie. "Wallace, report."

Not a single damn answer.

Damn it, Kadeem. No one gave you permission to die on me. If that fucker was dead, I was going to— Not now, alpha . Keep your head straight.

"Find them," Astria whispered, and stars blew past us. She ran after the stars without looking back. I shifted and jumped to run ahead of her. If there was a threat at the end

of the rainbow, I would be the first one there. Not her.

Fire crackled nearby, and I knew we were close. I cleared the trees and found the ruins of the cockpit with Wallace kneeling on the ground. Bright pink burns were painfully obvious on his umber skin tone. He'd been close to the impact. He clutched a parachute wrapped body in his arms.

The body was too tiny to be one of our men, especially in his big arms. Giant holes were scattered around him where the meteor shower just missed him. "You idiot, you didn't try to run?"

His brown eyes met mine, and the distress in them shook me. It took me back to the orphanage after being attacked when we were young, and how his brother, Elias, died in his arms.

"If I died, I wouldn't have to tell her I failed." His voice was full of gravel. I walked over and tried to pull the edge of her wrap back, but he pulled her away from me. "Kylie wouldn't want Astria to see her like this."

One glance over showed me his back was twenty times worse. I was surprised his shirt was still on, considering the back was hanging on by a literal thread. He tried to shield her from the blast.

I told him. "Let's look for the others and get the fuck out of here."

"She trusted me." I understood the wounded sound in his voice. Her trust was a hell of a thing, and it wasn't cheap.

"Get up, Wallace." I killed the kindness in my voice, opting to deal with him as a subordinate. That way, I could bear the mental weight of motivation for him. I filled my voice with the alpha command. "Now, wolf."



His eyes slowly lifted up to me. It didn't work. Kadeem was on my level as an alpha. He could have been the alpha of his own team. The only reason he was still with me was that he didn't trust anyone else to watch my back.

"Get up, Bubba. You know I'm not going to let you give up." I put my best friend hat on instead. "Don't make me drag your ass through this forsaken forest. It'll make me throw my shoulder out."

"I landed on my back trying to cushion the blow for her when the parachute failed." He said.

"You can obviously move, so do it." If he wasn't a wolf, he'd be dead or paralyzed. A lesser alpha would be laying waiting for death to take him. He growled in pain as he struggled to his feet. He wouldn't let Kylie go, so I grabbed his burned bicep and hauled him to his feet.

Astria cleared the trees and her eyes fell to the body in his arms. Just like that, Kadeem kneeled back down. "I'm sorry, my lady. I failed to complete my task."

Her steps slowed and the last glimmer of hope faded from her eyes. But I could tell she'd already thought Kylie was dead. That was why she ran so slow, she didn't want to find the outcome.

She took Kylie from his arms, and tears fell down her cheeks. "I'm sure you did everything you could."

The agony in her voice ripped at me. My celestial was grievously injured, and there wasn't a damn thing I could do to fix it. I wouldn't be able to fix either of them.

She turned to head back to where we left the other two, cradling Kylie to her chest.

“My lady, take your pound of flesh.”

She didn't pay him any mind and kept walking. Shuffling her feet, barely enough strength left to trek off.

I put my hand out to help him back to his feet again and put his arm over my shoulder. We started on our way back. We'd lost men. But we'd never been in a position to lose an omega before.

“I knew she wouldn't punish me,” he whispered as he watched her back.

Back home, I'd seen wolves die for less. His death sentence would have been an example to the other wolves. The few celestials we managed to find would have their entire guard publicly tortured to make a point.

I knew he did everything he could. Even in her current state, she knew that, too. For him, I was sure the burden of her forgiveness was worse.

Living was always harder.

We found Rios struggling to breathe on the ground as Pierce came back. “I found all the bodies. No other survivors.” Eight men and one baby celestial witch were dead. Two more seriously injured. And not one person would ever be the same.

I did what I came to do, but this mission couldn't be called anything other than a loss.

“Keep going,” I told Kadeem.

“Yes, boss.” But it lacked any fire or motivation. He was just going through the motions. Astria kneeled on the ground again, clutching Kylie to her chest.

“I’ve never seen her cry.” Kadeem’s eyes never left her..

I didn’t tell him that when that plane exploded her screaming rattled me to my bones until I was paralyzed. That anger and darkness I’d never felt before pushed me and I was sure many others back to their feet to try to fight another round.

