



BENEATH THE SILENT STARS

MIRANDA L.

THE CELESTIAL COURT SERIES

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SILENT STARS

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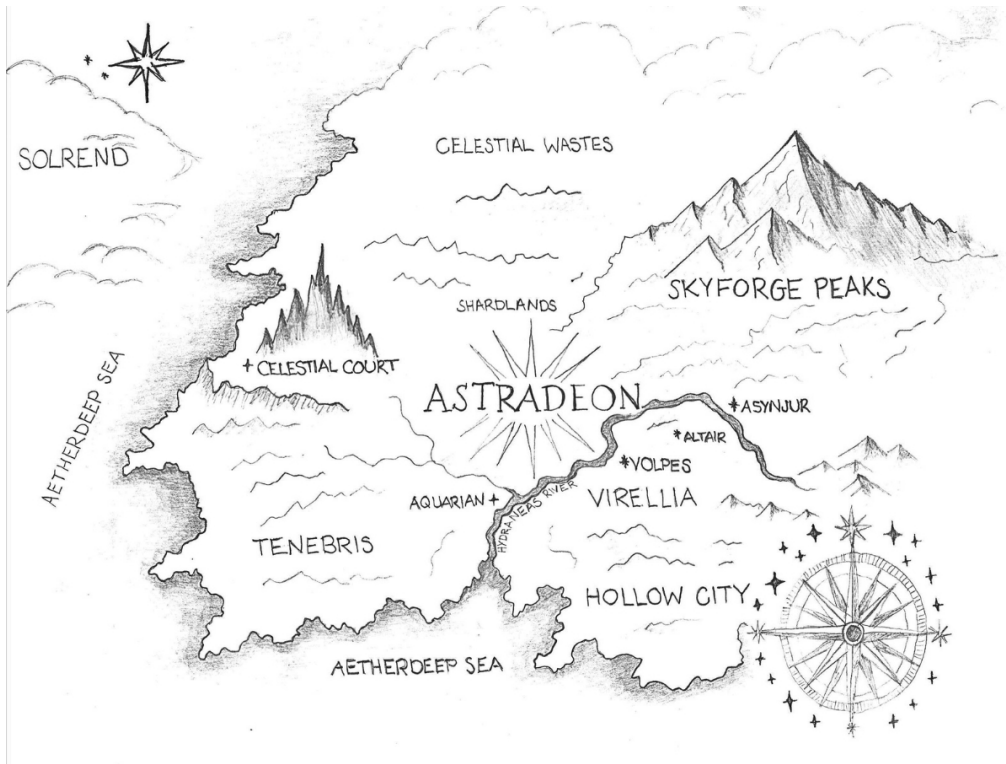
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For the ones who feared they were never enough. The ones who bore crowns of duty and bent beneath the weight of perfection, yet never broke. For the ones who never stopped burning even when the night was darkest.

May you find *starlight* here.



PROLOGUE

HELL MIGHT LACK THE FURY of a woman scorned, but its keeper had vengeance to spare. Too long had he waited for justice. Too long had he held his shadows at bay as the cosmos kept turning, while the realm below cycled through generations without even a pause to grieve the absence of Unity—of her.

He would wait no longer.

Black wisps curled around his fingers, inching up his arms as he walked down the golden hallways, threatening to consume the obscene opulence with his wrath. His black cloak billowed behind his steps as he marched to the gold double doors ahead. There was shouting from the other side, muffled but clearly agitated. Narrowing his gaze at the armed guards on either side, he coaxed more shadows to his side, blocking out the light from the walls and plunging them in gray darkness.

“If you value your meager existence, I suggest you open the doors,” he growled, encircling their necks with shadowy hands, threatening to snuff them out of existence.

One of the guards swallowed beneath the shadows, gasping as he struggled to breathe. Loosening his dark grip slightly, the guard coughed and croaked as he spoke.

“Your Excellency, the Emyrean have already started the Council.”

“Then I suggest you open the doors with haste. I would hate to think you played a part in keeping a Constellation from such an important event,” he snarled, gradually pulling back the shadows, allowing the light to filter through and the guards to draw breath.

One guard fell to the ground, wheezing, while the other placed his golden gauntlet on the door. A light shimmered across the door at the guard’s touch followed by a soft clicking sound as the locking mechanism unraveled. Before the guard

could push the door open, a shadow lurched forward, shoving the doors aside and bursting into the massive circular room.

A woman shrieked as blackness seeped into the brilliant white, tainting the golden aura of the Constellations. In the center of the space was a circular glass table suspended in the air. All around the table were ornate chairs inlaid with gold, thirteen in total. One chair for each Constellation. A few Stars stood, clearly caught in the middle of a heated discussion, while others looked as though they had seen a ghost as he entered.

His steps echoed across the golden floor as he strode toward the table, his venomous gaze peering into the faces of each and every Star. He was met mostly with fear, but some dared to show disgust or disdain. Only one face was missing—the only face that mattered. He slunk to his seat, sinking down slowly onto the cushion, but his eyes lingered on the empty chair as his thoughts teetered between fury and despair.

“Ahh, Sceptra. So pleased you could join us,” a sultry voice sang across the table, directed at the shadowy figure.

The few Stars who had been standing lowered themselves into their chairs, muttering under their breath.

“It would appear, brother, that my invitation to this Council was overlooked,” Sceptra replied, allowing more of his wisps to slither along the top of the table, eliciting grumbles from the Star on his right, Eros. “I should hope it was an oversight, rather than intentional.

Leo smiled in return, resting his hands on the arms of his chair. His gold-plated armor glistened in the sunlight, as did his golden hair that fell below his shoulders. The white cloak that typically shrouded his head was pulled down, revealing the shimmering golden star marked on his forehead—a proud display of his self-elected role to maintain order over all the cosmos.

Control disguised as order.

Sceptra gritted his teeth, the sight of his brother only fueling the flames of his anger.

“Of course, a mistake. I shall have the guard reprimanded for his negligence.” Leo spoke firmly, but the duplicitous smile never left his mouth.

“By all means, do not stop the Council on my account.” Sceptra waved a hand nonchalantly, leaning back into the chair as he calmed his nerves. He had waited a century for this moment, had planted many seeds of doubt over the years to finally break the trance his brother had over the fools surrounding him. He would not ruin it with his temper, no matter how justified.

Leo paused, nodding then gesturing toward the entire Empyrean. “We were just discussing the separations of the realms.”

“You mean the divisions!” the burly man next to Sceptra bellowed, slamming a fist the size of Sceptra’s head down on the table. The table shook, but did not break, despite the force.

“Constantia?” Leo’s brow raised, eyeing the Star, a clear look of disapproval on his face.

“You heard me. The humans call you ‘Balance,’ but all I see is your way of controlling the realm. Your *plan* divides us all!” Constantia spat, leaning forward in his chair, his knuckles white from clenching his fists.

“I agree with Constantia,” another voice boomed across the table, strong and commanding. A younger Star with short blazing white hair and silver eyes straightened in his seat, a sense of calm assuredness on his face.

“Lupus? You wish to share your sentiments with the Empyrean?” Leo narrowed his eyes on the Star, the smile wiped from his face.

“My sentiments are not merely my own, Leo. Most in this Council agree—you are stretching the confines of your supposed order.” Lupus glared back at him, with a confidence Sceptra wished more of the Stars could possess. No wonder the realms gave him the name of Power.

“You dare contest my motives? I am the Star of Balance.” Leo turned his head to address the entire Empyrean as he

spoke, clinging to the deception. “I bring order and harmony to the chaos of the cosmos. When there is a pull, I push. I am simply pushing for more simplicity, to keep the realms at peace.”

“You go too far,” a woman with silver hair braided down her back replied before Lupus could argue. Her eyes glistened with stardust, pale white in the golden glow of the room. “Chaos begets growth. Creates a will for the cosmos to keep spinning. It gives creation the motivation to seek harmony. Without it, there is no will to build or change.”

“My esteemed Sophia, even your wisdom must see that my greatest wish is to give the realms the strongest chance of peace and prosperity.” Leo softened his voice, playing on the hearts of the weaker Stars. “By separating parts of the realm for each of your Starborne and stewards, it eliminates feuds and wars and death.”

“It also eliminates choice and cohesion. Without choice, there is no will to live,” Ira growled at Leo, flames licking his hands and his yellow orange eyes blazing with heat.

Sceptra smirked, relishing in the rebuttal. Ira was his closest friend and had been there in his despair, as he grieved the only one who truly understood him—the one who had seen the soul beneath the shroud of death.

“It is for their own good!” Leo shouted, his chair toppling over as he stood. Gold sparks of light danced around his hands and feet, crackling across the glass table. “This is for order. I *will* have order.” His face was fuming now, staring down the Stars, daring them to challenge him.

“No,” Sceptra replied, his voice only slightly louder than a whisper, yet the entire room stilled.

“No? You who relish in death? Of course you would choose chaos. It only brings you more bodies to Solrend,” Leo spat, clenching the edge of the table as he stared at Sceptra.

“I do not rejoice at death, brother. Unlike you, I believe in choice as I also believe in justice. And, unlike you, I do not manipulate my duties to the realm to suit my wants. I was

charged with shepherding the dead, so I do.” Shadows curled around his hands as he answered, his voice placid despite the growing hatred inside him.

“Justice? You mock me, brother. I am the embodiment of justice, for justice creates balance.” Leo smiles again, puffing out his chest.

“Like the justice you so graciously bestowed on Cordia?” Sceptra rose from his chair, no longer able to fight back his wrath. His hands shook with anger, shadows pouring from his palms, enveloping him in darkness.

“That is *not* the same!” Leo shouted, control slipping from his voice.

“No? Then tell me, oh Star of Balance, what judgment did you cast on her killer? Her own steward who betrayed her?” Sceptra’s voice rose with every word, shadows billowing around his feet and crashing around the chairs of the Stars next to him.

Constantia rose as well, looking at Sceptra and back at Leo, bewildered.

“What does he mean?”

The soft melodious voice cut through the heated argument as a painfully beautiful figure dressed in navy robes rose from her chair, her body quivering as she looked at Leo.

Before he could reply, Sceptra answered first, “Tell her. Tell Andromeda how her beloved sister died and how you did nothing to avenge her.”

“No, please. Leo. Tell me this isn’t true?” Andromeda’s voice cracked as tears welled in her eyes.

“She went against my command! She wasn’t supposed to be there!” Leo yelled, golden light arching from his hands and his hair.

“What do you mean?” Sceptra paled as he stared at Leo, his heartbeat quickening. The shadows continued to creep along the room, slivers of black slithering over the windows and dulling the golden room.

“I... I...” Leo stuttered, his eyes widening.

“Answer me!” Sceptra shouted, feeling his eyes turning their devilish red as more shadows filled the air.

“I sent the Leviathan,” Leo blurted out. “It was me. I sent her steward to destroy the ships. The mortal ships were straying too close to Solrend. She did not know I sent it, and she went anyway. To save them. To save the pathetic mortals. It is her fault. If she had only listened to me, understood the necessity of control, she would not have been destroyed.”

Leo’s eyes darted between the Emyrean, seeking vindication.

But all that met him were the stares of disbelief and malice.

“You...you killed her,” Sceptra muttered in shock.

“It was not my fault. I was doing it for the good of—”

Leo’s words were cut short as shadows burst from Sceptra and ensnared the Star of Balance. Long tendrils of blackness blasted through the chairs and shattered the table, glass flying in all directions. The thick wisps latched around the golden-armored figure, curling around his entire body until only his face was visible.

The other Stars scattered backward, some screaming as they fled.

Sceptra could faintly hear Ira yelling at him to stop, but that was simply not an option.

Not now.

More waves of shadow erupted from his core, flooding the entire room until there was barely any starlight left. Leo gasped, choking as tendrils wrapped around his neck, cutting off any more worthless excuses. The guards outside the Council chamber pounded on the door in a feeble attempt to break through the shadows, but it was no use.

Sceptra’s feet crunched over broken glass as he stepped in front of Leo. The golden Star’s eyes widened, fear glossing over his pupils. He struggled against the black constraints, trying to summon his golden light to no avail.

There was no amount of light that could fight off the darkness of a broken heart.

“You may not believe in justice, but I do,” Sceptra seethed, his voice low and sinister. Raising his voice, he looked around the room at the other Stars, none of whom had tried to intervene in his assault.

“Leo, Star of Balance, you have defiled your duty and position as an Empyrean, murdering a Star twice your worth. You will no longer sit as one of the Council.” Sceptra finished his decree and turned to face Leo, lowering his voice once more, fury dripping with every syllable. “Now you will learn why the mortals call me *Dominion*.”

And with a flick of Sceptra’s wrist, the Star of Balance exploded, stardust erupting from where the shadows engulfed him.

A loud *boom* echoed through the circular room, blasting the windows apart and throwing any remaining chairs across the room. The Stars shouted, covering their faces as stardust pelted them.

Sceptra breathed deeply, reeling in his shadows, but just as the last of the darkness dissipated, a rumble hummed beneath them.

The golden floors cracked, and the floor shattered beneath them, collapsing into a swirling dark hole and pulling the Stars out of the Empyrean. Screams were silenced as the destruction of Balance brought the cosmos to its knees and slowly devoured the deities.

And then, the Stars fell.

CHAPTER 1

Despite the conflicting texts surrounding Dominion's motives, there is no contest regarding the final devastating event. Without the intervention and martyrdom of Balance, the fallen Empyrean would have surely destroyed the realm, if not the cosmos.

THE SHATTERING: A HISTORY



THE CITY WAS A GRAVEYARD long before the Plague took hold. Astraia pulled her hood lower as she slipped through the narrow alley, the fabric damp with sweat, though dawn had barely broken. Even before the sun crested the rusted rooftops, heat rippled from the cobblestones, thick with the breath of too many bodies, too little hope.

The stench of rot came as no surprise to Astraia Solenne after five years spent in the back alleys and slums of Tenebris. It clung to the very city walls like a second skin. She choked back bile as the odor flooded her senses, dense and wet in the humid air.

Her boots echoed on the uneven stones, each step drawing her deeper into the slums' underbelly. The buildings leaned together like conspirators, their cracked stone facades weeping with moisture, shadowed windows dark and silent. Between them, scraps of cloth fluttered from broken frames—attempts at privacy where none could truly be found. These were not homes but holding pens for the dying. The thought made Astraia shudder.

Striding past several dilapidated merchant stalls and boarded shops, she gritted her teeth, fists clenched by her sides until her nails bit into her skin. Once a heart of trade and commerce, Tenebris had spiraled into chaos with the emergence of the Plague four years ago. When the regent King Maelrik took the black throne of the Celestial Court, he had disregarded the city

and its people as expendable chaff in the wind, letting nature take its damning course.

“Dominion take you,” she cursed under her breath.

Disease swept through the slums faster than the sun could rise. Poverty and crime soon followed, transforming the bustling city into a cesspool of debauchery and black-market deals. Astraia did what she could, but it was a drop of light in a sea of shadows. Physical healing could not mend the broken spirit of the city.

A child’s cough echoed ahead, sharp and brittle, and the bond stirred at her spine.

No. Not now.

She took several deep breaths, willing the flare to subside. The bond had grown restless these past weeks, more unpredictable with every pulse. It burned colder than it once had, but the flames were no less fierce.

Her eyes swept the alley ahead. The morning was quiet, save for the buzzing of flies and the distant clatter of carts in the market district beyond these walls. She cursed as her foot landed in a pool of something foul. Rain, maybe. Blood, more likely.

Several heads peeked out of covered doorways as she passed. Some of the older women placed a hand on their heart, then raised it skyward, thanking the silent Stars. The people of the slums knew her face, or at least her shadow. The girl in the navy cloak who came when the red marks appeared and chased away death.

Astraia nodded at the sign of respect toward her but internally scoffed at their ill-placed faith. She did not come for thanks. Astraia called Tenebris home, and she had no intention of abandoning the helpless. She came because no one else would and no one else cared to try. Especially not the Stars.

Lost in thought, she nearly passed the door. A rotting tarp, painted over with a bold red “X”, hung limply from the frame. The mark of death. No one would come here. No one but her.

Astraia was the only one at this end of the alley, but eyes watched her from other doorways—silent, hollowed faces. She adjusted her navy cloak tighter around her dark hair and took a deep breath before pulling the tarp aside.

Inside, the air was thick with death.

Astraia stepped into the dark, the tarp falling closed behind her. Sweet, cloying rot clung to her tongue, instantly drying her mouth. Instinct had her hand hovering near the dagger at her thigh, though she knew it would not be needed. Not for what waited here.

The room was small, no more than four paces wide. Shadows crouched in every corner, and the only sound was labored breathing. Someone still alive. Barely.

Her boots crunched on the dirt floor as she advanced

A shape stirred in the far corner.

“Who’s there?” Astraia called, her voice low, steady.

A small figure straightened from the shadows. A child.

“Please...please help me.” The voice was fragile, raw.

Astraia’s jaw clenched. She turned around, tugging the tarp aside just enough to let in a sliver of light. What she saw made her breath catch.

Two bodies lay on a cot against the wall—gray, still, and long past saving. Flies circled lazily, undisturbed. And in the corner, barely standing, was a girl no older than six, skin stretched thin over bone, eyes hollow with hunger and grief. The red marks of Plague bloomed across her face and arms, cruel and dark.

Slowly, the girl raised her head to meet Astraia’s eyes. Tears streaked through the dirt on her cheeks as she spoke.

“Please. Please help me,” she pleaded once more, panic in her eyes.

Astraia, staring back at the little girl, nodded, and motioned for her to come toward her. The girl hesitated, but stepped forward, her feet bare.

Astraira found a piece of rope on a small table and tied the tattered tarp back to allow some semblance of light into the room. When she turned back around, the girl was trembling, her head bowed.

“I—I don’t want to make you sick. I made my mama and papa sick, and now they’re gone,” the girl sobbed between breaths. “It’s all my fault they’re gone.”

Astraira knelt on the ground before her and gently tipped the child’s chin up to meet her gaze. “I am not afraid,” she reassured the girl, tucking a small strand of her hair behind her ear.

The girl’s eyes widened at her touch, no doubt worried the simple graze would transmit the deadly disease. But *she* was not concerned about death. He was her constant companion, pursuing her to no avail—her Sacrifice bond made sure his claws never sunk in too deep.

Astraira’s eyes softened as she gazed into the girl’s green eyes. Another set of emerald-green eyes flickered through her mind, and a sad smile curved her lips. She shook the memory away and spoke softly.

“It is not your fault. Now, I can help you—but you must promise me one thing first.”

The girl blinked through her tears and nodded.

Astraira locked eyes with her. “You must not speak to anyone about what you are about to see. Not one soul. If anyone asks about your parents, you tell them they died—and you fled before the Red Death reached you. Understand?”

Again, the girl nodded slowly.

“Good. Now, close your eyes.”

The child obeyed, squeezing her eyelids shut tightly.

Astraira flexed her fingers and took a slow, deep breath, doing her best to ignore the reek of rot in the air. She reached inward. It didn’t take long, seconds maybe, before she felt it – a tingling at the base of her neck, spreading warmth down her spine and through her limbs.

Astraiia closed her eyes and let the warmth consume her. She saw her favorite memory flicker to life in her mind, blurring the dank room around her.

She was sitting with Elion on the small hill overlooking the beach, staring at the Aetherdeep Sea as its waves lapped on the sand. The sea breeze blew through her hair and the sun warmed her pale skin.

“You are impossible,” she snapped, elbowing his muscular arm.

“Life would be incredibly boring for you if I was not.” He smiled, laughing as he dodged another elbow jab.

The hillside grew brighter until the light overtook the flashback, dissolving the image and searing it into the back of her eyes.

Anchoring herself to the memory, she let the warmth build in her fingertips until she could sense the light before she saw it. When she opened her eyes, her hands glowed a soft blue—her Sacrifice bond. It cut through the darkness of the room with ease, erasing the shadows in an instant. The light was as familiar as breathing, and still, it amazed her every time.

Heat gained momentum in her body, threatening to overtake her, but she tugged on that blissful memory that anchored her—the thin thread that prevented her from a full flare and burnout. The glow steadied to an even pulse from her palms as she placed her hands gently on either side of the child’s face.

The girl flinched at first, squeezing her eyes tighter, but relaxed as Astraiia’s warm hands remained. Astraiia coaxed the bond forward, her blessing and curse from Sacrifice—the Star of healing.

The fear melted from the girl’s face, and the dark circles under her eyes dissipated in seconds. Red marks of the plague faded as well, leaving behind not even a scar of what once afflicted her skin. Her bones filled out, skin flushed with health, lips tinged pink. Even the girl’s hair gained shine and luster in the few seconds Astraiia’s hands made contact with her skin.

Astraia pulled her hands away, tightening the inner tether. She placed the memory inside the box she kept only for him and pushed it down into the safe haven of her inner thoughts, separated from the whispers that fueled her nightmares. That even with her Starborne ability, she was still not enough—that she could not save the one person in the world who mattered.

As soon as the lid closed on the box and his smile faded, the light vanished. The room was plunged once again into darkness, except for the fragment of sunlight from the doorway.

Astraia pulled her hands away and rose to her feet.

“You may open your eyes now,” she whispered gently.

The girl’s lashes fluttered open. She looked at her arms, her legs, her feet. “I feel so much better. I’m warm. And the red spots...” She glanced down, eyes wide with a mixture of awe and fear. “They’re all gone!”

“Yes. You’re healed. But remember what I said—you must never speak of this. Ever. Do you understand?” Astraia’s voice was firm, echoing in the enclosed space.

The girl nodded fervently. “Yes. I understand.”

“Good. Now come with me. You mustn’t stay here. I’ll see to it your parents are honored—but this will no longer be your home.”

Astraia extended her hand and turned her back to the room.

The little girl gave her parents one final glance. No more tears fell from her eyes. She simply turned her face toward the doorway, then took Astraia’s hand, and together, they walked out of the hellscape.

CHAPTER 2

In the fifth year post-Shattering, the census of the remaining population was half of the recorded peoples pre-Shattering. Evidence suggests the initial impact on the Province of Stellasaltus – now Celestial Wastes – annihilated its people.

A PEOPLE'S CHRONICLES OF ASTRADEON



“ALRIGHT, GIRL, TIME TO PAY your dues.” The old woman smiled as she shuffled across the Moonbeam Tavern floor.

Astraia had come shortly after dawn to thank Delphi for helping the girl from the day before and to see what became of her. Astraia hadn't expected another smuggling shipment, but Delphi was a woman of opportunity. If she saw a good bet, she took it.

“Just tell me the child is okay first, old hag.” Astraia smirked at the old woman and took a sip of the tea Delphi had poured for her when she entered the tavern this morning.

“Ha! Old hag! You better watch your tone, girl, before I throw you to the dogs.” Delphi cackled, and as if summoned on cue, two giant dogs came around the corner to greet their master.

Delphi scratched their ears, and seeing Astraia, they plodded over to receive equal attention. Smiling, she gave both a healthy amount of ear-scratching and received licks on her hands in return.

“Oh, yes, we wouldn't want that, now would we?” Astraia rubbed the dogs' ears once more before looking back at Delphi.

“Useless mutts,” Delphi scoffed and returned to her position behind the counter. “The girl is fine. The Orionness family in

east Tenebris took her in. They lost their daughter two years ago and have been childless. She will be well cared for.”

“Good. Thank you, Delphi.” Astraia shifted on her bar stool as her shoulders relaxed. *At least the girl won't be in that cesspool anymore.*

“Yes, well, I need your particular set of skills, my dear, so it will not be for free.” Delphi eyed Astraia with one brow raised and rested her arm on the bar. The wood was worn from the years of serving ale to passing merchants and Astradeon soldiers who frequented the city. Being so close to the Celestial Court, castle guards also used the Moonbeam as a place of escape when not on patrol.

Astraia stared down the old woman. Delphi might be aged, but there was marked evidence of her beauty. Subtle curves of her dimples were still visible beneath minimal wrinkles. Her brown eyes sparkled with youth and adventure even now.

She bent over, grabbing a teacup, and her braided white hair fell over one shoulder.

“Fine. When and where?” Astraia sighed and rested her arms on the marred wooden bar.

Smiling, Delphi poured herself some tea. The twin daggers strapped to her trousers glistened in the sunlight as she moved—a subtle, yet effective, threat. “I’ll send you the details. But be ready within the next few days.”

“Stars, Delphi. Why do you have to be so cryptic?” Astraia moaned, finishing the last sip of her tea. “Thanks for the tea.”

Astraia pulled her navy cloak back over her head before sliding off the bar stool and heading toward the door. She heard a “humph” but did not look back as she closed the door behind her.

The Moonbeam Tavern sat nestled between a dry goods store and an apothecary shop. Being at the center of town provided an advantage of funneling all kinds of people into the tavern, making it the most frequented in Tenebris.

Although the sun had only just risen perhaps an hour ago, people were already bustling in the street either setting up

stalls or opening shops for the day. A few merchants were shouting about what wares they had for sale, while customers haggled prices.

She kept her head down as she entered the throng of townspeople on the street, careful to avoid bumping into anyone and to not get run over by an oncoming horse or carriage. Stealthily, she made her way down the street toward the slums, desperate to bury herself in her work away from prying eyes.

Just as she managed to sidestep an oncoming horse and carriage, an ear-piercing scream split the air.

Feet halted, and heads whipped from side to side.

Another scream had Astraia's hair standing on end as she forced her way through the crowd that was gathering a few yards from her in front of a bakery. Standing on her toes, she could see the door of the bakery was open, and two royal guards stood on either side of the door, forbidding anyone to enter.

Shoving past a man gaping at the commotion, Astraia was able to see more of the bakery entrance just as another guard exited the building, his hands grabbing the shirt of a younger man.

The guard threw him to the ground in front of the spectators. Astraia's breath hitched, recognizing the baker's son. Leolus was maybe nineteen and had helped his mother run the bakery after his father's death. The young man knelt on the ground as the guard behind him unrolled a scroll of parchment.

“By order of the King of Astradeon, King of the Celestial Court, His Royal Majesty King Maelrik.” The guard's voice boomed through the square, now eerily quiet except for the weeping of Leolus's mother, who now stood in the doorway, watching her son with horror on her face. “You, Leolus Pycles, are hereby arrested and shall stand trial for high treason against the Crown of Astradeon.” The guard rolled up his scroll, and produced manacles from beneath his cloak.

“No! Please! Not my son!” his mother screamed, desperately trying to break free of the two guards detaining her.

Leolus rose from the ground and looked at his mother, a small smile on his lips. “It’s okay.”

He turned calmly to face the guard before him, his stare filled with loathing.

Astraia’s pulse quickened. She recognized the implications of such a stare—all of which led to destruction.

He stretched his hands out in front of him, offering his hands for the guard’s shackles. The guard took a step toward him, shackles prepped for his arrest, when a pale blue light shimmered from Leolus’s fingertips.

Astraia whipped her gaze to his eyes to find them alight with a blue glow—just before the entire street flooded.

Water came rushing from all directions of the square, pulled from the fountains, rivers, alleyways, gutters, and wells. It moved in unnatural arcs through the air and wove its way through the buildings and crowd of people now screaming and retreating from the streets.

Astraia hurried to kneel behind an overturned cart as she watched the baker.

Leolus flicked his fingers, and with a simple turn of his wrist, carved the water into deadly whips and struck the main guard.

The guard was slammed into the side of the bakery, the windows shattering upon impact.

The remaining guards drew their swords, rushing Leolus with a battle cry—but he was ready.

Another slight turn of his palm, and the whips of water joined into a wave behind him. Both of his hands flexed, his palms facing his attackers, and the wave descended on them.

In a breath, the two guards had been knocked off their feet, and the wave pushed them further down the street. The guards

tried to stand against the wave, gasping for air, only to be knocked down once again.

Leolus forced the guards into the river next to the town, but just as he finished disposing of the two guards, the one remaining had crept up to Leolus and within seconds, slapped the shackles on his wrists.

The baker blinked rapidly, the blue glow of his eyes snuffed out. Water fell from the sky around them where it was just suspended mere seconds ago.

“Enough, Starborne!” the guard snarled, unsheathing his sword and pointing it at Leolus. “There is no use fighting me now. Those chains are meant for vermin like you.”

Staring down in disbelief at the chains now holding him and his bond prisoner, the baker hung his head in defeat. Astraia’s pulse quickened at the sight of the shackles. A way to dull Starborne abilities—a way to control the connection with the Constellations.

Panic flooded her mind, triggering tumultuous waves of uncertainty in her thoughts. She needed to get out of the square—or there would be more than one Starborne bond smothered. Cautiously, she retreated from her spot behind the wagon and made for the opposite side of the square as some people dared to reenter the flooded street. She passed in front of a building when she felt it.

The familiar warmth that tingled in her spine. The bond was warning her.

She came to the alleyway between two shops, and in a split second, she whirled on her pursuer, pinning them to the alley wall. Her dagger pressed to his throat before he had the chance to speak.

He did not flinch. Did not blink. The man before her stood still, a wall of calm wrapped in shadow and a composed smile on his face.

His skin was sun-warmed bronze like his hair, which was pulled back into a knot. His jaw sharp beneath the rough

stubble of a few days' travel. He smelled of smoke and pine, like he belonged to the wild more than the city.

But it was his eyes that caught her breath in her throat. Amber. Not just golden. Not soft. Molten. They watched her—not with fear, but with a quiet calculation that made her pulse stumble.

“Bold of you,” he murmured, voice low and rough. His breath warmed her wrist. “Holding a blade to a stranger before introductions.”

She tightened her grip. “Bold of you, following me.”

“Would you believe I was passing through?” He smirked, which only inflamed Astraia's anger into pure rage.

She gritted her teeth, and her bond begged to be untethered, to overtake her, but she yanked on its leash and quieted the rebellion raging inside her.

“No,” she snarled.

The corner of his mouth tugged again—not quite a smile. Something else. Amusement, maybe. Or challenge.

Who was this? Not a Celestial Guard. Not with that ease, that stillness, like he had seen a thousand blades, and none had touched him. But not harmless either.

“Then you're smarter than I thought,” he said.

“Who are you, and why are you following me?” she growled, pressing the tip of her blade until it broke skin, a drop of blood rolling down his neck.

“Let's just say your days of healing in the slums are numbered, *Starborne*.”

Her stomach dropped, panic washing over her as she stared at her attacker. “What did you say?”

“You heard me. And I'm not the only one looking to cash in on your capture.” His eyes darkened.

Footsteps behind her made her shoulders tense, and her eyes flicked to the entrance to the alleyway, heart pounding.

That one moment of hesitation cost her.

Suddenly, the stranger grabbed her arm holding her dagger and twisted it behind her back. He stood behind her, pinning her back to his chest.

“Now who’s the bold one?” Astraia seethed, struggling to break free from his hold.

“I’m not one for standing on ceremony.” His voice was low and close to her ear. The hair on her neck stood up at the sound, and she forcefully stopped a shiver that threatened to run down her body. “Now what are the chances you’ll walk out of this alley without a fuss, like a good little girl?”

“Slim,” Astraia said defiantly. There was no way she would allow him the satisfaction of besting her. She had already resolved to haunt his every waking moment. She needed to know why he was hunting her and what had sent him—then she would send him to Dominion with a flick of her blade.

“Hm. I thought as much. So it appears we are at an impasse.” Astraia could practically hear the sarcasm dripping from his tongue.

“It would appear so,” she bit back.

He was strong, but if she dove into her bond, she could flare enough to subdue him. It was risky in broad daylight, but she was used to hiding secrets in the gloom of the alleyways.

Before he could say anything else, a figure appeared at the entrance to the alley, several feet from them.

“Traia, is that you?” Delphi, in all her splendid glory, stood in the dark alleyway with dual daggers drawn in her hands. Behind her were two Celestial Guards, armed with swords.

She opened her mouth to yell out for help, but before she could form the words, she was hurtling towards the ground. She just had time to stretch out her hands, letting her palms take the brunt of the impact and slow her fall just enough to stop her face from slamming into the cobblestone.

She jumped up as soon as she landed and spun around to face her opponent—but all she found was shadow. Her

attacker had vanished into thin air.

Her dagger right along with him.

“Stars, girl, what happened?” Delphi poured Astraia a glass of whiskey. It was a little early for liquor, but after the chaos of the morning, she welcomed the burn down her throat and the warmth it provided.

“I have no idea, Delphi. But I think I’m being hunted.” Her gaze fell to the empty glass in her hand. She had almost lost control of the bond during the confrontation. It had never been so bold before, and that frightened her.

Delphi eyed her, her brow raised in suspicion. The old woman had never asked of her past, never probed as to why she ended up in Tenebris. Just as Astraia never questioned her mysterious smuggling business.

“Well, you need to watch yourself, Traia. He could still be in the city.”

“I can take care of myself, Delphi.” Astraia instinctually reached for her dagger, its absence from her thigh noticeable. It left her feeling vulnerable, an extension of her body cut off. Elion had gifted her the dagger when she turned eighteen. The idea of that bounty hunter holding it in his filthy hands made her stomach sour.

“Not from where I stood today, girl. Thank the Stars I showed up when I did and thought to grab two Guards when I heard a ruckus in the alley. You’d have gone to Solrend if I hadn’t.” Delphi touched a hand to her heart and lifted it to the sky, an act of thanks to the Stars.

Astraia tried not to roll her eyes at the sign of honor. Delphi believed the Stars were still attentive, alive, listening. But the skies were silent. The constellations did not answer. Not anymore.

“I had the situation under control. But thank you.” Astraia nodded toward Delphi and stood up to leave, tugging her cloak to cover her head once more.

I'll get it back, with or without the Stars.

“Hmm. Well, take the day off. I don’t need your help with deliveries today,” Delphi replied, “But be careful. You still owe me.”

“Noted.” Astraia slipped out the door.

She scanned her surroundings. The hunter was nowhere in sight, but an eerie coolness crept up her spine, as though a million eyes were watching her every step.

It took half the time as usual to reach her apartment. A bead of sweat rolled down her temple, but not from the heat. She was walking around a dangerous city, unarmed, with a bounty hunter stalking her—unsettled was an understatement.

Nervously, Astraia shoved her hands in her pockets to try to subdue the anxiety that threatened to cloud her mind, only to find something crumpled in her pocket. Astraia stopped mid-stride and pulled out the small piece of paper. Unfolding it, she found only three words scribbled in ink.

Dawn. Starfell Woods. It was in Delphi’s handwriting.

“A few hours? Really, Delphi?” Astraia muttered to herself as she scrunched up the paper in her fist and held tight until she could burn it. Delphi was shrewd, but Astraia could not be too careful covering her tracks.

Rest from the day would have to wait. She needed a few hours to prepare for the journey to the River Hydraneas, including preparing her horse and provisions. It was a two-day ride there and back on side roads that were not well traveled. They would need to avoid the main road to prevent unnecessary questions and any searches from the Celestial Guard. Those were the terms Delphi set, and Astraia never questioned them.

Resuming her trek down the street, she turned toward the stables near her apartment to secure her horse when she saw it. Plastered on the wall next to her was a large piece of parchment paper with the royal seal affixed at the top.

By order of the King of Astradeon, King of the Celestial Court, His Royal Majesty King Maelrik. Any whereabouts of Starborne are to be reported to the Celestial Court for acts of high treason to the Crown. The Starborne are a danger to the entire kingdom and the future of the realm of Astradeon. A reward of great value will be granted to anyone who brings in a Starborne alive to the Celestial Court. Long live the King.

Astraia swore under her breath. This was why Leolus had been arrested and why the bounty hunter had followed her today. An influx of bounty hunters hungry for their share of the reward would mean not only precarious living in Tenebris, but also increased presence on the roads in and out of the city. An unwanted presence that would surely cause obstacles on her journey to the river.

She ripped the parchment from the wall and crumpled it in her hands. She would add this to Delphi's note to burn tonight.

CHAPTER 3

Oh, but to marvel at the brilliance. To cast a plea into the heavens, with intrepid certainty. To cling to the echoing of wisdom. To assuredly bask in the blanket of fate. Oh, but to wish for such a time as this. To witness unshakable brilliance in the void.

STARLESS NIGHT



DAWN SEEMED TO TAKE A millennia to appear as Astraia waited on the outskirts of Tenebris, the main pathway leading into the Starfell Woods to her right. The morning fog had settled on the woods, making it even more ominous than the stories surrounding it. It was said that after the Shattering, many of the mythical stewards of the Constellations were cursed to their beast forms and roamed the Starfell Woods. Vicious bears and wolves lurked in the shadows, their humanity completely forgotten, ready to spring on any unsuspecting travelers.

Astraia's horse, a black stallion, paced nervously at the forest's edge. Even he was wary of the tightly packed trees and the shadows that drifted between the branches.

"Shhh, Orion. It's okay, boy." She stroked his head. He had traveled into the woods before on one of Delphi's shipment details, but it did not make the woods any less unpleasant.

She tugged her navy cloak tighter around her with a shiver. She had barely slept last night. For once, she did not dream, but the anxiety of being found again by the amber-eyed bounty hunter tormented her thoughts.

Her ears pricked when a new noise emerged in the distance. A second set of horse hooves broke the silence around her as they trotted up the path from the city, toward Astraia. She removed her bow strapped to her back, nocked an arrow, and aimed for the trail.

The bow was her ideal weapon. She spent years honing her skill, at her father's behest. She had been gifted the bow along with her Celestial dagger on her eighteenth birthday, both works of art. Intricate star carvings adorned the bow. It was made of Starwood, a rarity that had only grown in what was now the Celestial Wastes. All the Starwood had been destroyed in the Shattering when the Stars collided with Astradeon, creating the Wastes and the Shardlands—a black desert devoid of life. The bow was truly the only one of its kind.

Her hand absently reached for her Celestial dagger, only to remember it was missing. The blade had been forged by the best swordsmith in Astradeon, using forbidden Starshard remnants mixed with steel, giving it a black sheen.

Sounds of the horse and what sounded like the wooden wheels of a carriage grew louder as they made their approach toward the forest. Astraia kept her gaze locked and her breathing slowed, controlled. She pulled her bow taut, feeling the bowstring strain under the pressure.

A brown horse appeared first through the trees that lined the road, a man seated on the buggy being pulled behind it. Behind him, two men on horseback kept an even pace. The lead horse drew closer, and Astraia could just make out the driver's face. She let out a sigh and lowered her bow.

“Yeer a tad skittish aren't ye, girl?” the man said loudly as he brought the horse to a stop in front of Astraia.

“Hello to you too, Val.” Astraia scowled and replaced her bow on her back. “You realize there's going to be even more bounty hunters in these woods with the king's new decree?”

“Eh. Ain't nothing we ain't dealt with before.” He shrugged and placed his pipe in his mouth to smoke.

“Yeah, well, you won't be the one fending them off, Val. Who are the lackeys?” Astraia turned toward the other two men on horses behind the buggy. They were both of strong build, with what appeared to be swords hidden beneath their cloaks on their backs, their faces expressionless.

“That there is Thalen, and the sour-looking feller is Vastor. They’re some hired hands of Delphi. She figured we could use some more swords this time.” Val gestured to the two men and winked at Astraia.

Her hair bristled, irritated at the unwelcome vagabonds joining their party. Delphi had been her closest friend since arriving in Tenebris five years ago with no money to her name and barely surviving on the streets. The old barkeep had found her hungry and homeless and provided her with a means to support herself by making deliveries. The only requirement was to never ask about the cargo and never question Delphi’s instructions.

“Fine. Are we ready?” Astraia nodded toward the buggy, covered in a large tarp, concealing whatever in the Stars Delphi was smuggling.

Val nodded again, puffing on his pipe, and urged the horse forward with a snap of the reins. Astraia spurred Orion onward as well, falling in step with Val. The two men took up the rear.

Astraia took a deep breath as the trees loomed closer. The morning fog remained on the ground, covering the path inside. The twisted trees curved unnaturally, beckoning the caravan inward, luring them in with the smell of pine and eerie quiet. Their contorted branches reached out toward the road, keen to snare any unsuspecting travelers.

Once the caravan broke through the tree line, the closeness of the trees intensified, the only breathable space being the road they traveled. One step off the path, and you were certain to get lost or swept up by one of the mythical beasts. If you believed such stories.

Astraia remained alert, scanning the forest for signs of threats. She made sure to peer over her shoulder occasionally as well to keep an eye on the two new additions to their party, unsure yet what to make of them.

Up ahead, there was a fork in the road, with the main road continuing to the right and the lesser-traveled path on the left. Not many people used the side trails because it was not as cleared, and bandits littered that part of the woods. It made a

perfect way to smuggle goods to the river, albeit a more dangerous one.

Astraia drew her bow from her back once again and loosely nocked an arrow. She could not afford to relax for even a few moments. As the horses and buggy came to the fork, Val guided his horse to the left. He simply kept puffing on his pipe when the path veered into the darker shadows.

The trees morphed into more mangled shapes as they trudged forward. Little light penetrated the canopy above them. The shadows of birds flickered on the forest floor.

Astraia whirled her head to the right as a branch snapped. Her bow pulled tight, an arrow ready to down the unsuspecting enemy.

Just then, a murder of crows scattered from the tree branches, narrowly missing the top of Astraia's head. She swore and relaxed her bow once more.

Val laughed. "Don't let the woods frighten you, girl. They've survived more than any of us have."

"Let's just keep going. The sooner we get there, the sooner we can leave." She nudged Orion onward at a quicker pace.

Hours passed without incident. Astraia could feel her backside numbing from the saddle and longed for her small apartment bed. She could tell Val was feeling the effects of the long ride as well, noticing him rub the small of his back and stretching his neck.

She glanced back at Thalen and Vastor again. Their faces blank, their hands always too close to their cloaks. The bond in her chest stirred, uncertain and wary of the mysterious men. They had not given her a reason to suspect bad intentions, but something in her blood whispered that they would.

She gazed up at the Starfell canopy, the leaves of different trees knitted together with only small patches of sky peeking through. The woods would be blanketed in nightfall soon. They should be able to reach the river within the hour and could set up camp. Delphi's contact from Virellia would collect the shipment in the morning.

“Let’s pick up the pace, gentlemen. We need to reach the river before dark,” Astraia called over her shoulder and urged Orion into a trot.

If the Starfell Woods were ominous now, it was nothing compared to when a starless night sky was overhead—when the true evil of the woods woke.

It only took another few minutes before Astraia heard the melodic sound of running water. She let out an audible sigh of relief and slowed her horse as she glanced at Val next to her.

“Thank the Stars. My old arse wouldn’t make it much longer.” Val laughed and smiled at Astraia.

The Hydraneas River had never looked so beautiful as the caravan burst from the Starfell Woods into the small clearing by the water. Not a moment too soon, as the last fragments of sunlight flitted on the river’s surface. The river was as tumultuous as it was wide. Rolling currents could easily drag even an experienced swimmer beneath the icy surface.

Despite its foreboding appearance, Astraia wished nothing more than to be free of those horrifying woods and drink the crystal-clear water it offered. She led Orion to the river’s edge, sliding out of the saddle. Her feet hit the ground, the impact vibrating up her vertebrae.

“I forgot how much I loathe long rides,” she groaned as she removed Orion’s saddle.

Astraia glanced over at Val to find him already setting up his bedroll for the night. The other men had set to work building a fire. *They must be as tired as I am*, she thought.

Within just a few minutes, Val had launched into cooking dinner, which consisted of potatoes and some veal he had brought with him. The four escorts sat around the fire, devouring the meal in silence. A palpable tension hung in the air, especially between Astraia and the new men with them.