“How can we give her anything? The only thing she wanted was for that baby to be safe,” he asked.

“We get her the fuck out of here, before Nadine’s clean-up crew gets here and takes out the survivors.” We couldn’t handle another round. Especially not from a team of wolves that were fresh and working at full capacity.

I let Kadeem go next to a boulder and went over to her. “Astria.”

She didn’t move. Tears hit the dirt below her hung head.

“It’s not over yet.”

“Yes it is.”

My dead heart wrench on itself. “I have reason to believe we were all set up and if we were, there is going to be a team that follows up to make sure we all died.”

“Okay.” As far as she was concerned, she was already dead. She didn’t care.

I couldn’t drag both of them. Since she was capable of walking on her own, I needed to get her moving. “They want Wallace, Pierce, Rios, and me dead, too.”

That managed to get a little more life out of her.

“Wallace and Rios are hurt badly. We can’t handle another wave. We need that plane you talked about.”

She nodded and magic blew out of her. Kylie turned into a star. Stars flew to her from around the island, and I realized it was the dead. Her hands filled up fast and poured over onto the dirt.

Rios grunted as he dug in his pack and handed her a small velvet sack that made me think the men had snuck in some whiskey.

She opened it and stars flew into the pouch. She pulled the drawstrings closed and rose to her feet. “I’ll get you there.”

I didn’t like the sound of that.

But Kadeem and she would get on that plane if I had to force them kicking and screaming.

### Chapter twenty-one

Astria Zielle

I numbly lead the last of Dirus's team through the ruins of my home village. My boots squished with blood under them with every step. Some people were marred beyond recognition. My father was sure to be in some panic room hiding from the ramification of his actions. No doubt he had his hand in this.

But at the end of the day, this was all my fault. This was a ploy to get rid of me because I wouldn't comply or die.

My people were gone. All the women who'd gotten me through everything were nothing more than empty meat sacks now. At least their husbands and fathers couldn't hurt them any more.

As my heart twisted in pain, the dead bodies turned into stars and flew to me as I passed them. I collected all the stars in the pouch Lucero gave me as we passed. I wasn't sure why that was happening, but if I was given a choice, I wouldn't let them be buried here.

"Mommy!" a familiar voice screamed. "Wake up."

Elizabeth laid with lifeless eyes on the ground with her throat ripped out. Everlynn kneeled beside her dead body, covered in some kind of dust. Knowing Elizabeth, it was defense warding.

The costs kept piling up on my shoulders.

Everlynn tried to shake Elizabeth awake. “Mommy!”

I walked over to them and kneeled beside Everlynn. My best friend. My comrade.

I stared into her blue dead eyes. You always protected mine. I’ll look out for yours.

“Everlynn,” I said. Everlynn’s eyes were so much like her mother’s, it made me sick to my stomach. “We need to leave. Something is going to finish off the survivors. If you stay, you won’t make it.”

“Mommy!” Her sob was another crack at my already fragile state of mind.

If I left Everlynn behind, Elizabeth would never forgive me. And I owed her too fucking much to let that happen.

With a steadying breath, I grabbed the child and picked her up.

“No! Mommy! Mommy!” she shrieked while I carried her as she tried to flail out of my hold.

“It’s going to be okay.” I was such a liar. Even I didn’t believe me. How could I ever expect her to?

I rubbed her back in a way that soothed Kylie, but it had no impact on her. She fought and screamed just as hard, if not harder. She was so much larger than Kylie. I struggled to handle her thrashing weight.

I wasn’t her mother. She wasn’t my daughter. When I held Kylie, it was as natural as breathing. But we weren’t bonded to each other like that, not that I would let that stop

me.

“Do you want me to carry her?” Dirus asked me after about a mile of her fighting me.

He reached out as if to take her, and her screaming turned into a shriek of terror. Now she clung to me, eyeing Dirus like one would a wild animal. I waved him off, and she finally settled into me without fighting.

Regressing to her training, don't get the men's attention.

We went into a clearing where my husband's plane was. “Nikolai uses it for supply runs to the mainland.”

“She looks like a damn dream.” Pierce threw his fist up. I guess it was a small victory if you hadn't lost everything.