“So...” Val began. “How do you two know our Delphi? Forgot to pay yer tab, did ya?” He chuckled. He speared a potato with his knife and gestured toward the two men before he plopped it in his mouth.

The two men glanced at each other as they ate. Thalen spoke first, clearing his throat.

“Something like that. She did us a favor a while back. Just paying our dues.” His eyes landed on Val first then Astraia, as he proceeded to eat more of his meal.

Val hummed, obviously unconvinced but smart enough to not probe further.

“I know a thing or two about owing debts to Delphi. I definitely wouldn’t be here if I didn’t.” Astraia shifted as she sat on her bedroll, finishing her food. She drank heartily from her water canteen before making eye contact with Thalen first, then Vastor.

Both simply nodded in return. Astraia welcomed the lack of questioning from two strangers. The least they knew about her, the better.

“Well, not that yer stories aren’t riveting, but an old man needs rest before we finish up the job tomorrow. Traia, you be taking the first watch, eh?” Val did not wait for a rebuttal from her. He just took a swig from his own canteen and lay back on his mat, covering himself with his cloak.

“Sure, Val. I live for it,” Astraia replied with as much sarcasm as she could muster.

Thalen smirked toward her, the most emotion he had shown the entire journey, and lay down across the fire from her, Vastor following suit on her right.

Astraia let out a sigh and cast her eyes skyward. The dark expanse glared back, void of any light save the sliver of the crescent moon. She wondered, as she stared, what the expanse looked like before the Shattering. When thousands of bright stars painted the celestial sphere, casting their glow on all of Astradeon. The twelve Constellations, in their glory, provided peace, prosperity, and order to magic across the empyrean and the world below. Now, just a whisper of a memory. The Constellations no longer offered protection. No longer answered prayers. No longer offered their Starborne solace.

Astraia's sight clouded, tears brimming her eyes. If only the constellations had not deserted Astradeon. If they had not deserted her, he would still be here. She wiped the single tear that managed to escape her eyes and roll down her face.

The Stars be damned.

CHAPTER 4

For it was decided by Balance, to maintain order and equality, that the Constellations would choose among the realm and the living beings therein, bonded and stewards. Bonded to wield the blessing. Stewards to serve and command the blessing.

THE EMPYREAN SCROLLS: REMNANTS OF THE HOLY TEXT



HE HAD APPEARED IN MOST of her dreams lately. Likely a result of her more frequent trips to the slums and reviving old memories.

Once again, she and Elion were on the grassy knoll overlooking the Aetherdeep Sea. They both lay in the grass, lungs full of salty air. There were seagulls overhead, riding the sea breeze. The city of Tenebris was visible in the distance, teeming with life. But here, on this little patch of dirt, all was peaceful and quiet.

Astraia took a deep breath in and sighed loudly.

“What’s wrong?” Elion probed. His arms were crossed under his head, and his eyes remained closed. He was wearing a simple tunic and pants, an outfit a mother would loathe, which was precisely why he chose it.

“I don’t want to go back,” Astraia murmured, worry shadowing her face.

“I know,” he replied, regret in his voice. “You know...” A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth as he rolled onto his side and propped his head on his hand, eyeing Astraia. “We could just leave. No one even knows we’re here. We could get on those horses and head for the Hydraneas River right now. I happen to know a tradesman with a boat who owes me a favor.” His smile widened, eyes dancing with excitement.

“Elion...” Astraia groaned. She sat up, wrapping her arms around her legs, and put her head down on her knees. “You know I can’t.”

“Why? What have they ever done for you except make your life hell?” Elion demanded as he sat up. She could feel his stare like daggers piercing her skin but refused to look at him.

“I can’t just leave. It’s what I was born to do.” Her voice rose defensively.

He had never understood the pressure she faced, not fully. She whipped her head to the side and returned his stare with an icy one of her own until those green eyes met hers. Her anger dissipated, and she lost all resolve.

“Will you go with me?” she asked softly.

Elion paused, sighing in frustration and shaking his head. With a huff, he stood up and extended a hand to Astraia.

“I suppose,” he said with a smirk.

The image blurred.

The dream shifted.

Astraia stood before her father. His cold blue eyes were alight with anger and taking on a life of their own. His hair was disheveled, likely due to lack of sleep again. Whatever project it was that had been occupying his nights was taking a toll on his stamina, that much was clear.

However, he mustered enough strength to argue with Elion. He was shouting at him, but the sound was muted—like voices behind glass. Astraia watched, straining to hear, but couldn’t make out the words.

Elion stood in defiance, gesturing toward her, shouting something back. His voice was muffled, his face red with rage.

A woman stood in the corner of the room, her narrowed eyes fixed on Astraia. Hatred, violent and intense, echoed in the woman’s eyes. She could not recall the woman’s name. Why was she looking at her with such disdain?

Astraia tore her eyes away from the venomous woman's glare and back to Elion and her father. She tried to speak. Nothing. No voice. She tried to move. Nothing.

She was frozen.

Something was wrong.

Why were they fighting? What were they saying? Why was she rooted in place?

That was when she felt it—a low rumble all around her. It shook the ground beneath her feet so hard, the glass in the windows rattled. A high-pitched ringing pierced the muffled silence and filled her ears. Her father and Elion stopped shouting. They both turned their heads, and their eyes fixed on her.

Elion's face twisted in panic as he reached for her. His green eyes bored into her soul. His voice filled her mind, echoing through her body.

He whispered, soft and low, "You are Starlight, Astraia. You will not fall."

A burst of white light erupted—brighter than the sun—engulfing the room.

Astraia screamed, "*No!*"

Her voice shattered the dream—

And then came blackness.

Astraia jolted awake, sweat slicking her spine. She sat up, heart pounding, breath ragged. It was barely dawn, and morning dew clung to the ground surrounding the camp, making the grass of the clearing appear to be carpeted in Starlight. Stiffly, she rose from her mat and pulled her cloak around her, noting a slight chill in the summer air.

Val was smoking his pipe, stoking a fire with a pot of tea warming. Thalen and Vastor were absent from their bed rolls.

"Ahh, yer awake. Good. The transport should be here soon." Val puffed on his pipe and nodded toward the river beside them.

“Where are they?” Astraia inclined her head toward the absent bed rolls as she grabbed a metal cup from her pack and poured a cup of tea, steam rising to meet her face as she poured. She had nudged Thalen awake for the second watch last night but passed out quickly afterward.

“Doing a perimeter check, I reckon. That’s what they told me earlier before ye woke up.”

Astraia set her cup down. Her eyes scanned the tree line, the heavy fog rolling in from the river like a veil. The Starfell Woods stood silent—too silent. No birdsong, no wind. Just the pulse of something unseen.

Her bond stirred. Not a flare. But the familiar tingle along her spine, the breath just out of reach.

Then her gaze landed on where the horses had been tied up the night before—only to find them all missing. Orion included.

Astraia leapt from her spot around the fire. “Val, they took the horses! How could you not notice they took our horses?” she shouted, thankful she had kept her bow and arrow by her side last night as she slept. She slung her quiver over her head and stared at Val incredulously. *How could he be so naive?*

“I—I don’t know, Traia. I wasn’t fully awake yet and I guess...” He ran a hand through his hair as he stood in front of her. He let out a troubled breath, his eyes locked on hers with clear regret filling them. “Stars, I’m sorry.”

She bit the inside of her cheek, swallowing her frustration as she glanced over where they had unhitched the wagon. It too was gone.

“And they took the wagon. Just great.” She sighed, rubbing her forehead.

“Listen to me, Val, you need to tell me right now what Delphi was shipping,” Astraia demanded, irritated more so at herself for letting her guard down.

“You know I can’t tell ye that, girl. Less people know, the better,” he said, eyes narrow.

“Val...if I’m going to go after them, I need to know. What if they’re explosives and they try to ambush me?”

“They ain’t no explosives, but they might as well be.” He sighed, running his fingers through his beard.

“What do you mean?” she asked, arms crossed.

“She be shipping Starshards, girl. Barrels of it. To the highest bidder.”

Her blood froze, fear creeping into her mind. People had tried manipulating the Stars, attempting to create their own bonds using the Starshards, remnants of the Shattering. Some people succeeded, creating synthetic partial bonds, weakened forms of the Constellation’s blessings. They called themselves the Shardborne. Others went too far, experimenting with multiple different star shards, which always ended in death or worse—unnatural bonds and unimaginable pain. This group of zealots were known as the Tredecim. If Delphi was in league with either group, Astraia wanted no part in it.

“Stars...” Astraia cursed under her breath. “You mean to tell me Delphi was smuggling Stars-forsaken *Starshards*?”

Val’s face was deadpan. “I told ye, it was better off ye not know.”

“*Stars!*” she shouted, throwing her hands up. She knew Delphi was likely smuggling illegal goods, but never this.

“We need to move. Now. Before they come back to finish us off as witnesses.” She kicked dirt onto the fire, smothering it.

“Ye really think they’d come back just to kill us?” Val lumbered toward her.

Astraia stopped and pivoted toward Val, facing him. “Look, Val, I like you. You’ve always been kind to me. But I know about bad people. And people who want Starshards are bad people. Now you can linger, and become collateral damage, or you can come back with me.”

And watch me deal with Delphi, she thought.

She had worked for five years to build the life she now had, albeit a pathetic existence on the surface, but she treasured it.

She once believed the emptiness she harbored in her soul would engulf her, devouring her will to keep breathing. Working in the slums had healed a part of her. It gave her purpose. Tenebris was all she had left, and by the Stars, she would not lose it over some wretched black-market deal.

“I’ve been runnin’ these woods longer than most have drawn breath,” Val said quietly, not looking at her. “But I don’t like the feel of this one, girl. Feels like the Stars are holdin’ their breath.” He paused, looking at her with a smile. “I’ll go with ya. But only cause I’ve grown fond of ya.”

Astraia stared at the man, wide-eyed. He had been her companion on several shipments but had never spoken to her like this.

“Okay then.” She turned and started walking toward the road.

The air was too still. Not even the river’s waters rippled. Her bond thrummed in her bones, a silent drumbeat warning her to run.

That was when she heard it. The sound of branches snapping, leaves crunching, horses breathing, vibrating through the twisted and tortuous woods.

She swore under her breath. *Stars, I hate being right.*

From the shadows of the Starfell Woods, the forest awakened.

Figures moved—swift, spectral, emerging from the twisted trees with silent intent. Not just Thalen and Vastor. More than ten men emerged. Shadows cloaked in ash-gray and leather, faces hidden, blades gleaming like serpent’s teeth. They were only forty yards away and would be upon them in seconds.

Astraia didn’t hesitate. Her bow was in her hands. She took aim in a single breath, and the world slowed.

Sounds dulled around her, the thundering footsteps fading into a distant hum. Replacing the sounds of her surroundings was just her own breath, in and out in a slow rhythm. She could smell everything. The pine in the woods, the saltiness of

the sweat coating her brow, the blooming wildflowers of the clearing, the lingering ash of the doused fire.

Her vision sharpened, narrowed, until her arrowhead gleamed like a star before her, and in a heartbeat, her eyesight expanded. Vastor's face swam into focus, every detail crystal clear. The damp strands of hair clinging to his brow. She could see every freckle that dotted his nose, the crude smile that blossomed on his lips. Every stitch of his cloak, every scratch on his blade. He was moving, but through quicksand.

Astraia took another breath, and her eyesight cleared even more. The air around him shimmered, thick with floating pollen, golden in the dim light. She exhaled purposefully and released her arrow with deadly precision straight into Vastor's chest.

Time snapped back.

Sound returned in a crash. The world lurched, senses reeling. The glow behind her eyes faded, her breath ragged now.

Vastor crumpled to the ground, clutching the arrow as blood oozed from his gaping mouth.

"Val, *move!*" she shouted, but her voice was swallowed by the crashing of hoofbeats, the snap of branches, the roar of betrayal.

Val reached for his sword—but it was too late.

Thalen roared at the sight of Vastor on the ground and spurred his horse into a full gallop, overtaking Val in seconds. A flash of steel, a grunt of effort, and Val staggered, blade sunk deep in his side.

"No!" Astraia's scream tore through the clearing.

She let another arrow fly. Senses heightened once more, she could feel the exhilaration of hitting her mark. The arrow struck Thalen in the chest, and he fell from his horse without sound.

Val dropped to his knees, eyes wide, hand clutching at blood. His eyes found Astraia's, and he toppled over, dark red

staining the grass.

There was no time to mourn. The others were on her.

Astraea moved, fluid as breath, the next arrow finding its mark in the throat of a man she didn't recognize. Another arrow followed—through the eye of a cloaked brute as he charged.

But they kept coming. She had downed four men, but six remained. She was outnumbered. Her heart pounded, the bond rising. Heat licked at her spine, a storm building in her veins.

I am Starlight. I will not fall.

A blade grazed her side as she twisted, the pain sharp, immediate—but she didn't fall. She turned, loosed another arrow, her assailant dispatched.

Five left.

They dismounted their horses and circled her, cautious now.

Her quiver was almost empty. Her breath ragged.

And the bond—it wanted out.

Her fingers tingled, light dancing at the edge of her vision.

No. Not now. Not here.

She aimed an arrow. "Let me walk away and take the wagon. And I'll let the rest of you live!"

One of the men, a burly-looking mammoth with a long brown beard, snickered as he moved closer to her. "We aren't here for the wagon."

Her knees hit the earth as a second man had come up behind her and kicked the back of her legs. Her hand burned, white light flaring, uncontrolled. A hand wrenched off her cloak hood and yanked her hair backward, forcing her face skyward.

One step closer—and she would unleash it all.

She opened her eyes, white light blasting into the faces of the men. The man closest to her yelped, wrenching his hand away from her and stumbling backward.

Then, a shadow moved.

A blur, fast, silent.

Steel met flesh.

One of the bandits jerked, eyes wide, before collapsing—a blade still embedded in his chest. Astraia’s captor released her hair, and her flare lessened enough to break her gaze. The glow ebbed from her eyes.

The other four bounty hunters whipped around, on the defensive—but they were already too late.

Astraia’s rescuer was a storm, all dark leather and silent rage. His hand wrenched his sword from the fallen man, moving with brutal grace as he sped toward another.

One fell, throat slit. Another stumbled, fear in his eyes before he was cut down.

Astraia struggled to rise, the light still sparking at her fingertips.

The dark figure stepped between her and the last two men. One bandit roared with rage, raised his sword, rushing the defender. With unnatural speed, the figure ran forward, falling to his knees and sliding on the grass. His sword rose and sliced through the bandit’s side.

Without missing a step, her shadowy savior rose and directed his sword at the last man. His voice was low, final.

“Run.”

The man did not need to be told twice. He bolted for the Starfell Woods, tripping over the earth as he went.

Astraia rose slowly. She pulled the last arrow from her quiver, raised her Starwood bow, breath filling her lungs, senses harmoniously intensified. And released.

The fleeing bounty hunter flinched in the distance as an arrow embedded itself in his back, then toppled forward, screaming as he went down.

The clearing was still again, save for the crackle of the dying fire, and the trickle of blood into the soil.

Astraia gasped for air, the bond still pulsing, wild beneath her skin.

Her rescuer turned, his eyes—amber fire—locking onto hers.

“You’re welcome,” he said, voice like dusk.

CHAPTER 5

Equality is folly. There can be no light without dark, no balance without chaos. The delicate equilibrium is precarious, with but one decision standing between total abandon. Dominion, cunning and devious, took full advantage to assert his supremacy, cloaked in shadow.

THE RISE OF DOMINION



ASTRAIA DID NOT RESPOND. STEELING herself, she strode toward the woods, where the last man had fallen. He was still writhing in pain, lying on his side with the arrow protruding from his back.

She knelt beside him, close enough to smell the iron in his blood that coated the dirt.

“Who sent you?” she seethed. Anger boiled under her skin.

He coughed, blood splattering her boots. “Wouldn’t you like to know, *Starborne?*” he whispered, sputtering blood, a sickening smile spreading across his face.

Astraia did not falter as she grabbed the man’s own dagger from his waist and plunged it into his thigh. A shriek of pure agony escaped his lips.

“Now I can make your last moments on this stars-forsaken world as painful as when your mother brought you into it, or you can tell me what I want to know, and I’ll send you to meet Dominion with haste. Your choice.” Not a hint of pity in her voice, Astraia removed the dagger from his thigh.

Another yelp shattered the silence of the clearing as his hand grazed his now bleeding thigh.

“So, let’s try this one more time. Who sent you?”

The man gasped for what little breath remained in his lungs. “Delphi. Delphi sent us. She said she would split the bounty

on your head when she handed you over to King Maelrik.”

Astraia’s breath hitched. She couldn’t be hearing the man correctly. He was dying and delusional.

“You’re lying!” she bellowed, her hands shaking.

He coughed again, more blood spraying the ground around him, and laughed weakly. “Not everyone is who they claim to be.”

He breathed one last shuddered inhale, then silence.

Astraia sat down next to the dead man. Her hands shaking, holding onto the bloody dagger as it dripped red on the ground next to her.

Why? Why would Delphi do this? How does she know about my bond?

Her bond flickered in her spine, not out of warning, but out of comfort and healing. The gash in her side from the attack was already mending, the muscle and skin melding together, whole once again. She could feel her energy being restored, and fatigue faded.

A shadow covered her.

“Are you going to sit there waiting for more of them?” His voice was low, with a hint of annoyance.

Astraia pushed herself to her feet. “You followed me?”

“I never stopped.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Were you waiting for them to wear me down first, or is that just a perk of your charming personality?”

“If I wanted you dead,” he said, sheathing his sword, “you would be.”

The wind shifted, lifting strands of her hair as silence stretched between them. Her bond hummed against her skin—Sacrifice pulsing low and warning. Not because he’d hurt her. But because he *could*.

She crossed her arms. “What do you want?”

He stepped closer. “To keep you breathing. Until I’m paid what I’m owed.”

Her jaw clenched. “You’re a bounty hunter.”

“No,” he said, tone dry. “I’m *the* bounty hunter.”

She hated that her heart still pounded—not from fear, but fury. From the sting of helplessness. “I don’t need your protection,” she snapped. “And next time, don’t bother saving me.”

“I won’t.”

She moved past him, brushing his shoulder. He didn’t stop her—but he didn’t step aside either.

“You’re bleeding.”

“Not anymore,” Astraia coldly replied over her shoulder.

He was exactly as she remembered him from the alley. His hair was golden and ash, tousled from the fight. Rough stubble covering his angled jaw, some specks of blood visible on his golden skin. And those eyes of molten amber pierced her fortitude.

A flicker of light flashed in her periphery, her hands responding to the calming sensation of the bond before she tightened her tether, stuffing her hands beneath her cloak to hide the light.

Val was still lying where he had fallen, a huge gash in his side that no longer had blood to spill. She knelt beside him, letting out a breath.

His eyes were still open. His chest no longer rose and fell. His pipe was in his tunic pocket. Astraia closed his eyes with trembling fingers.

“I’m so sorry, Val,” she whispered. The ache of another failure gnawed at her bones. Sacrifice, her so-called bond, was silent once again.

She hurried to build a pyre as was the Astradeon custom. The mysterious man simply watched from a distance, not

interfering, a look of indifference on his face as the fire burned.

“May the Stars carry you to Solrend,” Astraia whispered as the flames grew taller. Her eyes blurred with tears, but she refused to let any fall. She would not give the Stars the satisfaction of making her resolution falter.

“You believe they still hear you?” That same low, husky voice sounded from beside her, a hint of surprise in his tone.

“No,” she countered. The Stars had shattered before she was even born, in the great Celestial War against Dominion. After the Shattering, only strands of their presence whispered to the bonded. But when she had needed Sacrifice the most, the Constellation remained silent. No, the Stars had abandoned her long ago.

Anger darkened her mind, thinking of the betrayal she felt not just from Delphi, but from the Stars themselves. She had been double-crossed more times than she could count, constantly deserted in the world. Trust was no longer part of her vernacular. It had been unraveled first by her father, then by almost every person she had allowed a glimpse into her heart.

No more.

Not ever.

Trust was a fool’s gamble—and Astraia Solenne refused to lose again.

Astraia rose from the ground resolutely, turning to face the mysterious man who hunted her, only to help her instead. The silence between them snapped like a frayed cord as she stepped away, boots crunching over blood-slick leaves.

“I told you—I don’t need your help,” she said.

“That wasn’t help. I’m protecting my asset.”

Astraia stopped cold, pulse hammering in her ears with fury. “*Asset?*”

“The king is very eager for your capture, *Traia* Starborne.” He drew out her name, careful to accentuate every syllable.

Astraia blinked, stunned. “What...what did you just say?”

He didn't flinch. His gaze dropped to the blood-slick dagger still clenched in her hand, then lifted again, locking onto her eyes with a focus that made her breath catch. Those molten amber eyes reflected the river behind her, swallowing its silver light, pouring it back as molten fire aimed straight at her.

“You heard me,” he said, voice low and sure. “You were minutes away from a full flare when I showed up.”

He stepped closer. The distance between them, already too small, shrank until the air tightened around her. His presence was impossible to ignore now—towering, unyielding. She had not realized before how massive he was, the breadth of his shoulders beneath worn black leather, the strong lines of his arms flexing as he moved.

Astraia fought the urge to step back. She anchored herself in place instead, curling her fingers tighter around the dagger, though deep down she knew it would be useless against him if it came to that.

Her bond stirred faintly at her spine—not in warning, but in *recognition*.

And that terrified her more than any blade.

“So what is this? You're keeping me alive so you can trade me in as livestock to the false king?”

“Or until he wishes you dead.” He flicked some dirt from his leather armor, as if she was nothing but a child's plaything that he would soon tire of and destroy for amusement.

Astraia clenched her teeth, forcing her bond down as it threatened to engulf her and melt the bounty hunter's face off for good measure. Hands closing into fists, she glared at him. “And who exactly are you? Other than the king's lap dog?”

“Draven,” he replied, deadpan.

“Well, Draven, you can take your bargain and blade and shove them right where Dominion reigns. I am not yours to protect or sell. And I will not go quietly.” Astraia stared into his eyes, transfixed but unafraid, daring him to try.

His grin deepened. “Bold of you, Starborne, making demands of the man who kept you breathing.”

With deliberate, slow movements, he sheathed the massive broadsword across his back.

Astraia, however, did not lower the dagger in her hand.

“You don’t trust me,” he said, almost admiring the fact. “You shouldn’t.”

He stepped aside then, granting her a clear path past him. An unspoken challenge. Freedom dangled at her fingertips—but but so did danger.

“You can stay here,” he continued, shrugging one broad shoulder. “Wait for other less-patient bounty hunters to find you. Or you can come with me. Live long enough to beg the king for your life.”

The ache in Astraia’s spine deepened, her bond thrumming with a low warning she could not quite decipher.

Trust no one. Survive first. Question later.

“Fine,” she said, her voice like iron. “But first, I’m going to need my dagger back. The one you conveniently stole from me.”

Without a second thought, he reached for the sheath at his side. A dark black metal hilt shimmered in the sunlight. In one slow, deliberate motion, he freed the dagger and held it out with one hand, surveying it.

Her dagger. He *did* have it.

“Pity. I was becoming attached to it.” He turned the dark blade over once more in his hand and extended it to her, the hilt angled toward Astraia.

She did not take her eyes off of Draven as she sheathed the celestial blade, a familiar and welcomed weight pressing to her thigh. She discarded the bloodied blade she had stolen from her attackers, letting it fall to the ground.

Astraia glared at the man who could be her next betrayer or savior. “If you so much as look at me the wrong way—”

“You’ll spear me with one of your arrows,” he finished, one brow arching in amusement. He turned, heading toward the tangled tree line without waiting for her to follow. “Come on, Starborne. The night’s falling fast. And you’re no good to me dead.”

For a moment, Astraia just stood there, staring after him—this maddening, infuriating, impossible man who strutted through this broken world as if it could not touch him.

Then, with a muttered curse under her breath, she followed him.

Trust no one, she reminded herself. Not even the ones who seem like they’re trying to save you.

Especially not them.

CHAPTER 6

“Luxterra will not withstand another assault. The wraiths do not weaken, though we exhaust our forces. The Bears and Wolves have joined from the south, but the Phoenix has abandoned us. You must advance. Send your best Drengir with their Drakari. Look for my falcon.”

**CELESTIAL WAR CORRESPONDENCE OF KING
ILLIAS, RULER OF THE CELESTIAL COURT, KING OF
ASTRADEON TO LORD FAFNIR OF THE SKYFORGE
PEAKS, STEWARD OF RAGE**



“NOT A CHANCE, BOUNTY HUNTER.” Astraia shook her head, crossing her arms for extra emphasis.

“We only have one horse, Starborne. And although your charm rivals that of a bear, I do not trust you. So, you can either put them on yourself, or I will force them on you,” Draven replied, his hand holding the same iron manacles that had bound the baker’s son in Tenebris. An ancient language from before the Shattering was etched on the metal cuffs.

She stared at them. “You want to bind me?”

“Your bonds flare when you’re emotional. I’m not risking your powers turning me into ash because you get a jump scare.”

“How about I just stab you, take your horse, and leave you for the Starfell Woods to claim?” Astraia quipped, absently feeling for her dagger, still not completely convinced it had returned.

“Very funny. We don’t have all day. I would rather not be in these woods come nightfall. Would you?” His hand remained outstretched, waiting for her answer.

Astraia weighed her options, none of them inviting. Slowly, she stepped closer to Draven, raising her hands in submission.

Draven closed the distance between them, opening the manacles and holding them in both hands.

Before she could rethink her decision, Astraia grabbed the outside of his forearms and drove her knee upward with enough force that it threatened to give out.

“Stars!” he shouted, letting go of the manacles and falling to his knees, grasping his pants.

She wasted no time. In one fluid motion, she slapped the horse’s flank hard. The beast reared in shock, then bolted down the Starfell Woods road. Without a second glance, Astraia broke into a run off the main path, directly into the black abyss of the cursed woods.

She could hear Draven shouting her name behind her, but she did not stop running. Her breath evened out as she maintained a steady cadence, avoiding rocks and logs obscured by dead leaves.

Astraia was not sure of anything right now, but one thing she did know was that she would not trust a single soul again. She made plans of her own.

She spared a glance upward at the canopy to see the sun was already beginning to leave the Astradeon sky. A starless night was closing in, and she was running through the Starfell Woods alone.

She was headed the same direction those betrayers had come from when they attacked her. If she could just keep running north, there had to be another side path that they had used to cut through the forest.

It was her only chance.

She kept running, never looking back to see if Draven pursued her. The only sound was that of her boots crunching leaves as she ran. The glimpses of light that flickered through the forest canopy were dwindling.

Astraia took a deeper breath and dove into her bond. It awaited her, always ready to answer her call. She pulled back the lid to her tether, and Elion’s face flooded her memory. Warmth, immeasurable and calming, blanketed her in an

instant. It filled every sinew, every vein, every bone of her body. It took only a few seconds and suddenly, her strength was renewed, her stamina refilled.

She peered down at her body, and her skin glowed a faint soft light, a beacon in the onslaught of darkness encompassing her.

Her pace quickened tenfold, her feet a blur as she bounded through the forest. Breathing came easy now. Euphoria enveloped her. She had not felt this free in so long. Had not let her other bond freely flow in over five years.

Astraia kept her eyes focused ahead as she flew with unnatural speed, leaping over boulders and fallen pine. Until she spotted it.

Just ahead, another trail cut through the forest maze.

She stumbled once, her boot catching on a gnarled root hidden beneath the bracken. Pain bloomed up her shin, but she pushed onward, lungs searing, the woods swallowing her footsteps. When she dared to look up again, he was there—a shadow rising from the mist, ears perked and waiting. Orion.

Orion's eyes met Astraia's in recognition. He lifted his head and walked over to her as she placed a hand on his head.

"Hi, boy, I missed you," she said, stroking his head. "Let's get out of here."

Astraia patted Orion's neck and walked to his side, mounting her horse in one smooth motion.

Orion had found her, by whatever odds. The only true companion she had left in the world.

Pulling the reins, she guided Orion down the road, out of the murky woods and east to Virellia.

Astraia awoke with a start. She was slumped over in her saddle, holding onto Orion's neck. Painfully, she straightened her back and rubbed the back of her aching neck. She must have fallen asleep while riding.

It was still dark out, so she could not have been sleeping for long. Based on the moon's travel across the ebony heavens, it was around midnight.

She glanced at her surroundings. Orion had continued to follow the Hydraneas River north, staying beside the riverbank, away from the Starfell Woods.

Astraia patted her steed. "Good boy, Orion."

The horse merely snorted in reply.

Her roughly concocted plan was to reach the river town of Aquarian, which bordered Virellia and the Shardlands. There was a stone bridge there, built a century ago, that allowed passage and ensured smooth trade between the two regions of Astradeon. It would be the easiest way to cross the unforgiving waters into Virellia and get as far away from Draven as she could.

The only downside to the plan was the prospect of another bounty hunter finding her and dragging her back to the Celestial Court to be tried by King Maelrik. That, and the river town was still a few hours away and despite her persistence, her body needed more rest.

They would have to make camp for the night by the river. It was not ideal, sleeping out in the open, exposed. But it was better than facing the perils of the woods.

Astraia pulled on Orion's reins to stop and gingerly slid from his saddle. Her body ached from travel, battle, and pushing her bond to its limit. Orion even sighed and made his way to the river to drink.

She had left all her supplies back at the previous campsite, including her mat, yet this did not deter her from lying on the grass and allowing sleep to overtake her.

Dreams did not come that night. Fatigue kept those distant memories at bay.

A piercing pain lanced her back. She was dragged from the recesses of her resting mind back to the starless world in an

instant.

She bolted upright from her grassy bed, eyes focusing in the dim light of early morning. Her bond had awoken her—warning her.

Astraia rose, drawing her bow and nocking an arrow as she surveyed the tree line.

Orion was close beside her, his eyes also fixed on the shadowy forest before them, his ears shifting in alertness.

A silence as thick as stone pressed against her ears...until red eyes opened in the dark.

Astraia could not make out the outline of the figure, but the eyes were too low to the ground to be a man's. No, it was definitely a beast of some kind.

Her breathing quickened at the realization, just as two more sets of red eyes appeared alongside the first. They were fixed on Astraia.

She raised her bow, aiming for the first set of eyes.

What are they waiting for? she thought, afraid of the answer.

The first set of eyes began to move, slowly and deliberately, closer toward the river. Astraia remained motionless. She was not sure what it was yet, or where her aim would be deadliest.

Before her eyes, the nightmares of children's stories and folklore materialized.

A massive, otherworldly wolf crept from the trees. His fur was solid black, as void as the starless skies. His paws were the size of a man's skull, carrying his enormous frame with grace and power. And his teeth—his canines shone bright in the dusky morning, glistening white and sharper than any blade.

The other two flanked it. Massive, rippling beasts with eyes like molten embers and pelts darker than pitch.

Astraia held her breath, afraid to move.

“Hail, stewards. I am Starborne, bound to Power,” she spoke firmly, though her voice quivered slightly at the sight of the

unnatural red eyes boring into her.

And still, the wolves approached.

Something was wrong. The wolves were her stewards, guardians of Power's Starborne. They should heed her call.

The alpha tensed, muscles twitching in preparation to lunge. A low growl reverberated through the wolf's bared teeth.

Astraia had no time to contemplate. She took aim, feeling that electrifying sensation filling her mind—time slowed, senses heightened.

She could smell the iron of old blood coating the wolf's fur, a prior triumph over his prey. Her eyes narrowed on the drops of saliva falling from the beast's mouth. The sound of lungs expanding and paws clawing dirt and leaves echoed in her ears.

With a final exhale, she released her arrow.

The world around her pitched as her senses rebounded.

A loud thud resounded from the direction of her aim, her arrow hitting its mark. Directly between the red eyes of the wolf.

A whimper escaped the wolf's mouth before the enormous animal succumbed to death, falling on its side.

The remaining two wolves took a step toward their fallen leader, sniffing the motionless body.

Astraia grabbed another arrow from her quiver, taking aim once more. If the beasts attacked at once, she would not be able to fend them both off.

Her pulse quickened as the wolves turned and faced her, their eyes aflame.

"Come on, then!" she screamed. If she was to die today, she would do so fighting.

She reached for the tether to her bonds, finding the box in her mind easily, and snatched the lid wide open. Her bond flared to life, filling every pore of her existence.

A bright, brilliant light burst from her, filling the glen surrounding them, ricocheting off the river surface.

I am Starlight. I will not fall.

The two wolves faltered at the sight of her power, but they recovered. Their legs tensed and within seconds, they leaped for her.

A flash of dark silver arced through the light.

One of the wolves let out a gurgling yelp and crumpled, a broadsword buried deep in its flank.

Before Astraia could even blink, a figure burst from the shadows, cloak billowing, sword already spinning for a second strike.

Draven.

The air rippled with heat as he moved, Astraia's light catching the muscles of his forearms. Pure rage, just barely caged. Controlled.

The second wolf lunged. Draven ducked beneath it, dragging his blade upward in a wide arc that split it clean open. Blood soaked the ground. Red eyes now vacant.

Silence fell.

Astraia dropped her bow, chest heaving. Her bond pulsed in her spine—relieved. She tugged on her tether, watching the light surrounding her dissipate.

Draven turned, blood on his blade. Astraia noticed gray smoke coiling from his skin as his eyes fell to hers.

“You are terrible at running,” he growled.

As much as it pained Astraia to admit it, she was grateful to see the bounty hunter. That was twice now that he had aided her. She wasn't sure if she was more irritated that he found her again...or relieved.

Probably a bit of both.

“How did you find me?” she asked, feeling for her blade at her side.

“Not even a thank you, Starborne?” He wiped his broadsword clean on the beast’s fur, sheathing it leisurely on his back, as he strode up to her.

Astraia wanted to kill him. His ego had clearly been left unchecked, and she would happily oblige to bestow some humility upon the bounty hunter.

But her anger was two-fold. She had been reckless, letting those monsters get remotely close to her while she slept. If not for her bond, she would have been wolf prey.

Astraia stepped forward, matching his arrogance with pointed disdain. He stiffened but did not move.

A familiar pine and smoke smell lingered in the small space between them.

“So that’s your game?” she seethed, “Let me nearly die just to sweep in at the last second and play hero?”

He returned her stare, not a shred of empathy or softness reflecting back at her. “I told you, protecting my asset. It’s not profitable for you to die—yet.”

She flinched at the word *yet*.

“You waited until I was about to die,” she seethed, voice rising in frustration.

That devilish smile that made Astraia’s pulse throb crept back onto his face. “You looked like you needed a lesson.”

Her blood boiled. “Lesson?”

“Maybe now you’ll think twice before slapping horses and running blind into cursed woods.”

They stood there, breathing hard. His face was too close to hers, with an irritatingly calm expression. His hand still rested on the hilt of his blade, as if contemplating if she was done being a threat.

“Stars! I should have killed you!” she yelled, whirling away from Draven, anger threatening to unleash her bonds. She marched to where Orion had retreated closer to the river.

“You flared,” he called after her, tone quieter now. “And it wasn’t Sacrifice.”

Astraea froze mid-step. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t I?” He paused. “I’ve never seen a flare so strong. That was Power.”

Her breath caught. Her bond stirred—almost like it was listening too. “You’re not safe.”

He tilted his head. “Neither are you.”

“How do you know about Sacrifice?” She quipped.

“You think the alleyway was the first time I had seen you?” he chuckled, “your little escapades into the slums were quite entertaining to watch. What exactly were you trying to accomplish? It was like spitting on a housefire.”

“How *dare* you,” she seethed. Her hand lit with a white flare of Power, a pulse of warning light between them.

He did not flinch, but stared at her hand like it was a particularly stupid animal. “You flare like a child throwing a tantrum,” he pointed out. “No wonder everyone wants you dead.”

He withdrew a set of cold iron manacles from his cloak. The runes etched into them pulsed faintly—dull, silencing, wrong.

“Come one step closer with those, and we’ll see if the color of your blood matches that black heart of yours,” she hissed, hand hovering above the hilt of her dagger.

He did not heed her warning, stepping toward her, the crunch of scorched grass cutting through the forest. “You nearly lit the forest on fire. Again. I’m not dragging a star-flaring liability into Aquarian unless I’m sure you won’t incinerate the first person who looks at you sideways.”

She clenched her fists. “You don’t get to chain me like some cursed beast.”

“Try to run again, and I’ll knock you unconscious and haul you in over my saddle.”

She could feel every hair on her body stand on end, her bonds screaming at her to run, to fight, to make sure this hunter never laid a hand on another Starborne again. White and blue light lit her fingertips, demanding to be unleashed once more.

“You see?” he said quietly. “Even now, you’re not in control.”

She stared at him and the foreboding manacles in his calloused hands. Her pulse quickened, and the forest around her stilled in anticipation as he stepped within arm’s reach, eyeing her with a smirk.

She did not think. She grounded her weight, tightening her core, and threw her right fist toward his jaw.

A warm strong hand wrapped around her wrist mid-air, squeezing intensely, forcing her fingers to splay.

“You son of a—”

“Don’t flatter yourself. It isn’t personal.”

A deafening click resounded in her ears as cold smooth metal closed around her right wrist. Before she could blink, the second manacle snapped shut around her other wrist.

The flare at her fingertips was snuffed out, vanishing without a trace. Overwhelming silence coated her mind.

Astraia stumbled backward, her vision swimming as her legs gave out, and she fell to her knees. A wave of nausea rolled through her as she broke out in a cold sweat, her clothes suddenly too tight and the air far too thin.

She felt hollow. Empty.

“I hope you burn with Dominion,” she spat, raising her head to meet his eyes.

He knelt in front of her, the insufferable smirk lingering on the corner of his mouth. “As long as I get my cut, Starborne.”

As Draven tied Astraia’s shackled hands to Orion’s saddle, she clawed through the murkiness of her mind, aimlessly searching for her bonds to no avail. It was like screaming in an

empty room with no windows, no doors, no one to answer her pleas.

Her captor did not utter another word as he tied a rope from Orion's bridle to his own horse and set off on the road to Aquarian.

"You have no idea what you've done, bounty hunter." She spoke barely above a whisper, lacing hatred in every syllable as she shot daggers from her eyes at the back of his head.

"I know exactly what I've done, Starborne," he replied, peering over his shoulder.

"I've kept you alive."

CHAPTER 7

One would hesitate to assume that eleven Constellations could be so easily toppled; yet, it is the opinion of several scribes, most notably Sophia Alquentias, that inner turmoil within the Stars is the only justification for such distraction, allowing Dominion's assertion of supremacy.

THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE CONSTELLATIONS



AQUARIAN DID NOT LOOK LIKE a prison with its stone roads and bustling markets, but Astraia had never felt more caged.

The length of the town ran along the Hydraneas River, with docks dotting the river's edge, making easy access for rafts and small vessels. It was the heart of trade between Tenebris, Villeria, the Hollow City, and practically every outlying province of Astradeon.

The manacles stifling her bonds and the massive bounty hunter beside her drew too much attention. Between his enormous build, eyes like the sun, and menacing broadsword, he would certainly be a beacon for trouble.

She needed to find a way to get the cursed shackles off her and vanish into the crowds. Astraia had lost count of the number of ways she planned to kill the bounty hunter, but none would be successful with her hands bound.

She twisted in the saddle, biting back the thousand venom-laced words that wanted to claw out of her throat.

Draven rode just ahead, reins loose, his posture annoyingly at ease.

“So how does one stoop to the position of lap dog, bounty hunter? You must either be incredibly stupid or incredibly desperate to owe the king your allegiance. Willing to capture

innocent Starborne for torture at His Majesty's command." Her voice was placid, hoping to elicit the undercurrent of rage she knew brewed beneath his icy exterior.

He did not glance back, but she could see him straighten in his saddle. He laughed—soft, bitter. "If you think innocence has anything to do with survival, you're living in a fairy tale, Starborne." He paused, casting a sideways glance as she rode beside him. "You think I owe him allegiance? I owe him nothing." His teeth clenched, words clipped. "I have a skill of collecting things that bleed."

His eyes met hers, unreadable. "You included."

Before she could spit another curse, a scream pierced the air.

The people crowding the street stopped, heads turning. A hush fell over the people as the crowd parted like waves, citizens stumbling back and ducking into shops, covering their mouths with trembling hands.

A man stumbled forward through the gap of people, clutching his chest, his skin pale and hanging loosely over his thin frame. Dark crimson splotches mottled his skin, blood oozing from some of the open sores, his eyes wild as he spoke with a raspy voice. "Please, help. Please..."

His hand reached out to the surrounding crowd, but no one moved, some covering their mouth with their cloaks and backing further away.

The man shuffled forward another step before collapsing onto the stone road, choking on his own breath as blood-tinged foam trickled out the edges of his mouth.

Astraiia watched, frozen, realization hitting her.

The Plague.

Her hands flexed against her manacles, her instinct to heal overtaking common sense.

"He's infected," she breathed.

Draven pulled her horse closer to his, scanning the crowd for any threats.

She eyed him sharply. "I've seen this before. I worked in the slums of Tenebris helping to treat it."

"Not without your bonds, you didn't," he replied, turning their horses toward a side street.

Astraiia jerked her shackled wrists upward. "Take them off. Let me help him."

Draven laughed. "So you can flare and burn the town and me to ash? I think not."

"If I flare, restrain me. But if I don't help him, he will die."

Draven stopped the horses, staring at her with a brow raised. "Why do you care? I can see the way your mind schemes of destroying anyone in your path. This man is a hindrance."

"I care because I know what it is like to feel helpless in the dark." Her voice was soft. "And as a healer, I cannot live with myself if I stand by and do nothing as he dies."

"They will see you. They'll know what you are. You're willing to expose yourself?" His eyebrow quirked upward.

Loath as she was to admit it, the bounty hunter was right. She had been so cautious in Tenebris. Starborne were hated by most, scapegoats for the dismal state of the realm. Secrecy helped to keep her from hatred and harm. But a soft voice in her mind pushed her forward, tugging on her heart.

"Yes," she replied.

He let out a long exhale, running his fingers through his tousled hair. "You get ten minutes," he said, already dismounting from his horse. "One flare, and I swear—"

"You'll cage me again. Understood." She held out her wrists. "Now do it before he dies."

His hands moved achingly slow, retrieving a key from around his neck, his brows furrowed. He was battling with himself, that much was apparent.

Astraiia breathed deeply as he turned the key and the manacles slid off her wrists. It only took seconds before a distant warmth rushed back to her spine. A flicker of her

bonds breathed to life inside her, her mind focused with clarity once more, a part of her soul restored.

Her bonds enveloped her like a cocoon, edging to her core and into her hands. It would be too easy to flare and force Draven to cower, but she bit down on her contempt and pulled on her tether, forcing the bonds to quiet.

Breathing deeply, she swung her leg over Orion's saddle and hopped down onto the cobblestone.

Draven stood mere inches from her, staring down at her with suspicion. "Do not test me, Starborne."

Astraia couldn't help the smile that tugged at the corner of her mouth. "I wouldn't dream of it."

She could have sworn she heard him curse as she strode past him, straight for the infected man who was still convulsing on the ground.

Many onlookers had dispersed, eager to put distance between themselves and the Plagued. The spectators who remained whispered amongst themselves as Astraia approached, gasping as she knelt beside him.

She surveyed his wounds, noticing he likely had been infected for some time, given the extent of damage the boils had caused to his eyes and hands.

Steeling herself, she closed her eyes, diving into her Sacrifice bond, allowing it to rise to the surface of her mind. Making sure she held firm to her tether, she pushed the bond beyond her spine, into her fingertips.

Astraia did not have to open her eyes to see the bright blue light illuminated her hands, the crowd gasping and someone whispering, "Starborne."

Ignoring the mutterings, she stretched out her hands, placing them gently on the chest of the man, allowing warmth to seep from her into his cold skin.

For a moment, she allowed a memory of Elion to flash before her closed eyes. They were racing down the beach on horseback. Sand kicked up behind their horses as they flew

across the beach, wind whipping through Astraia's dark hair. Elion laughed as he tried to pass her, his face moving in slow motion, as if frozen in time.

Astraia's breath slowed as she packed away the memory inside the corner of her mind, then released more of Sacrifice, feeling the Plague lift from the man.

She opened her eyes, seeing the boils fade and color return to his skin as his breath became more even. More gasps filtered through the crowd, watching as death lost its victim.

Astraia began to rein in her bond, the blue glow fading from her hands. Peering out of the corner of her eye, Draven approached, the clanking of the manacles making her pulse quicken.

She stood slowly, backing away from the healed man and from Draven.

"You said ten minutes. That's all I needed." Then she whispered—not to Draven, but to herself, "No more cages."

She stared into his amber eyes, lingering a moment longer than she should before forcefully channeling Power, driving it forward .

A blinding white light erupted around her, more screams rippling through the townspeople, before she vanished.

CHAPTER 8

Order is a concept, a fanciful desire, unless solidified in action. Thus, Balance sustained order through his guidance and allocation of blessings. We too must bridge the gap between disarray and harmony. Only then, with our deeds and conduct, can the realm flourish with the Stars.

TRUTINORIS, PRIEST OF BALANCE



ASTRAIA'S CLOAK RUSTLED BEHIND HER as she sped down alleyways, weaving through buildings, unsure of her destination but certain of her motive.

Get as far away from the bounty hunter as possible.

The sound of rushing water was her only compass as she sprinted, slowing as she came to groups of townspeople in an attempt to avoid suspicion. Tugging her cloak lower over her head, she pushed her way through a particularly busy part of the market as shopkeepers offered their wares and haggled prices. The roar of the crowd deadened the anxiety threatening to overcome her.

She needed only to reach the bridge, then she could lose herself in Virellia. Without Orion, it would be difficult to cover ground quickly, but she could stow away in a wagon if needed or temporarily borrow a horse.

A disturbance up ahead gave Astraia pause as she craned her neck to see what the commotion was. She could just make out three Celestial Guards riding down the street toward her, shouting at the townspeople to clear the way.

A man beside her muttered to his companion, "They're looking for that Starborne."

Her pulse quickened as she backed away from the street and ducked into a dark alleyway. Cursing under her breath, she ran

through the shadows.

Astraiia's boots pounded against the ground, lungs burning with each breath, her newly returned bond humming beneath her skin like a barely caged storm.

She was almost to the other end of the alley, close to the docks, when her back slammed against the stone wall, her breath knocked out of her.

Rough hands grab her wrists, pinning them above her head.

Her eyes adjusted to the darkness to find glowing molten eyes glaring back at her.

"You're going to get yourself killed," he breathed, both of them panting.

"You think I care?" she seethed, teeth bared, trying to pull her hands down out of his grasp.

"You lit up half the district like a beacon. If the Court's eyes didn't see it, the bounty hunters did."

"I saved a man's life. That used to count for something."

"Not if it gets you killed." His voice was low, harsh, clipped. But his eyes searched hers—like he wasn't sure if she was about to collapse or combust.

Astraiia's bonds were still humming, on edge from the threats surrounding her. "You will never let me go. I use my bond to give people a sliver of hope, and you still don't care. All you care about is your bounty."

"Now you're finally using your head."

Astraiia stilled, her breath catching.

"If I'm not the one holding you," he continued, quieter now, "some other hunter will find you. And they won't offer manacles. They will offer the sword or worse."

She swallowed, her throat tight at the truth in his words. His body still blocked her way, heat radiating between them.

"Don't pretend you care about me," she muttered, glaring at him.

“I don’t. But I care about keeping you alive.”

They stared at each other, weighing the gravity of the moment. Astraia had a choice—which cage she could accept. The cage that kept her bonds quiet but her skin intact, or a cage of inevitable torture.

Draven stepped back, lowering her wrists, but kept a hand wrapped around her arm. “Come on. Before someone less patient finds you.”

“And if I don’t?”

He looked at her sternly as the sound of boots and clanking armor echoed down a nearby street. “Then you better pray to the Stars the next person who finds you still thinks you’re worth more alive.”

—
“There.” Draven motioned just ahead to a sign hanging above a door that read, *The Capri Inn*. He still held her arm, but did not bind her with the manacles, which puzzled Astraia.

The smell of baking bread and roasted meat floated through the air as they drew closer to the inn. The noise of boisterous patrons reverberated off the stone walls of the alleyway. Tired and suddenly famished, she eagerly stepped through the door held wide by her captor.

The inn was full of guests either grabbing a drink from the bar or eating their meal. A true melting pot of Astradeon with people from all over the continent.

Astraia’s eyes flitted between the tables, first noticing a small group of acolytes from the Hollow City temples, wearing their white robes and heads shaved.

Seated at the bar were two men dressed in furs and wearing leather armor, a custom of the Skyforge Peaks dwellers. Their long beards were braided with small white beads. Old stories once said the beads were whittled from Drakari bones, the once great beasts that flew across the empyrean as stewards of Rage, their massive bat-like wings carrying their enormous scaled bodies leagues without effort, breathing fire as judgement.

Other unassuming people were seated at various tables, laughter and conversation filling the entire room.

Her mouth tugged into a smile at the sight of the people. The resilience of Astradeon's people never ceased to amaze her. The Constellations had left them, forsaken them, but they still found a will to keep living. The world might have darkened, but there was still some Starlight left in the hearts of the people.

Astraia noticed Draven shift beside her, and she stole a sideways glance toward him, only to find him staring at her.

Without a word, Draven dropped her arm and strode to the barkeeper, inquiring about a room.

She took advantage of the brief reprieve to breathe deeply, the realization of her predicament crashing down on her. There was no clear path ahead. Astraia was a tactician, born and bred to ascertain her enemy's weaknesses and exploit them to achieve her goals, but she had not prepared to be caught in a hunter's snare.

Failure was for the powerless. Astraia was not powerless. She was power reborn, and she would escape. There was no alternative.

The innkeeper barely glanced Astraia's way, even with her cheeks flushed, cloak battered and soiled with dirt and the blood of her enemies, and eyes like twin storm fronts.

Draven dropped some solas into the innkeeper's hand and returned to her side holding a single key.

She glared, heat rushing to her face.

"You don't have to like it. But I still don't trust you."

Without another word, he gestured toward the stairs, allowing Astraia to lead.

With a sigh, she walked ahead of him and climbed the narrow wooden staircase in silence. The hallway flickered in candlelight and smelled of rain mixed with damp stone.

Draven moved in front of her to the nearest door to the staircase and unlocked it. Astraia stood in the doorway,

irritation flaring as she gazed at the moonlit room.

One bed. One chair.

“I am not sharing a bed with you,” she said flatly.

“Wasn’t planning on it, Starborne,” he said as he threw his pack on the ground and sat on the edge of the bed, shrugging off his boots.

She stepped further into the room, floorboards creaking, and shut the door. “You could have let me go, let me disappear. I would have never sought you out. Why did you chase me?” she asked as she shrugged off her cloak, throwing it on the worn cushioned chair.

“Because I’ve seen what Celestial Guards and bounty hunters do to Starborne like you. Believe me, I’m doing you a favor.”

Heat rushed to Astraia’s face.

“Look,” he said, eyeing her, “I could’ve handed you over already. Chained, unconscious, maybe missing a finger. But I didn’t.”

“You want gratitude?” she snapped.

“I want you to shut up and stay alive.”

Astraia huffed, making her way to the chair, and angled it to face the bed, the chair legs scraping against the floor. With an exhale, she plopped into the chair and looked at Draven with contempt.

“If you touch me while I’m sleeping,” she said, “I’ll slit your throat and burn you from the inside out for good measure.”

“If I touch you, it will be to put those manacles back on,” he said, deadpan.

“Try it.” Challenge laced her words.

He gave a half-tired laugh, running his hand through his hair. “Stars, you are exhausting.”

“Good,” she said, a small smile of satisfaction creeping onto her face.

“And you stink,” he said, nose wrinkled.

“What?” She gaped at him, taken aback. Of all the things for him to say, this was unexpected.

“I’m not going to be stuck in this pathetically small room with you smelling like Plague rot and blood. Use the washroom.” He pointed to the door beside the fireplace, one Astraia had neglected to notice earlier.

She snorted. “Mighty bounty hunter unbothered by leading an innocent woman to death, but sneers at foul stench? My, how the mighty have fallen.”

Draven argued to his feet, making her pulse quicken and muscles tense, readying for a fight. He snatched his satchel from the floor, yanking a white shirt from the bag, and threw it to her.

Reflexively, she caught the shirt, eyes wide as she looked at him.

“Wash before I dunk you in the river myself,” he growled, turning his back to her and striding to the door. “I’m getting a drink. Don’t even think about trying to escape. I’ll know.”

He shut the door. The sound of the lock turning made Astraia’s blood boil.

She cursed at him, grasping the shirt—*his* shirt—and opened the washroom door.

“Oh, thank the Stars,” she moaned as she discovered a large tub with modernized plumbing. A luxury she had not experienced in years. She took full advantage of the fact, letting her muscles relax in scalding heat and using a healthy amount of the vanilla soap she found to clear away rot, death, and days of running.

Finally satisfied, her skin purified from slaughter, Astraia climbed out of the tub. There was a small mirror on the wall next to the wash basin. She paused at the woman staring back at her.

Although her body was tired from fighting and running for days, her face glowed, a radiance beaming back at the mirror. Her eyes no longer looked haunted and her hair glistened with stardust in the lamplight. The Sacrifice lumenmark glistened in the lamplight, reflecting the Pegasus Constellation on her skin. The brand of the Starborne.

Her gaze fell to the shirt lying on the table next to her. “Stars save me.”

But she really did not have any clothes to wear. This journey was never supposed to happen. It was either wear the shirt, or wear nothing. And *that* was not an option.

With a sigh, she pulled the shirt over her head, the fabric falling to just above her knees, brushing against bare skin like a phantom touch. It smelled like pine and firelight and something darker—something that reminded her she was still alive. Her bond flickered...and she didn't push it down, sending warmth up her spine.

She breathed deeply, finally coming to terms with her plight. Captured. She had been captured. After five years of hiding, her efforts were counted worthless in a matter of a few days.

But she was not shackled. He had left her unbound. She could work with this fortunate slip-up.

Sighing, she opened the door to find the bounty hunter asleep on the bed, his massive frame taking up every inch of space on the mattress.

Unbelievable, she thought. He must have an unnatural ability to separate his emotions from his actions—hunting down Starborne in exchange for solas and still managing to sleep like an infant.

A flicker of hope fluttered in her stomach. She crept toward his hulking form, standing just beside the edge of the bed. She stared at his face, his brows no longer furrowed, his mouth in a relaxed line. His beard had grown since their first encounter in Orastrea, more than a shadow now. A small strand of his golden-brown hair fell over his forehead, obscuring one of his eyelids. She fought the urge to sweep it to the side of his face.

The realization hit her like a wave. He was beautiful. She hated him for it.

Shiny metal caught her eye as she stared at the sleeping captor. The room key peeked from beneath his shirt, hung loosely on a cord around his neck.

Her hand extended toward his chest, her eyes trained on the key. Freedom was within her reach. All she needed to do was take it.

Warmth emanated from his skin as she lowered her fingertips toward his chest. Her breath hitched.

“I wouldn’t do that, Starborne.”

Astraia’s hand snapped back as she stifled a cry.

Draven’s eyes remained closed, a smirk on his lips. “But I applaud the effort,” he said as he opened one eye to look at her.

Blood rushed to her face, embarrassed at being caught and equally vexed. “Stars, you are insufferable,” she seethed, stomping over to the chair and collapsing into the worn cushions.

“Good,” he replied, closing both eyes once more.

CHAPTER 9

The stone masonry appears to have been buffed; the etchings no longer raised on the walls. The ancient language is also no longer visible on the columns, making it appear washed clean – as though the temple is an omen to an unknown Constellation.

RUINS IN THE CELESTIAL WASTES: VOLUME 1



THE NIGHTMARES VISITED AGAIN.

This time, she was staring at Elion and her father shouting, the sound of their voices muffled behind some sort of barrier as her mother crept from a corner of the room toward Astraia.

The woman's eyes filled with rage. She jabbed a finger at Astraia and yelled, "You did this! Stupid, selfish girl!"

Astraia tried to scream back at her, but no sound left her lips.

She turned to Elion just as thunder rumbled the stone beneath her feet. An ear-piercing shrill filled her ears, breaking the muffled sound barrier.

Elion looked at her, those green eyes wide with fear. "You are Starlight, Astraia. You will not fall."

Bright light erupted in the room, whiter than snow, brighter than the sun. It pulsed and engulfed Elion.

"No!" A blood-curdling scream tore from Astraia as she reached for Elion.

Blackness consumed her.

"Traia! Traia! Wake up!" someone was shouting at her.

Her eyes flew open, and within the span of a breath, she had pulled her dagger hidden under the chair cushion and pointed it under the dark figure's chin.

A soft white glow radiated from her body, her bond awakened, as the light illuminated Draven's face. Panic filled his eyes.

"Traia, it's me. It's just me." He spoke softly, not retreating from the tip of her blade.

She blinked, clearing the fog of her dream. She eyed her hand, clasping her Celestial dagger.

"It's okay. You're okay," he said gingerly.

Sweat coated her forehead. Her damp hair clung to her neck as she nodded and finally lowered her dagger.

Draven let out a breath, running one hand through his disheveled hair as he stood in front of her. "You were screaming, then you started to flare. What was that?"

Astraia stood, her legs unsteady, then walked to the window. She looked at the starless sky, a sliver of the moon visible, casting a soft glow on her face. She took a deep breath, willing herself to open a place of her heart she had closed off to everyone, sometimes even herself.

"It was a nightmare. I have it...a lot," she explained, focusing her eyes on the inky blackness above her.

"Do you need to talk about it?" Draven asked, not a hint of judgment in his voice as she heard him step up beside her.

She blew out a breath, holding back tears threatening to spill, a lump forming in her throat. Astraia was not sure what made her tongue loosen around the bounty hunter. Maybe it was the anticipation of death, or finally surrendering to the pain, but she no longer cared.

"It's the worst day of my life. I relive it every time. Sometimes small details change, but it always ends the same."

She paused, waiting for a retort from Draven. When none came, she continued.

"It's about my younger brother, Elion. He was my best friend, the only person who truly cared and loved me for who I was, not my bond." Her voice quivered. It was the first time in five years she had uttered her brother's name. Five years since

the day he was taken from her. “He was reckless, a free spirit. My parents expected more of him, but he didn’t care. They expected a lot of me too, a Starborne. Our father, he...he betrayed us. Betrayed Elion. And our mother just watched, blaming me for the feud between my father and brother.”

Her voice softened, unable to hold back tears now as she recalled that day—when she was left alone. “One day, my father revealed the horrible plans he had for my brother. I watched as they fought, screaming at each other. My mother yelled at me. Then...it happened. I had never known until that day that I was dual bonded. That not only had I been chosen by Sacrifice, but also by Power. It was untethered, raw, and undisciplined. I was so angry and wanted to protect Elion and destroy my father. I flared. Power and Sacrifice. Together.”

The silence in the small room was deafening, her pulse pounding in her ears.

“And I killed them. My father, my mother. Elion. I destroyed them.”

She was weeping, tears flowing freely down her face as she stared absently into the darkness through the window.

Her brother had died because of her. Because of the Stars and the bonds they gave her. She had lived with that torment alone—until now. Now, this maddening, amber-eyed stranger stood beside her like he belonged there. Perhaps maybe, just maybe, her pain did not have to be hers alone.

So many times she had considered ending her suffering, dark thoughts clouding her mind as she envisioned jumping from the white fjords into the Aetherdeep, letting the icy waves claim her.

But whenever those dark thoughts entered her mind, Elion’s last words would echo in her memory.

You are Starlight, Astraia. You will not fall.

She let all the years of grief pour from her as she stood beside the bounty hunter. Why she had decided to trust her deepest regret with a practical stranger, she did not know.

Something inside pulled her toward him, even though her mind screamed at her to run.

Draven's little finger grazed the top of her hand, causing an electric shockwave to rush through her blood, coursing up her spine. Her bonds roared to life, rising up to meet the surge. Bright spots swarmed her vision, thoughts became hazy, and a breath caught in her throat.

Draven's eyes widened, gaze flickering down to where their skin met, then back up at Astraia's face. She lifted her eyes to meet his.

His mouth opened, then shut again. She couldn't be sure, but something flickered behind his amber gaze—something not unlike guilt.

“It's not your fault, Traia. You are not your bonds.” His voice was low and steady.

She did not believe him, but the secret that had tormented her waking and sleeping thoughts was slightly less smothering. She no longer harbored her regret alone, letting it eat her inside.

Several seconds ticked by before Astraia realized she was staring at him intently. Heat rushed to her cheeks. She cleared her throat and backed away.

Draven cleared his throat, raking his hand through his hair again. “Right. Well, we should get some rest.” He turned and stopped in front of the bed. “You can take the bed.”

He did not look at her as he stepped over to the chair and slumped down.

Astraia blinked, confused, but did not refuse as she lowered onto the bed, inhaling the scents of pine and wood smoke.

CHAPTER 10

*Why do you seek the living among the fallen? Why
do you pine for the days of old? When the land
teemed with fortune and the blessed were
celebrated? Why do you heap sorrow on your soul?
Is it not better to bury the lost? Is it not better to
accept what can never be again?*

STARLESS NIGHT



ASTRAIA WOKE TO THE SOUND of a light knock on her door.

She glanced outside the window of her room and noticed the sun had barely risen. Her eyes fell to the chair, which was empty.

A loud huff escaped her lips. She swung her legs over the bed, toes grazing the cold floorboards—only to hear another knock.

“Since when do you knock?” she barked, flinging open the door.

Only to find a short young girl standing in her doorway, holding a wrapped parcel and visibly trembling with fear.

“Oh,” Astraia said, surprised. “I’m sorry, I thought you were...someone else.”

“So sorry, miss. I didn’t mean to disturb you,” she squeaked. “Your companion asked us to launder these and return them to you by morning.” She offered Astraia the parcel, keeping her eyes lowered.

“Oh. Umm. Thank you.” Astraia took the package from her outstretched hands.

The girl curtsied and scurried down the hall.

Closing the door, Astraia unwrapped the parcel to find her clothes were freshly cleaned, including her navy cloak.

A smile ghosted her lips. It was such a small gesture, perhaps one others would overlook. But to her, it was the most kindness she had been shown in years.

A few minutes later, she was dressed in her white tunic and black leathers. She strapped her Celestial dagger to her thigh. She had kept Draven's shirt tucked away in her satchel, not sure if it would be worse to keep it or more mortifying to return it. Slinging her Starwood bow across her back with her quiver, she made for the door.

Hesitating, she grasped the doorknob and turned, shocked to find it unlocked. Either the bounty hunter intended for her to leave, or he had forgotten to lock it. She very much doubted it was the latter.

The Capri Inn was already buzzing with morning guests. The smell of fresh bread and tea floated through the air, and Astraia found herself salivating by the time she sunk into one of the chairs at a free table.

An older woman with flour covering her apron brought her some cakes and hot tea as Astraia surveyed the room.

She spotted the same two brawny men wearing furs sitting at another table, conversing in hushed voices. A few other men lumbered through the inn doors, appearing to be fishermen with the looks of their damp clothes and smell of fish and briny water wafting from them.

Taking a sip of her tea, her attention fell to another man leaning against the bar. Dark unkempt hair and darker eyes. A sword flashed under his traveling cloak. He was laughing at something the innkeeper had said when his head turned and his eyes met hers, dark gray and mesmerizing.

Astraia held his gaze for a few moments, before returning to her tea and ignoring the redness she could feel creeping up her neck.

A cough sounded beside her, startling her.

The dark-eyed man stood in front of her table, more attractive than he had appeared from a distance. His hand rested on his sword.

“I don’t suppose you would mind if I joined you?” He smiled and began to pull out the chair next to her.

A wave of desert heat bloomed in her core, and her bond erupted from her spine in recognition.

“Actually, she does,” a husky, low voice growled. Draven’s hand gripped the dark-eyed man’s wrist holding onto the chair.

The man grimaced, wide-eyed at the sight of the enormous bounty hunter. “Apologies.”

Draven clenched his arm tighter, his knuckles whitening, then shoved the man’s hand away.

The man rubbed his arm and retreated without a word, leaving the inn entirely.

“What was that?” Astraia demanded, eyes narrowed at him.

“Nothing. I didn’t like him,” Draven replied flatly and sat down next to her, signaling the innkeeper for tea.

“You don’t even know him.” She huffed, irritation coating her tongue.

“I don’t need to,” he said, voice low and tone more serious.

She got as close as she dared to the bounty hunter’s face as she spoke through gritted teeth, “You may hold my body captive, bounty hunter, but you do not decide who I speak to.”

His amber eyes found hers, and her breath caught. The room around them blurred, sounds hushed, as suddenly she was bathing in the pools of molten light.

Why does this man make me react this way?

He was infuriating and pretentious and moody—yet she could not decide if she wanted to stab him or just melt into his stare. Stabbing him would be much more useful.

“Maybe not, but you don’t have the best history with judgment of character,” he replied, his face mere inches from

hers, that irritating smirk forming on his lips.

“I have excellent judgment of character. I knew you were going to be a thorn in my side from the first moment you tried to capture me in the alleyway in Tenebris, and you have only continued to solidify my verdict.” Her voice was on edge as she fought to control her urge to cut out his tongue.

“At least my intentions are plain. I cannot say the same for others’. Besides”—his voice lowered to a deep whisper—“a threat to you is a threat to me.”

“Right, because I’m an asset.”

“Because you’re *mine*,” he breathed.

She stopped breathing. Her pulse thundered in her ears. She opened her mouth, then closed it. No clever retort, no venomous quip came to her tongue.

“Stars,” she muttered, tearing her eyes away. “You’re insufferable.”

Draven pulled away from her, nonchalantly drinking his tea.

Astraia sat stunned but refused to acknowledge his declaration.

What is he playing at?

CHAPTER II

In the tenth year of the reign of King Illias, Ruler of the Celestial Court, King of Astradeon, the Celestial Wars began. First, in the heavens, as Dominion sparred with his enemies, bringing them low with trickery and deception. Then, in the realm, by the hands of his stewards, spreading shadow and unholy fire across Luxterra.

BROKEN: THE CELESTIAL WAR



“SO WHAT NOW, BOUNTY HUNTER?” Astraia all but shouted as they wove through the crowded streets. “If you think I’m going to readily let you parade me to the Celestial Court to meet my death, you clearly have not been paying attention to who I am and what I’m willing to do for my freedom.”

Merchants were hurriedly opening their shops, while boats moored on the banks, coming and going as bees to a hive.

After breakfast, Draven had been unbearably quiet as he gripped her arm and all but dragged her outside. Now, she had the mind to stab him in the back. Another curiosity she could not shake was the fact that he left her armed. He never once tried to make her relinquish her dagger or bow. As though he did not deem her a threat. Eyeing him now, exposing his back to her as he wove between townspeople, only solidified this theory.

Draven finally turned off the main street and approached a courier emporium. The outside of the shop had a glass window with gold etching that read, *Falconry Correspondence—officially sanctioned by the Celestial Court*. Draven did not pause at the window, pulling open the door and shoving Astraia through the threshold.

The shop was musty; the smell of saltwater and the clear odor of bird droppings made Astraia’s toes curl. A young

woman stood in front of the teller's counter, holding out a small box wrapped in cloth and tied with string.

The teller smiled as he spoke. "Of course, we can deliver this to Tenebris by nightfall. Our falcons are the best in Astradeon."

He was an elderly man with white, disheveled hair that almost mimicked a bird's nest. Gold-rimmed spectacles were perched on the end of his long nose, giving him the appearance of a wise owl. Even his brown vest and white long-sleeved tunic were covered in brown and white feathers. Astraia wondered if he merely worked here or if he actually slept with the falcons.

The Astradeon falconry correspondence system had been established long before Astraia was born. The falcons were born in the wilds of the Skyforge Peaks, high enough that only the native folk could traverse the terrain to find them. The falcons were trained by elite falconry masters, but the real magic was the ability of the falcons to understand where they were meant to travel and how to return to their original starting point.

As a little girl, her father owned his own falcon for private correspondence. The bird had been mostly brown with some white feathers atop his head, giving him the appearance of wearing a crown. Astraia had given him the name Prince Aquilias after the constellation, petting him frequently and slipping him biscuits. Her father scolded her for treating the falcon as a pet, saying she would grow too attached and when the falcon did not return one day, she would cry.

Her father had been right.

The young woman paid the teller and turned to leave. Her eyes locked onto Draven, pink flushing to her cheeks as she passed him.

Astraia's eyes rolled. "No wonder the size of your ego could match a Drakari," she muttered, loud enough for him to hear her.

"You would be surprised," he quipped.

“Be right with you, sir,” the teller chimed as he walked through a curtain behind the counter.

Astraia could just make out several compartments filled with falcons, all eager to take flight. The teller stopped in front of a rather large bird, strapping the box to his leg. The old man stretched out his arm, allowing the falcon to perch on it as he walked to the large open window at the back of the shop. With forceful enunciation, the teller boomed, “Tenebris”—and with that, the falcon took flight.

A proud smile bloomed on the old man’s face as he ambled back toward the counter. “That never gets old. Now, what can I help you with today?” His gaze flickered between Draven and Astraia, clearly unsure what to make of the pair.

“There should be a letter that arrived this morning for me,” Draven said, “from the Celestial Court system.”

Astraia flinched, her bleak circumstances crashing over her like cold water. It had to be orders from the king. Who else would be sending Draven letters from Court? Certainly not a lover—there was not a courtesan within a hundred leagues that would tolerate this brute.

Her lips pursed, forming a line as she glared at the back of Draven’s head, her knuckles white. She could drive her dagger in his neck right now, rid herself of his scheming for good. But a tiny voice in her head told her to bide her time. Astraia would be free again, but slaughtering him in the falconry was not the opportune moment.

“Ah, yes, of course.” The teller looked over his spectacles at Draven, then moved to a series of shelves to his right. After a moment of filtering through scrolls and letters, he snatched a letter with the royal seal embossed in wax on the back. “Here you are, sir. Will that be all?”

He slid the letter across the wooden counter toward Draven, who promptly snatched it up and shoved it in his cloak.

“Yes, thank you.”

Without even sparing Astraia a glance, Draven marched out of the falconry courier’s door.

Astraia was not accustomed to idleness, always finding ways to either secretly heal those in the slums or go on deliveries for Delphi—may the Stars curse her. So, sitting in the same spot tucked in a corner table of the Capri Inn was making her skin crawl.

Draven had instructed her to stay in the inn as he inquired after their horses and made some preparations. Stars only knew why the bounty hunter spoke cryptically, as if she did not know exactly what kind of preparations he was making. Preparations for her death march.

Astraia had been sitting in her corner of the hall until the sun began to set, drinking tea and munching on bread and cheese as she watched people float in and out of the hall. The urge to bolt out the door and over the bridge to Virellia made her fidget uncontrollably, her foot tapping incessantly on the wooden floors.

The only change of pace for the last hour had been the steady beat of raindrops on the window next to her. The dark clouds continued to linger over Aquarian, comfortably unburdening themselves of rain.

Astraia peered outside at the small grassy field behind the inn, likely as a grazing spot for the horses stabled next door. There were a few apple trees along the edge of the field all in bloom, white flowers dotting the green leaves. It made her yearn for another garden, full of the most exotic and wondrous plants in the realm.

The sound of wood scraping against wood startled Astraia from her daydreaming.

A man, one of the burly ones from the Skyforge Peaks, had pulled out the chair next to her, his frame engulfing the seat. He had a cup of ale in his hand, with clear evidence of previously consumed cups lingering in his beard.

“Oi, you been here a while, ain’t ya?” His voice was husky, slurred as he spoke, glancing sideways at her.

Astraira only cocked an eyebrow, gritting her teeth in annoyance. She already had one egotistical brute to deal with; she did not need a second. Instead, she shifted in her seat, angling away from the barbarian and stared out the window. Her right hand slid to her dagger on her thigh, her fingertips grazing the embossed hilt.

“Hey now.” He belched, the stench of ale on his breath. “I just wanna talk. Hadn’t talked to a pretty girl in a while.”

He slammed his mug down on the table, sticky ale sloshing over the table. Before Astraira could react, he had grabbed her chair and turned her to face him. One hand lingered on her chair, his other hand braced on the table, preventing her from leaving.

“Perhaps I do not wish to speak to a drunk,” she snapped, her bonds reacting to the threat, begging to be unleashed. She gripped her tether, images of Elion flashing before her eyes as she bit down the desire to flare. Her tether was slippery, uncertain and wavering. She did not trust herself to control Power and resist a flare. There could be countless bounty hunters in the inn. She could be staring at one right now.

“What’s the matter, girl? I’m just lookin for a good time.” A sloppy smile appeared on his bearded face. His right hand inched away from the edge of the chair and came to rest on her upper left thigh.

Her bonds were screaming now. White spots dotted her vision as Astraira tried to dampen the overwhelming hunger to flare and turn the man into a pillar of ash.

“Remove your hand, drunkard, or lose it,” she growled, her skin burning from Power lingering just beneath the surface.

“Ahh, so yer a feisty one, eh?” His speech was garbled as he slid his hand further up her thigh.

In a breath, she pulled her dagger from her thigh and slammed it down through the man’s left hand straight through the table.

He wailed, yanking his right hand away from her thigh, and made to grab the dagger that now speared his other hand to the

wood. Astraia jumped from her chair, wrenching her dagger free, which elicited another scream.

The entire inn had gone silent, all eyes glued to the scene unfolding in the corner of the room.

The man grasped his bleeding hand, panting as he spoke. “You’re gonna pay for that, girl.”

Astraia stood, and in one swift motion, grabbed his long blond hair and yanked his head back, the cold black metal of her dagger pressed to his throat. A single drop of blood dripped from the blade as it sliced through his neck, barely breaking his skin.

“If you ever force yourself on another woman without her permission again, I will personally seek you out and cut every finger from your hands, then your manhood, before I erase your name from memory.”

She removed the dagger, allowing it to cut deeper, before shoving his head down and walking away from the table.

Just as she made for the door, a pair of amber eyes caught her gaze, a smile lurking on his face as he leaned against the door frame.

“Where do you think you’re going?” a low voice called from behind her as Astraia stomped to the grassy field behind the inn.

White light glinted beneath her fingernails as blue hues lit up the creases of her palms. Raindrops pelted her face, steam rising where the water met her skin. She was mere seconds from flaring. She had felt a disconnect with her bonds since the manacles had been removed, as if they were more on edge than before. The scene in the inn proved control was slipping further from her grasp.

Astraia had never been trained to channel Power. She had attempted to discover the way it flowed through her and the ability it gave her to cause massive destruction and also hone her senses, but she had never been able to master it without

proper instruction. Her inadequacy made her a walking bearer of destruction—it seemed a fitting penance for her failings.

“With any luck, to Volpes, and far away from you!” Astraia shouted over the rain, not turning to face Draven.

He had stood by and watched the man accost her. Of this she was certain. Why, she could not fathom. This only incited her further.

She stopped mid-stride through the field, lightning striking in the distance and a clap of thunder rolling down the valley in answer. Her wet hair stuck to her neck as rain streamed down her face.

Astraia turned slowly, her damp cloak and tunic clinging to her skin and her boots sloshing in the muddy field.

Heat rushed to her spine, flowing from her center to her hands and feet. The rain no longer met her skin, but simply disappeared into mist from the scorching heat pouring from her. The glow of her fingers was barely contained, bright light ebbing into her vision. Any second, her eyes would start glowing white. If any passerby or inn patron noticed her, her demise would be certain.

Dark thoughts slithered into her mind, pushing her to the precipice. She was trapped. Trapped and incompetent and dangerous. Perhaps she deserved to die at the hands of the false king, to protect the people of Astradeon. Perhaps, she should burn out right here, in this field—Stars and their blessings be damned.

A hushed whisper in the tumultuous sea of her thoughts hissed in the darkness, “*You could burn them. Be free forever. All you have to do is release.*”

Astraia opened her eyes, not even realizing they had shut. Her eyes fixed on Draven, now only a few steps from her.

“Why did you let him assault me?” she demanded, eyes still glowing.

“I believe you told me that I do not control who speaks to you,” he replied, crossing his arms across his broad chest. “Besides, you appeared to have the situation under control.”

“Since when do you listen to me?” Astraia shouted, stepping closer to the bounty hunter with every syllable. “You, who would claim to be a noble member of the king’s illustrious pack of dogs, let some drunkard lay hands on your asset? You are a coward and a hypocrite.”

Heat enveloped them. Either from her own bonds or from him, she could not discern.

His smirk vanished, replaced with a hard line. She had struck a nerve.

“Not so noble now that your true form is brought to light?” A smile of satisfaction curved her lips.

“You know nothing of my true form, Starborne. As I am sure I am not fully aware of your own.” His voice was low, harsh as he spoke, looking down into her blazing eyes, a challenge.

The rain pummeled the bounty hunter and Starborne as they stood in the tall grass. Lightning flashed around them as thunder boomed across the darkening skies, a dance between two threatening forces.

“My true form would give even you nightmares, bounty hunter,” she whispered, feeling her bonds flutter at the impact of her words. True fear coated her voice.

The Stars had cursed her to fear herself more than any other in the realm.

All her fight left her in the span of a breath. Her bonds crept back, allowing her to firmly grasp her tether and pull them into submission. The light from her hands snuffed out, and the heat from her bonds waned.

Suddenly, she was freezing as her soaked tunic clung to her skin, sending a shiver down her spine. Rain-soaked strands of hair fell across her eyes as she continued to gaze up at the bounty hunter, all light vanishing from her eyes. He did not break her stare, an inkling of concern on his face.

“I came in as you stabbed the drunk,” he said. His eyes flashed with something akin to fury. “If I had been there, I would have cut off his hand and shoved it down his throat and

watched him gag on it. Then I would have slaughtered his friends for simply standing and letting it happen.”

Astraia’s eyes widened in disbelief.

“Because I am your asset,” she sneered.

“Something like that,” he replied, taking a step backward, pointing toward the inn.

A command. Not a request.

Without another word, Astraia trudged through the muddy field with the bounty hunter at her heels.

CHAPTER 12

The provinces boil over with contempt, waging wars amongst the Starborne within. Peace evades them, like the winds that flow between the snowcapped peaks of Skyforge. The people seek a scapegoat for their suffering, for the barren lands and barren tables. Those Star blessed are so easily hated, with lumenmarks as the target.

POLENTIAS, SCRIBE TO THE PRIEST OF POWER



ASTRAIA MOANED AS HER CHILLED body slid into the hot bath water, burning her frozen fingers and toes. Leaning her head against the back of the tub, she attempted to decipher the interaction in the field. The glimmer of empathy from the bounty hunter unnerved her. It could all be a trick to tame her before marching her to the foot of the throne. Or he might have been genuine—which made Astraia’s pulse quicken with trepidation.

Heartless bounty hunter determined to kill her, she could handle. A man with compassion and a conscience was an impediment in her plans.

She sighed, dunking her head under water. She closed her eyes, allowing her mind to clear as sounds muffled. If only her mind could be so quiet without the constant war between her bonds overtaking her and darkness calling to her like a siren of the Atherdeep.

Astraia stepped out of the tub, hands pruned from staying in the warm water so long, and pulled Draven’s shirt over her head. A different kind of warmth skimmed over her skin, with faint hints of pine caressing her nose.

Running her fingers through her wet hair, she opened the door, only to find Draven standing near the fireplace, the faint glimmer of a wax seal—the seal of the Celestial Court—visible beneath his hands as he read a piece of parchment.

Her heart skipped a beat as she realized what he held. Draven glanced up at her and crumpled the letter in his hand before tossing it in the flames.

Astraia bit her tongue as she made her way to the bed. She could feel Draven's eyes boring into her as she sat on the edge of the mattress, running fingers through her tangled hair.

She wanted to scream, demanding he let her go if he truly did care if she lived or died.

Before she could confront him, he turned and stalked out the door. Astraia flinched as he slammed the door behind him. She strained to hear if the lock clicked, but there was no such sound.

Surprised, she jumped up from the bed and tiptoed to the door, placing her hand on the doorknob. Hesitating, her hand lingered on the cool metal before she slowly turned the knob. A welcoming creak of the door opening made Astraia's breath catch. He had not locked it.

Carefully, she slid the wooden door closed, tiptoeing over to the fireplace and her clothes that had been drying. This was her chance. She could slip out down the servants' stairwell at the other end of the hall, completely unseen by Draven.

There was no time to get dressed. She shoved her clothes into her satchel, and as she reached for her dagger, something caught her eye in the fire. A small sliver of parchment remained from the letter Draven attempted to burn.

Astraia paused, stooping lower to see if she could make out any of the damning message. Most of the letter had already burned, but there, on the edge of the parchment were two words that had been underlined—*bring her*.

Those two words were all the motivation Astraia needed to stow her dagger in her satchel. Slinging her bow and quiver over her back, she shoved her feet down into her sodden boots. Quietly, she crept to the door once more, this time not an ounce of hesitation as she wrenched open the door and slipped down the servants' stairs.

The cool night air barreled into her as she opened the side door of the inn. Draven's shirt was not affording her much cover from the foreboding wind as she hurried down the alleyway toward the stables.

There were no lamps in the stables, making it difficult for Astraia to fumble in the darkness. The moon was only half full, providing barely a trickle of light through the open doorways of the stables.

"Orion," she whispered, hoping her steed was as eager to leave this Stars-forsaken town as she was.

A whinny at the far end of the stable made her heart leap with real joy for the first time in weeks. Astraia set down her satchel and bow, pulling open the stall door. Orion nudged his head into her chest.

"Hey, boy, I missed you." She pressed her hand to his head, stroking his black mane. "Let's get out of here," she said as she heaved his saddle over his back and began to fasten the buckle.

"Well, look who we have here."

Astraia froze, dread pooling in her stomach as she turned toward the end of the stable.

There stood the drunkard from Skyforge Peaks, although definitely sober, a lantern in one hand and a bandage wrapped around his other hand.

His two companions flanked either side of him, arms crossed and grotesque grins plastered on their faces. The brute in the middle snarled, his teeth glistening in the lamplight.

"I told you that you would pay." He grinned as he stepped toward her. "Let's see how feisty you are without your weapons." He sneered as he picked up her satchel and quiver and flung them outside. She flinched when her gear made a sickening crunch as it landed on the cobblestone street.

Astraia stood facing her attackers, channeling whatever remaining resolve she had left as she squared her shoulders. "Your mothers must weep as they look at their shameful sons.

Three men against one woman. Pathetic,” she taunted, scouring for her tether in the waves of her mind.

The middle brute growled, shoving the lantern into his companion’s hand and wrenching a cleaver from his back. “I’m going to cut your tongue from that pretty mouth of yours, and then no one will hear your screams.”

Astraia’s breathing quickened as she shoved deeper into the depths of her mind, pushing through the waters, desperately clawing for her tether. All that reflected back at her was darkness.

Panic set in. She could not flare without her tether. She would instantly burn out, killing herself immediately.

Her skills were with the bow and her bonds. She swore under her breath. Maybe if she had taken hand-to-hand combat training more seriously with Elion, she would be able to last longer. Now, she would be mutilated and likely killed or worse.

“Not so feisty any more are we, girl?” He edged closer, cleaver in one hand, his companions chuckling behind him as he advanced.

Astraia stood transfixed, a doe looking into the face of a hunter.

A wave of calm settled over her as her mind stilled. She would not die here, not like this.

She turned, slapping Orion’s flank. He jolted and ran out of the stables, just as Astraia refocused on the three men, a smile spreading across her face.

The gates of her bonds burst open.

Without a tether, the bonds heated instantly, rushing past her spine and directly for her hands. Pain, red-hot, seared through every sinew and muscle, burning her from the inside.

Astraia let out a scream, drowning in the white and blue light now erupting from all around her. The light blasted the men backward, slamming them onto the ground and into the

walls of the stable. Horses in the stalls around her neighed and tried to break down the stall doors, ramming with their hooves.

Astraia's bonds kept flowing, Power and Sacrifice as one. She could feel Sacrifice healing her as her skin burned and peeled away from her flesh. Power was stronger, white, crackling streaks of light burning everything it touched. The stables caught fire, unnatural ivory flames licking the sides of the building.

Two of the men lay still, blood pooling from their eyes and ears, claimed by Dominion. The maimed blond managed to crawl to his knees, holding his cleaver, blood oozing from his nose. Scorch marks had torn open his face, leaving bone exposed, and blackened burnt flesh clung to what was left.

Astraia could barely see through the white flashes, her body succumbing to burnout. More burnt skin flaked away from her body as Power continued to flare. The heat of the burning stables lapped at her feet, burning through her boots.

A sigh escaped her mouth as she closed her eyes and stretched out her hands.

I'll see you soon, Elion, her mind whispered in the blazing inferno.

A coldness pressed over her hands, and suddenly her mind was blank, empty, a void.

Astraia opened her eyes, expecting to see her brother, only to find Draven shouting at her. At least, he appeared to be shouting, but she could not hear any sound coming from his mouth. A warm trickle ran down her neck below her ears—they were bleeding, muffling the chaos unfolding before her.

Blinking again, she looked down at her burned wrists, now encircled with metal manacles. The smooth iciness of the engraved iron hung limply on either wrist, silencing her bonds. Multicolored spots danced across her vision as the blinding white and blue lights were smothered.

Slowly raising her head, her eyelids caked with dried blood, she glanced at the bounty hunter.

“Traia, answer me!” he shouted again, his hands resting on her shoulders.

She blinked once, then nodded, her throat too dry and burned to speak.

Draven nodded back, then turned away from her, facing the last of the attackers who tried to rise from ground with his cleaver.

A flash of black metal gleamed in Draven’s hand—Astraia’s Celestial dagger. With one swift motion, he cut the brute’s hand off. Grasping the severed hand, he shoved it into the man’s mouth with a sickening crunch, breaking his jaw. The force knocked him flat on his back with a thud.

Muffled screams could be heard coming from the man’s disfigured face as he lay in the ashen dirt. Draven drew his broadsword from his back, putting a boot on the chest of the man to pin him down.

“You will never touch her or any woman again,” Draven growled, then slashed his broadsword across the man’s neck, severing his head.

Without a second glance, Draven strode over to Astraia, sheathing his broadsword and her dagger. He placed his hands around hers and looked into her eyes.

“I’m here,” he whispered, his voice low and dark.

She could only nod as she attempted to step forward, but her body collapsed. Draven swept her up in his arms before she hit the floor, cradling her head against his chest. At first, she wanted to protest, but the burns on her skin and raw pain she could feel inside her were enough to silence her refusal for aid.

“Hang on. We need to get out of here before anyone finds you,” he said, hastened out of the burning stable. He scooped up her satchel and bow as they left, darting back to the servants’ stairwell entrance to the inn.

Just as they opened the door, surrounding merchants were shouting about the fire, pouring out of their homes. Patrons of the inn and the barkeeper burst out of the main door, carrying buckets of water.