They opened up the door, and we boarded. I sat Everlynn on the bench, ready to do what I needed to help get the plane moving.

“It's got just enough gas to hit Central America to one of our drop spots. Perfect,” Dirus gave commands to Pierce. They hit some buttons, and the plane whirred to life. I'd never actually been on this thing before.

Kadeem groaned as he sat at the second set of controls. He growled in pain, but rattled off things that didn't make sense to me. I didn't think I could help there, but Lucero laid on the sitting bench across from me, watching me with sad eyes. There were more bullets in his body than should have been possible.

“He needs tending to,” I told Everlynn. She blinked as if she was taking in her surroundings for the first time. She gasped at Lucero's condition and hopped up to grab the first aid kit mounted on the wall.

“Forceps?” she asked. I handed them to her, and she pulled out bullets with an efficiency that I would never be able to do.

“Her mother was the village healer. She’s young, but she’ll get the job done,” I told him. Hell, Elizabeth would have died weeks ago if it wasn’t for Everlynn.

“Don’t worry about stitches.” He winced. “If the bullets are out, I’ll heal.”

“You can’t lose any more blood,” Everlynn disagreed quietly. I threaded the stitch needle like Elizabeth taught me. She was dead, but she was still saving people’s asses. Wasn’t that just like her?

That thought halted me in my tracks. Pain wracked through me at the very thought.

“Alcohol?” Everlynn’s voice broke me out of my train of thought and got me moving again.

Everlynn moved like a pro. Ten bullets were removed and sutured before we were fully in the sky. A giant explosion shook the plane. I stood to find the island collapsing on itself in a giant blaze.

It was incredible that such a big place was so suffocating. It was more amazing to watch it leaving existence as if it never destroyed countless lives. I noticed a cloud behaving strangely. Like it was imploding, too. “Dirus, do you see the clouds?”

“They destroyed the pocket. Hang on to something. It’s going to get rough,” Dirus answered.

The plane took a harsh turn and tossed me on top of Lucero. He grabbed the seat with one arm and wrapped the other around me when we took a nosedive.



I barely got my fingers on the back of Everlynn's shirt, keeping her from flying across the plane.

"We've gotta even out," Dirus growled.

"The air pressure changed," Kadeem answered with a groan of pain.

The growling crescendoed. "Still have to even out, dumbass."

"Pull up, genius."

"Fuck you."

Both men suddenly laughed, and for whatever reason, that calmed my racing heartbeat.

"Don't mind them ladies, they are always like that." Pierce smiled from where he was strapped in to the bench across the way. "They should have gotten married years ago."

My grip on Everlynn was slipping. "Grab me."

The plane jerked and shivered. The metal groaned. Maybe a plane wasn't a great idea. It wasn't the last time.

Everlynn grabbed my arm with both hands and screamed when we bounced. The horror in her eyes made me steel my nerves. "Don't let me go, Astria."

"I've got you. Always." I had no business making that promise, but it was too late to take it back.

Just when I was sure we'd crash into oblivion, we ripped through something in the sky. It reminded me of a film over pond water when you toss a rock through it. A red cover of magic keeping things in. Once the body of the plane was clear, it evened out.

"Free and clear. For now," Dirus yelled.

"I'm sorry." I climbed off of Lucero. Everlynn went right back to what she was doing.

"The man that's burned needs to be scrubbed," Everlynn told me. "I assume he heals fast, but we don't need bacteria making a home in the open wounds."

I went to the front where the men were. Kadeem stared ahead and didn't turn to look at me. "Everlynn says she needs to scrub you down to avoid infection."

"I'm fine," he grunted.

"There's debris in your wounds." I pulled a twig out of his shoulder to make my point.

"Let the kid do her work," Dirus told him.

"Fine." He scoffed. "The kid can come here then. I've got to co-pilot this plane."

Dirus cut Kadeem a glare, but Kadeem ignored that too.

First, get the guys fixed up.

Second, take care of Everlynn.

Keep going, stupid bitch. You made this mess, now clean it up.

This wasn't the happily ever after I fought for.

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:45 am*

“You’ll stay in my bedroom,” I told her, flipping the lights on. She didn’t acknowledge anything I said. She stopped being responsive in Costa Rica. I guided her to lie on my bed, and she followed my lead. “Do you need anything?”