Astraia felt Draven tug her tighter to his chest as they walked up the stairs. Within seconds he had kicked down the door to their room and gently laid her on the bed.

“Do not move,” he said as he left her side to close the door, then hurried to the washroom, returning with some rags and a basin of water.

She was acutely aware of every single burn on her body. The tip of her nose was black, singed and bone visible. Even her toes were charred, the skin between them completely eviscerated. Red blisters bubbled over her arms and legs, swelling as she lay recumbent, which only intensified her pain as the skin stretched to accommodate the fluid.

Draven knelt beside the bed, wringing the cloth with clean water. “I have to clean some of your wounds before they become infected. I can’t remove the manacles yet to let Sacrifice heal you, or you might flare again. We need to give you more time to recover your bonds.” A different kind of pain echoed back at her from his gaze.

She nodded, still afraid to speak should her throat combust from swelling.

“This may hurt,” he said softly as he began to dab at her worst wounds.

She flinched, her body shaking uncontrollably at the touch of the cloth on her flayed skin. Clenching her teeth, she closed her crusted eyes and tried to focus on a memory—anywhere but here.

But the manacles kept her mind eerily silent. Like a desert, with rolling dunes and no hope of water in sight.

She could feel the blood crusted to her eyes being wiped away. Then her face, every swipe as gentle and tender as he could be. The bounty hunter worked tirelessly, taking his time to cleanse the blood and burns. After a while, Astraia’s body grew numb—either from exhaustion or shock, she was not sure.

Draven made his way to her boots, removing them. He hissed as he surveyed her marred feet but continued to

meticulously clean her wounds despite the damage.

Astraira had not noticed until now that his shirt was somehow intact, as though the fire burned only from within her body but did not scorch her boots or his tunic.

Hours had passed, and the sounds of the men outside putting out the fire were no longer noticeable. Either the stables had burned down, or they managed to douse the flames. Astraira did not care, as long as the horses escaped and the men's bodies burned to ash—an oversight she should have rectified in the dining hall.

Draven finished cleaning her and pulled the chair to the side of the bed where she lay motionless, afraid to move and elicit pain once more.

“Can you drink some water?” he asked, weariness shadowing his eyes.

Astraira nodded slowly, trying to crane her neck from the pillow. Draven supported her head with one hand and brought a canteen of water to her lips. Carefully, he tipped the canteen back, allowing a small stream of water to glide down her scalded throat. She bit back a cry from the pain as she swallowed, her entire throat burning, but she was so thirsty she pushed through.

After she drank, Draven lowered her head, then slumped back in the chair, running a hand through his hair and letting out an exasperated sigh. “Try to sleep. I will remove the manacles after you sleep so you can heal.”

Astraira nodded again, letting her eyes close, willing her body to forget the rippling ache coursing through her body. Just as she felt herself surrendering to fatigue, a calloused finger grazed her cheek, making her burned skin tingle with relief.

A hushed whisper floated through the air as sleep finally took her.

“Forgive me.”

CHAPTER 13

The sacred thirteen Constellations lived harmoniously in the Empyrean since the birth of the cosmos, long before the written world.

THE SHATTERING: A HISTORY



DAWN BROKE AND THE TWITTERING of birds outside the window aroused Astraia from sleep. It took a few moments for her to realize her eyes were swollen almost entirely shut, and the rush of memories from the night's horrors came flooding back.

She attempted to shift in the bed, but her body was like a corpse in rigor mortis. Her back was stiff, aching and throbbing everywhere—even her insides were as though molten lava had been poured down her throat and settled in her gut. She dared not breathe too deep, as she realized her lungs were also damaged. Breathing was like ice shards stabbing her lungs, every inhale as painful as the exhale.

Forcing her swollen eyes as wide as she could, she peered at the chair next to the bed, and the bounty hunter sleeping there. Astraia could faintly make out his disheveled hair, his head at an uncomfortable angle, overextending his neck. She tried to turn her head, but was met with white-hot pain. An unsolicited moan wrenched free from her throat, a searing throb following as the sound escaped.

Draven bolted upright, inhaling sharply, and his gaze landed on hers. Pity and remorse flickered across his eyes before he spoke.

“I’m going to remove the manacles now, okay?” He looked at her in earnest, waiting for her approval.

Fear crept into her mind at the idea of her bonds returning. She had lived with her Sacrifice bond for over a decade, but

Power still frightened her. Her incompetence and lack of control frightened her. What if her tether did not return either? She could never use her bonds again, or she would burn out. Without a doubt, she would never survive another flare like last night.

“I will not let you flare. You have my word,” Draven said firmly, pulling the key from around his neck.

Astraia stilled, inhaling slowly as she buried her fear. She was Starlight. She would not die today.

Nodding, Astraia relaxed her hands, allowing Draven to remove them. The sound of the key turning and metal clinking together as the shackles were released made her pulse quicken.

As soon as the manacles were gone, a flood of emotions came rushing back to her. The desert of her mind was washed over with the sea of her bonds, memories, and feelings—everything that made her who she was.

She was nauseated, her burned stomach now gurgling with acid, and she choked down bile that threatened to burn her throat more. White spots floated in front of her eyes, and she slammed them closed before she fainted.

Refocusing on finding her tether needed to be her priority. Trepidation was her companion as she swam in the murky blackness of her mind. Treading above the surface, she called for Elion, a little more than a whisper echoing in the dark. When there was no response, she swam further, shouting now for her brother. Still no smile or comforting voice flickered in the darkness.

A memory of a locked chest buried deep in her mind resurfaced. Letting the dark seas take her, she sank into the abyss, pulling through the expanse with her hands. Years passed by in seconds as she swam through time itself before she finally saw a subtle golden glow tucked in the deepest corner of her mind.

She made her way to the glow, a small chest appearing in the black depths. She exhaled loudly, relieved, and tipped open the lid to the chest.

A warm light glowed up at her. Elion's smile flashed across her mind. His laugh bubbled from the depths. His teasing tickled her insides.

Stretching out her hand, the delicate memories floated in the expanse until they coalesced into a silvery white thread upon her palm. There was never an end or a beginning to the tether. It just stretched endlessly before her and behind her, as if linked to time. Astraia hated time—always asking for more than it gave.

Slowly, she anchored her tether to her core, and wrenched open the door to Sacrifice. Warmth in her spine spread to her hands, a blue glow pulsing from her palms. Her pain seeped away as Sacrifice worked to heal her mangled body. She let out a small laugh, a tear sliding down her cheek as her body mended.

Her eyes were no longer swollen as she looked at the bounty hunter. A small smile crossed his lips as he gazed at her, the muscles in his shoulders relaxed.

“Thank you,” she croaked, but her throat was no longer in pain.

“Heal, Traia.”

It took several hours for Sacrifice to completely heal her wounds. Even then, soreness still throbbed in her muscles, making every effort annoyingly strained. However, she could walk and talk and eat, so that had to count for something.

Astraia had never been so thankful for her bond before now. She was always grateful to heal others, allowing her some form of penance for her sins, but she had never been on the brink of death herself. Despite Draven's attentiveness, the likelihood of Astraia making a full recovery without the use of her bond would have been miniscule. At the very least, she would have never been able to walk properly again, and her hearing would have been permanently damaged.

She hugged her arms around her chest, pulling her cloak tighter. It was later in the afternoon. The midday meal already

passed as she stood in the grassy field behind the inn. Draven had protested when she began to pull on her clothes to leave their room, saying she needed more time to rest.

But she had simply waved her hand at him, scoffing, and said something along the lines of, “You see what I do to men who assert themselves,” before she sauntered out the door.

To her relief, the bounty hunter had left her in peace as she let the sun’s rays warm her. Her gaze lingered on the burned stables for but a moment, taking in the damage. Half of the twenty stalls had burned completely, but from the gossip she heard this afternoon in the dining hall, none of the horses perished. Astraia uttered a small prayer of thanks for this one good omen.

Before leaving the dining hall, she did hear the barkeep muttering about scattered skeletal remains being found in the wreckage, but they had quickly disposed of the evidence before more whispers ruined the inn’s reputation. Astraia was overcome with a wave of relief and shame walking to the field. She knew the men deserved their fate, but she had killed again—her tainted soul thrust closer to condemnation.

Inhaling deeply, relishing the ease of breathing with fully healed lungs, Astraia forced the dark thoughts back into their cage. She had accepted her damnation the day her brother died. At least now there were three less evil men to plague the realm.

A loud snorting noise broke her from her thoughts as she stood in the field. Looking to her left between some of the blooming apple trees was Orion lazily grazing on sweet grass. As if sensing her stare, his ears perked up, and he raised his head from his feasting, walking toward her.

She smiled, holding up her hand as he approached. He nuzzled his head into her hand, allowing her to scratch between his ears before she patted the side of his neck.

“Hi, boy. I’m so glad you’re safe,” she murmured, resting the side of her head on his enormous neck, his black silky coat warm beneath her face.

He snorted, as if cursing her for being reckless and for slapping him.

Astraia chuckled, then grabbed his reins and led him toward one of the intact stalls of the stables.

After bribing Orion with oats, she left the stables and made her way back to the room above the dining hall before dinner. The smell of roasted boar wafted through the hall as she climbed the stairs, her stomach growling in protest, but she had not seen the bounty hunter all afternoon, and this had unsettled her.

Yanking open the wooden door, she froze. Draven was sitting in the chair facing the fireplace, a few embers still glowing. He had made sure the fire remained lit all night as she healed.

But the flames were not what caught Astraia's eye. It was the sealed scroll in his hand. This scroll was smaller than the letter he had received previously, but the wax seal was identical—another correspondence from the Celestial Court.

Astraia did not breathe as she stood in the doorway, looking at her fate literally held in his hands. The bounty hunter sat on the edge of the chair, his elbows resting on his knees as he held the scroll with both hands, and his fingers traced the edges of the wax seal.

He did not raise his head, but Astraia could see the furrow between his brows, and the muscles in his jaw clenched.

Hours passed in a matter of seconds before Draven finally rose from the chair, glanced down at the unopened scroll, and flung it into the embers. It took a few moments before the parchment caught fire, but as the wax melted and the words burned, Astraia's heart thundered out of her chest.

Draven watched the fire lick the ink clean from the scroll before he turned to face her. The glow of the flames flickered against his face, catching the golden flecks of his eyes and reflecting them back at her. She still had not moved from the doorway, afraid of what answers lay beyond the threshold.

The bounty hunter held her gaze as he spoke, his voice commanding and resolute.

“I will take you to Volpes.”

Astraia’s eyes widened, perplexed. “I don’t understand.”

“I said, I will take you to Volpes.” He cocked one eyebrow at her, as if annoyed by her question.

“And what of your reward, bounty hunter? Your king will be expecting his pound of flesh. You expect me to believe you would defy your master?” she sneered, slamming the door behind her as she strode toward him. Her boots thudded on the floor with every flustered step.

Draven did not falter, keeping his eyes trained on her as she approached him until they were only an arm’s length apart.

“No,” he replied, a challenge in his stare.

“Then why should I trust you? Why take me to Volpes?” Astraia hissed, her fists clenched by her sides, her bonds stirring just beneath her newly healed skin.

“Because maybe, I have realized that you would rather burn than be taken prisoner.” His voice lowered to a hushed whisper. “And maybe, I would rather face the wrath of a false king than see you burn.”

Astraia blinked, stunned at the bounty hunter’s confession. Her mouth opened, then snapped closed, words escaping her.

A small curve tipped the side of his lips, forming a subtle smirk, a look of satisfaction that he had rendered her speechless.

“We will leave at first light,” he said as he turned away from her, making for the door. He did not utter another word as he closed it behind him.

CHAPTER 14

Remnants of pottery and the hilts of daggers were discovered among the northern outskirts of Stellasaltus, now Celestial Wastes, during the excavation in the fourth year of King Haluropa's reign, fifty- and six-years post Shattering.

RUINS IN THE CELESTIAL WASTES: VOLUME 1



ASTRAIA SAT ON THE EDGE of the bed for several minutes after the bounty hunter left her, puzzled by his treasonous admission. Her mind did not have much time to wonder before she heard a light rap on the door. Slowly, she turned the handle and cracked the door, peering into the eyes of the young servant girl once again.

“Pardon me, miss,” the girl said softly, a smile on her face, “but I thought perhaps you could use this for tonight.” She held out a bundle of folded fabric in her hands.

Confused, Astraia took the fabric, letting it unfold as she held it up. A simple dark blue dress unfurled as she held it beside her.

“My thanks, but”—Astraia turned to the girl, bewildered—“what would I need this for?”

The girl laughed, then beamed at her with excitement. “Tonight is the Festival of Pouring to honor the town’s namesake, the mighty Aquarius. He was said to be a mighty warrior during the Celestial War and—”

“Defended the rivers from Dominion. Yes, I am well aware of the tales,” Astraia cut her off, sighing.

“There will be a great feast and dancing in the field. You simply must come!” The girl spun around the hallway, eyes closed as she daydreamed.

Astraia chuckled, envying the girl’s carefree spirit.

A flush of red bloomed on the girl's cheeks as she stopped spinning, then met her eyes once more. "I was not sure you had a dress to wear, so I brought one of my older sister's. You appear to be the same build."

Astraia struggled to swallow a lump forming in her throat, her eyes watering. "Surely your sister would miss her dress?" She cocked her eyebrow but watched the servant girl's countenance fall.

"Not anymore," she whispered, her eyes downcast.

The air grew cold, grief written on her face—a grief Astraia knew all too intimately.

"I would be honored to wear your sister's dress," Astraia said, grasping the girl's hand and giving it a quick squeeze.

The girl glanced up once more, a tear trickling down her nose, and smiled. Curtsying, she hurried down the hall, back to the servants' stairs.

It took Astraia a few moments to change into the cotton dress, opting for no shoes given all she had were her leather boots. She managed to weave half of her hair into a braided crown on top of her head, the rest of her unruly locks falling down her back. Strapping her dagger to her thigh beneath her dress, she gazed out the window overlooking the field.

People scurried around setting up tables and benches for the grand feast as the sun's last rays were peeking behind trees. A large bonfire was being lit in the center of the field, and a maypole was hoisted high close to the inn, children already screaming and laughing as they chased each other barefoot in the grass. As more townspeople flocked to the field, the louder the chatter became. It warmed Astraia to see a celebration of life, of hope, of joy. It almost made her forget the atrocities of the night prior.

Draven was nowhere to be seen in the crowd below, but Astraia was certain he was not far off. The instinctual urge to jump on Orion's back and escape into the night made her bonds hum, vibrating in her spine. With the ruckus of the festival, it would be too easy to slip past the moody bounty

hunter. Yet the idea of facing unknowns of the starless night alone gave her pause. No, perhaps for tonight, she could just be Traia—the girl with no past and forgotten grief.

Astraia smiled, a bounce in her steps as she hurried down the stairs and out of the dining hall. Rounding the corner at the back of the inn, the festival had fully commenced in the light of the full moon. Lamps dotted the tables and littered the grounds around the field. Above the laughter and voices from those dining, a flute and fiddle could be heard playing a spritely tune as children gave chase through the grass. All manner of smells filled Astraia's nose, including roasted boar and fresh bread, making her mouth water.

Her appreciation of the lavish scene was interrupted by the young servant girl bouncing up to her with her blonde hair braided with small flowers atop her head. She wore a soft pink dress which complemented her milk-white skin and the pink blush that graced her dimples.

“You came! I am so pleased,” she said earnestly, grasping Astraia's hand and leading her to the bench next to her at the table. “I am Felicity, by the way.” Her smile widened, and she handed Astraia a goblet of wine.

“Stars keep you, I am Traia.” Astraia smiled back at her.

“And the Stars you. Now, you must eat!” Felicity grabbed a sweet roll, handing it to Astraia before she proceeded to fill her own plate.

It had been years since Astraia had attended a festival. Tenebris's common people were considerably more destitute than those of Aquarian, scraping by with just enough food for one meal a day, let alone providing for a feast. Aquarian was under the same jurisdiction as Tenebris, but the trade route afforded more room for economic advancement. Tenebris had been reduced to little more than a facade for black-market dealings, and a prison where all the undesirable and Plagued were herded and forgotten.

Astraia savored the moment, eating her fill and drinking wine until her muscles loosened and laughing became effortless. Felicity introduced her to everyone sitting around

them, including the two younger men who could not peel their eyes from the young girl. Astraia gathered they were Felicity's age, no more than twenty, and their flirtatious competition for her attention was almost comical.

The music picked up tempo as the moon rose higher—a serenade for the starless night. Astraia giggled watching both of the young men ask for Felicity's hand to dance, arguing over who could sweep her off her feet and make her dreams come true.

“Well, who will you dance with, Felicity?” the taller boy asked, his hand still outstretched with mischief in his eyes.

Felicity looked at her suitors, then gave Astraia a wink before she said, “I believe I shall dance with whoever I like.” Grabbing Astraia's hand, she pulled her to the bonfire, giggling at the exasperated looks on the boys' faces.

Astraia could not help but laugh with the girl as they danced together around the bonfire, twirling barefoot on the summer grass. Soon others joined their revelry, the fire casting their silhouettes as giant shadows across the field and onto the side of the inn, as if the essence of the Stars were dancing with them. The remaining number of sunrises might not be certain for the Starborne girl who worked in the slums, but today she would let the moonbeams kiss her skin and the flames paint her steps.

Closing her eyes, she let her feet follow the music, twirling once more with her hands above her head until her back hit a wall, halting her merriment. Catching herself before she stumbled forward, Astraia whipped around to see what had stopped her, only to find an annoyed bounty hunter blocking her path.

“Excuse me, hunter, but you appear to be directly in my way,” she said, smiling as he scowled at her.

He did not move, just crossed his arms and stared at her with brows furrowed. Astraia noticed he was not wearing his leather Drakari-scale armor, just his tunic and casual riding pants and boots. He blended in for once, instead of looking

like he might start another war and steal maidens in his conquest.

Astraia frowned as she thought of Draven stealing maidens. For some reason, this idea did not sit well with her. She shook her head to clear her mind, though it was already muddled with wine and dance.

“I thought you had made another reckless attempt at fleeing, so forgive my irritation after searching the town for several hours for signs of you only to find you...” He trailed off as he glanced down at her borrowed dress and bare feet. “Dancing.”

Astraia burst out laughing, giving Draven a start. “I thought you were supposed to be a bounty hunter?”

Draven huffed.

“Lighten up and dance, bounty hunter. It is not you who faces imprisonment, torture, and likely death,” she said, twirling in front of him, perfectly content ignoring the threat he posed to her freedom.

“I do not dance, Starborne,” he said, voice stern.

“Do not tell me that the ruthless king’s dog, feared by all, killer of man and beast, is afraid of...dancing?” Her eyebrow rose, challenging him.

“I am not afraid. I said I do not dance,” he snapped.

“You know what I think?” Astraia strode up to him, never breaking his gaze, until she could feel the warmth of his breath on her face. Her bonds responded in kind, warming her core at his closeness. “I think you *are* afraid. You fear failure. It’s why you blindly follow orders. Even if those orders kill innocents and are slowly costing you your soul.”

Draven chuckled, his voice rough and low. “And why do you care for my soul?”

“No one should be left alone in the dark,” Astraia whispered.

Her eyes fell, breaking the tension. She stepped away from him, the heat from her bonds plunged into cold with her retreat.

His mouth opened, but she did not wait for his rebuttal. Turning on her heel, she floated through the crowd, the sounds of dancing and music and laughter fading as she walked barefoot in the grass.

Moonlight withered away with each step she took. Her mind wandered to the edge of a steep cliff. The darkness purred beyond the edge, coaxing unspeakable horrors from the depths as it hissed from the blackness.

You are already alone in the dark, Starborne.

CHAPTER 15

What was once a common occurrence, traditionally passed down through generations, being blessed by the Stars became increasingly rare in the ten years post Shattering. Starborne numbers dwindled exponentially with each passing generation. Starborne abilities that had been a privilege and honor were seen as tainted stains on the people of the realm; little more than a reminder of the abandonment from the Stars.

A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF ASTRADEON



GETTING THE HORSES READY FOR their journey to Virellia had proven more of a challenge than she wanted to admit. Visions of the men who assaulted her and her close encounter with death kept muddling her thoughts. She stood outside the half-burned stables for several minutes, trying to steady her breaths, but every time she took a step forward, her vision blurred and her skin became clammy.

“You know, we cannot actually reach Virellia if we do not leave?” Draven said impatiently behind her, his horse snorting as if in agreement.

She clenched her teeth, choking back a rebuttal. But after her third failed attempt, he sighed and dismounted his horse.

“Wait here,” he muttered as he strode past her into the stables. After a few moments, he returned, leading Orion out to her, already saddled. He stopped in front of her, holding out the reins. She begrudgingly grabbed them, nodding to him.

“Thanks,” she mumbled, pink rushing to her cheeks.

“Don’t thank me yet, Starborne. I’m still contemplating the manacles.” His eyes lingered on hers for a split second, face empty, then he walked back to his horse.

Pink turned to red as her embarrassment morphed into rage.

It is still early. Plenty of time to consider the one hundred ways I can kill him.

Sunlight broke over the horizon, warming her skin as Orion's hooves struck the stone Aquarian bridge in a rhythmic cadence. Astraia closed her eyes, breathing in that fragile moment of calm. The revelry and wine of the night before still lingered in the form of a persistent headache. Yet it was not the headache that vexed her, but the unwelcome shadow in her wake.

She could hear Draven's horse walking beside her and blinked, letting her gaze drift sideways, and was unable to stop the fluttering of her bond sending a thrill through her. She cursed at the intruding sensation. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see his amber eyes locked on her. Draven's gaze lingered, unreadable—but steady. As if he sensed something she had not meant to reveal.

She blinked again, setting her sights ahead, where they were approaching the other side of the bridge. Last night she had overstepped, letting herself feel sympathy toward the man who could end her life in an instant. Yet, every time she was near him, her bonds betrayed her, and she realized she did, in fact, care if he had a soul—cared if he lived or died.

Other travelers passed by them, heading toward Aquarian. Astraia kept her cloaked head low and wits about her, reminding herself that she was being pursued by other bounty hunters, not just the one who had consumed her thoughts. Orion's ears perked, sensing her uneasiness, and he picked up his pace. Within moments, hoofbeats softened as they set foot on Virellia soil.

They would reach Volpes, the capital of Virellia, within two sunrises if they kept a steady pace. The capital was known for its lush landscapes and mystical gardens, harboring all kinds of flora and fauna, including herbs and rare plants used for healing. The Constellation Desire had chosen many of the people of Virellia as their Starborne, giving them the gift of the earth. The result was the province teeming with verdant greenery, a beauty only Desire herself exceeded.

Astraia and her brother had visited Virellia many times growing up. She remembered a glistening white manor at the capital, covered in ivy and blooming flowers. She chuckled, recalling Elion causing chaos on their visits to Volpes. She seemed to remember a host of frogs being let loose in the kitchens of the manor followed by a pointless scolding by their father.

Draven turned his head toward her, raising an eyebrow. “Something funny, Starborne?”

“I was thinking of my brother,” Astraia replied, a soft smile on her face, her stare fixed ahead as Orion walked on the grassy road. “He was always getting into trouble. Mostly to vex our parents. But he always had a way of making the days entertaining. I was so happy back then.”

“Your brother was fortunate to have your love,” Draven said without jest, his tone soft.

Astraia paused, turning her head to look at him. His face somewhat tense, those amber eyes always shocking her when they met hers.

“It still was not enough,” she replied, blinking away a tear from her eye.

“You claim fault for his death, but I wonder...” He paused, narrowing his eyes on her. “What would he say if he knew you carried that blame like a shield?”

“What?” Her eyes widened.

“You use his death as an excuse to ignore your Power bond. You refuse to claim it fully or train it properly, which makes you dangerous. Based on what you told me about your brother, I do not think he would approve of your ignorance.”

Astraia seethed, her skin heating with anger, and her bonds rushed to life, as though they could sense the topic of conversation.

“How dare you,” she snapped, teeth bared. Her fingertips pulsed with white light, thrumming through her core, desperate to unleash chaos on the infuriating man next to her.

“Now who is afraid?” He smirked, raising an eyebrow, then nudged his horse forward ahead of her.

“I will kill him,” she whispered to Orion as she kept a few paces behind the bounty hunter, eyeing the back of his cloak.

Whether she would admit it or not, the brute had struck a nerve. Elion would be ashamed of her for stifling her bonds, for hiding parts of who she was, all because of fear. It was righteous fear, she reasoned. Fear that kept her from harming others.

Yet the more she tried to silence her Power bond, the louder it screamed and the more aggressive and unyielding it became. Losing her tether in the void of her mind was not an experience she wished to revisit ever again. Neither was flaring Power until she burned to ash.

She could not fail Elion again. Power could be tamed. She just needed the right training. It was then she decided she would master her bond, if not for herself, then for him.

They made camp in a narrow clearing nestled between the moss-draped trees of Virellia’s borderlands, where the air shimmered with pollen and low-floating mist. The sky above them was beginning to darken, yet a few scattered stars managed to pierce the fading veil—faint reminders of what once was.

Astraia knelt by the firepit, coaxing flames from dry kindling. The warmth of it was meager, but enough to ward off the chill creeping through the undergrowth.

Across from her, Draven sat sharpening his blade with quiet precision, amber eyes catching sparks from the firelight.

She hated how easily the silence between them had become...comfortable.

“I still don’t trust you,” she muttered.

He looked up, smirking faintly. “Good. I wouldn’t trust me either.”

She rolled her eyes and settled onto her cloak, knees drawn to her chest. “So what’s your game then? Following me across

the continent. Playing my shadow. Waiting for your opportunity to turn me in?"

Draven didn't answer immediately. He finished a pass of his whetstone, then set his sword aside.

"I've seen what happens to those who flare without control," he said, voice lower now. "You're powerful. Too powerful to be reckless."

Astraiia flinched, her fingers curling at her sides. "I wasn't reckless," she said quietly.

Draven's gaze didn't waver. "I didn't say you were. But you're scared of it."

The truth of it hit harder than any blade. She looked away, the fire casting shadows across her face.

"You're hiding it. Binding it down so tight you can't even breathe. That's no way to live, Traia."

She stiffened at the sound of her name in his mouth. It sounded...different. Less like a challenge and more like a plea.

"And what do you know of it?" she asked.

Draven stood and crossed to her side of the fire. She didn't move as he knelt beside her, close enough to feel the heat of him through her cloak, eclipsing the heat of the fire.

"My father was star-bonded," he said. "To Rage."

Astraiia blinked in surprise, her gaze snapping to him. He had never spoken of his life, let alone his past. "Then you know what it feels like...when it rises. How it tries to consume everything."

He nodded once. "I also know it doesn't have to." He glanced at her, then nodded toward the glen beside their camp. "Come on. You've rested enough."

"No." Astraiia stood, arms crossed, facing Draven.

He held out a sword to her, a smaller one than his broadsword he kept strapped to his back, but just as sharp.

“If you don’t learn how to harness it, you’ll just keep losing control. Your fear of it is more dangerous,” he said, stepping closer to her. The moonlight reflected off his eyes, creating an ethereal glow, not unlike the glow of her bonds.

“I’m not fighting you.” She stood her ground, refusing to relent. Her fists were clenched at her sides, eyes glowering at the bounty hunter.

“Then let me be clear—this isn’t a request.” He stepped closer, closing the space between them. His hand gripped hers, firm as he pressed the hilt of the sword into her palm. His touch lingered, deliberate, eyes locked to hers like a challenge. Then, slowly—he leaned in.

Her breath hitched, chest rising faster as heat bloomed beneath her skin. Her lips parted on instinct—half anticipation, half defiance. She braced for a smirk, a quip, anything to break the tension tightening around them.

His eyes flicked her lips, desire burning behind those flaming eyes. He angled his mouth to her ear. “Let’s see how dangerous you really are.”

She shivered. *Damn him.*

Without warning, steel sang from his back—and his blade came down, swift and brutal, toward Astraia’s head. The sound of steel meeting steel echoed in the night as she barely managed to raise the sword up to meet his strike.

But he did not relent. Her parry only spurred his enthusiasm as another set of blows rained down on her.

It took a few strikes for Astraia to familiarize herself with the sword in her hand and Draven’s fight pattern. At first, the movements were mechanical. Blocks, swings, dodges. Draven corrected her form only when necessary, saying little.

But then she began to move with more fire. Her footwork sped. Her strikes gained intent. She could almost anticipate his next move.

Then the thick blanket of warmth thrummed from her spine, weaving its way outward into her mind, her arms, her legs.

“I can feel it,” she gasped between strikes, sweat beading on her forehead.

“Good. Don’t run from it. Anchor yourself first,” Draven breathed, halting his assault.

Astraea swam into the depths of her mind, where she kept that precious box protected. Her Elion, her tether—always ready to save her, to pull her back to herself. She pried the lid open, gently coaxing the memory forward. The light of his laughter echoed in her consciousness. His smile flashed before her eyes.

She took a deep breath, focusing on her tether.

“Are you anchored?” Draven asked firmly and took a few steps toward her, his boots muffled by the mossy earth surrounding them.

“Yes,” she breathed. “I’m anchored.”

“Now, I want you to let it extend beyond you. Your anchor isn’t just about keeping yourself rooted. You need to extend the anchor to the world around you. Push it to the heavens.”

She hesitated, panic starting to cloud her vision. “But what if I flare and I can’t control it?”

“Traia, look at me,” he commanded. He placed a finger under her chin, tipping it upward, and their eyes met. Not an ounce of fear in his gaze. “Elion’s death is not your fault. The bond does not own you. You command it.”

The words hit her like a current.

She loosened her grip on her tether, allowing it to surface from her mind, and compelled it forward. She willed it to seep into the earth, move with the wind, crash into streams, fly toward the barren night sky.

She flared. Not completely—the glow of her Power bond coated her body, illuminating the glen around them in white light.

A smile crept onto her face as she stared at her hands, embracing her second bond for the first time in her life without fear.

Her eyes lifted to meet Draven's. A slow, dangerous smile curved his mouth, and she sensed it—the raw, terrifying pull defying gravity, drawing them closer. Stars, it was unfair that he could look at her like that. Like he'd already chosen to burn for her.

She lowered the blade, panting, chest heaving with the force of it all.

“Well, I guess you're not as hopeless as I thought,” Draven said, pulling the sword from Astraia's hand, and winked at her.

“I can still gut you, bounty hunter,” she quipped, her glow ebbing as she sealed her memories away.

“I have no doubt, Starborne, but before you do, I'm going to bathe and sleep. I suggest you do the same,” he said over his shoulder as he walked toward the wide stream flowing by their camp.

Astraia huffed and made her way over to Orion to retrieve the vanilla soap she had taken with her from the Capri Inn.

Standing next to her horse, giving him well deserved neck scratches, she glanced up at the black void, and for a second, she thought she saw a glimmer of light in the dense blackness. Blinking, she shook her head and looked ahead at the stream a few yards away.

Regret filled her. There in the moonlit waters was Draven, shirtless. His muscles rippled in the moonbeams. His hair glistened with the luminescence. She had the sudden thought of being held in those arms, running her fingers through his untamed hair as he held her close to him.

Heat rose to her face, knowing full well that it was not her bond flaring causing this reaction.

“Stars save me,” she whispered, unable to tear her gaze away from the sight of him.

He turned, his back to her, shadowed by the night. Astraia noticed several elaborate tattoos covering most of his torso and arms as well as scars, long slashes that marred his perfect body. She wondered what could have made those scars, or who.

Just then, she noticed a different set of markings, right in the middle of his spine. These were different, not as dark as the tattoos, but not as light as healed scars. She squinted in the dark, trying to decipher the markings, when he turned.

Draven's eyes found hers, almost as if he sensed her watching him.

She averted her eyes, returning to the task of retrieving her vanilla soap, forcing down her embarrassment.

Splashing and quiet footsteps approached the campfire.

"Enjoying the view, Starborne?" His voice was low, husky again, a hint of a challenge in his tone.

"I don't know what you're talking about, bounty hunter," she snapped, yanking her cloak from Orion's saddlebag and storming off toward the stream.

She made sure to stay behind a tree beside the stream to bathe, preventing any further embarrassment by overexposing herself. The water was cool, but not unbearable as she scrubbed off the sweat from traveling and training.

In the moonlight, she could faintly make out her lumenmark. The sigil of the Constellations, a sign of being Starborne, only appeared when you were chosen by the Stars.

Not everyone was chosen for the bond. Only those who demonstrated the trait of a constellation to its highest degree were bestowed abilities.

Astraia's Sacrifice lumenmark appeared when she was only twelve. She had accepted blame for one of Elion's mischievous tricks, but her father had been in an unforgiving mood. He had whipped her with a rod, twelve times to match her age, a lashing for every year of "being a disappointment," he had said. That night, while she wept as Elion dressed her wounds, the lumenmark had illuminated her skin—branding her as Starborne.

Etched into the smooth flesh of the left side of her chest just below her collarbone, the mark shimmered faintly beneath her skin—a constellation of golden light, each star a precise,

gleaming point woven in a graceful arc that mirrored the sacred formation of Pegasus in the heavens.

The mark was not static. It *breathed* with her, pulsing faintly with the rhythm of her heartbeat, waxing brighter in moments of pain, and dimming when her thoughts were calm. The central star mark, just below the curve of her shoulder, burned the brightest.

And when she flared—when the bond ignited with purpose—the entire lumenmark blazed with celestial fire, lighting her skin from within like a divine brand. Lines of fine, thread-like gold connected the celestial points in an elegant silhouette—wings flared wide, head bowed not in defeat, but in defiant grace.

At a glance, it resembled a winged steed mid-flight—but to those who looked closer, it was a story written in Starlight: of selflessness, of strength tempered with sorrow, of a girl who would burn for others before she'd ever let them fall.

She traced her fingers gingerly over the mark. The healing abilities of Sacrifice were always a comfort to her. A drop of mending in a shattered world.

Her second lumenmark dotted the middle of her spine, a tribute to the constellation Canis Major, the white wolf. Power was one of the few constellations that had dared challenge Dominion in the Celestial War—a noble but ultimately futile effort.

Astraea had refused to acknowledge the brand on her back. She had even contemplated carving it out of her skin, as if this would somehow sever the bond with Power.

Yet tonight, for the first time in five years, she was no longer afraid of the golden etchings adorning her.

Just to prove her reformation, she let Power glide from her center, remembering Draven's instruction to use the world as her anchor, not just her own resolve. Warmth pooled in her core, tingling as it surged up her spine and into her limbs. The sensation was exhilarating—like fire and light dancing through her blood. Her skin began to glow, a pale white gold, until

even the surface of the stream shimmered with refracted Starlight.

She smiled, euphoric. For the first time, she knew Power belonged to her. That she belonged to herself.

But then—a crack.

A tremor ran through her limbs. The light pulsed once, then again—brighter, hotter, erratic.

Her grin faltered.

The tether slipped. Just slightly.

A surge of power burst from her like a wave. The surface of the stream hissed, boiling in a flash of steam. The nearby trees bent under a gust of unnatural wind. Pebbles trembled across the bank. A branch split with a sharp *crack*.

“No—no, no, no,” Astraia gasped, heart pounding. “Not again.”

She scrambled for her tether, blindly reaching through her panic to anchor herself—but the chest in her mind was distant, like it was sinking beneath her, and she was losing her grip. The world spun with the same dizzying chaos she had felt the night she flared years ago.

“Elion,” she whispered aloud, pleading to the memory.

Stillness.

Her breath hitched—the laugh, the smile, the warmth of her brother’s memory blooming through her chest. She grabbed it like a lifeline, yanking the tether inward, willing the power back into its cage.

The light flickered. Dimmed. Dissolved.

Silence returned to the glen.

Astraia fell to her knees in the shallows, her breathing ragged, her glowing skin now dulled to its usual pale hue. Tears blurred her vision. Her body trembled—not from exhaustion, but from the suffocating weight of almost losing control again.

I could've hurt someone. I could've hurt him.

She dragged in a shaking breath, her hands clenching the water-soaked moss. Even now, after everything, she was still a danger. Still a risk.

Still...wrong.

Astraira stayed kneeling in the stream, the cool water lapping against her legs, trying to soothe the fever of fear under her skin.

She wiped at her cheeks, furious that tears had fallen. She hadn't cried in years. She didn't cry anymore. Not for herself.

A rustle in the dark made her freeze.

Her eyes snapped to the shoreline—and there he was. Draven was leaning against the very tree where her clothes were hanging.

His arms were crossed, half in shadow, but his expression was unreadable. Not smug. Not mocking. Something quieter. Something too still.

“Enjoying the show, bounty hunter?” she snapped, her voice sharp from the sting of shame. She crossed her arms over her chest, though the stream masked her body beneath.

“Immensely,” he said, but the usual teasing edge was dulled—faint, like a reflex rather than intent.

He pushed off the tree and turned without another word, disappearing into the glow of the firelight.

CHAPTER 16

“The Wraiths have overrun the Peaks. Their shadows and unholy fire ensnare us. Their whispers call to us from the darkest caves and deepest gorges. The Drengir and their Drakari are spread thin. I will send what I can. I await your falcon.”

**CELESTIAL WAR CORRESPONDENCE OF LORD
FAFNIR OF THE SKYFORGE PEAKS, STEWARD OF
RAGE TO KING ILLIAS, RULER OF THE CELESTIAL
COURT, KING OF ASTRADEON**



MORNING IN THE LUSH COUNTRYSIDE of Virellia was sacred. A kind of peace Astraia had never managed in her own life wrapped around her as she packed up her sparse belongings and readied Orion for the road to Volpes.

The night had been restless—too many unanswered questions, all clawing at her mind. She had no idea what she was going to do once she reached the city, or if it even led to sanctuary for her. A small part of her still clung to the foolish hope that Volpes would be a place to disappear. Somewhere she could melt into garden walls and be forgotten.

But the realist in her knew the truth, sharp and nauseating: no matter how far she ran, her past would always find her.

Then there was the question of *him*.

She dared a glance toward the bounty hunter as he saddled his horse, every movement precise, practiced—annoyingly graceful. Tension hung thick in the space between them, but neither had made a move to shatter the silence.

It seemed impossible that it had only been a few days since she held her dagger to his throat in Tenebris, when he crashed into her life and forever altered her path. She felt as if she had known him for eternity. For the first time since Elion had blinked out of existence, she did not hate herself or her bonds.

Astraia was still unsure what was more frightening, the fact that she was breaking down walls for him, letting him see the unfiltered parts of her soul.

Or that she no longer cared what his true intentions were.

One thing was certain: Draven was dangerous.

Astraia refocused on Orion, swinging her leg over the saddle.

“Let’s be off then. I’d rather sleep in a bed that doesn’t smell like dirt,” she called, slinging her bow over one shoulder.

Draven raised an eyebrow. “One night on the ground too much for you, Starborne?”

He nudged his mount forward without waiting.

“The ground’s not the problem, bounty hunter.” Astraia urged Orion into a brisk walk along the Volpes road. “I’ve simply little patience for egotistical brutes who hide their motives.”

She kept her gaze fixed on the ribbon of dirt ahead—anything to avoid looking at him. Last night’s confessions still roared in her head, clashing with the memory of his blade, his repeated rescues, and his unspoken agenda.

Draven’s smirk drifted into her peripheral vision. “You seemed perfectly patient watching me in the river.”

Astraia’s jaw clenched. He’d always known exactly which nerve to rub. She tapped her heels into Orion’s flank and lifted into a trot, swallowing what she really wanted to say.

They did not speak for several hours, a heavy silence blanketing the tension between them. Astraia welcomed the reprieve, exhausted from the toll of the past few days on her mind and body.

She had transformed from a shadow healer to fugitive Starborne on the run with a stars-forsaken bounty hunter as her companion.

Elion would have never let me live this down.

A small piece of her grieved the life she was leaving behind in Orastrea. She had no belongings to speak of, except the celestial blade and Starwood bow she now carried. But the small piece of the world she had carved from nothing was the only home she had known for five years.

The future was a void—the moment of time that bridged dreams and the cold harshness of reality. So much potential and promise that could be lost with the flick of a blade.

Astraia dared a glance at the massive man riding beside her. His face was maddeningly calm. Not even a wrinkle of worry creased his forehead. But then, why should he concern himself with the verdict of her life when he was, in fact, one of the paths to her destruction?

Her back stiffened with the thought that Draven was toying with her for his amusement. That he enjoyed the hunt and prolonging the inevitable end—her hands in shackles or his iron sword in her back.

It was there on the grassy dirt road to Volpes that Astraia decided Draven needed to disappear.

The grassy roads twisting through Virellia moved harmoniously with the landscape of rolling hills and river valleys. The scenery gave any travelers a welcomed sight of luscious greenery and fertility, which was in stark opposition to the death and decay that infested not only Astradeon's people, but also its lands after the Shattering. All the air in the realm was thick with centuries-old destruction, but not in Virellia. Here, the Starborne of Desire flourished.

The roads were not heavily traveled, but a few merchants with their carts laden with goods passed by Astraia. Their smiles would quickly disappear, eyes shifting away when they noticed her brute companion—no doubt nearly soiling themselves at the sight of him.

The bounty hunter remained emotionless most of the time, his lips set in a permanent scowl and his eyes slightly narrowed as if disgusted by everyone and everything around

him or simply annoyed—Astraia could not decipher which was truer. If his face did not deter onlookers, his physique, armor, and weaponry certainly would. She was still curious as to the origin of his Drakari-scaled armor as it was not from the Celestial Court, and his black iron broadsword that was eerily similar to the black metal of her dagger.

The soft pounding of their horse's hooves on grass began to lull Astraia asleep as the day stretched on. They had only stopped once to let the horses rest, but still had at least a day's journey ahead of them. The sun's beams were flickering through the trees beside the road, casting golden rays onto Orion and warming Astraia as she rode beside a small stream that abutted the trail.

"We should camp here for the night," Draven said, guiding his horse to a large open space next to the stream, several paces from the road.

Astraia did not argue as she swung down from Orion's saddle, her back and legs aching for solid ground. She led Orion to the stream and sat next to him on the grassy bank, relishing in the coolness of the afternoon and the serenity of the crystal-clear water bubbling over rocks. She removed the cloak from her head and closed her eyes, letting tiredness seep into her bones.

Until she could sense a large, annoying presence standing behind her. Her eyes flashed open, narrowing on his face.

"Don't get too comfortable, Starborne." Draven smirked. "We have more training to do."

"You seem to take a great deal of pleasure in exhausting me."

His voice lowered, deepening as he stared at her eyes. A muscle flexed in his neck. "There are far more enjoyable ways I could exhaust you."

Astraia froze. Her eyes flashed to his lips, aching close to hers. Her body betrayed her as it reacted, pulse thrumming and bonds blazing to life, caressing her spine and heating the air between them. *Stars, what is happening to me?*

“Don’t flatter yourself,” she whispered through clenched teeth, making Draven smile wider as she struggled to remain calm.

“Until I can trust that you won’t burst into flame, you are a liability. So yes, you will train. This is not up for debate.”

“I am not a liability,” she snapped, arms crossed.

“The stable at the Capri Inn would prove otherwise,” he replied, eyebrows raised.

Astraia cursed, stalking past the bounty hunter without another glance.

Turning sharply on her heel in the clearing, she pulled off her cloak, flinging it on the forest floor, and faced Draven. A small smile crept onto his face as he also discarded his cloak, rolling up his sleeves to reveal his tattoos and scars. Astraia’s core heated at the sight of him, making her teeth clench.

“Now that your tether is more secure, I want you to try to anchor faster,” he said as he approached her, unsheathing his broadsword. The muscles of his arms flexed as he gripped the hilt of his sword firmly in both hands.

Astraia swallowed a lump in her throat, thinking of how his arms would feel around her waist, his warm, calloused hands on her hips. She let out a breath, shaking the ridiculous notions clouding her mind.

Nodding to her opponent, she dove into her bond, latching onto her tether and throwing it immediately down into the earth, anchoring to the roots of the trees and flinging it to the skies. Her anchor grabbed onto every wisp of cloud and ray of sun as it poured from her, locking her bond in place. White light burst from her fingers, her eyes glowing as she stared at Draven.

“Good. Now channel it into one steady stream, like an arrow. Don’t let it overtake you.” He looked at her hands, raising his sword to shield his body.

Astraia’s pulse quickened, feeling Power thrumming in her core, begging to be unleashed on everything living and breathing in the forest. “I’m afraid. What if I can’t control it?”

Her voice quivered, fear creeping into her mind, making her anchor waver.

“You can. See your bond as an extension of yourself, not a weakness.” His voice was firm, but kind.

She steeled herself, planting her feet and straightened her shoulders. Diving deeper into her bond, she let it extend beyond her fingers and into her palms. Beads of sweat dotted her forehead, and her ears rang with each breath. The forest blurred around her. Her vision sharpened and narrowed on Draven as she breathed deeper and pulled more of her bond to the surface. The streams of white light crackled in her palms, lashing out to the ground around her, lapping at Draven’s boots.

“Concentrate!” he shouted through the crackling, but his voice was muffled in her ears.

The blinding white light of her hands crept up her arms and pulsed from her chest, blanketing the forest in the glare, as though the realm had been drained of color. Astraia clung to her tether, pushing down the fear that threatened to consume her.

Control it. Control it. Control it.

White streams of light burst from her—unwieldy, wild, erratic. It jumped into the air with a life of its own, latching onto anything breathing surrounding her. The horses reared, jumping out of the way of the rogue streams. Another flash of pure Power leapt forward, straight toward Draven.

Astraia started to scream, but before the warning crossed her lips, Draven brought his broadsword up in one sweep.

The light met his blade, a loud crack reverberating off the steel. She was certain the metal had shattered, killing the bounty hunter, reliving her worst nightmare in real time. But as the light ebbed, the metal blade held fast—edges glowing red and smoking.

Draven’s insufferable smirk was visible through the plumes of smoke. As Astraia drew her bond back, the light ebbed and retreated away from him and once again pulsed in her hands.

“Again. Concentrate. Command it.” He spoke as one who had conquered his own bonds to bend to his will. A small shred of doubt itched the back of her mind.

How does he know so much?

Before she could dwell on the possibilities, he was shouting at her again. Unflinching, unfazed by the chaos, he pushed her to limits she had never crossed with her bonds. It was both terrifying and exhilarating.

Concentrate. Command it.

Grasping her tether firmly in her mind, she commanded her bond to tighten, willing it to yield. The light flashed around her body once then flowed back into her arms and hands, before it morphed into the shape of a sword. A sword made entirely of brilliant white light—a sword of Starlight.

Astraia blinked, gasping for breath, looking at the blade within her hands.

“Now, let’s see what you can do.” He grinned, lunging for her with his sword.

She did not balk at his advance, snapping the light blade up to defend against his attack. The white light collided with his broadsword and crackled on impact. His black blade responded, glowing red with white smoke billowing from the point where the blades touched.

Teeth clenched, Astraia pushed against Draven’s firm stance, trying to unbalance him.

“All that Power, and you can’t even drive me away,” he breathed, making her skin pebble.

Astraia pushed once more with her blade, except this time she dropped her right hand and placed her palm on his abdomen. His muscles flexed beneath her touch, and with a smile, she forced her bond into her hand, slamming hard against his frame.

Draven’s eyes went wide as he was thrown backward, his entire body, soaring through the air, until he landed with a splash in the stream several paces away.

He coughed as he sat up in the stream, water dripping down his face. “I believe you have channeled your Power bond,” he rasped, standing slowly.

Astraia laughed, pulling on her tether and willing the light to fade from her hands. The white Starlight blade flickered and vanished. She looked at her hands, surveying for wounds she knew would not be there, awestruck at what she had just managed to accomplish. Her gaze lifted to meet Draven’s as he walked out of the stream, wet clothes clinging to his frame. Her pulse quickened at the sight.

“How do you feel?” he asked as he strode up to her, looking her over for any sign of harm.

“Me? I just flung you halfway across Virellia,” she said in disbelief, trying to keep her focus on his face instead of his wet tunic.

He chuckled. “Worried about me?”

She huffed, rolling her eyes. “I should have remembered your inflated ego would cushion your fall.”

That insufferable smirk graced his lips, and she fought the urge to slap it off his face. He stepped away from her, making for his saddle bag, then turned to face her once more. This time, he held something much more frightening than any bond in his hands—the iron manacles.

Astraia unsheathed the dagger at her thigh, grasping it so tight her knuckles turned white as she angled herself to face him. Her muscles tightened, ready to defend herself, and her bonds flared again in the center of her spine.

“Just what do you think you’re doing with those?” she demanded, fuming. He was a fool if he thought she would let him put those horrific devices back on her.

“Easy. Hear me out,” he started, holding up one hand in protest. “You’re a strong fighter with your bonds, willing to burn yourself and everyone else to ash if you need to. And you’re decent with a bow and dagger from what I’ve seen.” His voice was even, calm, despite holding the one weapon in

the entire realm she feared most. “But when you were attacked by those men in the stables, you lost your tether. You’re getting stronger, but what if you can’t access your power again one day? And what if you don’t have a weapon? What then, Starborne?”

There was no condescension in his tone. If Astraia did not know any better, she would have thought there was even an inkling of concern from the bounty hunter.

“Come closer with those, and I’ll show you,” she hissed, still poised to cut off his hands if he advanced.

“Fine. Prove it.” He stopped walking toward her, holding the manacles in one hand. The chain between them clanking together set her teeth on edge.

“I won’t go down without a fight,” she replied, deadpan.

“I would expect nothing less. Show me you can defend yourself. No weapons. No bonds. Just you.”

“Why?”

“Let’s just say I’m protecting my asset.”

Astraia still held her stance, unconvinced of his true motives. Her bonds thrummed against her spine, ready to channel at the first sign of danger, but he did not move. The two of them stood in the forest at a stalemate.

“Look, I’ll give you the key,” he said as he pulled the metal key from around his neck, holding it out toward her.

She eyed it warily, but her mind jumped at the prospect of holding the literal key to her freedom in her own hands. “And you will help me remove them when I have proven I can?”

“Yes.”

Relaxing her hands, she sheathed her dagger, then extended her right hand. Without blinking, Draven dropped the key into her open hand. The small key appeared so insignificant, but the weight of it in her palm was liberating. Exhaling, she placed the chain holding the key around her neck. The cool metal met her bare skin, making her shiver, both from the cold and from the implications the key possessed.

“I need your hands, Starborne.” Draven held out the manacles, unlocked and ready to claim their victim.

Dread pooled in her stomach, but Astraia stifled her fear, burying it deep into her mind. She was a Starborne—chains would not hold her. She took the remaining step forward until their chests were a hand’s breadth apart and grabbed the manacles. This time, she smirked at the bounty hunter as he snapped both of the cuffs in place around her wrists.

Darkness claimed her.

Her mind became devoid of all emotion, dampening access to her tether and her bonds. She could tell Power and Sacrifice were still connected to her, but hidden behind a cage—impenetrable and inaccessible. Astraia breathed deeply through her nose, acclimating to the chasm in her soul, before looking directly into Draven’s eyes with pure contempt.

In the blink of an eye, he had unsheathed her dagger and was pointing it under her chin. She stiffened as the cold point grazed her skin. Impulsively, her mind searched for her tether, ready to channel Power and knock the brute onto his back to wipe the grin off his face.

Only to find nothing. Not a whisper of Power was left to flare. It was just Astraia, just the abandoned warrior from the slums that greeted her.

“I’m waiting,” he taunted, holding her dagger steady.

She edged her face closer to him, until their breaths mingled, hot and humid in the forest air. Draven’s focus faltered for just a moment, letting his eyes fall to her lips.

It was all the time she needed.

Raising her right foot, she slammed the heel of her boot down onto the side of his foot. He groaned and lost his balance for a split second, removing the Celestial dagger from her chin.

Astraia took advantage of his unsteadiness, shoving her shackled wrists upward as hard as she could onto the wrist holding the blade. Forcefully, she twisted her arms, capturing

his wrist between the chains and rolled his forearm in the opposite direction.

He grunted, grabbing for her chains with his free hand, but she would not relent. The dagger dropped from his hand, landing by their feet. She righted her hands, but Draven was already moving, grabbing her forearms and yanking her chest flush with his.

“You need to hurt me like you mean it,” he breathed in her face.

“You mean like this?” Astraia did not hesitate. Driving her knee upward, it met its mark, right between the bounty hunter’s legs.

His grip promptly loosened as he bent over, groaning as he struggled to remain upright.

A boot blurred beside her fingers, kicking the dagger across the grassy clearing. Cursing, she spun on her feet, rushing for the blade, but not before her feet were yanked out from under her. She fell to the forest floor with a thud, air whooshing from her lungs on impact.

Scrambling, she flung her weight to one side and managed to roll onto her back, but Draven was already upon her, pinning her to the ground. Her shackled wrists were thrown above her head, held down with calloused hands. A frustrated roar ripped from her throat as she attempted to wriggle her body free of his weight, but it was useless. A mountain would be easier to move.

“Yield.”

“You’ll have to break me first,” she spat, twisting beneath his hold.

“Fine.”

A snap echoed above her head, followed by sharp, stabbing pain shooting down her arm. She yelled, cursing him. He had broken her wrist.

“Now, do you yield?”

“You broke my Stars-damned wrist!” she bellowed, gritting her teeth from the pain. True pain. Pain that had been muted for years since Sacrifice chose her. It was excruciating.

“Others will not be as kind.” He narrowed his eyes on her, refusing to budge.

“I yield. Just get off me!” she shouted, squeezing her eyes shut, wrist throbbing.

He paused, then stood, releasing her arms and stepping over her. Cradling her wrist, Astraia clumsily rose. The manacles constricted her injured wrist as it began to swell, throbbing in sync with her heartbeat.

Whipping around to face the bounty hunter, her voice menacing, she said, “You had no right.”

“I had every right. You were sloppy and you failed, miserably,” he droned, arms crossed as a statue of indifference.

“Unbind me so that I can heal.” She marched over to him, wincing as each step pounded the earth and ricocheted through her broken bones. As soon as the manacles were off, she would beat the apathy off his pretty face.

“No.”

She halted, eyes wide, temper rising. “You said you would take them off the moment I asked you.”

“No, I said I would remove them when you proved to me you could defend yourself. I remain sorely unconvinced.” His eyebrow quirked, eyeing the wrist she held close to her chest.

“And how, pray tell, do I convince you with a broken wrist?” Malice dripped from every syllable as she spoke.

Rolling his eyes, he grabbed her waist and spun her around, back to him. Despite her resentment toward him for breaking her bones, a thrill ran up her spine at his touch, making her stomach flip. Her eyes widened at the sensation, and she swallowed hard.

“You need to unbalance your opponent. Catch them off guard. Eyes, nose, ears, any way to disrupt their senses is easiest, but in this position...” He slid a hand down her

unbroken left arm, angling her elbow and pushing it back into his side. “I would go for the spleen. Drive your elbow backward.”

He dropped his hand and turned her around to face him. “Once they are distracted, get them on their knees. I believe you have already proven you can successfully do that.” He smirked, then gently held her manacled wrists in his hands.

Her wrist still throbbed, but the adrenaline racing through her blood dulled the pain. They were frighteningly close, her chest shuddering with each breath. She could smell pine and wood smoke from his skin, could feel the warmth of his body against hers, could hear the thundering of his heart matching hers beat for beat. The entire forest blurred around her. She was hopelessly adrift in the essence of the bounty hunter.

“Now you can use the chains or your arms to choke them out from behind.” His hands lingered on her wrists. “Do you understand?”

“Yes,” she whispered, afraid if she spoke any louder, the forest floor might collapse beneath her.

“You are stronger than your bonds. Use that strength. Never hesitate. Your opponent will not offer you the same mercy.”

Then Draven released his hands and stepped backward. A rush of cool air passed between them, cutting through the tension. Astraia was not sure if she wanted to sigh in relief or scream in frustration.

“May I?” He gestured toward the chain around her neck, holding the key to the manacles.

She nodded, remaining motionless as he reached for the chain. The tenderness of his fingers skimming over her exposed skin above her chest made her breath hitch. Time slowed—and there was no bond to blame. Just the slightest touch of his hand made her skin sing, her head spin, and her heart open a little more.

The chain came over her head and passed through her dark hair. She heard a soft click, and the manacles gave way. Emotions burst into her mind, pounding against every corner

until spots danced before her eyes. Blinking, she watched as Draven tucked the key under his tunic and stored the shackles in his saddlebag once again.

“You should rest and heal. I’ll start a fire,” he said, walking away from her toward the stream without a second glance.

Sacrifice bloomed in her core and coolness wrapped around her wrist, the broken bones sliding into their proper place. At that moment, Astraia realized there was, in fact, something more dangerous than manacles. More consuming than her bonds.

And it had captured her with golden pools of amber.

CHAPTER 17

Gold. Gold conquers. Gold topples nations. Gold brings about ruin. Gold forces Kings to their knees. Gold once glittered in the Empyrean. Gold now paid with Starborne blood.

STARLESS NIGHT



Neither of them spoke as they set off down the road, the horses' hooves the only sound to break the tension. She was still processing her reactions during the training sessions and did not trust her tongue to be bridled this early in the morning. Her bonds had been muted, and still she felt warmth and electrifying energy whenever he got near her.

Yet dark thoughts managed to taint those feelings. She stood once more on the edge of her mind, peering down into an endless black void. A dark, ominous voice rose from the depths, weaving discord. Anyone who she had valued in life, who brought her joy, had been destroyed or betrayed her. True happiness was not a luxury life afforded her. Not after what she had done.

You deserve your reward, the darkness snarled, vibrating the walls of her mind.

Letting the cold reality settle over her, she straightened in the saddle, taking a deep breath, and tried focusing on the road before her. The landscape was changing as they neared the center of Virellia and the city of Volpes. Trees became thicker, flowers bloomed in abundance, and all manner of shrubs and plant life coated the roadside. With the morning sun peeking through the trees, a golden glow blanketed the road and covered the plants, making it look ethereal.

Since the Shattering, most of the realm was cloaked in dark, cloudy days and dying lands. The entire center of Astradeon, where the stewards fought in the final battle of the Celestial

War and where the Stars collided with the earth after their fall, was the Shardlands. A dark, rolling desert of black Starshards, rocks, and barren lands. Only the Shardborne and Tredecim zealots ventured into those regions, in search of Starshard fragments for unnatural bonding.

The only part of Astradeon that recovered after the Shattering was Virellia. Some texts claimed that Desire placed a mythical shield around her favorite place in the realm, preventing the fallout that destroyed the rest of Astradeon from scorching the gardens. Whatever the reason, Astraia was thankful some piece of the realm could experience rebirth and growth. Although she could not help but pity the rest of the citizens, scrounging for food while Volpes basked in excess. She blamed the regent king and his ruthless regime.

A small flicker of her bonds licked her spine. This was not the usual warmth she felt around a certain bounty hunter. It was a warning.

Astraia smelled death before she saw it.

Sacrifice rose to the surface of her skin as the smell of wood smoke mixed with iron coated her nose and throat. Her bond pulsed stronger as the stench intensified.

“Do you smell that?” Astraia asked, glancing at Draven.

His eyes were fixed ahead, trying to see between the trees for the source. “There’s a town. Just ahead.”

His shoulders tightened. But Astraia already knew.

“Maybe we should—” He began to slow his horse when the sounds of shouting and screaming broke through the trees.

She kicked Orion into a gallop, not waiting to see if Draven followed.

Her bond screamed. Her pulse roared.

As Orion sped forward, she dove deep into both bonds, unsure if what she would face meant repairing or retribution.

Within seconds, she could see black smoke billowing over the treetops, blotting out the sun and swallowing the clouds, but she did not slow her approach.

The forest blurred as she let Power unfurl—heightening her senses, sharpening every breath. Coming around a bend in the road, Astraia gasped, pulling hard on Orion’s reins to stop.

Pure chaos unfolded before her. The town was ablaze, but as Astraia looked more carefully, she could tell the flames were not natural. Red-hot flickering blazes licked the sides of the buildings, twisting and turning as though a snake of hellfire was consuming the streets.

The townspeople were running between houses, trying to douse the flames with buckets of water, but to no avail. The water evaporated before it even hit the flames.

Several people laid lifeless in the street, their loved ones wailing over their bodies.

A boy knelt beside a woman’s body, his hands stained with ash as he shook her.

“Mama,” he sobbed, over and over. “Mama, wake up.”

Astraia’s throat burned. Sacrifice flared white-hot in her chest.

The rest hit her like a wave—flames, smoke, bodies. Dominion had already claimed too many.

But the Stars be damned if she let him take one more soul.

Somewhere beyond the flames, something shrieked—high-pitched, unnatural. The kind of sound that didn’t belong to anything living.

Astraia’s head whipped in the direction of the shriek, at the center of the town where the smoke was thickest.

A flicker of red tore through the smoke, then another.

Astraia’s pulse quickened as she realized it was a pair of molten red eyes peering through the billows directly at her. Her mind reeled at the eerie similarity to the wolves she had only just encountered a few days before—the same hunger and evil radiating from them.

Stepping from the black abyss, a monstrous form took shape, the owner of the unholy eyes. At first glance, it

appeared to be a massive man, towering over seven feet tall, but as the smoke parted with his steps, her heart stopped.

The formidable figure was wearing black steel armor and a hooded, tattered cloak that was black as pitch, darker than the starless skies. Only part of the creature's face was visible, dark gray skin, cracked with black fractures—as though it burned from the inside, fissures forming from the combustion.

And eyes gleaming red. Red as the blood of those slain at the creature's hand.

The horrifying monster carried a dark iron sword, black smoke billowing from the edges of the blade.

Realization hit Astraia like a cold wave.

Wraith.

Once stewards of Dominion, the Constellation that started the Celestial Wars eons ago. But Dominion had fallen, shattered according to Astradeon history, along with his stewards.

Yet here, in a small town on the outskirts of Volpes, was the very figure made of nightmares.

The wraith moved deliberately, each step pounding the earth with a force that would make even the bravest soldiers in Astradeon tremble. Sparks of vile fire spewed from the impact of each boot, eager to take hold of the nearest townhome.

Several of the women around Astraia screamed as they pointed to the unholy creature gliding through the smoke. Men stopped bailing water, throwing down their water buckets, grabbing their wives and children and fleeing into the woods behind her.

The monster paid the fleeing crowd no mind, his attention focused on Astraia.

Astraia steeled herself, stepping into the town square directly in his path. He was still several yards away, but she was not going to give him the luxury of gaining ground.

She forced her tether down, into the earth, into the sky, into the trees, into the air she breathed—anchored to the soul of

Astradeon. Her mind opened, the lid to Power unhinged, and pure force poured into her.

The world slowed as her senses sharpened, white light pouring into her hands and surrounding her body. She could feel her eyes glowing white, her hair standing on end as Power engulfed her.

She did not know how a wraith came to be here, but she would not allow its path of destruction to continue.

She nicked an arrow, aiming directly at the wraith's red eyes. She took a deep breath, forcing Power into her aim, praying to the Stars that no longer answered that she hit her mark—and released.

White light trailed behind her arrow, now a blur as it scorched the air, permeating the smoke.

The wraith did not move, did not even flinch, as the arrow sailed toward him. Black shadows and smoke erupted from him, stretching forward and disintegrating the arrow before it even grazed his face.

Astraea swallowed, her mouth dry, her heartbeat thundering in her ears.

She grabbed another arrow from her quiver, nocking an arrow once more. Stepping forward as she took aim, she fired, releasing waves of Power with every arrow. Again and again she fired, trying to hit any part of the wraith left exposed by the iron armor.

And every time, the arrow never made it past the smoke screen.

Within seconds, she had fired almost all of her arrows, to no avail, and the wraith was now only a few yards away. Smoke threatened to suffocate her as the distance between them lessened.

Astraea placed her bow on the ground, unsheathing her dagger. The black blade reflected the white light around her, still pulsing from her bond.

If she could just get close enough, she could shove her dagger between his armor plates, and with Power coursing through her and the blade, it would be a swift end.

It had to be. Or she was dead.

Letting her bond surge forward, the blade warmed in her hand as it was imbued with strength. She would need to be quick, even with her heightened senses.

She took a deep breath, steadying her hand, remembering every hour of training with Elion as he helped her master the celestial blade. The early mornings spent running miles on the beach, working through drills with her blade and bow, teaching her about balance and strategy—were all for this moment.

You are Starlight. You will not fall.

Elion's smile flashed before her mind, calm resolution washing over her, as she ran toward the red-eyed demon.

Her bonds flared around her in response to the evil that defiled the earth. The wraith raised his sword, grasping the hilt of the blade with both hands, ready to rain down wrath on the Starborne.

Time slowed, her bond sharpening her senses further, morphing her into the weapon her father expected her to be—the weapon the Constellations had chosen. She was only a breath from the wraith now. Heat and smoke scorched her lungs, but she did not stop.

Then, he struck.

The force of his blade slashing through the smoke vibrated the air, a whistling sound filling her ears with the speed of his movement.

But Astraia was ready, the black metallic of her Celestial dagger already raised in defense. She bent her legs, tightening her core to steady her form, and released Power into her dagger.

The brightness of her bond flare caught the wraith off guard, his eyes squinting against the light, but it did not lessen his

forceful slash.

The sound of iron meeting steel reverberated through the town as blades met. Sparks flew. Astraia winced as the energy vibrated through her skull, making her ears ring.

But she did not fall. Power surged forward from her blade, white sparks traveling down her arms into the dagger and repelling the wraith's iron broadsword.

Screaming with fury, Astraia flared her bond, pushing with every ounce of strength she could muster into the black steel to force the wraith back. She sidestepped and jumped back from the attacker, breathless.

But the wraith did not relent. His broadsword billowed with smoke, slashing down again. She rolled, ducking just out of his reach. The air ruffled her hair from the near-miss.

Faster. I have to be faster.

She had not pushed her bond for this long in years—not since training, not since that day five years ago when her whole world burned.

Now it was her turn to attack.

Channeling Power once more, the blade pulsating with brilliant white streaks of light, she lunged. Slashing, it collided with the black broadsword.

She held her ground, forcing the wraith to remain on the defensive, blades locked and unmoving. The only way she was keeping him from slicing her in two was her bond flowing through every inch of her skin and every shard of her blade.

Astraia only had one chance.

Shoving her body weight behind her dagger and allowing her bond to drive her forward, she forced the wraith back. His footing faltered for only a second, but that was all the time she needed.

Without blinking, she plunged the dagger into the small space between the wraith's metal armor plating. Power reacted, pouring into her dagger and straight into the wraith.

The wraith stumbled backward, releasing an ear-piercing shriek, louder than any natural sound, a sound of the steward of Dominion—death itself.

Astraia jumped backward out of the reach of the wraith, her dagger still glowing with Power embedded in his rotting flesh.

But death was not finished with her yet.

Red eyes glowed with hatred as a billow of smoke surged from his hands and broadsword, flooding the town square.

Astraia pulled her cloak over her mouth, coughing, but refused to pull her eyes away from the wraith. She dove for her bow and quiver, her last remaining tools of retribution.

Through the haze, she could see the white glow of her Celestial dagger still wedged between the wraith's armor. He lifted an ashen hand to remove the dagger by the hilt, but as soon as he made contact with the blade, the white glow of Power blazed brighter eliciting another shriek.

It was now or never.

Raising her bow, she anchored deeper into the earth. Elion's face flashed before her, as if he was mere inches from her. A small smile etched on his face as he stared at her.

Then a sound sweeter than any melody, than the song of the constellations themselves, filled her ears and drowned out the wraith's screams.

"You are Starlight, Astraia," Elion echoed across the village.

"I will not fall," she whispered, nodding to her brother.

Astraia flared.

White light intertwined with blue streaks erupted from her core. The brilliance filled every corner of the town, every inch of smoke evaporated with the mere touch of her light. It sang from the earth, it poured from the fallen stars, it banished the darkness back to Dominion. She was pure Starlight—she was a constellation of reckoning.

The wraith bellowed a roar of defiance, marching forward. A low rumble shook the ground with each step as his boots

struck dirt. Red sparks flew in every direction.

Astraia stood firm and loosed her arrows.

Her hands were a blur as she let every arrow from her quiver fly. The air around the points split as they flew toward their target, white streaks of light and blue flashes painting the air in a symphony of force.

The wraith went on the defensive, slowing his steps as he held his broadsword in front of him as a shield. As the arrows peppered his blade, the impact sounded like thunder clouds just overhead, vibrating the ground around them. The sheer magnitude of the collision caused the wraith to stumble, his boots sliding backward across the dry dirt as the arrows kept striking.

Astraia's flare intensified, her steps moving in a circle around the wraith, trying to find a weak point. Just when she grasped for the last arrow, she noticed the glowing dagger once more from the demon's side.

Her vision honed, she could see thick black drops falling from the wound, ashen flesh exposed. Time slowed to a crawl, the wraith almost at a standstill. The white light crackling through the air from her arrow was suspended in motion. Sound muffled around Astraia as she aimed her bow.

The white and blue pulses from her bond crept their way from the fletching to the tip, as her gaze remained fixed on the inky fluid oozing from his side.

Holding her breath, she flexed her hand and released.

Time jolted back. Sound rushed to her ears, and her eyes refocused—just as the arrow whizzed through the air and found its mark beside the entry point from her dagger.

More white and blue light seeped into the wraith. Another shriek from the demon steward pierced the air as he lowered his sword, clutching his side in vain. He could not touch the arrow or the blade embedded in his ashen flesh, her bonds' strength still flowing into his wounds.

The wraith faltered, his red eyes locked on Astraia, smoke billowing from his nostrils.

“This ends now, demon,” she seethed, dropping her bow.

Latching onto her tether, she channeled Power. Remembering her training with Draven, she focused on wielding the bond into an extension of herself. Commanding it to concede, a glowing white sword erupted from her hands. She held fast to the shimmering hilt, feeling the energy pulsing through her arms and whirring around her.

A scream ripped from her throat, a yell she had been holding inside her for five long years. A shout of justice, of anger, of retribution for her brother and the selfish pride of her parents—for the life stolen from her.

She did not hesitate as she sprinted toward the shadowy beast. Running faster than she had in her entire life, bonds lightening her steps, her blade aglow with Power’s intensity. The wraith was within a sword-length from her as he struggled to raise his weapon, smoke and fire spewing from his mouth, bringing down his might upon her.

A final surge of Power filled her as Astraia ran then dropped to her knees, momentum driving her forward and arching her back as low as she could. Within seconds she was sliding beneath the legs of the wraith, and using every ounce of strength from her bonds, she slashed her sword across the creature’s thighs.

As soon as she cleared the wraith’s legs, she bolted upright and spun to face her opponent. Shrieks split the air as the wraith fell to the ground on his knees. Glowing white and blue slashes marred his colossal thighs, black liquid pouring from the wounds.

Astraia gasped for air, her vision filled with white spots, her body much too heavy. She was still surging her bonds. Desperate, she reached down for her tether, feeling for the anchor line to rein in her bonds. But it was thin. She could not grasp the line in her mind or find Elion.

Her knees hit the ground as she struggled to fill her lungs. The glare of white and blue light did not dissipate; it continued to blast away the soot and black smoke from around her and

the town. She tried to channel Power once more, to control her burnout, but she could not form the sword.

She was no longer commanding Power—it was commanding her.

She was going to burn out.

Astraia drowned in her own mind, grasping for anything to keep her afloat. She was so small in the vastness—as an endless sea with no sight of land for days.

Please. Help me, Elion. Please.

Her voice was only a whisper in the void. No one could hear her. No one would know. She would die inside her own mind.

Through her blurred vision, she could just make out the wraith struggling to stand, slower and more intentional in his movements. The slashes in his legs and the gaping wound in his side still glowed, still trying to bring down the monster.

The wraith would not go easily. He meant to end her.

And she would burn from the inside out as he cut her down.

Astraia did the only thing she could. The only thing left to do.

She prayed to the Stars who no longer listened.

CHAPTER 18

*Though unburdened by the frailty of man, the Stars
are reflections of the souls they guard and guide.
Taking on the appearance of man, they give unholy
eyes a familiar form to grasp as they linger in
Solrend and float between memories.*

THE EMPYREAN SCROLLS (REMNANTS OF THE HOLY TEXT)



THE WRAITH WAS CLOSE. THE stench of his burning skin reached her nostrils. His black shadows attempted to cover up her light, to no avail.

Dominion's steward dragged his broadsword on the ground, sparks dancing from the blade. His steps were uneven and slow as he raised his broadsword with both gloved hands, angled to behead her in one swift motion.

Astraia could not move. Her burnout locked her firmly to the scorched dirt.

The wraith flexed his hands, holding the hilt of his blackened sword. The crunch of his gloved knuckles grated her teeth.

She refused to close her eyes. Refused to give the demon the satisfaction of killing her in submission. If this was her end, she would go knowing her light still burned.

His arms tensed for the blow but halted. His red eyes opened wide in shock as he peered at Astraia. Black liquid poured from his mouth, streaking down his chin and coating the front of his armor.

The end of a broadsword, glowing red, protruded from the wraith's chest. Burning the sides of the exit wound, charred flesh flaking away in the wind.

The red sword disappeared as it was yanked back.

The wraith gaped at the opening in his chest, red light still pulsing from the edges. Slowly, he turned, stumbling over his boots.

Golden-brown hair and amber eyes bore into Astraia's.

Draven held fast to his broadsword, red light glowing from the blade's edge. Through blurred vision, she could almost see veins of red pulsing from his exposed arms, and black smoke enveloped him.

Nodding at her, Draven turned his attention back on the demon, who now had its back to Astraia—fully focused on his new opponent.

A different sound filled Astraia's ears. A guttural, low tone, coming from the wraith. It took her a moment to realize the wraith was speaking. The language was not of this world. It was ancient, harsh, foreboding.

Draven did not flinch at the sound. As if he was familiar with the heathen words of the afterlife.

“You will not touch her,” Draven growled. His eyes burned, as if the Constellations had imbued them with Starlight to blind his enemies.

The demon laughed. A raspy, grating laugh, choking on black blood that was still filling his mouth. The steward's gravelly voice uttered another stream of demonic words as he lifted his broadsword with one hand and pointed it at Draven.

“If he wants her, he will have to go through me,” Draven roared.

A flash of red blurred as he lunged, bringing his blade to meet the wraith's. Red and orange flames burned on collision of the two broadswords, and a loud clang rang out in the town square.

Draven's movements were flawless, a dance of precision and deadly swordsmanship—the dance of a man who had seen battle. The bounty hunter sidestepped the wraith's attacks, easily avoiding the blackened blade as the injured demon slashed.

The steward of Dominion raised his weapon once more, holding the hilt with ferocity, but Draven's fluid movements were too fast and calculated. Red blade met black, but instead of holding his defensive, Draven brought his sword full circle, catching the wraith off guard.

With a single powerful sweep, the wraith's head was severed from his molten body.

The wraith's dismembered form thudded to the ground, black liquid pouring from his headless neck.

Draven stood, his breath even despite the battle, his broadsword dripping in black. The red glow of his blade dissipated, and black smoke no longer lingered around him.

Astraia was barely breathing now. She could only make out blurred shadows as Draven approached her. Her ears were ringing, and she could feel every wisp of her bonds graze her skin, as though every inch of her were ready to burst.

She swayed, her eyes closed. Her head became too heavy—everything was too heavy. A rush of air blew through her hair as her body pitched forward toward the ground, but she did not feel the earth on her face. Instead, warmth enveloped her along with the smell of pine and smoke.

“Traia, I'm here.” The low whisper grazed her ear, concern etched in his tone. “Traia, listen to me. You have to find your tether again. You're burning out.”

She tried to open her eyes, to see him one last time, but she could not find the strength.

I can't. I can't find Elion. I'm lost. She cried out for him again, into the dark oceans of her mind.

“You are not gone. You are here with me. And I am not going anywhere. Listen to the Stars, Traia. Reach for them.” Draven's voice was a soft whisper, but a command, nevertheless.

The Stars are gone. They left me.

“They are still here, Traia. Reach for them.” Draven's voice was louder, firm.

Astraia quit believing the Constellations were listening. To believe they survived the Shattering was a fool's hope.

But what hope did she have now—steps from Dominion's door. Death was grinning at her, welcoming her. She had to at least try.

Help me. Help the Starborne that gave you everything. That never wanted it but accepted it anyway. If you care about me, please hear me now.

An involuntary tear slid down her cheek as she begged the constellations to hear her prayer. She did not want to die. She did not want Elion's death to be in vain.

Her mind went eerily quiet as she listened. Listened for a rustle of the wind, a whisper from Sacrifice or Power. A blip in the darkness. Time stretched before her as she tried to swim in the depthless sea of her consciousness.

Then, on the horizon, a single speck of light, barely visible, appeared just above the waters.

Astraia's mind stilled. The waters calmed.

An ethereal sound broke through the silence, an echo in the expanse. Several voices blended together as one, creating a melody of song.

"Starlight." The voices hummed, soft and serene.

Her mind locked on the light, her physical body responding with the quickening of her pulse.

"Arise, Starlight. You will not fall today," the voices sang, reverberating inside her skull, a command from the Constellations.

Astraia reached for the light, for the voices of the Constellations she had long dismissed. She drew her tether from the deep, casting it on the drop of light. As soon as her cord touched the light, the waters around her subsided. Her mind began to clear and brighten as she anchored to the Stars, holding tight to her new tether.

Her breath came easier, and her pulse slowed, her senses snapping back to normalcy as Power and Sacrifice subsided.

She could feel her bonds waning, being pulled back to her, lights fading around her closed eyes.

Astraia fluttered her eyes open, letting her vision clear.

Warm, amber hues stared back at her.

“There you are, Starborne.” Draven spoke softly, a small smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. A sight Astraia thought she would never see again.

“Here I am, bounty hunter,” she croaked, her throat sore from the ash.

Then, darkness took her.

CHAPTER 19

The initial battle that sparked rebellion by the wraiths, stewards of Dominion, was that of the siege on Interitus, the capital of Luxterra. The shadow demons overran the walls of the city, charging Nyrekh through the gates.

BROKEN: THE CELESTIAL WAR



THE FIRST THING ASTRAIA NOTICED was softness on her bare skin. Silky smoothness caressed her arms and legs. She was also warm—warm and cradled in clouds.

Her mind was clear. There was no dark abyss threatening to drown her. Just the calm serenity of her mind. She did not search for Elion. She was afraid of what she would find, or not find. And she decidedly did not have the strength for any mental turmoil.

It was quiet, but she could make out the faint sound of several people talking and laughing coming from somewhere close by, perhaps even beneath her. She breathed deep, relishing the ability to draw breath so easily without burnout mere moments from claiming her.

A calming scent filled her nose as she inhaled—pine and wood smoke.

Her eyes flew open at the familiarity.

Gazing around, she gained her bearings. She was in a small bed, covered in satin sheets and a warm, intricate quilt. She was wearing the tunic Draven had lent her in Aquarian. Her hands were clean of blood and soot, and her hair had been washed. Unsure how she had gotten cleaned and dressed while she had been passed out was unsettling to her, but she did not linger long on the notion, as a creak of the door opening interrupted her thoughts.

Contrary to her cleanliness, Draven was still coated in black, sickly wraith blood, and ash peppered his hair and face. He had removed his Drakari-scale leather armor, wearing a white long-sleeved shirt, with the cuffs rolled up to his elbows. His mysterious mural of tattoos was visible, along with some newer scars that appeared to be scorch marks on his arms and hands. They only served to enhance the plethora of marks from previous injuries and battles he likely had faced. She recalled his battle with the wraith, the way he effortlessly dispatched Dominion's steward—sheer power incarnate.

Her gaze rose to his battle-worn face. A strand of his unkempt hair fell over his eyes, and his beard could use a shave.

What was worse, was that not only was he irritatingly beautiful on the outside, but she was starting to see cracks through his rogue bounty hunter facade that showed a man of worth.

Astraia did not believe trust had been earned by Draven. But he had come to her aid. Time and time again. That had to mean something.

“Nice of you to join the living, Starborne,” he said, clearing his throat as he closed the door behind him. Astraia could have sworn there was a hint of relief in his voice, but she did not dwell on the thought.

“Sorry to disappoint.” Astraia narrowed her eyes at his retort.

He smirked, that annoying tug at the corner of his mouth that enraged and excited her.

“How long have I been asleep?” She eyed the small room around her, noticing sparse furniture, but there was a window overlooking a grassy field outside. It must be about mid-morning, based on the sun's rays casting shadows from the trees.

“About two days,” he replied.

“*What?*” Astraia breathed, her gaze whipping back to Draven.

He sighed and slumped down into the chair next to her. “You passed out after you nearly burned out. You had several burns again. And a broken arm as well, I’m guessing from meeting the wraith’s blows with your dagger. Your Sacrifice bond did not awaken immediately to help heal you, so I brought you here.” Draven eyed her right arm as if waiting for it to snap in two, not totally convinced it had actually healed.

“Why?” she asked, tone low in disbelief.

“What?” He stared at her, confused.

“Why did you come after me? Why not let the wraith end me? You could have taken my body to the king and collected your reward. Instead, you followed me into the fire. You finished the wraith. You saved me from burning out. Then you brought me here to heal. Time and time again you *keep* saving me. I need to know why, bounty hunter—if that’s even your true occupation.” She tried to keep her voice even as tears of frustration threatened to spill.

He was lying. No bounty hunter in all of Astradeon could fight the way Draven effortlessly dispatched the wraith. Granted, the demon had been wounded, but the sheer force and speed by which Draven executed his judgment was otherworldly.

Most importantly, it was assuredly not a bounty hunter’s style.

He leaned forward in his chair, clasping his hands in front of him, elbows resting on his knees. He was just inches from her face—his breath warm as it caressed her arm, sending a shiver through her.

“The Constellations spoke to you.” It was not a question but a declaration.

Astraia’s eyes widened, recalling the faint dot of light in the storm of her mind. The melodic voices that called to her, commanding her to live.

“How do you know that?” she whispered, uncertain if she wanted to know the answer.

“Only the constellations themselves could have pulled you back from the brink of total burnout like that.”

“But the constellations are gone—were gone,” she stammered. “How can I hear them? Where have they been since the Shattering?”

“You are Starborne. Chosen by not just one, but two of the Constellations. You are not like most. The Stars chose you for a reason. And now, you can hear them.”

“*Why?*” she yelled. Her entire body was shaking. Her hands gripped the sheets so tightly her knuckles were white. A flutter of her bonds awakened, quickening inside her with the shift of her emotions, but swiftly dimmed from fatigue.

Astraia glared at Draven. “Why now? Where have they been, Draven? Where were they five years ago when my entire world burned to ash from the curse *they* gave me?”

She was crying.

She had not meant to cry, but the overwhelming sense of betrayal and pure exhaustion was too unbearable. Her vision blurred from the tears, but she could not stop them.

A rough, warm hand closed around hers, gently coaxing her fingers to relax.

“Traia, breathe.” His voice was low, calm, caring even.

She blinked several times and stared at Draven, focusing on her breath—in for three seconds, out for three seconds.

Draven took deep breaths with her until she was no longer clenching the sheets and her vision cleared from crying. He continued to hold her hand, willing her to relax further.

“I do not know why they have chosen to speak now. If I knew the Stars’ intentions, believe me, I would be leagues away from here. All I do know is that you bested a steward of Dominion, a feat most warriors could not achieve. And you did not burn out while flaring two bonds, which no average Starborne could possibly have survived.”

He narrowed his eyes at her, fierce determination in his gaze as he spoke. “You are meant for more. You are meant for the

Constellations' purpose.”

He relaxed his hand, pulling it away, and ran his fingers through his hair as he stood. “I am going to go check on the horses. There’s a washroom through that door. I’ll send some food up for you. You should eat.”

He grabbed his cloak from the back of his chair and made for the door.

“Draven.” Astraia shifted in the bed, wiping the remaining tears from her face. “Thank you.”

He simply nodded and closed the door behind him.

Astraia’s body was pathetically weak as she made to stand from the bed, her legs threatening to give way. How she was supposed to ride the remaining way to Volpes without falling off Orion, only the Stars knew.

The Stars... They were really alive. *And they answer me.*

She exhaled loudly, unsure how she should feel about this revelation.

A light knock on the door disrupted her thoughts. Shuffling slowly to the door, she opened it cautiously. A young girl stood with a platter of food in her hands.

“Hello. I was asked to bring you some food,” the girl said, smiling at Astraia.

“Oh, yes, thank you.” Opening the door wider, Astraia let the girl bring in the tray and thanked her again as she left. She hungrily devoured the soup and bread and decided a scalding bath was the best way to clear her head and wake up her body.

She gathered, based on the sounds coming from downstairs, that they were at an inn. They must be close to the lavish city of Volpes because despite the modest furnishings of the room, the washroom had running water and a large tub.

Astraia moaned as she settled herself into the steaming water, eager to let the heat melt away her sore muscles. The wraith had drained her, mentally and physically. Her right arm still throbbed, even though her bond had already reset the bone and likely stitched together the ligaments and tendons that had

torn. Massaging her arm, she tried to recall when it had broken, but she had flared so fiercely, it overpowered her natural senses during the fight with the wraith—dulling her pain response.

She lifted her legs from the water one at a time, inspecting for any sign of the burns Draven had mentioned, but only saw a few miniscule white scars on her left upper thigh.

Sometimes, Astraia yearned for more scars to ruin her porcelain skin. Her bond always intervened to keep her intact, but the life-threatening wounds she had experienced were only a thread of memory etched on her skin—a pale line her only reminder.

In her darker moments, she had wished her face was marred with deep horrific scars. So that every day she could look at herself in the small circular mirror in her apartment in Tenebris and remember the monster she was—the monster created by the Stars, who damned her brother.

Astraia dipped her head underwater, trying to drown the darkness in her mind. But the darkness was always there, looming on the edge of her thoughts.

She took her time in the bath but knew the rest of her journey would not wait forever. Sighing, she wrapped a towel around herself and folded up Draven's shirt to replace in her satchel.

Opening the door to the washroom, she found Draven standing not a foot away from her, shirtless, his hand raised to knock on the door.

Tanned, scarred skin glistened in the lamplight. Every single muscle toned.

His gaze traveled from the towel wrapped around her, barely reaching her knees, and finally landed on her eyes. His hand dropped, but he did not step away from her.

"I was just finished," she said, acutely aware of their closeness.

His insufferable smirk played across his mouth, and she could not help her eyes from flicking to his lips. She wondered

what they would taste like—whether they were harsh like his hands, or soft like his eyes.

Stars save me, she thought, then blinked.

“Don’t leave on my account,” he said.

Astraia rolled her eyes and huffed, sidestepping his hulking form.

She could have sworn she heard him chuckle before the door closed behind him.