Tears pooled in her eyes and fell down her face. At least it was something, I guess. Enough to let me know she was still in there. I wiped the tears away and tried to ignore the way it ripped at my own sense of wellbeing.

I kissed her forehead and left, then headed to the living room, unwilling to watch her agony any further. I rubbed my eyes, and when I opened them, there wasn’t anything better in the living room.

Kadeem was covered in bandages that were still seeping blood. He should have healed by now. Those burns were deep.

He stared into my bedroom with a serious expression as he toyed with a gold chain in his hands. I left the safe house, needing the fresh air. Anger that had been trained out of me welled in my chest.

You’re the alpha. They need you to hold them together.

No. They needed the conniving fuckers who did this to pay.

No, you can’t leave them vulnerable. Stay calm.

They won’t be vulnerable if there is nothing threatening them anymore.

Shit, what was this? It was like being an alpha times a thousand. The intense protective instinct was smothering all my training and strangling common sense. I punched the concrete wall as I walked past, hoping the pain of my knuckles breaking would slice through the insanity quickly building.

Protect your pack.

Protect your pack.

Even when the instincts agreed, they were at odds with each other.

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I stomped through the perfect marble halls of the celestial villa, taking a straight shot to the main den. The rage I'd held together finally seeped through my control. Death and destruction itched under my skin.

I needed to take action. No one was allowed to think they could send my team to their deaths. No one could almost kill my best friend and hurt his kind heart. No one could shatter my omega like that and get away with it.

Nadine 'the golden' would no longer think she was immune to the blowback from her actions. I didn't give any fucks about why she did what she did. It didn't matter.

A snarl ripped through my chest as I took a corner. The giant gold door of her den was guarded by two wolves. She was so arrogant to think no one would come after her. How long had this bitch gotten away with this shit? How many centuries?

Not any more.

The two wolves waved at me. "Hey there, Morales."

“She’s expecting my report,” I lied.

They opened the door, not questioning my presence, but when I stepped through, the perfect pristine woman sitting at the end of the table turned whiter than a ghost. Her golden eyes, that were so much like Astria’s, went wide. Her bright blonde hair bounced around her as she jerked in her chair.

I ignored the five alphas sitting in their chairs around her. She craved my attention so much, but I never pandered to her like the others. Now she had it. I only had eyes for her.

The door behind me closed, but I stayed locked in our staring contest. The tremble on her lips told me she understood the shit she was in.

She gave a sweet, bubbly laugh, but couldn’t hide the discomfort in her voice. “There is my favorite—”

“Save the bullshit, Nadine.”

“Lower Alpha Morales, watch your tongue and kneel,” a higher Alpha, her right-hand man, Charles Swanson, commanded. But his dominance was nothing. It meant nothing to me. It hadn’t been like that before I left.

Probably because I wasn’t Nadine’s lower alpha anymore. I was a high alpha for Astria. I stared C. Swanson in the eyes as I stepped forward, wanting him to know exactly how little his command affected me.

Recognition filled Nadine’s eyes, and she jumped back. “Stay there.”

“I’m going to rip your fucking trachea out, you selfish bitch.” Before I could take another step, one of my alphas jumped into action.

Ji Kim was one of the most powerful wolves I ever met, and he'd been the one who taught me how to be the man I became. I'd hoped he wouldn't be here, but I was also mentally ready to tear right through him if I needed to. Anything for her.

Amazing how a few days ago I would have never seen myself doing any of this. She woke up something inside me that was ready to scorch the earth in her name.

Kim snarled, putting his full force as an alpha behind it. It rattled me, but I wasn't sure how much of that was my faith and respect in him and what was his dominance. It might have slowed me down, but it didn't stop me.

I wasn't going to fight him. I'd lose. I had no intention of losing anymore. There was no way to beat an alpha who had two millennia of experience and taught me everything I knew. So I shifted and leaped around him. Jumping on the table and running right for her.

She screamed and fell back onto the ground when she failed to scramble away. Good. She should know the terror my celestial knew.

"Sit down," the command was familiar and there was no fighting it. I laid down in submission before my legs stopped running, so I slid across the floor on the table. Raj Ahmed came into view with disappointment in his eyes, and it was like being a cock happy pup again, fucking up.