CHAPTER 20

My enemies knock at my gates, threatening my peace. They roar like beasts, demanding their pound of flesh. They believe me weak, easy to succumb to their blades. But I will bring blades of light and wipe their dark stain from the realm.

**PERSONAL JOURNAL OF QUEEN VIRTUS, RULER OF
THE CELESTIAL COURT, QUEEN OF ASTRADEON IN
THE FORTIETH-YEAR POST SHATTERING**



ASTRAIA WAS CERTAIN HER MUSCLES would simply implode on their way to Volpes. Her Sacrifice bond was still not at even half strength after her flare with the wraith, and the residual soreness from her battle and injuries echoed with every step Orion made along the road.

She tried to distract herself from the pain by identifying each of the trees and shrubs that lined the road as they traveled. The closer they got to Volpes, the lush and thicker the flora became. She used to be able to name every native plant in Volpes, but now she struggled to recall them as if the five years had erased them from her memory.

For several hours, only hoofbeats and the distant trill of a meadowlark filled the air. Then Draven cleared his throat.

His voice was smooth, low enough to rattle her spine. “So, Starborne—what’s your plan once we reach Volpes? In case I need to save you from certain death again.”

Astraia flinched and brought Orion to an abrupt halt. Draven’s mount skidded beside her.

“Ah, I see. So you get to know my agenda, but I can’t know anything about you, where you came from, who sent you, why you’re insistent on following me, and why you keep aiding me? That’s what you consider fair? Well, that’s not how this works, *bounty hunter*,” she quipped.

Her voice wavered with rage as her Power bond flickered to life—ivory light pulsing beneath her skin. “I’ve been sharpened into a weapon by the very people who claimed me as blood. They lied. And it cost me my brother.” Heat roiled under her cloak, her hands clenched white around Orion’s reins. “Don’t mistake my gratitude for blind trust.”

For a heartbeat, she toyed with her tether, the promise of total abandon calling to her. But she remembered the feeling of near burnout and pulled back.

She let out a small gasp as she realized her tether had completely transformed. No longer did her brother’s carefree face flash before her eyes, unlocked from the safe box she stored within the crevice of her mind. Instead, she was holding a tiny thread of gold. The thread was smooth, but incredibly strong.

Curious, Astraia gently tugged on the thread, only to find it did not budge. She traced the thread in her mind, seeking the origin. Gazing across the calm surface, she could see the thread extending beyond the horizon of her mind, pulled taut and aimed toward the heavens. There, in the middle of the expanse, was the faint glittering light that had blinked to life during her burnout.

It was the Stars. Sacrifice and Power. They formed her tether.

And it was stronger than any anchor she had tried before.

The sound of Orion’s hooves broke the silence, bringing her focus back to the road ahead.

“I told you once before, Starborne, you shouldn’t trust me,” Draven said bluntly. His gaze was focused ahead as he rode.

“Even the Stars couldn’t make me trust you,” she snipped. Exasperated did not begin to scratch the surface of her feelings. People were never as they seemed.

No, she thought, they are worse.

For once, Draven said nothing, only watched her with an unreadable expression. No snide retort. No easy dismissal.

Astraia pulled Orion into a walk again, turning her head toward the bounty hunter in confusion.

He sighed loudly, running a hand through his hair—his unspoken ritual of frustration. What she said had actually struck a chord.

“Stars, Traia. Would you stop moving away from me?” he called after her. “Traia, stop!”

Astraia whipped her head around as he moved his horse closer to her.

“Look, I was sent—”

A loud thump silenced him.

Draven stopped, peering down at his chest, at the arrow sticking out from his left side just inches from his heart. Bright red blood already began to flow from the wound.

His gaze flitted back up to meet Astraia’s.

Time stilled.

His body went limp and fell sideways off his horse, hitting the ground beneath with a deafening crunch.

“*Draven!*” Astraia screamed.

Her bonds flashed through her body in seconds. Power flooded her senses, making her acutely aware of her surroundings as Sacrifice ached to attend to the fallen bounty hunter.

Blue and white light, blinding and fearsome, burst from every curve and angle of her body.

Astraia dismounted Orion, pulling her Starwood bow from her back, and aimed an arrow into the woods across from their position.

Another arrow whistled by her ear, coming from further into the woods.

She dove into her bond, grasping her new tether to the Stars, allowing Power to flow from her fingertips to the sharpened end of the arrow. Senses sharp, she could sense the attackers

were moving amongst the trees, attempting to get closer to their target.

On an exhale, Astraia released her arrow, pushing her bond from the nock to the deadly tip.

She could see deeper in the woods as her arrow flew, as if she had become part of her weapon, a beacon for revenge.

An attacker stepped out from behind a tree, readying his own arrow—but the hunter became the prey.

Arrow pierced flesh.

The man flew backward at the force of the ended arrow, leaves fluttering around his now lifeless body.

As soon as the first arrow flew, Astraia nocked another in its place, her breathing slow and steady as she searched for her next victim.

Pain erupted from her right thigh, and she let out a cry.

An arrow had grazed her thigh, cutting through her pants and ripping her skin open.

Breathing heavily, she stood her ground. Power surged from her spine, demanding to be unleashed.

With her amplified sight, she could just make out the cloak of the other ambusher, behind a tree several yards away. Hearing augmented, his quivering breath echoed in her ears, the smell of fear in the wind.

Good, she thought. Let him fear me.

A frightening twang resounded from her bow as she released her fueled arrow, followed by a cry from the downed man.

Astraia waited a moment more, feeling with her bond for any hint of more attackers, before limping to where Draven fell.

His chest was barely moving, blood oozing from his wound, coating his armor.

She knelt beside him, inspecting the injury. The arrow had managed to wedge between two flaps of his leathers.

She cursed as she pulled back his chest piece. “Draven, you have to stay with me, okay? I have to pull the arrow out so I can heal you,” she said sternly, attempting to hide the fear in her voice.

He blinked several times, choking out a laugh. “If I had known this would be my prize for saving you, I would have left you to the wraith.”

Astraia rolled her eyes. “Stars, you’re insufferable.”

“Yet you’re still here,” he said, softly this time, his breaths becoming more labored.

“Just hold still. This will hurt.” She grabbed the end of the arrow closest to his chest firmly with her hand, steeling herself.

Sacrifice flickered beneath her palms, eager and ready. Allowing her bond to flare, she prepared to heal him as soon as the arrow was free.

Taking a deep breath, she wrenched the arrow free in one smooth motion.

Draven moaned in pain through clenched teeth.

Astraia pressed her hands to the wound now gushing blood. Opening the gates to her bond, Sacrifice flared. A soft blue light webbed its way through her fingers, intertwining with the broken skin.

Warmth replaced the sticky coolness of blood on her fingers as the gash mended. Tissue knitted together, blood clotted, and scars vanished with her touch.

She dared a glance at the bounty hunter.

He was blinking slowly, awe in those amber pools.

“You’re incredible,” he said, voice low and reverent, before closing his eyes.

CHAPTER 21

Put down notions of revolution, for this is folly. Do you not know that the Empyrean, once cloaked in magnificent starlight, was formed on the premise of order? Hail Balance.

TRUTINORIS, PRIEST OF BALANCE



ASTRAIA READJUSTED HERSELF IN THE overly plush armchair, gazing out the massive floor-to-ceiling window beside her.

The town of Volpes glistened below in the morning sunlight. Every building was made of whitewashed stone, once thought to be incorporated with stardust by the constellation Desire as she sought to establish Volpes as the glistening jewel of Astradeon.

Astraea involuntarily rolled her eyes at the notion. *Pretentious* was a more fitting term for the town.

It was the wealthiest province in Astradeon thanks to the mining of Stardust, which was used to strengthen swords, structures, armor, cookware, and all manner of both helpful and harmful objects.

The people of Volpes benefitted from the riches, flaunting their lifestyle and indulging in the finery of life. The mystical gardens of Desire surrounding the city only inflated egos further—with rare trees, plants, and flowers surrounding the town and Volpes Manor.

Astraea sighed, turning her attention to the extravagant room around her.

The room was bright, with cream-colored walls and gold-trim accents throughout, even on the door handles. The ceiling was ornate, a hand-painted mural reflecting the white starbloom flowers of the surrounding gardens. Polished marble

floors were carpeted with lavish rugs, also accented with gold threads. Even the silk curtains adorning the side of each window were stenciled with gold.

Pretentious asses, Astraia grumbled to herself.

Her gaze shifted to the bed across from her, another ostentatious display in itself, large enough for Orion.

But it was not the bed that captured her attention—it was its occupant.

Draven had not yet gained consciousness. After healing him on the road, he had passed out, likely from the blood loss. Despite her weakened bonds, she was able to stop the bleeding from the arrow wound, but she had never been able to replace a person's blood volume quickly.

Astraia discovered this inconvenient restriction to her Sacrifice bond during a house call in the slums, when a woman was bleeding profusely after childbirth. Despite Astraia flaring her Sacrifice bond to its limit, the woman did not survive.

It still haunted her.

Draven's chest rose and fell steadily beneath the silk sheets. Astraia had not left his side since they arrived, guilt-ridden knowing the only reason he was here was because of her.

He'd followed her, protecting her for some unknown reason.

She stood, stretching her legs, and sat on the edge of the bed. Gently, she pressed two fingers to his wrist and checked his pulse. It was far stronger than when they arrived, and warmth had returned to his skin.

Astraia sighed in relief. Her bond tickled her spine at the faint touch of his skin, and she removed her hand, shivering. Cursing silently, she concentrated instead on his breathing pattern—even, unlabored, and soft.

She could make out the contour of his muscles beneath his shirt, his armor having been removed. Tattoos peeked from beneath his shirt sleeves, just above his hands. She could just make out letters of an old language she did not recognize

ornamenting his right arm but did not dare roll up his sleeve to investigate.

Her gaze climbed to his face. The sharp angles had softened, his brow relaxed as he slept. His lips were parted, somehow a shadow of that frustrating smirk lingering. And his disheveled golden hair shimmered in the morning light.

Without hesitation, Astraia lifted her hand to sweep a small section of hair from his face. Her touch lingered, the same electric wave pulsing through her blood.

Hesitantly, she lowered her hand—as amber eyes opened, meeting hers.

The room was silent.

Draven did not blink, nor did he tear his gaze from hers. The roughness of his finger grazed Astraia's hand that rested on the bed as warmth surged through her.

“You're not dead,” she whispered.

“Shame,” he rasped. “Was hoping for some peace and quiet.” His infuriating smirk returned to the left side of his mouth.

“Stars, you're insufferable,” she replied, a small curve forming on her own lips.

His eyes darted around the room, lingering on the etched ceiling, fine drapery. His voice dropped. “This isn't an inn.”

“No,” she replied. “It's a favor.”

Footsteps echoed in the hallway outside the room. Astraia stiffened just slightly before the knock—an old reflex.

“May I come in?” A man's voice—smooth, low, and laced with both curiosity and something else.

“Yes,” she answered, standing hastily at the foot of the bed just as the door opened.

Looming in the doorway was someone Astraia never thought she would see again. He was dressed in typical Volpes nobleman attire, everything too perfect and too tailored. A captain's signet was embroidered on his right sleeve, and a

sword hung by his side. His jet-black hair was cut shorter than she remembered, but his green eyes were just as wild, and so eerily similar to Elion's.

His steps faltered as he stared at her.

“By the Stars... I thought you were dead.” His voice broke faintly, and he took a cautious step closer—then a second. “They said you burned.”

“Apparently not,” Astraia responded, calm but clipped.

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Draven rise slowly to a sitting position. His jaw ticked, but he did not speak.

The visitor turned to Draven, his mask slipped back on—noble, but challenging. “I assume you're the reason she was bleeding on my doorstep.”

Draven glowered at the man. “And you are?”

“Lord Caelan Vireaux,” he says, smiling without warmth. “Her betrothed.”

A palpable beat of silence filled the air.

Draven turned to Astraia.

She did not flinch, but her fingers twitched on the bedpost. “*Was*. Was my betrothed,” she snapped, looking first at Draven then at Caelan.

Draven sat up straighter than he should, shoulders tense, voice lower. “I see.”

“You're not the only one who gets to have secrets.” Astraia sauntered over to the chair and plopped into the cushions, crossing one leg. “I saved your life. He housed you. That's all that matters.”

Caelan stared her down, voice stern. “We need to talk. Later. Alone.”

“Don't let me keep you,” Draven interjected flatly.

Astraia reclined further into the chair, settling both her arms on the armrests. “I'm not one of your cabinet members,

Caelan, so whatever you need to say, just spit it out. I don't have the time or patience for politics."

Caelan stepped closer toward her. "You've chosen a hell of a time to resurface, Traia."

Astraia leaned forward in her chair, seething. "I'm sorry for the inconvenience of my blood spilling."

Caelan huffed and rolled his eyes, pulling another chair in front of Astraia and sitting on its edge, mere inches from her. "Traia, listen. There have been attacks. Quiet ones. We're calling them shadows, but they're wraiths. No one will say it, but I know."

Astraia cocked an eyebrow at him. "Are you sure? I was certain it was just an angry bear that attacked me in the village outside *your* city."

Draven stifled a chuckle.

Caelan's eyes widened. "What? What do you mean you saw one near Volpes?"

"Saw, fought, nearly died in the process. But we managed to destroy him. The villagers survived, but the town did not." Astraia's hands remained resting on the chair, her face indifferent.

"We?" Caelan's eyebrow rose as he peered at her then at Draven.

"I just said a wraith, a steward of death itself, nearly killed an entire village and forced me to near burnout, and all you're concerned about is that *he* came to my aid?" Astraia's hands gripped the arm rests, anger boiling beneath her skin. She made little effort to hide her irritation as she narrowed her eyes. "Perhaps, my dear Lord Vireaux, the more critical issue is that wraiths are breaching your borders and attacking your people without cause. So instead of flexing your manhood in an effort to assert your authority, you should direct that energy to discovering why the wraiths have resurfaced and how."

Draven coughed, trying desperately to cover his laugh.

Caelan scowled at Astraia for a moment, then a small smile spread across his face. “Charming as ever, Traia.”

Despite her vexation with the nobleman, she smirked back. “You always brought out my best qualities.”

Caelan’s face hardened, and his tone became sterner—a captain’s voice. “This is serious.” He looked directly at her as he spoke, a hint of fear in his eyes. “The king has a bounty out for Starborne.”

“Yes, I am quite aware,” she snapped. “Why do you think I’m here, Caelan? I’ve been on the run for days. The oh-so-benevolent king’s declaration has the entire realm hunting Starborne so they can pad their pockets with solas.” She stood, voice low, eyeing the nobleman. “And before you scold me—remember this is not just *my* problem. It involves you, your court, and your people.”

Caelan’s eyes narrowed at her, his mouth set in a thin line of determination. “Kings or demons, I will always protect the people of Virellia.”

“Fine. What are you asking then?” she said, annoyance lacing her tone.

A familiar smile graced Caelan’s face as he took her hand in his. “I need a hunter.”

CHAPTER 22

*Anger and jealousy twisted the mind of Dominion.
Once charged as a carrier of the dead to Solrend,
the Star sought a higher purpose, to overtake
Balance and sow chaos.*

THE RISE OF DOMINION



“YOU SAID YOU BURNED YOUR past to the ground. Seems a few embers still glow.” Draven spoke coolly, breaking the silence that had blanketed the room after Caelan left minutes before.

Astraia stared at him, fury brewing beneath her skin. “This isn’t about my past. It’s about a favor.”

“Feels like a forgotten wound.”

He did not say another word. But the look he gave her—quiet, unreadable, almost hurt—said more than she was ready to hear.

The manor was too quiet—no clatter of dishes, no murmured footsteps. Only the sharp strike of Astraia’s boots against polished marble. Not a single maid or footman loitered about the manor, but this did not surprise her.

After the ambush, she had flagged down a wagon driver—half-conscious from her own injuries and covered in blood that wasn’t hers. The man didn’t argue as he helped load Draven into the wagon. Fear made people helpful.

As soon as they arrived, the butler named Graves recognized her instantly.

She had sworn him to secrecy, threatening him with swift removal of an arm if he breathed a word of her appearance to anyone but Caelan. Especially not to Lord and Lady Vireaux.

Graves was very agreeable and had rushed them to the corner apartment where Astraia used to stay on her summer visits to Volpes. It was then that Graves revealed the lord and lady were on holiday and were not expected to return until the month's end.

Astraia sighed as she passed the whitewashed walls of the elaborate manor covered with paintings depicting the city of Volpes, the mystical gardens of Desire, Lord and Lady Vireaux, and of course, Caelan.

Her steps slowed. Between two sconces, a painting stopped her breath in her chest.

Sunlight. Wind-swept hair. A stare full of fire.

Her own.

The summer breeze blew through her dark hair, small strands falling over her face. Her skin was sun-kissed from days spent in the gardens of Desire and riding Orion through the wildflower fields. There was no smile on her lips, but a pair of blue eyes were ablaze with determination, captivating any onlooker who would stop to admire the brushstrokes on canvas.

She had never seen this painting before. Not in all the summers she had spent here as a child and after Caelan's proposal.

"I tried to remember your face. Every line. It doesn't do you justice." Caelan stepped up beside her, his hands behind his back, staring at the painting.

"Why is this here?" Astraia asked quietly, fear seeping into her voice. Fear of what this painting meant.

Caelan stared ahead as he spoke, his tone hard. "When you left to return home that summer, I was another man. A man of hope, dreams, filled with passion. You said yes. It opened my eyes to the life we could have together. Then I got word of the explosion. Graves brought me the correspondence while I was out doing combat drills with the other guards."

He paused then, taking a deep breath before turning to face Astraia. The green of his eyes collided with hers, and a flood

of emotions from her past came rushing from her memory. Warm summer nights in the gardens. Elegant balls and dancing into the morning. Laughing until her sides were sore. Stolen kisses under moonlight and starless skies.

“It said you were destroyed, Astraia. That you perished with your parents and Elion. And I... I lost it. I flared. Desire broke through every thread of my tether. I injured two of my men. The earth opened up and swallowed them.” His eyes glistened with tears, his voice broke, but he held her gaze. “I spent weeks in grief. Every shadow in this stars-forsaken manor reminded me of you. I couldn’t breathe inside or in the gardens. The willows wept for you, Astraia. The entire manor was in mourning. I finally fled. I went to Antilias near the Hollow City and spent six months with my uncle. While I was with him, he helped me cope with painting.”

Astraia could not help the tears that spilled down her cheeks. The agony in Caelan’s voice was raw, real. Shame curled in her chest—not because she had left, but because someone had mourned her like this. Because someone had loved her so loudly while she had tried to disappear.

“You...you painted this?” she asked, disbelief still thick on her tongue.

“Yes.” Caelan took her hand in his, brushing his thumb over the top of her hand. “My world may have burned that day, but I never stopped loving you, Astraia.”

He brought her hand to his lips, lightly kissing her skin. For a moment, she didn’t feel like she was running. It was dangerous, how easily his presence unwound her, even after so many years.

Without thinking, she stepped forward, wrapping her arms around Caelan’s waist. His arms clung to her, embracing her as though she might drift away and disappear.

“Caelan, I am so sorry,” she murmured into his shirt, as dark spots from her tears appeared on his tailored guard uniform.

“Please, don’t say that. You’re here. You’re alive. And right now, that’s all that matters,” he replied, voice low and

relieved. “And this time, I’m never letting you go.”

Caelan led her down a familiar corridor to the kitchens, his steps unhurried, casting glances her way every few seconds as if he still couldn’t believe she was real. The moment they passed through the kitchen doorway, Corina dropped her spoon with a loud clatter and burst into tears.

Astraia barely had time to brace herself as the cook enveloped her in a flour-dusted hug.

“Bless the Stars! You’re alive,” Corina sobbed. She smelled of vanilla and fresh fruit.

“Corina.” Astraia smiled, returning the embrace.

“How? The explosion? They said no one survived.”

“I know. It’s a long story. But I am alive.” Astraia’s smile faded, remembering her failure.

“Oh, but we must have a feast! We must celebrate your return!” Corina clasped her hands together in excitement.

“No. Corina, please. You mustn’t tell anyone I am alive. Please promise me,” Astraia pleaded, staring at the cook.

“Of course, as you wish, but what about—”

Astraia held up a hand, silencing Corina. “Not today,” she said—an order, not a request.

“Someday, my girl, you will have to face the past. And I hope to live to see that day.” The cook gave Astraia a stern look before embracing her once more. Corina insisted Astraia take an entire cake with her as she left, wrapping it in a cloth that smelled of cinnamon, and kissed both of her cheeks.

Caelan did not say much as he leaned in the doorway, watching. But his eyes never left Astraia’s face, a wistful smile pulling at his mouth.

As they left the kitchen, Caelan informed her he regrettably had captain duties to attend to but would return later for dinner. As he departed, he kissed her forehead—so soft and familiar it ached—and left without another word.

Astraiia made her way back down the hallway, passing her painting once more.

Caelan had never been part of her plan. She had assumed he had moved on and married some duchess, which was precisely what his parents would have insisted. But he did exactly what Astraiia expected of the Caelan she once knew. Loyalty to love, even in death, had been kept alive like an ember in a locked room.

She was not sure what terrified her more—how deeply he had mourned her, or how easy it would be to fall back into his warmth.

Steeling herself, Astraiia pushed open the doors before her, only to find Draven was no longer in the bed. Panic rushed through her as she stepped over the threshold, careful to remain quiet. She placed the cake on a table and unsheathed her dagger.

The sheets from the bed had been pulled back with no sign of blood or a struggle. The glass doors overlooking Virellia were open to the balcony, the wind rustling the gossamer curtains that lined either side of the doors. Astraiia surveyed the remainder of the room, deciding there was no imminent threat when the washroom door flew open.

Steam billowed from the doorway to reveal a half-exposed bounty hunter, with only a towel around his waist. His skin was damp and gleamed in the sunlight, accentuating every curve of his muscular arms and chest. A kaleidoscope of tattoos adorned both arms and webbed their way across parts of his chest and back. Scars of various sizes marred his perfectly honed body, faded to white from time.

Astraiia could sense Power rising from her core, stretching, ready to erupt into life with just a thought. She cursed, sheathing her dagger.

“I could have killed you,” she said, irritation coating her words.

“I would love to see you try, Starborne.” He smirked, not bothering to fix his disheveled wet hair as he padded over to

the bed.

“And maybe you could try to be civilized for once and, oh, I don’t know, put on clothes before you parade around in front of the entire city of Volpes.” She waved her hand at the open balcony doors, the other hand resting on her hip in exasperation.

“Am I making you uncomfortable, Starborne?” He grinned, grabbing clean clothes from his satchel, and glanced at Astraia.

“Don’t flatter yourself, bounty hunter,” she retorted, crossing her arms.

“Perhaps you should have been civilized and knocked?” He grinned as he strode over to her, standing only inches from her.

Astraia could smell the eucalyptus scented soap mixed with his familiar scent of pine and smoke, as if the luxury of Volpes could not fully purge the wildness from him. She refused to look past his waist, all too aware that a desperately small towel was the only fabric attempting to hide his frame. Instead, she trailed her eyes up his sculpted bare chest, old and new scars ornamenting his tanned skin.

“Who did this to you?” she whispered, trailing her fingertips across the pale lines.

His muscles flexed in response, and he exhaled deeply.

“Those who would justify slaughter for control,” he said coolly.

“You were a soldier, weren’t you? No one but a soldier fights like you did against the wraith.” Her voice quivered, afraid he might confirm her suspicions or continue to lie.

“Yes, years ago,” he replied.

Her pulse quickened, from relief or fear, she was not sure—perhaps both. “And you were injured in battle?”

“War comes at a cost.” His voice lowered, but his eyes remained fixed on hers.

The molten amber glowed from his stare, two brilliant suns casting their light and warmth into the coolness of her deep blue oceans. She could feel her bonds responding to him, her spine warming and small lightning strikes stretching from her core to her fingers, aching to be unleashed.

Without thought, she cracked the door to Power, letting it flicker from her, giving over to the desire.

Draven did not falter. He did not blink as the white sparks glowed from her hands. His eyes fixed on hers, no trace of fear on his face. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw his hand slowly and deliberately move toward hers.

His fingers grazed hers, and the spark of Power excited at the touch. It moved like a winding ribbon from Astraia's hand to his—a white cord wrapping around their fingertips. She stared at their hands, barely touching, but her bond freely flowing between them. It reminded her of the sea breeze caressing her skin or the warmth of a fire on cold winter nights. It was calm and exhilarating all in one.

Her breath caught in awe, and her eyes flicked back to Draven's.

His lips turned upward into a true and deliberate smile. Astraia smiled back, unable to contain herself.

The fleeting desire to feel the warmth of his lips on hers flashed to the front of her mind. She swallowed a lump in her throat, her mouth suddenly dry. Draven's eyes fell to her lips, as if his mind betrayed him as well.

Then his hand pulled away.

"Maybe you are right," he said flatly, his tone no longer playful, the smile vanishing from his face. "I should be more civilized."

He strode past her toward the washroom once more, clothes in hand. "I'll ask for another room. Wouldn't want to cause a scandal for your fiancé," he said.

CHAPTER 23

The art of healing does not stem from the Starborne ability of Sacrifice alone. It originates in the innate sense of self-preservation instilled in every man and woman at infancy. Without such sense, one would welcome pain and death. Rather, it is with careful, deliberate attention to the preservation of the body and mind that unveils the art of a healer.

**MEDELA, HEAD PHILOSOPHER AT VIRELLIA
UNIVERSITY OF HEALING**



“INSUFFERABLE BRUTE,” ASTRAIA GROWLED UNDER her breath as she slammed the door to the stateroom behind her. The heat was still simmering beneath her skin from their touch, and from pure rage at his indifference toward her. He perplexed her, which only infuriated her more.

But a small voice in the back of her mind, the one she had shut out all those years ago, whispered shreds of doubt that began to crack her walls of self-preservation. Maybe he was a bounty hunter for the king, a trained soldier-turned-mercenary—or maybe, perhaps, he had come to care for her in the way she cared for him. Maybe he could feel the same celestial connection she felt at just his mere presence. The gravitational pull to be near him—as if their story was already written in the heavens and the Stars compelled them to action.

Astraia breathed deep as she pushed a door open that led to the Volpes Manor gardens, shielding her eyes from the sunlight. Blinking, she stepped onto the grassy pathway that curved through the gardens, weaving its way through rose bushes, starblooms, and every kind of tree and flower imaginable. Intoxicating floral scents filling her nose as she strode down her favorite part of the gardens, toward the small stream that nourished all the plant life. A white stone wall surrounded the manor gardens, for privacy more than security.

Many healers, and those like Astraia who were bonded to Sacrifice, attended the Virellia University of Healing to learn how to harness the medicinal properties of the starbloom and other plants for the good of the kingdom. Astraia had yearned to attend the university, but her father had other plans.

She clenched her teeth. The familiar weight of resentment and grief crashed down on her, making everything seem so hopeless. All of her dreams and future had been taken from her.

Never again.

The grass deadened the sound of her boots as she walked and a nearby stream bubbled louder as she approached the one place she had longed to see since they arrived at the manor. Astraia's jaw relaxed when she saw it.

The cascading branches of her favorite willow tree swayed gracefully in the breeze. Its trunk was bent toward the water, as a dancer would bend and bow to the audience, and the tips of the leaves playfully kissed the top of the stream running parallel to the tree's trunk.

So many summer moments had been stolen by the willow tree. When they were younger, Elion and Caelan would tease Astraia, trying any way to terrorize her. The willow was her guard from the playful boys. As she grew older, she would spend many hours reading beneath the cooling branches, letting the stream's song lull her to sleep in the warm afternoons.

She pulled aside the branches, ducking her head as she closed herself off from the world. Stooping down to the ground, she sat against the small bend in the trunk that perfectly curved around her back.

Another memory came rushing back as she sat beneath the willow. A cool summer night during a masquerade ball, torches lining the pathways in the gardens. Guests laughed and danced through the archways and grassy paths. Caelan's hand in her hair, pulling her close to him. Their lips brushing, stealing their first kiss beneath the green curtain of leaves.

Astraia closed her eyes, letting her head rest against the willow tree. But it was not the green eyes she expected to see staring back at her—it was fire. Wild, dangerous, and fearless flames danced across her vision. Every instinct told her to run, but she could no sooner challenge the Constellations than run from him.

The sound of rain peppering the stream broke her trance. She opened her eyes and saw through the willow canopy that the sun had lowered. Storm clouds now obscured its rays.

Then her bonds jolted awake. Power lurched in her spine but did not demand release. Astraia recognized the sensation immediately. Like the lightning before thunder, it excited every fiber of her body.

A calloused hand pulled open the willow curtains.

“You’re a hard one to find, Starborne,” Draven bellowed through the heavy rainfall.

“Clearly not hard enough!” she shouted back, emphasizing her annoyance.

“Well, are you going to invite me in?” He gestured with a nod at her spot beneath the willow.

Astraia stood as she spoke, a challenge in her voice. “Why would I, bounty hunter? So you can continue to lie to my face? Or so you can finally drag me to your beloved king?”

“I just want to talk. Can we agree to be civil, or are you going to let me drown out here?” Water was pouring down his face, his hair soaked.

“Fine. But one wrong move, and I’ll slit you from nose to navel.” Astraia pulled back her cloak, revealing her Celestial dagger for emphasis.

“Understood.” He grinned, stepping under the willow branches.

The rain only drizzled beneath the shade of the tree, but Draven was already soaked through. His shirt clung to his chest to accentuate his intimidating form. He had rolled up

both of his sleeves, his cryptic and elaborate tattoos on full display.

“Alright, you invaded the one sanctuary I have left in this wretched realm. So start talking,” she barked, forcing her eyes to meet his.

“Civil, remember?” His eyebrow rose, scolding her.

Astraiia huffed, not willing to indulge him with an answer.

He ran his hand through his wet hair, letting out a sigh, then rubbed the back of his neck. “I wanted to thank you. For helping me.”

She blinked in shock. “What?”

“You saved me. You could have left me to die out there in the woods, bleeding out, but you didn’t. You know what I am, and you still saved me. So, thank you.” His voice was lined with subtle disbelief, as though he still was grappling with the reality of her rescue.

“Well...” she started, “I owed you, so, let’s just call it even now.”

Astraiia made to leave the cover of the willow tree, but Draven grabbed her hand. Sparks danced between their fingers, warmth rushing through her skin, making her hair stand on end. Her gaze fell to their hands, then back to his face. His eyes were fixed on her.

“I’m leaving tomorrow.”

“What? Why?” She struggled to mask the panic seizing her.

“I told you not to trust me.” Draven echoed his warnings from days past, a touch of hurt in his tone.

“But why stay this whole time? What was the point of saving me, Draven? Is this just a game to you? Some kind of messed up game of cat and mouse?” Astraiia’s voice rose as red-hot heat flooded her face.

She tried to pull her hand from his, but he would not let her go, instead pulling her closer to him under the rainy willow tree.

“You aren’t what I was expecting. You are powerful, loyal, kind without cause. You have every reason to burn the world down. To make them all kneel to you. But you don’t. And now, I can’t trust myself. I need to leave, before I burn it down for you.”

Draven spoke without hesitation, resolute as he stood before her. Whispers of white smoke swirled around him, as though his declaration had caught fire—and Astraia was not afraid.

She quit tugging at her hand and looked at the bounty hunter. She could see the war waging inside him, a conflict between his honor and his orders. He was leaving to save her.

Astraia raised her free hand and cupped the side of his face. New warmth pulsed beneath her palm on contact, putting her bond on edge.

His hand moved to rest on top of hers, his eyes closing. His entire face relaxed, peace replacing the wrath he swore to bring down on her enemies.

“Stay. Please.” Her plea was but a whisper in the rain.

His eyes opened, locking onto hers. “This is the only way to keep you safe, Starborne.”

He gently pulled her hand away from his face, releasing his hold.

“I wish you wouldn’t call me that,” she murmured, looking up at him, trying to commit to memory every line and scar and curve of his face—terrified this would be the last time he would tease her.

A familiar smirk pulled at the corner of his mouth as he leaned closer to her, whispering in her ear, “If I had it my way, I would call you my queen. I would worship you as the Constellations are worshipped.”

Draven backed away from her slowly, holding her gaze. A gentle smile curved his lips as he pulled open the branches and stepped into the downpour.

Without another glance, the bounty hunter left her under the willow tree.

CHAPTER 24

The mistress waits for her lover. She waits in the coolness of the winter and the warm rain of the summer. She waits with hands outstretched, reaching for the owls and the wolves. She waits, dressed in velvet. The mistress of night waits; she waits for her starlight lover.

STARLESS NIGHT



ASTRAIA OPENED THE DOOR TO her stateroom, drenched from the summer downpour. She had lingered for an hour beneath the willow tree, allowing tears to fall unseen, rain eventually seeping through the curtain of branches and soaking her through. Her navy cloak dripped water onto the pristine cream carpets, a steady rhythm matching the cadence of her heartbeat.

The stateroom was empty, the bed freshly made, the glass doors to the balcony closed—no hint of the bounty hunter. Not even his scent of smoke and pine lingered in the ostentatious room.

She slumped against the door, feeling the latch click as it closed. *He left. To keep me safe.*

If Draven really was sent from the regent king to hunt down any Starborne, she would have been the ultimate prize. The only known dual-bonded Starborne. Her death would have been swift at the evil king's hand.

But he chose to let her go and gave her freedom—freedom for which she would have gladly burned.

She gritted her teeth, shoulders tensed. The king had stolen everything from her. Her small life in Tenebris had been ripped out from under her with just his word and ink on paper. Then the only person who cared that she burned, he had been taken from her as well.

She unclenched her fists, trying to focus on the empty room around her. It was too large, too open, and too quiet. She had become accustomed to the bounty hunter always by her side—his hulking form towering over everything and everyone.

Yet, he was gone. He left. Astraia would have to accept it.

Just the thought of dismissing Draven from her life made her throat dry, and she choked down more tears.

A light tap echoed in the cold stateroom, jolting Astraia from her thoughts.

“Yes, come in,” she managed, swallowing the lump in her throat.

A petite young woman edged into the room, curtsying and bowed her head as she spoke. “My lady, I am Savi. I am to be your lady’s maid. I was sent to help you prepare for dinner with Lord Vireaux.”

“Stars help me. He knows I hate this kind of frivolity.” Astraia rolled her eyes, running her hand through her hair.

She froze, realizing she had just mimicked Draven’s exasperated trademark.

Quickly, she lowered her hand and fidgeted with her shirt. “Right, well, let’s get this over with,” she said, clearing her throat. “And for stars’ sakes, stand up before your muscles are stuck that way.”

The young woman stood immediately, raising her head, and followed Astraia into the washroom.

Astraia could not help but indulge in all the soaps, oils, and perfumes that were spread before her. She might be a fugitive Starborne, but that did not erase the urge to want to feel clean. If she never slept on moss again, it would be too soon.

After hours of scrubbing and primping had passed, Savi was finally satisfied with Astraia’s appearance. The lady’s maid had smoothed her dark hair into a luxurious shine that would make even Desire envious.

Another knock sounded at the door, and Savi sprang from the washroom to answer, returning only a moment later with a

large black box in her arms.

“A present for you, my lady.” She curtsied, placing the box on the marble vanity in front of her.

Astraira’s eyebrow rose in suspicion. Pulling the lid off, she gasped. Inside lay a gorgeous gown. On top lay a note with handwriting she knew intimately.

For you, Starlight. Yours forever. C.

“May I?” Savi motioned to the dress, averting her eyes from the note.

Astraira only nodded, folding the note and holding tightly as Savi helped her slip into the gown. After a few moments of cinching the gown and placing delicate silk shoes on her feet, the girl stepped back from Astraira and smiled.

“Magnificent, my lady.” Savi’s eyes beamed as she gestured toward the mirror in the washroom with a small bow of her head.

Astraira turned her gaze and halted. She did not recognize the woman staring back at her. This woman had glistening dark hair, a reflection of the ebony heavens, glittering with stardust in her navy strands. Savi had braided half of her hair into a crown, while the remainder of her tresses cascaded down her back.

But the dress...it stole her breath away. The base of the dress was navy-blue and flowed out around her. On top of the base was a sheer navy overlay adorned with hundreds of Starlight crystals that scattered from the bodice and faded down the skirt. The bodice was form-fitted, with no straps, forming perfectly to her waist and featured a plunging neckline, almost to her navel. It gave the appearance of the Stars falling down her body.

Astraira turned, noticing the back of the dress was also cut wickedly low, revealing her Power lumenmark plainly.

She was likely wearing the fortune of the entire province on her skin. Starlight crystals were rare, even more so than stardust. Said to be the result of lightning colliding with stardust, only the ancient families of Astradeon were gifted

with Starlight crystals and passed them down through generations.

A small cough interrupted Astraia's gawking.

"Will that be all, my lady?"

"I would hope so, Savi. Thank you." Astraia smiled at the young woman.

With a quick curtsy, the maid quietly left the stateroom.

"Stars, what am I doing?" Astraia whispered as she stared at her own reflection. The blue of her eyes peered back into her soul. A small part of her wished amber eyes were staring at her instead.

Sighing, she left the washroom and decided waiting around in the eerie silence of the stateroom would only drive her insane. She strapped her Celestial dagger to her thigh and wrenched open the door.

Caelan stared back at her. A smile bloomed across his face. "Stars, Astraia. You look incredible."

Astraia eyed Caelan, noticing he had traded his captain's attire for a tailored navy suit. He was resplendent. A truly alluring smile spread across his face.

His green eyes stared at her, longing pouring from his gaze.

"You clean up pretty nice yourself." Astraia smiled, letting her shields drop a little more around him. He made her feel wanted, at home, safe. She decided at that moment, she would not live in fear and pain tonight. She would allow a sliver of joy to permeate the darkness of her thoughts.

Caelan beamed at her, a look of pure satisfaction and elation. "I see you got my gift," he said as he eyed her dress, lingering on her lumenmark just near her collarbone.

"Very subtle of you," she quipped. "You do not seriously think I'm going to let you parade me around your entire court with dual lumenmarks on display just so I can be captured?"

"Maybe only a small cavalcade."

She knew he was baiting her, but quarreling with him made her feel normal, as if she was eighteen again and her brother was not dead.

She crossed her arms, staring at him in the doorway.

Caelan chuckled. “You are simply no fun. You know I would not put you in harm’s way. Which is why I brought you this,” he said as he pulled a small round wooden box from his jacket pocket. Carefully, he twisted the top of the wooden box and opened it to reveal a clear, thick paste.

“And what, exactly, is that?” Astraia wrinkled her nose.

Caelan dipped one finger into the paste, a small amount sticking to his skin. “Trust me.”

Slowly, he brushed a few loose strands away from her Sacrifice lumenmark. His hand paused as his fingertips brushed her collarbone, and Astraia had to stifle a shudder from running down her spine.

“This is called ‘metamfiesi.’ When word of the king’s decree reached Virellia over a fortnight ago, I decided to take preemptive action. I have been working with some of the healers at the university to create a way to hide lumenmarks.” He paused, his voice low. “May I?”

Astraia nodded tentatively.

Caelan brushed the paste across her lumenmark near her collarbone, gently smoothing the substance until it was spread evenly on her skin. Heat rushed to her skin at his touch, making her stomach flutter.

“I will need to apply it to your second mark,” he whispered closely to her ear, making her hair stand on end.

Without a word, Astraia turned, allowing him to see her Power lumenmark on her lower back. His movements were deliberate, familiar, calming as he massaged the metamfiesi into the marks on her spine. Astraia fought the urge to close her eyes and soak in the caress of his hand.

Warmth left her as he pulled away his hand and cleared his throat. “Finished.”

She turned around to face him once more just as he replaced the wooden box inside his jacket, a tinge of pink on his cheeks. Astraia blinked, forcing her mind to clear as she peered down at her Sacrifice lumenmark.

“What? How?” She marveled at her skin, no longer marked with the map of the Pegasus constellation.

“Starblooms and a lot of patience. We have managed to produce enough to ration to the Starborne of Volpes and are starting distribution to the rest of Virellia secretly. It will not solve the problem of the king’s proclamation, but it will provide some momentary protection.” Caelan’s face fell, the realization of the monumental task of protecting his people weighing heavily on his shoulders.

Astraia reached out and grasped his hand, desperate to relieve some of his burden. “It is incredible, Caelan, truly.” She smiled, squeezing his hand.

He smiled in return, lifting her hand and pressing a gentle kiss to her pale skin. “Now, will you join me for dinner?” His green eyes danced in the lamplight as he placed her hand on his arm, leading her away from her stateroom.

“It would appear I have no choice,” she said, eyebrows raised.

“Of course not.” He smirked, and escorted her to the dining hall.

Two footmen stood on either side of the white doors leading to the main dining hall, both carved with intricate wooden embossing depicting vines and flowers, and gold leaf adorning every inch of the woodwork. With a simple nod from Caelan, the footmen opened the doors simultaneously.

Astraia allowed Caelan to lead her through the doorway, but her steps faltered as they entered the room. Where a massive table had once been, able to seat at least fifty courtiers and cabinet members, was a simple small table set for two. No other guests were in the room. Only the butler, Graves, was standing nearby.

“I hope you don’t mind,” Caelan started, gesturing for Graves to leave, “but I loathe the dinner parties my parents throw in some pathetic way of spoiling the cabinet members into submission. So I thought it could just be us tonight.” He glanced at her sideways, then made to pull out her chair from the table.

“You never were one for following the rules.” Astraia took her seat, watching a true breathtaking smile flash across his face.

Graves reappeared, pouring wine and bowing to Astraia as he left.

She bit her lip as he bowed, her face paling at the realization that two of Caelan’s servants were aware of her existence. It would only be a matter of time before the inevitable gossip wove its way through the entire staff.

“They are sworn to secrecy, Astraia.” Caelan’s voice rose, likely as a warning to Graves and any other staff members.

She nodded, mute as panic seized her. She had risked exposure of her existence by coming to Volpes. But she had nowhere to go. There was nowhere she called home anymore. Home was her brother. Home was the grassy knoll on the beach. Her home was destroyed. If she was discovered, she would be taken to the king. Caelan would be dragged away too, an accomplice and a Starborne himself.

The air was too thick, her dress too tight, as she started breathing quickly. She needed to leave now. If she started riding tonight, she could follow the Njord River on the north side of Virellia until she reached the Skyforge Peaks. Then she could hide away in a mountain village somewhere, disappear into the snowy forests and become another nameless sojourner, unable to hurt anyone else.

A rough, firm hand encircled hers and squeezed, jolting Astraia from her thoughts.

“Breathe, Astraia. You are safe here. No one will ever hurt you again. Not as long as I draw breath.” Caelan stared at her with conviction.

She took several deep breaths, calming her nerves, until her heart was no longer pounding in her ears. Caelan would keep her safe. He could be her new home. Sighing, she released his hand and drank from her wineglass. Sweetness coated her tongue, reminding her of another dinner party quite unlike this one.

“Do you remember the summer when we drank all the good wine for the trade summit gala your parents were throwing for the Hollow City?”

Caelan paused, puzzled at first from her abrupt statement, then laughed. “How could I forget? Elion was so drunk he fell into the fountain in the gardens and thought it was the Aetherdeep, so he tried swimming in it to get to Solrend.”

Astraia laughed, recalling the way Elion kept yelling, “To the Stars, Astraia, we are almost to the Stars,” and swam several laps around the circular fountain.

“And if I recall correctly, that happens to be when you first kissed me.” Caelan smirked, leaning back in his chair as he sipped from his own glass of wine.