That pointed look put some sanity back on me, and I realized what I was doing. If I died, Astria would be left wide open and vulnerable. Even if I killed Nadine, I wasn't getting out of here. I'd be killed by the thousands of wolves who worshiped her. What was I thinking?

"Don't move, Dirus," Ahmed told me. His brown eyes seared me, and I averted my gaze. I earned every ounce of his disappointment.

“He threatened our omega,” C. Swanson yelled. “Put that mutt down. Now.”

Ahmed and Kim stared at each other, an entire conversation happening, and I knew they would get me out of this mess I let my impulses get me into. I wouldn’t get out of this based on my skill or merit. No. My daddies were going to make this disappear.

Fuck. I really was acting like a pup.

“That’s a bit rash, don’t you think?” Ahmed said in that calm voice he used when he was about to slick talk his way out of something. “The pup is clearly in distress.”

“When was his last psych evaluation?” Kim asked, but he didn’t wait for an answer. He gave a haughty grin to Swanson. “Oh, that’s right. You overrode my rule about requiring them after every mission. So it’s been a year.”

“That was unwise,” Ahmed casually agreed, scratching at his beard as if he were thinking it over.

“When I had full control of our soldier’s schedules, nothing like this happened.” Leave it to Kim to find a way to squeeze in an ‘I told you so.’ “You had me dispatch him on five back-to-back missions, one of which was six months long, with no break or evaluation. Now one of our best alphas has snapped under the pressure of his responsibilities.”

“You’re saying this is my fault?” Swanson snarled.

“Of course, you moron,” Kim snorted.

Ahmed chuckled to slice through the tension. “Now, gentlemen. Pointing fingers at each other won’t help this poor pup.”

Fuck me. Poor pup. I snorted and went limp on the table. Whatever. If I could make it



back to my celestial and regroup, I had to go with it.

Ahmed shot me an icy glare that said to shut up and play nice.

“Explain yourself, alpha,” a different high alpha said, obviously biting on what Kim and Ahmed were putting down.

My eyes found Nadine creeping close and glaring at me with those hateful eyes of hers. The warning was clear. Don’t say a fucking thing about the celestial.

I shifted and turned to press my forehead to the table. If I mentioned her, they would have to protect her. But they’d ‘protected’ the others, and they all died. This pack was still Nadine’s, it was her people. Kadeem was right. She didn’t need to be here.

They didn’t even need to know she existed. Maybe that would also keep Nadine at bay, too. Ahmed was a perfect example of playing the game. He played the loyal high alpha, but he also hated her. Maybe it was time to take another page from his play book.

“I lost most of my team,” I admitted. “I need to cool off and think.”

All of that was true, at least. Maybe I’d score some points for honesty.

“Wallace?” Kim asked with a thread of worry in his voice.

“Alive,” I answered. “Barely.”

“We need the debrief,” Nadine spoke up.

“Not now,” Kim told her. “He’s got to get his head on straight before he can tell us what happened. Get up, pup, I’ll take you home.”

He tapped my head, and I leaned back to make sure the alpha that put me belly down in the first place approved. Ahmed nodded his chin, and I jumped to my feet. The other alphas crowded around Nadine.

“Don’t worry. She gets to live another day.” At least until I could find a way to kill her, that wouldn’t kill me or my celestial in the process. Maybe if I brought Astria the tongue and hands that were responsible for this mess, I could see a little life back in my Starshine’s eyes.

“Stop talking,” Kim growled under his breath, and grabbed the back of my neck, like he’d done so many times before. Granted, it’s been a long time since he needed to. “Act like you have some fucking sense. I taught you better than this. Stupid, pup.”

“I expect to see you later.” Nadine sneered at me. Easy to do when you had a bunch of wolves protecting you. She wasn’t so fucking ballsy when I barreled in here. She would never be half the omega Astria was.

“I don’t take my orders from you anymore, Nadine.” I walked toward the door. “Don’t worry, we aren’t done yet. I’ll be back for you.”

This was far from over.

“One more veiled threat and I will shoot you between the eyes. Do you understand me, pup?” Kim snarled.

I’m sure it sounded like he was taking Nadine’s side, but I knew Kim. He said it and he meant it. But not the way the other alphas thought. He’d do it as a mercy, so the others couldn’t make an example out of me.

“Yes, Sir.”

At least until things shifted in my favor.

To be continued...