“*Me?* It was you who stalked me in the gardens and basically threw yourself at me under the willow.” Astraia scoffed, downing the remainder of her wine, and speared a pear on her plate.

“The Lord of Volpes does not throw himself at women, even a breathtakingly beautiful one,” he replied, setting down his glass and staring at her. The green of his eyes danced with the light of the chandeliers above them, making them appear like the flowing branches of the willow tree in the breeze.

She laughed—a true, deep, laugh that made her sides sore within seconds and echoed around the grand dining hall.

Caelan just smiled.

The dinner was not extravagant, which was a happy surprise for Astraia. After the trials of the last few days, her appetite had still not caught up to her. She did allow herself to indulge in another glass of wine, despite the fact that she knew her tolerance matched an acolyte of the Constellations.

With another subtle nod from Caelan, music crescendoed from the corner of the lavish room. A violinist along with a pianist were playing a song Astraia had not heard in many moons. The song was from a play about the Celestial War, when Balance fought back against Dominion but perished in the attempt.

That was the tipping point of the war that led the remaining Constellations to rebel, Power leading the revolt. The Stars' stewards led their own war on the soil of Astradeon against Dominion's wraiths, who were attempting to annihilate everything and everyone in their path. Dominion was conquered, but the imbalance of the Stars was too much for the cosmos to contain.

The Stars fell—the Shattering sending a shockwave of destruction across the empyrean and destroying much of Astradeon and the surrounding realms. Chaos ensued with the imbalance and emptiness of the heavens.

Astraia fought back a wave of anger as she recounted the story. The Stars were shattered to prevent Dominion's corrupted rule, but they abandoned everyone in the process—most importantly, they abandoned the Starborne.

Caelan stood, refocusing Astraia on the present, and extended a hand toward her. "Dance with me."

Astraia was accustomed to danger, just not the kind of danger dressed in a tailored suit. Every fiber of her conscience was screaming for her to reject Caelan's outstretched hand, but a spark of curiosity overruled her instincts.

Placing her hand in his, she was swept from her chair and led to the center of the dining hall. He guided her left hand to his shoulder as he slid his right hand to rest on the small of her exposed back. Her skin pebbled at his touch, and Caelan smirked with devious satisfaction.

Grasping her right hand firmly in his, he led her around the hall in a flurry of twirling and refined steps. It took her a few turns, but muscle memory took over, and she was floating effortlessly. The opulent hall seemed to melt away, blurring as they glided on the marble floors.

Astraira felt weightless, and for the first time in years, she glimpsed a shimmer of hope. Hope that her days did not need to be spent in constant fear—her light being smothered and snuffed out by the world and its demons. The spark of hope was small, but it was the brightest light she had seen in her dim world in so long that she clung to the possibility regardless of the odds.

Caelan held her gaze as they danced. His eyes spoke louder than words, a fierce declaration of claim. He had told her he would never let her go again, and Astraira could see that vow was written plainly in his stare.

She should be apprehensive. She should challenge his reclamation. She should tread carefully on their history. There was a lot a trained warrior should do, but tonight she was not a weapon. Tonight she was simply a runaway Starborne. Tonight, she liked the notion of being claimed.

Caelan's smile fell as he spoke. "So what happened to your cryptic companion?"

Astraira was wondering when he would ask about Draven's absence. She was honestly shocked that he had held his tongue for so long.

"He left," she replied, deadpan. She refused to allow her disappointment of Draven's abandonment to taint this sliver of happiness she had found.

"I see," he said, an eyebrow raised obviously in confusion, but he did not probe for answers. A smile once again graced his handsome face as he slowed their steps and stopped. "I want to show you something."

Lacing her fingers in his, he led her away from the dining hall through a side door, avoiding the footmen. After several turns down corridors, Caelan came to one of Astraira's favorite places in the manor.

The smell of old manuscripts filled her nose as the massive wooden door to the library swung wide, and she could not help the smile that spread across her face.

Although she had spent hours hidden among the hundreds of manuscripts and scrolls housed in the two-story archives, it never ceased to amaze her how so many had survived the Shattering and hundreds of years after. Volpes boasted one of the most extensive records of the Celestial War and before, even compared to the Celestial Court registry.

Caelan chuckled as he watched her soak in the library's splendor. "I know you love to bury your head in these books, but this is not why we're here."

He tugged her hand and walked to the far end of the library next to a window overlooking the gardens. The moon was full, casting beams of light on the trees and flowers below—solace in an otherwise lightless night sky.

Caelan turned to face a tapestry hanging on one of the walls next to the window, pulling aside the fabric to reveal a hidden door.

Astraia stilled, releasing her hand from his grip. "Luring women into secret doorways may have worked for your past flings, but you'll find yourself missing a favorite appendage if you think you'll be able to tempt me with your charms."

"You may find you like my charms." He smirked, his green eyes glimmering in the moonlight. He grasped her hand once more and opened the hidden door, revealing a winding stone staircase. "Come on, Astraia, where's your sense of adventure?" he challenged her, then started ascending the stairs, slowly pulling her upward.

After several turns around the staircase, another smaller door opened to a massive circular room, barely lit by moonlight spilling in from a small round window. Caelan led her to the center of the room, then dropped her hand.

"Wait here," he whispered as he strode over to the wall opposite the window.

"What is this place, Caelan?" she asked, staring up at the domed ceiling, her voice echoing off the stone walls.

"This was a room for viewing the Stars before the Shattering. It is one of the only original structures that

withstood the Shattering aftermath. The manor was actually built around it a hundred years after. I discovered it years ago. No one else knows about it, or perhaps forgot it was here.”

Caelan walked to the edge of the room several feet from Astraia. He halted in front of a large metal lever that protruded from the stone wall. “The Stars may be gone, but I found a way to still see them with the full moon.”

Just as he pulled down the lever, a series of loud clicking noises rang through the room. Astraia whipped her head around.

Warm hands grasped hers once more as Caelan came to stand in front of her. “Look up, Traia.”

Astraia broke his stare and cast her eyes skyward, gasping.

Metal plates peeled away from the ceiling, leaving a glass dome in its place. The glass was dark, semi-transparent, with the moon looking down at them.

But instead of moonbeams, Astraia noticed thousands of small holes had been carved out of the glass dome. As she focused on the masterpiece of engineering, realization hit her.

Stars. It was a map of all the Constellations dotting the dark glass.

“What? How?” she asked breathlessly, in awe as she stared at the replica of what the star-filled skies would have looked like before the War.

“It’s Stardust mixed with glass and some obsidian. It took me several months to figure out the right proportions and heating point. I broke probably a hundred of the glass panes before it was set,” Caelan said, staring up at the simulated expanse.

Astraia blinked, refocusing her eyes on his as he marveled at his own creation. “You...you made this?”

He lowered his face and met her gaze. “I told you my uncle helped me cope with my grief with art,” he murmured as he held both of his hands in hers. “Even when you were...gone, I still wanted to give you the world—to give you the Stars.”

Astraiia sensed tears gathering on the edge of her vision. He had made this for her—a way to grieve her and keep her alive at the same time. He had given her the Stars while she had hidden away in the slums.

She did not deserve his heart, his dedication to her. She had hurt another person she had loved, and it was eating at her soul. Dark thoughts flickered to life again on the edge of her mind, just a hair's breadth away from dragging her into the blackness. All she ever accomplished in this Stars-forsaken realm was causing pain. She had inflicted so many scars over the years without even raising a hand. Her bonds were no blessing from the Stars—they were a curse.

The instincts she had ignored earlier were screaming now. She needed to leave and disappear before she caused more pain.

“Caelen...” she started, relaxing her hands in his.

“Astraiia, please... I have thought of you every moment since that...that day. Not a single sunset passed without a memory of you flooding my mind. I had resolved myself to never know love again—that I was blessed by the Stars to find love once, and that was enough for me. I blamed myself. If only I had insisted you stay here with me instead of letting you leave. Maybe... Maybe...” He trailed off, stepping away from her, pacing the room. His footfalls echoed on the floors. “But now you’re here. I thought Graves had gone mad when he told me you were here. Stars, Astraiia, I nearly fainted when I saw you.”

Caelan stepped over to her, wiping the tears flowing freely down her face. “The Stars have given us another chance. I won’t waste it. Not again. This is my promise to you, Astraiia Solenne: I will protect you from all the evils seen and unseen. I will be your anchor. From now until the Stars take me.”

Caelan raised his hands, placing them on either side of Astraiia’s face as he declared his love. The heat warmed her as wet tears trickled down her cheeks.

She was so tired of fighting just to survive. Caelan was a constant, a harbor for her wandering spirit. He offered her

sanctuary from the darkness.

Astraia felt his breath on her face as he came closer, tipping her head back, never letting his hands drop from her face. She did not balk at his advance. This was comfortable, familiar, home.

Soft lips grazed hers, and serenity passed through her, warming her bones and making her lighter. She let him kiss her deeply, a kiss of longing and devotion. For a moment, she lingered in the space between declaration and acceptance.

But she was tired of fighting—so she fell, letting him claim her entirely. Pressing into him, his kiss deepened as she relinquished her control, desperation taking over as years of longing came unbound.

Astraia brought her hands around Caelan's neck, weaving her fingers into his dark hair, letting her resolve dissolve. His hands circled her waist, pulling her closer to him. The smell of eucalyptus encircled her as her body became flush with his. Their breathing matched, breaths quick and hungry as they embraced, each claiming the other for their own salvation.

So the lord and Starborne kissed under the false stars.

CHAPTER 25

The unbelievers do not accept the historical artifacts and texts, claiming a single Star could not cause such disruption of the Empyrean and subsequently, the realms. Yet, no other sources have been uncovered to dispute the actions of Dominion or his wraiths.

THE SHATTERING: A HISTORY



ASTRAIA HAD TRULY NEVER BEEN kissed with such fervor, her lips swollen and hair disheveled by the time she retired to her stateroom. Caelan had accompanied her from the star tower, bidding her goodnight with another lingering kiss, running his fingers through her hair with unequivocal abandon of any decorum.

She woke the next morning with her heart and head at war. She could give Caelan part of her heart, but in doing so, she was painting a target on his back. It was folly to think they could hide her true identity forever, let alone her bonds. There would come a time when the truth would be brought to light, and it likely would only lead to death—hers and his.

Astraia cursed as she rose from the bed, head pounding from the wine, and glanced outside. It was still early morning hours, the sun not yet risen. Sleep had not been her friend in years. It seemed fitting that she could not sleep even here, covered in silk sheets and imprints of a lord's lips on her skin.

She needed to clear her head, focus on the here and now, and she knew the exact remedy for her muddled mind. As she strode across the room to where her small satchel of belongings still lay on a table, she caught a glimpse of white out of the corner of her eye. Her steps faltered as she glanced downward at her clothes. It was *his* shirt. She had worn his shirt to sleep last night.

Stars, how drunk had I been?

Impulsively, she lifted the collar of the shirt to her nose, inhaling the fabric—pine and a hint of smoke. A twinge of regret and bitterness flickered in her thoughts. It was insulting to save her life so many times, offer his companionship and strength, then disappear. No matter his noble intentions of attempting to save her, she should have demanded he stay—fought harder to protect the flame that had only just begun to burn.

Astraia steeled herself, breathing deeply to calm her vexation. With one swift motion, she pulled the shirt over her head, gently folding it and stowing it deep within her satchel.

It only took a few moments to get dressed in her leathers and tunic. She strapped her dagger to her thigh, slinging her bow over her back with her quiver of arrows. Without a second glance, she marched out of the stateroom and made her way to the only place where bitterness and rage were welcomed with open arms.

It took her a few minutes of walking east of the manor when she heard it. The familiar clang of metal meeting metal pierced the morning air. Horses whinnied in the distance, and some men were shouting obscenities.

Astraia smiled as she came upon the stone courtyard that served as the entrance to the Virellian military compound. Barracks surrounded the courtyard in a semicircle, offering housing to at least a hundred soldiers. Most Virellian soldiers who stayed in the barracks close to the manor were young men, handpicked by Lord Vireaux himself, to train and later compete in trials for the honor of being named Empyrean Guards. The Empyrean were not typical brutes or foot soldiers—they were as silent as the winds and twice as lethal. Trained not only in warfare and swordsmanship, but also in the contentious art of shadow-walking as assassins.

When Astraia was fifteen, she had already been training with Elion and her instructors to sharpen her into a weapon, at the bidding of her father. Her skills with her Starwood bow were unmatched, even at a young age. However, her blade

work was shoddy at best, despite hours of drills and several blisters on her hands. One summer she spent in Volpes, she snuck out of the manor and followed Caelan to the compound. For hours she had watched hidden from view as the men dueled and practiced drills with a blade, but she was ousted when Caelan found her cowering in the bushes.

Astraia had feared she would get a firm lashing for leaving the manor unattended and spying on the training sessions, but the training general, Cetus, had thrown her a wooden practice sword and, without a word, placed her in the lines of soldiers to run drills. Every morning that summer and the next, she joined the recruits for morning drills, running leagues along the hillsides of Virellia, learning battle strategies, and mastering the blade. Cetus would only ever give her short words of feedback. “Good. Again,” or “No, like this.” He might not have been a verbose instructor, but Astraia had cheated death on more than one occasion thanks to his tutelage.

Glancing around the courtyard, not much had changed in five years. It was still early morning, with mist coating the grounds of the compound, but that meant little to the men. They were here to be the lethal extension of Virellia, which meant late nights and early mornings paired with grueling training sessions that taxed the body and mind.

Another clang of metal clashing with metal reverberated through the courtyard. Astraia’s eyes locked on the source of the cacophony—two men dueling in front of the other soldiers. Both men appeared energized, clearly unbothered by the sweat pouring down their skin or the crowd of men goading them.

Both men were shirtless, wearing nothing but their leather pants and armed with longswords. The mist swirled at their feet as they danced in a circle, each weighing the other’s next move and calculating their retaliation. Their bodies were honed to be expert killers, muscles defined by sweat dripping down their tanned skin.

One of the dueling men had an intricate tattoo of a vine twisting up his right arm, spreading into roots across his back. Peering closer, Astraia could make out the faint peppering of

golden dots on the man's low back in the distinct shape of the fox Vulpecula, the lumenmark of Desire.

Caelan.

He moved with refined grace, dancing with his opponent. It reminded Astraia of his effortless footwork dancing with her last night. Pure instinct as he stepped, blade at the ready, and a smirk on his face. She kept her distance, watching the opponent's movements, attempting to decipher his next move.

Caelan laughed, goading his opponent, "You seem tired, Apus. Did you get locked out of the barracks again for missing curfew? Stars know it's not because of some woman."

Apus's face turned fifty shades of crimson, then he lunged with a roar, but Caelan was expecting him. As Apus lunged, Caelan sidestepped, evading his attack. Twisting mid-stride, Caelan was behind Apus within a breath and had kicked the backs of his knees. Apus cursed, falling to the ground as a blade came to rest on his neck.

"Your emotions will get you killed if you can't control them. Now, yield." Caelan spoke sternly, no longer flippant.

Apus nodded, laying his sword down in forfeit. The small crowd of soldiers standing behind them clapped, some laughing and teasing Apus for his misstep.

Astraia strode through the courtyard, unfazed by the looks the soldiers were giving her as she approached the dueling ring.

"I thought the Empyrean were honorable, Captain? Or have standards slipped so low that they allow any riffraff who fights using his manhood in the guard?" She stopped only a few steps in front of him, crossing her arms and narrowing her eyes.

The courtyard went completely silent, all eyes trained on her and Caelan.

Caelan smirked, sweat dripping from his brow as he closed the final distance between them. His eyes darkened as he spoke. "Why don't you show us, since I recall you were once part of our *riffraff*?"

Astraea smiled, removing her bow and quiver. “I thought you’d never ask.”

Astraea removed her navy cloak, lightening any restrictions that might impede movement. Caelan was strong and fast, but she would need to move quicker.

The dampness of the morning mist clung to her hair and skin, but she welcomed the cold shiver that made its way down her spine as wind met beads of sweat. She needed to feel alive and banish Draven from her thoughts.

Just to be safe, she dove into her mind and fortified the tether to Power and Sacrifice, pulling the cord taut. This would be a trial of purely body strength, speed, and technique—her bonds needed to stay deadened and hidden.

Caelan eyed her warily, tossing her a practice sword. He brandished his own as he circled opposite her in the dueling ring. Astraea drew her focus to the blade in her hand and the weight of the hilt, the way the blade reflected light. She readied herself, tightening her core and bouncing on her toes, preparing to dodge any advance from him.

Caelan winked at her, then thrust his blade toward her on the attack.

She dodged, spinning around and raising her blade to block another advance. The courtyard was eerily silent except for the clang of two dueling Starborne. Metal clashed with metal, creating an ominous symphony in the early morning hours.

The waltz continued for several minutes with Caelan on the attack, thrusting, slashing, and lunging at her. Her feet were light, avoiding his advances and managing to stay within the dueling ring. Soon, sweat beaded on her forehead as the sun rose, and her muscles screamed from the abuse.

Astraea knew Caelan was a better swordsman, with far more years of practice, but she could tell he was taking it easy on her. His breathing was not nearly as ragged as hers, and his attacks were lazy compared to what she had witnessed with Apus. Always the nobleman, he was not going to risk unintentional harm in a training duel.

But she did not want charity. She needed a challenge.

Caelan lunged again, bringing his sword down, but at half the strength she knew him to be capable of inflicting. Astraia waited until the last second, then dodged, spinning behind him.

Without hesitation, she crouched on her knees and spun out her leg, catching his feet. He tripped and tumbled to the ground. Just before his face met stone, he caught himself with his hands and rolled on to his back.

But Astraia was already there, driving her boot down hard onto the hand holding his sword. He yelled, relaxing his hand, and the blade slipped. With his other hand, he gripped her ankle and yanked hard.

Astraia fell on top of him, bracing her hands on either side of his face. He winked at her again, then gripped both of her wrists before rolling on the ground, pinning her beneath him. She tried to wriggle free, but he kept her hands pinned to her sides.

“Do you yield?” he asked, smiling down at her, his dark hair in disarray with dirt and leaves scattered between the strands.

“Don’t flatter yourself.” She smiled and flung her forehead forward.

The sound of his nose crunching on impact rang through the courtyard.

Caelan groaned, reaching for his nose now streaming with blood, giving Astraia the leverage she needed. Her knee drove upward, right between his legs.

He buckled, falling over onto his side with a shout. In a single fluid movement, she unsheathed her dagger and rolled on top of him, holding the blade at his throat.

“Yield,” she commanded, staring at the lord’s bloodied face.

Blinking, he stared at her, eyes wide in disbelief. “I yield.”

A roar of applause rippled through the men staring at the two warriors entangled on the courtyard grounds. A few men whistled, laughing and shouting her name.

Astraia did not notice the crowd. She only heard a low husky voice echoing in her mind, “*You are stronger than your bonds.*”

She blinked rapidly, dazed. Sheathing her dagger, she rose to her feet, peering down at the man she had kissed just the night before. He pushed up from the ground, rising to meet her gaze.

“Enough. Back to training!” he shouted at the men.

A unanimous “Yes, sir” resounded from the men as they took up their swords and began running through drills.

Astraia did not linger. She grabbed her cloak and walked back toward the woods, trying to process how she had acted. Not like a warrior—like a bounty hunter.

She did not get far before she heard Caelan shouting for her.

“Traia, wait!”

She sighed, stopping just inside the trees, turning to face him.

Caelan’s boots crunched on leaves as he stepped closer to her, lowering his voice. “What was that?” he whispered, looking at her as if he was seeing a ghost, his eyes searching hers for answers she was not sure she was ready to give.

“What?” she asked.

“That!” He pointed back toward the training grounds where they had just brawled. “That is not how the Astraia I know fights. Dirty, ruthless.” His nostrils flared.

“The Astraia you know *died*, Caelan. Five years ago in a flash of light. Her entire world burned. And she has been learning to *survive* ever since. Maybe”—she paused, narrowing her eyes—“you would know if you asked. But this is who I am now.”

“Who you are? What does that even mean?” he replied. “You survived an assault on your life, but that does not change your character. It does not change the fierce, noble girl I loved into some crazed barbarian.”

“You don’t know...” she murmured, regret coating her words.

“What? What don’t I know, Traia?” His voice was frantic, pleading.

“There was no assault, Caelan. No one else was in that room except my father, mother, Elion, and...me.”

“I don’t understand. I thought –”

“It was me! I *killed* them!” She was shouting, choking back tears. Her bonds responded with a blaze of hot heat surging at her spine, eager to be unleashed. “Power chose me, and I didn’t even know. Elion was arguing with Father, defending me, and I lost it. I flared. I flared the most devastating Starborne ability in the realm and murdered my family. Every last one of them. Dead.”

Relinquishing her tether, she let Power flash through her, a white blinding light pouring from her eyes and hands.

Caelan stepped back, eyes wide, fear etched across his face.

“Now do you understand? I am not the same innocent girl you loved because blood stains my hands, my soul.” Her voice echoed off the trees, scattering the birds. She could feel her hair standing on end, floating around her as Power surged through her.

He gaped at her, opening his mouth then closing it.

The trees surrounding her moaned in the wind, as if weeping for her. The air felt thicker as she struggled to draw breath from the crushing weight of her grief. In that moment, with Power filling her veins, she grieved her brother and the woman she used to be—the woman Caelan wanted her to be. She grieved broken trust and promises never kept.

Most of all, she grieved an uncertain future. Caelan might have been a fool to think her unchanged, but she was the fool to think she could have a future with him here.

But another voice tore through the darkness, tugging her away from the edge she so often found herself teetering over. At first, she thought the voice was Elion’s, but as it grew

louder in the recesses of her mind, she realized it was another's.

“Elion’s death is not your fault. The bond does not own you. You command it.”

Draven. It was his words that pierced the darkness.

She closed her eyes, focusing on the voice and wrapped her mind around her tether. The doors to her bonds gently closed, and the world stilled.

Opening her eyes, she found Caelan still staring at her, face pale.

“Don’t ask me to be more than I am.” Her voice was firm, commanding, unapologetic.

Silence swallowed them as they stood in the wild woods of Desire.

Then he lowered to a knee before her, his head downcast, and cleared his throat. “Forgive me, please. You’re right. Please, let me rebuild your trust, restore my honor in your sight.”

She looked down at the mighty captain of the Empyrean Guard, bowed low before her. He could never understand. But that was not his fault.

She sighed and crouched in front of him, placing her hands on either side of his face. Gently, she lifted his head, letting their eyes meet. Sadness and regret filled his gaze.

“I forgive you, Caelan.”

She gripped both his hands, and together they rose to their feet. Pulling her to him, he enveloped her in an embrace. He breathed deeply, and she could hear the steady cadence of his heart as she pressed her cheek to his chest. The future she was once promised might be gone, but at least for now, she would cling to the peace of the present.

“Now,” she started, glancing up at him, “when do we get to hunt these wraiths you mentioned?”

Astraira stood with her arms crossed as Caelan unfurled a map of Astradeon onto the large oak table before her. The ancient paper smelled of dust and was severely worn around the edges with frequent use. He placed a lantern and an empty goblet on the corners to prevent the scroll from rolling in on itself.

“For months, we have been hearing rumors of random fires starting without cause along our borders, mostly along the northeastern border of the Skyforge Peaks.” He traced a line with his finger along the map. “But only in the past fortnight have there been whispers of dark shadows accompanying the fires. And the fires were reported to be ‘unholy,’ almost impossible to distinguish.”

“That sounds like the fire from the village,” Astraira replied, recalling the unnatural way the flames wove through the buildings and only weakened when the wraith was injured.

“Yes, and just yesterday we received this.” He opened a drawer in the table, pulled out a small scroll, and handed it to her. “It is from the Skyforge Drenggr.”

The Drenggr protected the Skyforge Peaks province. They were warriors known for their brutality and ruthless battle tactics, taking no survivors. Before the Shattering, when the Drakari still flew through the skies as stewards of Rage, the Skyforge Drenggr fought with them as equals, a testament to their ferocity. There was a tentative truce between Virellia and the Skyforge Peaks, but an alliance had always been out of the question.

Astraira unrolled the scroll, reading the damning message scribbled on the page. Her face fell, dread pooling in her stomach. “They have seen more wraiths?”

“Yes, several. They believe the wraiths are gathering in hordes, mounting an army.”

“That is impossible. Dominion and his stewards were devoured in the Shattering. Balance sacrificed himself to ensure Dominion was destroyed. How can there be one wraith, let alone a horde?” Astraira’s pulse quickened at the idea.

Yet her mind drifted to the single shimmering light hovering above the waters of her mind. The Stars were her tether—they lived and spoke to her. It would not be so impossible to believe Dominion and his stewards survived the Shattering as well. Perhaps they had simply waited until the right moment to strike. A shudder ran down her spine at the realization that the wraith who attacked her was not alone.

“I do not know how, but I do believe the wraiths are becoming a threat.” Caelan leaned over the map, his fingers gripping the edge of the table.

“So what is the plan? Do we know the location of the horde?”

“No, but that is what we need to find out. And I could use a skilled archer in my hunting party.” He smiled, glancing sideways at her.

She smiled back. “When do we leave?”

“At dawn. I have a team of my best Empyrean Guards ready to move. But Astraia.” He paused, holding her hand in his. “Please, do not try to be the hero. I cannot... I *will not* survive losing you again.”

“Caelan, do not ask me to stand by and watch while you and your men fight.”

“Very well, but we do not engage until we understand what threatens us. I will not risk starting a battle with losing odds.” He rolled up the map as he spoke, but she was unconvinced.

If the wraiths were gathering in a horde, and they were even half the strength of the wraith she fought, they would need to be prepared for the worst.

CHAPTER 26

*When sky is torn and bonds unmade, the unity flame
shall walk the shade. One hand to heal, one hand to
burn—To choose the star that does not turn.*

**HOLY PROPHECY OF THE TREDECIM, ZEALOT SECT
OF THE SHARDBORNE NOMADS**



THE MORNING MISTS SETTLED AROUND Orion's hooves as Astraia rechecked her newly restrung bow before she slung it onto her back, right next to her replenished quiver. She placed her foot in the stirrup and swung her other leg over the saddle, hoisting herself up until she was firmly seated on Orion's back.

Pulling the hood of her cloak up over her head, she glanced around at the party of guards readying their own steeds. The men wore Empyrean leather armor coated in stardust as well as Empyrean blades endued with stardust. The deadly combination made them faster with the blade and more difficult to kill.

Astraia glanced sideways, watching as Caelan mounted his own horse and turned to face the four men. He wore the same leather armor, except a series of white dots had been marked on his arm panel—the constellation Vulpecula the fox and steward of Desire. He straightened in his saddle.

“Empyrean, today we set out to find the demons who plague our lands and threaten Virellians,” he boomed, all eyes trained on him as he spoke. “Your orders are to scout out these wraiths, but do not engage unless they attack first. We are to gather information and return to Volpes. Remain vigilant, and do not attract unwanted attention. Am I clear?”

“Yes, sir!” four voices roared back.

Caelan nodded at them. “Move out,” he ordered, waiting for Astraia to trot up next to him before setting out from Volpes.

The air was hazy, the sun just starting to rise over the rolling hills of Virellia as they rode north. The dew on the grass sparkled in the morning light, giving the illusion of stars sprinkled on the ground. She scoffed at the poetic irony.

“Where are we starting the search?” she asked, glancing sideways at Caelan, his face unusually stoic.

“Near Ásynjur, the fortified outpost outside Skyforge Peaks. It is closest to where the Drengur last spotted the wraith horde.”

Astraia nodded, noting the edge in Caelan’s voice, command mixed with dread. She did not mock him. The glowing red eyes of the wraith she encountered outside Volpes still haunted her nightmares. The ancient heathen language it had spoken whispered in the dark corners of her thoughts. It was no mere enemy; it was a demon of Dominion. Any advancing numbers of wraiths could only mean the death of innocents.

The party of Empyrean marched onward, careful to stick close together and follow the main roads through the countryside of Virellia. By late afternoon, they had crossed halfway to the Njord River in the north that created the northern border between the Skyforge Peaks and Virellia. Truthfully, it was an extension of the eastern fork of the Hydraneas River, but the fearsome people of the Peaks renamed this portion of the river decades ago after a fallen king. No one dared challenge them, thus the name remained. Better redrawn maps than angered mountain warriors.

As the sun lowered over Virellia, the band of guards made camp for the night, making quick work of setting up bedrolls and starting a fire. Astraia tended to the horses, making sure they were fed and had easy access to a nearby stream before she sat down next to Caelan by the campfire.

His brows furrowed as he placed a hand on his forehead and sighed. There had been no sign of the wraiths, which was reassuring but also built anticipation of what awaited them the next day.

“Eat.” Astraia shoved a plate of stew in front of him, forcing him to look up at her.

His green eyes danced in the firelight, like the leaves of summer trees painting themselves orange and red for autumn. “Thank you.” He smiled, taking the plate from her.

“What troubles you?” she asked, spooning stew onto her own plate.

“How am I supposed to lead men against demons, Astraia?” His voice was hushed, masked by the sounds of the men talking and laughing around the fire, drowning out their own anxieties with revelry. He gazed absently into the flames, lost in the sea of fire and smoke.

“These are no mere men, Caelan. These are Empyrean. Guards you have trained with, fought with, bled with. They would lay down their lives for you as I know you would for them.” She placed a hand on his, squeezing to let him know she was here. She would weather this storm with him.

“These are no mere men. These are wraiths. Stewards of death. You yourself almost burned out from facing just one of them.” He paused, turning his face to her. “I have only one bond. What good am I against a horde?”

Astraia took a deep breath, smiling as she thought back to a night similar to this, when she feared herself more than anyone. A certain insufferable bounty hunter had broken her in more ways than one under the starless sky, allowing her to breathe through her grief for the first time in years.

“Someone once told me that you are stronger than your bonds. Your bonds do not define you. You are a strong and courageous leader who loves your people. Your men need that right now. Not a Starborne, but the Lord of Volpes and Captain of the Empyrean Guard.” She smiled, rubbing her thumb across the top of his hand.

He beamed at her, raising her hand to his lips. “Thank you.”

Blushing, she broke his stare, tilting her head upward. A small shard of the moon was visible, nearly swallowed whole

by the starless expanse. Closing her eyes, she exhaled and dove deep into the murky depths of her mind.

Waves rose and fell around her as she floated through the waters, weightless and without direction. She plunged her hands into the inky blackness, reaching for her tether, beckoning it from the void. Her fingers danced across a thin but sturdy strand, and she grabbed hold, tugging on the thread. It strengthened, firming in her fingers, then a golden glow broke through the blackness. It stretched before her, extending beyond the surface and shooting to the horizon.

Twinkling in the distance, as her anchor, were the Stars. Her Stars. Power and Sacrifice, woven into the tapestry of her soul.

She waited, still in disbelief they survived. In another breath, she sent her thoughts down the tether, all her fears of the unknown and for the fate of Astradeon.

Please, guide me. Help me protect Astradeon.

It was a prayer, a whisper in the darkness to the Stars who defied death.

The Stars answered, *“Hold fast, Starlight. You are not forsaken.”*

For the first time in many nights, Astraia dreamed. It started much the same as it had for five years. In a room she wished to forget, and the flare she yearned to take back.

She stood in the corner of the room, her back to the door as she watched her father and brother argue. Elion rolled his eyes, ignoring their father’s rebukes. Shouting, their father’s face turned blood-red. His chair crashed onto the stone floor as he jolted from his desk. He gestured to Astraia, then pointed his finger at Elion, bellowing his commands.

Elion jumped to his feet, cursing him, flinging a hand outward in front of Astraia as if to shield her.

No sound came from their mouths, only muffled roars. She tried to yell back, but it was always in vain. Her mother emerged from the shadows, her eyes narrowed on Astraia.

Then the thunderous shaking of the room.

The brilliant white light.

Astraea stretched out her hand for Elion, as she had thousands of times before, still fighting the dream—fighting against memory and fate. Only this time, her hand met another's.

A warm, rough hand grasped hers through the blinding light, pulling her through the colorless oblivion. Weightless, she was guided through time, through her memories, through sorrow and pain and repentance. Every regret and offense was laid bare before her in the white radiance, but she was not allowed to dwell on the marks on her soul. The hand pulled her, forbidding her to linger.

Years of her life, all over in the blink of an eye—then time stopped. Her feet found solid footing, though the blank canvas remained, surrounding her. Peering down, she saw a familiar scarred and tattooed hand intertwined with hers. Pine and smoke consumed her, melting away all uncertainty and fear. She raised her head to find a familiar figure standing in front of her.

Draven.

He was here.

He was resplendent. His golden hair tied back, rough stubble clean-shaven. He was wearing the white tunic he had given her to sleep in—the one she still slept in every night. A familiar half-grin pulled at the corner of his mouth. And his amber eyes, they were ablaze, a ring of fire dancing in his gaze.

“There you are, Starborne.” His voice was low, rough, claiming.

“How are you here?” she asked, glancing around the vacuum of her dream.

“You tell me.” He smirked, stepping closer to her, holding both of her hands in his.

A spark jolted through her body as their skin touched.

Astraiia paused, trying to remember how her thoughts had turned to him and why. There had never been a time when her nightmare was left fragmented, unfinished. She gazed up into the glowing pools of molten fire, letting them consume her entirely, body and soul.

“I knew you would come. You always do.” Her voice trembled. “You have saved me in more ways than you know. You made me want to live again. And I knew on my darkest day, you would be my light.” Tears streamed down her face with her confession. She gripped the bounty hunter’s hands tighter.

Draven looked at her, smiling fully, then drew closer. His heat blanketed her, sending a wave of calm through her bones. Gently, he kissed the top of her forehead, his lips soft and warm. Her skin tingled at the touch.

She sobbed, letting years of grief pour from every deep crevice of her thoughts. Strong arms wrapped around her, enveloping her in an embrace. Her knees buckled, but he held her upright.

He breathed deeply before he spoke, his voice a whisper in the void.

“I will always be your light. Just as you are mine, Starlight.”

Astraiia gasped as she jolted awake, and her eyes flung open. It was just before dawn, a grayness covering the camp with the sun not yet cresting the hills. The other soldiers were all still asleep. Caelan lay next to her, his breaths even as he too slept.

A dream. It had been a dream.

A coolness grazed her face, and she stilled. Brushing her fingertips along her cheeks, she felt tears. Perhaps it had been a dream, but her body betrayed her. It had only been two days since Draven had left, but it felt like a lifetime.

She cursed under her breath, grabbing her bow before she marched to the tree line near their camp. She needed to clear

her mind before the trials ahead, and sleep clearly was not the solution.

Stepping forty paces back from an oak tree, she picked her target, a small knot in the tree at eye level. Rolling her neck, she loosened the tension in her shoulders before pulling back on the bow string, the fletching skimming her cheek. She took a deep breath, letting the cool morning air fill her lungs, then released.

A soft twang was followed by a thump as the arrow embedded in the tree's bark, a finger's length away from her mark. Cursing, she drew another arrow from her quiver, forcing her mind to clear and focus solely on the oak tree.

Another deep breath, and her arrow was flying.

This time, the knot was marked, dead center.

She smiled, relaxing her stance, just as a clap sounded behind her.

"I knew it was a good idea to bring you." Caelan stepped up next to her, elbowing her gently in jest.

Astraea nudged him back before walking over to retrieve her arrows. Her heartbeat skipped at the thought that she might release every single arrow she carried before the sun fell.

"Did you sleep?" he asked her as she walked back to him, concern etched on his face.

"Restlessly," she muttered, unable to make eye contact with him.

"Same," he huffed, walking beside her back toward the camp.

The Emphyrean were awake, readying their horses for the remainder of the journey to the Njord River near Ásynjur. The horses also seemed restless, pacing and neighing at their riders, itching to be on the move again.

Orion nudged her hand when she came up next to him, the image of calm before a storm. Patting his neck, she put one boot in a stirrup and mounted, settling into the saddle for what would likely be a long ride.

They set out again, heading northeast, with the hopes of reaching the Njord River and following it the rest of the journey east. They would stop along the way, inquiring at any of the river villages for sightings of the wraiths or even whispers of the shadows and unholy fires left in their wake. There had been no word of new wraith sightings or village fires from falconry correspondence sent from Volpes or the Skyforge Peaks since they had set out on their quest, but the lack of news was not surprising. The wraiths were being stealthy and random in their attacks from what Caelan had gleaned—being alert for any possibility was their best chance of survival.

By midday, the group came to the first village on the edges of the Njord River. It was a small fishing settlement, with perhaps twenty wooden buildings scattered along the bank and up the hill from the river's edge. Some boats were moored, small vessels for transporting goods and fish down the river. As they entered, people stared wide-eyed at the soldiers clad in black. Truthfully, to those unfamiliar with the Guard, they would make any man quake in his boots.

Caelan halted the group in the center of the village, dismounting from his horse and inspecting their surroundings. The village was quaint, with grassy fields around the homes and a single dirt road that ran along the river between some of the buildings. A few children ran across the road, giggling as they spotted the horses and armored men.

A little girl caught Astraia's eye, dressed in a pale blue dress with ribbon in her hair. The girl gaped at her as she stood beside an older woman, presumably her mother. Astraia winked, and the girl giggled, hiding behind her mother's skirts. The mother looked up, fear in her eyes, assessing the band of mounted soldiers.

Astraia tied Orion to a hitching post and walked over to the woman and little girl. Their faces paled with panic as she approached. She held up a hand in greeting, smiling as she spoke first to the mother.

"Stars keep you. I am Traia," she said softly, trying her best to ease their worry.

“And you. I am Liva, and this is my daughter Revna.” The mother’s voice was strong, her shoulders squared as she faced Astraia.

“We are members of the Emyrean Guard. We do not mean to frighten anyone. We come seeking answers.”

“The Emyrean Guard? Why are you so far north?” Liva spoke firmly, but there was doubt in her tone.

“We are investigating reports of strange fires and smoke from some of the neighboring villages. Have you heard of them?” Astraia smiled, trying to convey their noble intentions, rather than evoke fear.

“There was a fire. Near Ásynjur. The village there caught flame and burned for days. My aunt lived there and escaped. She said it was unlike anything she had ever seen. A fire that burned, though no wood was left to feed it.” Liva’s voice was hushed, her hand resting on top of Revna’s curly hair, guarding her.

“Is your aunt here? May I speak with her?”

“No, she went to live with her sister in the Hollow Cities. We have not seen her in a fortnight. But there are some trying to rebuild the village who were witnesses to the fire. They could help you.”

Astraia smiled, nodding. “My thanks. Good day.” She winked again at Revna and rejoined the scouting party. She found Caelan speaking to another villager, an older man, then he shook the man’s hand and walked over to Astraia.

“There was a fire a fortnight ago, near the outpost.” He lowered his voice as he spoke, untying his horse and gesturing for his men to do the same.

“Yes. I was told it was a strange fire that burned without wood. It sounds like the wraith’s fire,” she replied, then mounted Orion’s saddle.

“We will head east and speak to some of the remaining villagers there.” He nodded at Astraia, then spurred his horse into a trot.

She urged Orion on, joining Caelan at the front of the riders. Her pulse quickened in time with the thundering of the hooves meeting dirt. Anticipation hung in the air like a net, ready to drop on them at the most unsuspecting moment.

An hour passed, and the river curved sharply, trees obscuring the path ahead as they marched. Just as they came around the river bend, Caelan skidded his horse to a stop, throwing up a hand in command to halt. The riders waited with bated breath for their orders.

Astraia walked Orion beside Caelan, leaning forward in the saddle enough to see through the trees. Her hand flew to her mouth, stifling a gasp.

Up ahead, another village slightly larger than the one they had just left had been burned to the ground. Red and orange flames licked the sides of what remained of the homes, twisting and contorting, then slithering on the barren ground, like a sea dragon stalking its prey. Black smoke billowed from the flames and seeped between the skeletal remains of the buildings.

But the devastation and unnatural flames were not what made Astraia's stomach drop and blood rush from her face.

Standing in the midst of the fiery inferno, clad in black leather armor and tattered hooded cloaks, with blood-red eyes and inky smoke coursing from their molten ashy skin, was not one but six stewards of Dominion.

They had found the wraith horde.

CHAPTER 27

*“I have gathered what Drakari and Drengr remain.
The Peaks burn, but we have beaten the wraiths
back. I make for Luxterra. Hold fast, brother. I
await your orders with your falcon.”*

**CELESTIAL WAR CORRESPONDENCE OF LORD
FAFNIR OF THE SKYFORGE PEAKS, STEWARD OF
RAGE TO KING ILLIAS, RULER OF THE CELESTIAL
COURT, KING OF ASTRADEON**



ASTRAIA HELD HER BREATH AS she watched the wraiths glide through the village, spreading their unnatural fires, consuming every living thing in sight. The wraiths kicked over wagons, upending anything that could be a hiding space. The ravaging made her stomach turn, praying to the Stars that innocent blood had not been spilled.

Orion’s ears flattened, sensing evil was close at hand. She patted his neck, shushing him as they waited behind the trees.

Caelan narrowed his eyes at the wraiths, then gestured for Astraia to follow him. He turned his horse around, walking it back several paces down the road, away from the looming threat. The men followed behind them, their faces stoic, but fear hung in the air.

Stopping beside the riverbank, Caelan faced the Emyrean and Astraia. He straightened in the saddle, head held high. “We are here to scout, nothing more. Taurus, you will send word to the village we passed to evacuate to Volpes. Get everyone out.” Caelan nodded at the Emyrean Guard with skin as dark as the starless skies and eyes as deep as the oceans.

Taurus nodded, then took off in a gallop, his horse’s hooves kicking up dirt as he flew.

“Rados, Nax, head south, then come around from the east. Give the village a wide birth so as not to draw attention to yourselves. I want to know which direction they go so we can track them. If they head east, follow and send a falcon with your report.” Caelan’s voice was firm, commanding, but Astraia could see the slight tick in his jaw. He was struggling with sending his men into danger, into hellfire itself. “Keyser, you hold this position, and if the wraiths begin heading down this road, you will retreat and join Taurus to get the villagers out and report back to Volpes.”

Keyser nodded, his dark eyes fixed on Caelan as he placed his right hand over his heart, then to the sky, honoring Caelan and the Stars. “Yes, sir.”

“Traia, you and I will scout from the south. There is a higher hill in the trees we can use for cover and a vantage point.” He kicked his horse forward, moving down the road away from the wraiths.

She nudged Orion to do the same, nodding once at Keyser as she passed by him.

Several minutes down the road, Caelan veered his horse south, blazing a new path through the trees. Avoiding branches and undergrowth, they made their way south before heading east once more. The terrain shifted to a steady incline until they were high above the river. Ahead, an outcropping of stone jutted out from the trees, overlooking the village roughly a quarter of a league away.

Caelan halted just inside the trees, dismounting. Crouching low to the ground, he edged his way out of the trees then lay flat on his stomach on the stone cliff.

Astraia followed suit, making sure Orion was tied to a branch before she crept to the edge, lying down next to him. From this elevation, they were well out of sight but could still watch the wraiths as they slunk through the village.

There were six in total, black and ominous shadows with broadswords strapped to their backs and glowing red eyes. The smell of smoke lingered in the air, even high above the decimation.

Astraia shuddered at the memory of ash coating her throat and otherworldly strength bearing down on her from the wraith she battled. Squeezing her eyes shut, she willed the memory to fade and refocused on the scene below.

The wraiths had burned every scrap of wood. Only the cinders remained. One wraith in the center of the wreckage bellowed at the others, the unnatural guttural noise reverberating off the rocks and echoing far enough to be heard where they hid. Astraia fought the urge to cover her ears, to mute the demon tongue. The other wraiths stopped moving, snapping their attention to the wraith who spoke, then moved in tandem toward the eastern edge of the village.

“That one is a leader of some kind. Maybe a commander or general?” Astraia whispered, keeping her eyes fixed on the demons.

Caelan nodded, gesturing toward the far east side of what remained of the village, near a stone archway that now crumbled.

Astraia’s eyes drifted to where he was pointing, and her heart stopped. Partially obscured by the stone archway, a massive cloud of dark shadows grouped together. At first, it looked like another building smoldering in the dirt, but the longer she looked, the more defined the shadows became.

Blackness took shape, and glowing red eyes broke through. The wraiths marched over to the shadows, and they parted, molding into terrifying new beasts. Nostrils flared, hooves stomped on the ground, and an eerie ear-piercing shriek split the air. It was not until the wraiths mounted the beasts that their true form was revealed.

Skeletal steeds with ebony skin stretched taut over bones, giving the appearance of a mummified horse. Only the creatures were enormous, almost twice a man’s height. The head was exposed bone, with deep sockets where eyes should be. Now, only vivid red light pulsed in the holes. There was no nose, only bone fragments and teeth like fangs. Ghostly black shadows danced from the neck, creating a mane, and strung

out behind the creature as a tail. They were gruesome, vile, not of this realm.

“What are they?” Astraia croaked, fear inching its way into her subconscious.

“Nyrekh. Demon stallions. I came across them in old texts about the wraiths. They were once horses, massive stallions of the Celestial Wastes, but Dominion corrupted them for his stewards. They are neither living nor dead.” Caelan narrowed his eyes, staring down at the creatures. “This is how they’ve been moving so quickly.”

Once mounted, the wraiths beckoned their demon stallions onward, heading west toward the village that was now hopefully evacuated thanks to Taurus. As the wraith’s hooves struck the ground, red sparks danced from the impact, mimicking the fiery steps of their masters. Shrieking in unison, the Nyrekh galloped along the dirt road, leaving ruination in their wake.

Astraia and Caelan watched as they left, making sure they were out of sight before shimmying backward from the cliff edge and reclaiming their horses.

“We should be on the move. We cannot lose them. If we have any chance of besting them, we need more knowledge of where they’re going and from where they came.” Caelan grabbed a canteen from his saddlebag, taking a long drink before pouring some over his face. His dark hair glistened as the sun’s rays beamed down on his wet locks. Shaking the water off, he sighed, rubbing his face.

“You do not carry this burden alone, Caelan. Remember that.” Astraia placed a hand on his arm, squeezing and giving him a half smile.

He nodded but remained silent. His jaw was clenched, shoulders tense, as though he carried the weight of the realm. Virellia was the crowning jewel of Astradeon. But if they did not act, it would soon be nothing but a pile of soot and ash.

Resolve washed over Astraia as she mounted Orion. Her back straightened, head held high as she and Caelan descended

toward the demolished village. She would not allow the people of Virellia to suffer. Despite the bounty on her head, she would act.

Leaves crunched as the horses wove in and out of the trees, trying to avoid the main road the wraiths now traveled. There was no other sound in the forest except their horses marching onward. The eerie quietness unsettled her. The birds had ceased to sing. The wind no longer blew. Yet the smell of smoke intensified.

Astraia tensed, absently reaching for her bow and nocking an arrow. A warm flash spread from her spine to her hands, her bonds awakening—a warning. Orion’s ears flattened, and his gait slowed to a stop.

Caelan looked back at her, puzzled, then his face paled, eyes wide with panic. Slowly, she turned her head to look over her left shoulder.

Black shadow cloaked the woods, embers flecking the forest floor. Red eyes, hungry for flesh, peered back at them from the black smoke.

A pair of wraiths riding demon stallions appeared from the blackness, not forty paces away. One of the wraiths opened its mouth, spewing smoke and demonic language.

With a high-pitched shriek, the wraiths galloped toward them.

“Astraia, *run!*”

CHAPTER 28

Therefore, do not forsake the Thirteen. But pray that they would guide you. For only with the acceptance of all the Constellations can you truly be whole.

THE EMPYREAN SCROLLS (REMNANTS OF THE HOLY
TEXT)



THE FOREST BLURRED AS ORION sped through the trees, branches catching on Astraia's hair and twigs snapping under thundering hooves. Her heartbeat drummed in sync with his hooves, quickening with every passing moment they fled from the wraiths.

Caelan raced beside her, winding through the trees as a hawk would glide through the air. She dared a glance back, praying to the Stars they could outrun the demons and their wicked steeds.

But red eyes bore into hers, black shadow and unnatural flames licking the forest as they moved in tandem. The wraiths glided over the earth, like water over rocks in a stream, leaving only fire and ash in their wake.

Whipping her head back around, Astraia lowered her body closer to Orion's, shouting in earnest. "Faster, Orion!"

Orion's nostrils flared, and he neighed back at her, then his pace quickened. Faster and faster, her black stallion soared. Her cloak gave way, and her hair billowed in the wind, eyes watering as they flew. Orion overtook Caelan's horse, leading their retreat southwest, out of the woods and closer to Volpes.

But even Orion could not outrun the undead Nyrekh forever. They had to find a way to lose them.

Astraia's bonds heated, thrumming under her skin, as if in response to her question, but fear clouded her thoughts. She nearly succumbed to burnout before—nearly died. Now, there

were two wraiths. Two stewards of Dominion bent on destruction.

A low, rough voice cut through her fear, slamming it out of her mind.

You are stronger than your bonds.

Her pulse slowed, the loud heartbeat in her ears softened, and her bonds heated at the sound of his voice. For years she had been running, fleeing from heartache, accepting condemnation. But the time of running was over. Scars had been forged in the darkness, but now it was time to fight shadows with light.

Ahead, the trees thinned, opening up into rolling grassland. The sun was low in the sky, casting a warm orange glow over the terrain as they galloped onward. She breathed deeply, welcoming the reprieve from the suffocating woods, then glanced sideways at Caelan, who had managed to keep pace with them.

As if sensing her stare, he peered over at her, his dark hair ruffled in the wind. Just as they blew past the last of the trees into the open field, she smiled at him. His eyes went wide as she turned Orion to the right, then came around in a wide circle.

She yanked on the reins, Orion's hooves skidding to a stop. He reared, but she remained mounted, glaring at the advancing wraiths. Shadows poured out of the trees, crashing onto the green grass like waves on the beaches of her home. Sparks flew as the Nyrekh's hooves pounded the earth, blazing through the trees until the wraiths spotted the lone rider and halted. Their steeds shrieked, breathing black smoke as the wraiths assessed her.

Astraiia breathed deeply, then dove straight down into the depths of her mind. She wasted no time, extending her hand and compelled her tether to appear. The golden thread glowed, falling into her hand and extending into the expanse above her mind. She pulled, and the thread held fast to the glowing light in her mind—the Stars.

Anchored, she opened the gates to her bonds, letting Power and Sacrifice flood into her hands. White and blue light flared from her fingertips, her face, her eyes—her entire body was aflame in the bonds of the Constellations. Her body pulsed with warmth, aching to be unleashed onto the demons.

Leaping from Orion's saddle, she grabbed her Celestial bow and drew an arrow, aiming directly at a pair of glowing red eyes. She channeled Power, forcing it to flow into the bow and her arrow, from fletching to tip. Holding her breath, she steadied her hands. Sounds muffled, her vision cleared until she could see the molten cracks in the wraith's ashen skin, fire bubbling from beneath.

Time slowed.

Exhaling, her fingers flexed and released. White light crackled, trailing the arrow as it cleaved the air, hungry to meet its mark. A loud snap, followed by a flash of brilliant light, and time lurched back.

Astraia inhaled sharply, blinking as the brilliance faded, and an ear-splitting wail rattled the trees. Her arrow was lodged in the red eye of a wraith, white light drilling into his skull. A black armored hand reached up in a feeble attempt to remove the arrow, only to wrench it back again when more light exploded with the slightest touch. Her Power bond had sunk its claws into the demon and would not relent.

Unable to pluck out the arrow, the wraith convulsed, shrieking in agony until it collapsed and fell from his shadow steed with a crash. Smoke fanned out on impact, and the ground vibrated as the demon met earth, writhing in pain.

The other wraith bellowed, screeching and spewing words in its demonic language toward Astraia. It drew its broadsword, glowing red and sparking, then kicked the Nyrekh into a gallop, straight for her.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Caelan turn his horse around and speed toward her, sword drawn, but she did not break focus from the fight before her.

Seconds blurred as the steward of Dominion charged.

Astraia's core tightened, her stance wide and grounded. Grabbing another arrow from her quiver, she took aim, steadying her breath. She tugged tighter on her golden tether, allowing it to strengthen and opened her bond gates wider, letting the warmth spread through her ligaments and sinew. Her scalp prickled with the surge of her bond, and her eyes glowed white.

A wave of control washed over her as she willed her bond into the arrow tip, pulling her bow taut, and with an exhale, released.

Another blaze of light, and her arrow was soaring toward the wraith, defying the winds as it wove through the sky. The wraith roared, raising its sword acting as a shield, but it was too late. The arrow slid past the iron and straight into the side of the demon's ashen neck. Thick black liquid exploded from the wound as white light bore into smoking flesh.

The wraith screamed, its roar garbled, gore filling its mouth. It clawed at the arrow, but Power flared even stronger with every attempt.

Unable to maintain control of the undead steed, the Nyrekh veered off course, and the wraith careened off its back, falling in a heap on the grassy field only a few steps from Astraia. The grass singed where the wraith collapsed, black smoke unfurling from around the monster.

She gasped, finally able to draw breath again, and began to step toward the wraith.

"Astraia, stop! What are you doing?" Caelan shouted, bringing his horse up behind her.

"They must be stopped, Caelan, no matter the cost." She kept walking toward the fallen wraith, slinging her bow on her back.

It lay on its side, head covered in a tattered black cloak. It did not stir, did not draw breath. A pool of tar-like blood seeped into the earth around its head, killing the grass instantly. Wisps of black smoke still rose from the body, as though it still burned even in death.

She stepped beside the demon, and smoke filled her lungs. Diving into her mind, she grasped her tether again firmly in one hand and stretched her bond further, willing it to yield. White light flared around her entire body.

The field around her was bathed in brilliant light, overtaking the sun's setting rays. Channeling her bond, she focused on the image of a blade in her mind and felt the hilt form in her grasp. A crackling sound reverberated in her ears as the sword took shape.

Grasping it firmly in both hands, she held it over her head, ready to deliver the final definitive blow—

Just as a gloved hand, draped in shadow, shot to the sky and grabbed her throat.

Gasping, she tried to pry the wraith's hand off her neck, but it was no use. He turned his head to face her, red eyes ablaze and black blood oozing from its mouth. Despite his wounds, the wraith's grip did not loosen.

She tried to kick the demon, but she could not feel her toes. She was suffocating at the hand of the wraith, spots dancing before her eyes. Her bonds zipped through her spine, Sacrifice attempting to heal her crushed windpipe and Power trying to escape and destroy.

But she could not focus on channeling her bonds, and her glowing blade winked out.

Just as the world began to fade to black, a giant tree root burst from the ground and curled around the wraith's arm. Tighter and tighter it curled until the wraith could no longer hold its grip on her, and it screamed, releasing her neck.

She fell to her knees, struggling to draw breath, her vision slowly clearing.

“Move, Astraia!” Caelan roared. He was standing beside her, his hands outstretched. His body was alight with a green glow, pulsing into the earth around them—his green eyes alight with his Desire bond.

He clenched both of his outstretched hands into fists, and the root around the wraith's arm squeezed violently, crushing

the arm into pieces.

The wraith screamed again, but Caelan did not relent. With another flick of his hand, a second root slammed up through the back of the wraith's head, straight through its open mouth. More black ooze burst from the wraith, dripping down the root.

Green light pulsed around the body of the wraith, glowing from the dirt. As Caelan flicked both his hands outward, the ground opened up in a great fissure, a deep pit into the earth twice the length of the wraith and so deep there was only blackness that stared back up at them. The wraith plunged into the darkness, its red eyes already fading with defeat.

Bringing his hands together, Caelan sealed the pit shut, locking the wraith in the belly of the realm it had come to destroy.

Astraia stood and rubbed her neck. Swallowing, she bit back a cry from the pain in her throat.

Then two warm hands were on either side of her face. Dark hair rustled in the wind as green eyes peered into hers.

“Are you okay?” His voice quivered, low and uncertain.

“Yes, thanks to you,” she croaked, giving him a small smile.

His lips curled at the edge, the ghost of a smile beginning to form. She felt the tension in her chest loosen, just slightly.

A sharp *thunk*, and the smile never bloomed.

The bolt struck between his shoulder blades with sickening force, driving his body forward. His eyes widened in shock as he collapsed to his knees before she had time to shout his name. Red painted his tunic beneath his armor.

Astraia flung herself to the ground. Kneeling beside him, she helped him down to his side, seeing the black arrow lodged in his back. Astraia froze, the moment split in two—*before* and *after*.

“Astraia, run,” Caelan gasped, blood leaking from the side of his lips.

Her heart beat out of her chest, panic flooding her senses. *Not Caelan. Not the boy I had loved, who loved me even when I was gone. Not the man who built stars for me.*

A whistle whizzed by her ear, blowing her hair back, as another bolt nearly missed her head.

Snapping her head up, she looked back at the tree line, where the first wraith had fallen. He was kneeling on one knee, aiming a black crossbow at them. Her arrow was still wedged in his eye, pulsing with white light.

She glanced at Caelan, his breaths becoming shallower. She would not be able to heal him fully until the last wraith was destroyed. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath and rose.

Still channeling her bond, she grabbed her Starwood bow from her back. Speed was her ally, and Power was her deathbringer. In rapid succession, she loosed her arrows, aiming for all the exposed parts of the wraith. White streaks of light blazed through the darkening sky, like lightning strikes on a stormy night.

The wraith managed to dodge several of the arrows, deflecting some with his armor, and others with his smoke and flames. But Astraia did not stop. She walked toward the demon as she fired—arrow after arrow.

One tip wedged between his armor on his shoulder, streaming the Power bond into his cracked skin. An eerie shriek made her ears ring.

She was only a few paces away from Dominion's steward when her quiver ran dry. The wraith too had no more bolts to fire and pulled his broadsword off his back, the fiery iron aglow with flame and smoke.

Astraia ushered her bonds forward once more, flaring Power and channeling it into her lightning blade. Her grip tightened on the hilt, sweat dripping down her face from exhaustion as she stepped toward the beast.

Nightfall was upon them, only slivers of sunlight peeking through the trees and bidding the field goodnight. Yet the glow from the battle resembled a bonfire. White and red light

danced along the blades of grass as smoke and shadows painted the trunks of the trees. Both wraith and Starborne raised their blades in unison, ready to end the other in their own fires.

Astraia lunged first, slashing her Starborne blade down on her enemy. The air hummed as the sword cut through the air and came crashing down onto the broadsword of the wraith.

Power and Dominion met once again, this time in the hands of steward and Starborne.

A *crack* echoed through the field, red and white sparks flying on impact.

She did not wait for a counterattack, bringing her blade down again with all the force of Power behind her stroke. The wraith met her strike for strike. What felt like hours were mere seconds as blades collided, and Astraia's strength began to wane.

She needed to end this, now. Or Caelan would die.

Another whisper of a memory flashed before her mind.

Get them on their knees.

Blocking another blow from the wraith, she stepped sideways out of reach and unsheathed her dagger. With sword in one hand and her dagger in the other, she ran at the wraith.

His broadsword came down, but she was already blocking with her sword. Channeling what strength she had left, she pushed his sword back and drove her dagger into the side of his thigh.

The demon faltered, roaring in pain, and stepped backward before falling to his knees. Astraia whipped her sword around with both hands, driving herself forward as she slashed sideways with her blade.

She screamed, claiming her victory, and cleaved his head from his body. Smoke smoldered from the neck before the body toppled over, burning the grass around the corpse.

Astraia nearly collapsed as she watched the red glow fade from the dismembered head of the wraith. She could feel her

bonds on the brink of burnout, but as she swam into her mind, her tether to the Stars still held firm, and she pulled the doors to her Power bond closed. Her skin and eyes returned to normal, the glow subsiding, and her sword blinked out of existence.

Sighing, she turned back to where Caelan lay and sprinted back to him. Her chest heaved, burning from smoke and exhaustion as she knelt beside him. His eyes were closed and his skin pale, but his chest still rose and fell.

Thanking the Stars, she blinked away tears and allowed Sacrifice to fill her. Coolness coated her throat as her bond healed her own injuries, then flowed into warmth emanating from her hands. The familiar comforting blue glow lit up the grass around them as she lay her hands on his back.

“I’m going to remove the arrow, Caelan. I’m so sorry. Please stay with me,” she choked, whispering to him as she worked.

Deafening silence answered her.

Bracing one hand on his back, she grasped the shaft of the bolt firmly in the other and pulled. His back arched, and he groaned, then went limp.

Covering the wound with both of her hands, she flung open the doors to Sacrifice and let her tether go, allowing herself to flare. Blue light rippled through the air around her, engulfing her and Caelan.

Please. Please, let him live.

She prayed earnestly to the Stars—the Stars she now knew were alive and answered.

Blue light spilled from her, leaching the remainder of her strength from her body. She felt faint as a rush of warmth spread over her. Sacrifice battled to heal them both, keeping her from blacking out while she worked to heal the Lord of Volpes and one of the last souls in the realm who cared if she lived or died.

Blood no longer spread from the entry wound on his back, and new skin formed over the opening. The injury was healed,

but he was in shock from blood loss. She cursed under her breath. Pulling even more from her bond, she concentrated on every single drop of blood in his body, willing it to multiply. Sweat dripped from her brow, and her vision blurred, but she would not stop until she knew he would survive.

Several minutes passed, and just as she could feel her body slumping further onto the ground, she heard a gasp.

Caelan breathed deeply, his eyes opening for a moment and locking onto her. The wildness of green forests stared back at her, and a small smile pulled at the edges of his mouth. Sighing, she smiled back. His eyes closed again, but his breathing was no longer labored. Placing her fingers on his wrist, she felt his pulse and grinned to find it strong.

Exhaustion threatened to claim her as she pulled back on her tether, and her bonds finally calmed. She sat on the grass beside Caelan, unable to move or think. A cold bead of sweat rolled down her temple, followed by a shiver down her spine.

He was alive. She did not burn out. The wraiths were dead. For now, that was enough.

The final strands of sunlight winked from the horizon, teasing her with sleep. But she needed to move them to cover. They were too exposed in the field, and she was certain the rest of the wraith horde would be looking for their companions soon.

Clumsily, she rose from the ground, glancing around for their horses. Orion and Caelan's horse had fled into the woods during the fight, but she was sure they could not be far. She needed to get Caelan on his horse and get as far away from the wraiths as they could.

Scanning the tree line, she froze in terror, the air sucked from her lungs.

Two sets of red eyes broke through the darkness, searing into her. Two undead steeds snorted black smoke as they carried their masters. Two stewards of Dominion had come to claim her..

CHAPTER 29

Many archeologists agree there is a surplus amount of skeletal remains that perplex most scholars. Bones, appearing to be human, but substantially larger. One such femur was discovered to be over six handbreadths in length and solid rather than porous, with specks of stardust throughout, making it nearly unbreakable with man-made weaponry.

RUINS IN THE CELESTIAL WASTES: VOLUME 1



DEATH HAD BEEN AN UNRELENTING predator since the day the Stars chose her. Unable to fully quench its thirst for her demise, it relentlessly pursued her. It was not until this moment that Astraia realized the fragility of life—that she could not evade fate forever. No matter the will of the Stars, even they could not cheat death.

The moon rose in the starless sky, bathing the field in a soft white glow. But the moonbeams were tainted with the red glow of the wraith and Nyrekh eyes. Flecks of fire and ash floated in the air around the demons, threatening to set the forest floor ablaze. The shrieks of the Nyrekh set Astraia's teeth on edge, drilling into her mind and stealing what little resolve she had left to survive. Her bonds flickered at her center, their strength drained, but still they crawled to her call.

Caelan was still unconscious, lying in the grass. A few stray tendrils of his hair brushed over his forehead as he slept. One look at his helpless state, and she knew—she could not and would not satiate the hunger of death with her blood without spilling black blood of their own.

She squared her shoulders, resolve eclipsing fear as she drew in a steady breath. She removed her Starwood bow and empty quiver from her back, setting them on the singed grass. She reached for her throat and unclasped her cloak, a shiver running down her spine as it fell into a puddle around her feet.

Stepping around Caelan, she quieted the storms in her mind, willing a distant memory to surface once again—the memory once tied to her tether.

Elion was walking with her on the beach, the wind blowing his unruly hair into his green eyes. He tipped his head back, laughing, and her laughs joined his, weaving into a melody that lightened her heart.

She let the memory pause, his laughter etched in the expanse of her thoughts, floating about the waters like a beacon next to the twinkling Star she now called her tether. There were some things death's grip could not hold—undying love was one of those.

Astraea saw a small flash out of the corner of her eye as moonlight shone on the hilt of Caelan's sword, lying beside him. Kneeling, she grabbed the blade, feeling the roughness of the hilt against her cold hands. Her knuckles whitened as she clenched the sword in both hands, raising it across her chest in defense, just as the wraiths rushed for her.

Cinders danced from the hooves of the Nyrekh with every pounding step, rattling the forest with their march. The wraiths let out a battle cry, a terrible howling shriek that rang in her ears.

Even the Stars could not save her now.

Darkness and shadow swallowed the field as the wraiths charged her, their tattered black cloaks billowing behind them like sails for the ships that carried lost souls to Solrend.

Only her soul was not lost. It might have been at one time, but she had learned she was stronger than her bonds—they did not define her.

Raising her sword, she braced for death's final blow. Her voice rang out clear and absolute.

“I am Starlight. I will not fall.”

Red broadswords slashed down at her, and a blast of heat blew her hair from her face.

Red and blue flames roared from over her head, flinging the wraiths backward, hurtling them off their steeds. The Nyrekh reared, shrieking in terror, and peeled off into the trees. The wraiths clamored to their feet, billowing smoke from their mouths and flames from their swords.

Astraia whipped around, readying her sword for another attacker, only to find familiar amber eyes glowing into her own.

Draven. He was here.

“You came,” she breathed.

“I always will,” he replied, voice low as he strode toward her.

It was then she noticed that his hands glowed red. Faint, pulsing red veins crept up his arms and neck. His broadsword was still sheathed on his back, but the hilt pulsed red as well.

“What...” she started, but his eyes darted behind her.

Placing a hand in front of her, he pushed her behind him, shielding her from the two wraiths marching toward them. The ground shook with each step they took, boots slamming into the ground. Shadow and red sparks danced around their molten bodies. In tandem, the wraiths raised their blades, prepared to annihilate their prey.

Draven did not allow them the chance. In a breath, he drew his broadsword, gripping tightly with both hands, then a burst of fire erupted down the blade, coating it in red and blue flames. His entire body pulsed with red light, flooding the field in blood.

Without hesitating, he broke into a run, straight toward the pair of demons. Flames trailed behind him, licking at his heels as he closed the distance between the wraiths.

Just as he came within striking distance, he threw out one hand in front of the first wraith. Red and blue flames flared from his palm, widening into a cyclone of fire that engulfed the demon. Ear-splitting wails followed but were immediately silenced as Draven brought his sword of flames down, severing the wraith’s head.

The second wraith was on him in seconds, slashing down his own broadsword in a flurry of movement. Draven twisted, avoiding the strike, then countered with an upward slash. The wraith tried to block his attack, but it was too late. Red and blue flames spewed into the wraith's side, melting his armor, and his ashen skin sizzled from the heat. More shrieks filled the night sky, but the hunter was not finished yet.

With a roar, he drove his blade into the wraith's middle, spewing black blood onto the earth and burning flesh. The wraith doubled over as Draven removed his blade. Sparks flashed from where the wraith's blade fell from his hand onto the soil. The red-eyed demon knelt before Draven, coughing up black ink.

Astraia could hear the demon speak in his ancient tongue, looking up at Draven, who stood alight with a fiery glow surrounding him. The glow illuminated the wraith's face as it smiled, sharp teeth glistening.

Draven's hand shot out, wrapping around the wraith's neck. Red and blue flames flared from his fingertips and curled into the wraith's mouth as he gasped for air.

"You cannot have her. Not while I draw breath," Draven snarled and drove his flames down the demon's throat.

The cracked ashen skin lit up from the inside as the wraith burned until gaping wounds appeared on his body and black smoldering blood leeches out. The wraith no longer screamed, unable to draw breath or make sounds as molten fire was poured down his throat.

Seconds passed, and the wraith's body melted away, burning to ash from the inside out. Flakes of burned gray skin were all that remained when the flames subsided.

The red glow around Draven faded as he sheathed his broadsword, then turned.

Astraia's breath hitched, her heart fluttering at the amber pools staring back at her. He walked back to her. He was breathing faster, but he was untouched, unharmed.

“Are you hurt?” he asked. His voice wavered as he brought a warm, rough hand to her face, caressing her cheek.

“I’m fine, thanks to you,” she breathed, unable to tear her eyes from his.

“I should have never left...” His voice trailed off, his brows furrowing as he looked at her. Then his gaze fell to Caelan on the ground beside her.

Astraia knelt beside him, feeling his pulse and counting his breaths. He had not worsened, but he needed additional healing. “My bonds are weak. I was able to heal him partially, but we need to get him back to Volpes to more healers.” She glanced up at Draven, pleading.

He only nodded, then whistled for his horse, who had not fled far. It took some effort, but with both of them, they were able to secure Caelan on top of Draven’s horse. A low groan escaped from Caelan as he was seated. After calling for a few minutes, Orion and Caelan’s mare trotted out of the woods.

“I will ride next to him to prevent him from falling,” Draven said as he mounted Caelan’s horse.

Astraia followed suit, mounting Orion, eager to be away from the dark woods and out of reach of the remaining wraiths.

After a few minutes of riding, Astraia felt her muscles relax, letting the fear of certain death fade away. She closed her eyes and thanked the Stars for sparing her. She had been destined for death, but instead, a bounty hunter saved her. The realization of what she witnessed washed over her, and she inhaled sharply.

“What?” Draven asked, eyebrows quirked as he looked over at her.

“You have a lot of explaining to do, *Starborne*.” Her eyes narrowed.

“Do I?” he replied, that aggravating smirk blooming on his lips.

“Yes! Why did you not tell me?”

“You never asked.” He shrugged, shifting his focus forward.

“You’re insufferable,” she quipped, before huffing and glancing up at the heavens void of stars. The Stars might be lost, but they were still alive. They were alive in her. And it would appear they lived inside a certain bounty hunter as well.

CHAPTER 30

The Starborne are fading, either from fear or from slaughter at the hands of hate. The King and Queen do little to prevent these unholy acts or protect the blessed ones. I fear, the Starborne will cease to exist should these inquisitions continue.

SCRIBE TO THE PRIEST OF POWER, POLENTIAS



SHE AND DRAVEN HAD RIDDEN through the night nonstop, pushing Orion and the other horses as fast as they dared with Caelan clinging to life by a thread. At one point, she had fallen asleep on Orion's back, slumped over his neck. When she had come to, her reins had been looped around Draven's saddle, keeping her tied to him.

When they burst through the servants' quarters door in the early morning hours, they had nearly given Graves a heart attack. Carrying Caelan to his room, Astraia had bellowed orders for the butler to fetch the best healer while she tried to coax her Sacrifice bond to life enough to provide Caelan some relief from pain. Her bond had sputtered, barely a glimmer of blue light, but it had afforded him a small reprieve.

His face was ghostly pale when the healer finally arrived, an older man cloaked in the blue robes of the university flanked by one of his apprentices. She had insisted on staying, but Draven eventually dragged her away from Caelan's bedside to allow the healers to work. She vaguely recalled her knees giving way from exhaustion in the hallway and a warm body pressed to hers as he carried her to her room.

The next morning, Astraia groaned from stiff muscles as she made her way to the washroom. Her eyes widened at the wild creature staring back at her in the mirror—tangled hair, dark shadows under her eyes, dirt and soot smudged on her face. She could not recall another time when she had been so tired,

except perhaps after nearly burning out when she lost her tether.

She took her time soaking in the tub, lathering with eucalyptus soap, turning the water gray with ash. Once she felt she had finally scrubbed wraith blood and smoke from her skin, she stepped from the tub and ran fingers through her wet hair. She rifled through the dresses she found in her wardrobe and rolled her eyes at the impracticality of most, likely Caelan's doing.

Finally, she found one of the simpler dresses, although it likely could feed a small village with the cost of the fabric. It was dark blue gossamer material with a fitted bodice and simple flowing sleeves. Gold thread was stitched along the waist, cuffs, and hem in the shape of tiny stars and phases of the moon. It was resplendent, the gold thread catching the light from the sun and glistening on the marble floors.

Slipping into the dress, she felt somehow naked beneath yards of fabric. For years, she had worn clothes for utility, not for appearance. It was not to say that she disliked wearing lavish clothes; she just never felt the need, nor did she have occasion to impress.

She sighed and pulled her hair back loosely, small tendrils of her hair managing to escape and frame her face. She polished off her ensemble by strapping her Celestial dagger to her thigh beneath her gown then strode down the hallway.

She could hear muffled voices from inside Caelan's room as she drew closer. Before she could knock, the door was yanked open, and the university healer stood in the doorway, eyeing her suspiciously.

"Lord Vireaux requires rest, my lady," he stated firmly, blocking her way.

"Stand aside, Borea," Caelan commanded from behind the doorway.

Begrudgingly, Borea stepped aside, allowing Astraia to enter. She glared at him, then strode past to sit in the chair beside Caelan's bed. He was sitting propped up by pillows, a

tray of food in front of him. His coloring was still pale, but his lips were pink, and he beamed at her as she came to sit beside him.

“That will be all, Borea.” He did not break his stare from her as he spoke, entirely dismissive of the hovering healer.

“Yes, my Lord,” the healer replied, closing the door unnecessarily loudly.

“How do you feel?” Astraia asked, leaning over to hold his hand in hers. It was warmer, and she could feel his steady pulse, which put her mind at ease. The green in his eyes sparkled in the sunlight, making her heart swell.

“I’m alive. Thanks to you. And...him,” he said, squeezing her hand in his.

A lump formed in her throat, and she swallowed hard. She had not been to see Draven this morning. There were too many questions, and she needed to make sure Caelan was recovering without complications before she faced her next opponent.

“If not for him, we both would have died. Of that, I am certain,” she murmured, a wave of gratefulness and disbelief washing over her.

“Then he has my thanks, for saving you, for saving us both.”

She smiled at him, silently thanking him for his gratitude. “As much as I do not want to admit the grumpy healer is right, you must rest. And eat. I am still not satisfied with your coloring.” She frowned at him, then slid his tray of broth closer.

“Yes, healer.” He winked at her, then brought her hand to his lips, placing a gentle kiss on her cool skin. “Come see me again today? I fear if I am left alone with Borea all day, I may go mad.”

“Of course.” She smiled again, then rose to leave. “Now, eat, sleep.”

He rolled his eyes, spooning some broth into his mouth.

She smirked, shaking her head, then softly closed the door behind her.

Making her way back toward the guest wing of the manor, her shoes clicked on the marble floor, matching the quickening of her pulse. She was not sure where Draven had slept last night, but she was certain he had not left the manor. Something deep in her core had warmed the moment she woke, a sensation she realized she only felt when he was near, and it was still heating her now.

She walked past several guest rooms that were vacant before coming to her own. Across the hall from her room was another suite, one her brother had used when they stayed in Volpes during the summers.

The door to the suite was cracked. Stepping up to it she raised her hand, nervous of what lay on the other side. Softly, she rapped on the door and waited, holding her breath. When no answer came, she nudged it open, peering inside.

The room was empty, but there was evidence someone had slept there. The sheets were disheveled, balcony doors opened, and strewn across a chair was black leather armor with a Drakari-scale design imprinted on it. The washroom door was also ajar, but it was quiet, unoccupied.

With a sigh, she closed the door and paused as she glanced down the end of the hallway. The door to the gardens was open, a sliver of light pouring through and fanning out over the glistening marble floor.

She made her way through the gardens, dusk settling over the trees and starblooms. In a few moments, the magical flowers would glow in the moonlight. It had been her favorite flower as a child—a beacon in the starless night.

Stepping through the flowers, weaving through the lush greenery, she breathed deeply, closing her eyes and letting the sun's last rays warm her face before it set. She stood in the middle of the flowers, thanking the Stars in her mind that she lived to see the sun rise and set again.

That was when she felt it.

Heat, different from her bonds, blazed to life in her core. A deep longing that seeped into her bones, lighting her on fire.

“There you are, Starborne.”

Her eyes flew open, searching frantically for the source of the voice until Draven stepped from behind a tree and strode through the starblooms toward her. He wore a simple black shirt, the sleeves rolled up and his tattoos on full display, a dagger strapped to his thigh. His light brown hair was pulled back on top of his head and his eyes... His eyes were two suns, setting her heart on fire and burning her inhibitions.

He stopped right in front of her, gazing into her eyes, a hint of longing in his stare.

“Here I am,” she breathed, pulse quickening, heartbeat pounding in her ears. Words muddled as she sank into the amber pools looking back at her. She let the pools claim her, drowning her in liquid sunlight.

It was his eyes she wanted to see every time the sun rose and the starless night claimed the day. It was his eyes she had dreamed that took her pain and guilt away. His eyes that gave her strength to face death and become the strongest version of herself, stronger than her bonds. It was his eyes she begged would consume her.

“How do you feel?” he asked gently.

“Better.” She watched the last of the sun’s rays dance across his face, illuminating the weariness she knew he was hiding. “Thank you. For saving me, saving Caelan. For coming back...” Her voice trailed off as her throat tightened.

He scowled, sighing as he looked up at the darkening sky, and ran his fingers through his hair. He rubbed the back of his neck then met her eyes again. Agony was etched on his face. “I should have never left.”

“How did you find me? You were gone for days, and we were nowhere near Volpes.” Her pulse quickened, unsure if she was prepared for his answer.

“I was barely a day’s ride away from Volpes when I had a dream. It sounds insane when I say it out loud, but it was so real,” he said, shaking his head.

“What...what was the dream?” Her palms were clammy, a cold sweat rushing over her.

“I was in a bright room, bright as the Stars. At first, it was quiet, then I could hear shouting. The sound grew louder, and I knew, in my bones I knew, it was you,” he replied, holding her gaze.

She could not breathe. Could not move.

“I called out to you and reached into the light for you.” His voice was low, barely more than a whisper. “And suddenly you were there, holding my hand. You stopped screaming and just stared at me. You said in the darkness that I was your light.”

Spots danced in her vision, and the back of her neck was damp with sweat. It was not possible. Could not be possible.

Draven cleared his throat, shifting on his feet. “I woke from the dream and knew I had to return. But when I got to Volpes, you had already left. That squirrely butler was hesitant to give me your route, but I am...persuasive.”

“Draven,” she started, swallowing the lump in her throat. “I had the same dream.”

“What?”

“Probably the same night. It was my nightmare. But this time, you saved me before I destroyed them.” Tears welled in her eyes, but she blinked them away, holding his bewildered stare.

“The Stars. They must have been speaking to us,” he murmured, rubbing the back of his neck. “I shouldn’t have left. They knew it too.”

“Why did you? You say it was to save me, but...” Her voice lowered, unsure.

“But what?”

“You never asked if that’s what *I* wanted,” she said. She now realized how angry she had been when he left her, claiming it was for her own good. But she knew it vexed her more than she had been willing to admit.

“What is it *you* want then, Starborne?” He stepped closer, his breath warm on her face, the scent of him overpowering her, clouding her thoughts.

It was hard to breathe, hard to think clearly with his body so close to hers. Her bonds pulsed in her spine, a burst of warmth flooding her body, enhancing her senses. It was almost too intoxicating to bear.

“The truth,” she replied, voice firm and demanding. She was tired of the hidden agendas, hidden half-truths, hidden feelings. She was tired of standing on the precipice of uncertainty—she needed something real.

“The truth is complicated,” he said, staring at her.

“Enlighten me.”

“Very well.” He stepped back from her. The space between them felt like a chasm, cold and dangerous. His shoulders tensed, jaw clenched. Then he sighed before he spoke, his voice calm and even. “It’s true that my father was bonded to Rage. That was not a lie. But I am also bonded to Rage. It is somewhat of a generational right.”

“Go on,” she urged, crossing her arms.

“Many years ago, my father... He died. In battle. He and the entire legion of warriors with him.”

Astraia held her breath, and a palpable silence filled the air, but he did not stop.

“His death was my doing. The enemy swarmed us, and I was too far from him to render aid. Even with his bond, he was overtaken. I watched him fall, and the anger... I flared uncontrollably. I killed them. The enemy. The legion. I woke days later under the care of a healer who had found me. But something had been broken that day. Now, I cannot access my full bond, my true form.”

He paused, glancing up at the black abyss, then back at her. The pain and grief he bore laid bare before her, plainly written on his face. He had suffered as greatly as she had—cursed by bonds they never chose.

“But you—you were the one who told me to believe the Stars answered, that they lived. How could you after what they took from you?” She grappled with the truth, that he was Starborne, that he flared and others paid the price, just as she had.

Yet he still clung to the Stars, to an undeserved faith.

“I believe because they speak to me too, Traia. Rage, he speaks to me. The Star is my tether. The healer taught me how to harness my bond, channel it, and I found Rage in the darkness. Evil will forever lurk in the shadows, on the edge of the night, ready to break those who would stray from the light. But the light is an ever-fixed mark. You need only to allow it to burn.”

He began walking toward her once more, closing the gap between them with every step. “I knew that day, when you flared with the wraith, that you were strong, but you clung to your grief, letting it consume you in darkness. You just needed to allow the light to burn brighter for the Stars to answer you.”

Astraea swallowed hard, choking down tears. Years of regret, grief, guilt marred her soul. Thoughts of Elion burning by her hand threatened to consume her yet again. The darkness flirted with the edge of her mind, waiting to ensnare her in despair, eager to pollute her light.

Your light drowned in their blood. Darkness will always prevail, the blackness hissed.

A warm hand grasped her own, yanking her back from the edge, rescuing her yet again. She looked into Draven’s eyes, seeing more than just a bounty hunter, more than just a Starborne. She saw a reflection of herself, torn apart by the evil of the world and compelled by the Stars—pawns in the war between light and dark.

“I fear the darkness will consume me. It haunts me even now,” she whispered, unable to stop the tear that escaped and slid down her cheek.

Gently, he placed a hand on the side of her face, his fingers intertwining in her hair as he wiped the tear away with his thumb. “The grief will remain. But the darkness will only take hold if you allow it. And you are more than your grief. You are kind, strong, fierce, unashamed of fighting for good in a fallen world.” His voice was low and gentle as he lowered his hand from her face, his other hand unmoved from hers.

She slowed her breaths and closed her eyes, bracing herself for answers to the questions she was nearly too afraid to ask. Blinking, she steadied her voice. “Why are you here? Why have you not taken me to the king?”

Silence.

Seconds felt like hours as she waited with bated breath. Unable to move, to breathe, to think, she waited. Nausea rolled through her stomach, and a cold sweat beaded on the back of her neck. The words he spoke now would decide her fate—break her or choose her.

He breathed deeply, fixing his gaze on her. “Traia, I—”

A door creaked open from behind them, and Draven dropped her hand, unsheathing his dagger just as Astraia whipped around with her own dagger drawn.

The moonlight cast an eerie glow over the manor, illuminating a tall figure standing in the doorway. The man walked closer toward them, dark tousled hair blowing in the breeze.

“Caelan?” Astraia asked, relaxing her stance as he strode through the starblooms.

“Stars, Traia. Do you always carry that dagger?” His smile morphed into a slight frown as Draven came to stand next to her, dagger still in hand.

“That is an asinine question, as you already know the answer,” she replied, sheathing her dagger and crossing her arms. “What are you doing out of bed?”

“I could ask you the same question. I went to your suite, and can you imagine my surprise when I found you were missing?” His eyes narrowed, darting between her and Draven.

“I am not your pet, Caelan. I may come and go as I please, with whom I please, and speak with whoever I please.” She rolled her shoulders back, standing straighter. Her Power bond flared to life with her anger, rushing to the top of her skin.

“Even with him? A bounty hunter whose intentions remain questionable at best?” Caelan glowered at Draven, his eyes flashing a brilliant green as his own Desire bond surged.

Draven stepped closer to Astraia’s side, his hand just barely grazing hers, sending sparks through her arm and into her spine. Her Power bond lurched at the touch, frantic to be released. The bounty hunter cleared his throat, his arm muscles flexing subtly as he stared down Caelan.

“No one gets to decide who she speaks to.” His voice was rough, commanding, and she could have sworn flames danced behind his eyes. The heat from his body intensified, radiating from the hand that touched hers.

“Enough!” she shouted in exasperation. “Caelan, you owe him your life. As do I. If that does not grant him clemency, I do not know what does.”

“You...trust him? You know nothing of him! He may have saved our lives, but remember why he is really here.” Caelan shot Draven a look of disdain, green glowing from his fingertips as he struggled to maintain control of his bond.

“I do. And he has earned my trust. That should be enough for you.” She steadied her voice despite the fact she was fuming.

Draven tensed next to her, his heat ebbing with her proclamation. They might have begun their journey as a hunter and prey, but somewhere along the way they had transformed into something more—and she sensed he knew it too.

“Very well. I trust you. So if you say he is noble, I will honor your judgment.” Caelan crossed his arms, the green

glow fading from his hands as he stood under the moonlight.

“Great. Now that you have come to your senses, I am going to bed before I kill both of you for being ridiculous,” she snapped, marching past Caelan and throwing open the door to the manor.

Without looking back, she stomped back to her room. She threw herself onto the bed, and exhaustion swept over her. She let her eyes close, imagining a set of warm tattooed hands caressing her skin beneath the sheets. She cursed as she drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER 31

Starbloom petals, when boiled, can be consumed as a tonic to heal most maladies. Great caution should be practiced, however, as too great a ratio of petals can cause the opposite effect, worsening the affliction or even causing asphyxiation.

**MEDELA HEAD PHILOSOPHER AT VIRELLIA
UNIVERSITY OF HEALING**



“I DO NOT UNDERSTAND THE issue,” Astraia said flatly as she tore into a sweet roll, her mouth watering from hunger.

She sat across from Caelan at the ridiculously posh oak table in the dining hall as Graves served them breakfast. Her fingers traced the intricately carved design along the edge of the table, vines and flowers whittled into the wood in a beautiful array to match the manor’s elaborate gardens.

“You cannot just go back out there. We were almost slaughtered, burned with shadow and fire. I will not allow it,” he fumed, leveling his eyes on her. She could see his jaw tick in the morning light pouring through the floor-to-ceiling windows.

She chuckled softly before setting down her roll and leaning forward in her chair. “I am not sure which is more laughable—the fact that you believe me ignorant of the risk, or the fact that you truly believe you have authority over me.” Her voice lowered as she willed her Power bond to flash in her eyes, white light glowing in a challenge.

He slammed his fist on the table, giving her a start, the dishes rattling in protest. “I will *not* lose you again. If you are so determined to go, then I go with you,” he asserted, his own eyes pulsing green in defiance.

The potted plants in the room exploded from their holding vases, dirt spilling onto the carpet and roots shooting out like

fingers. But Astraia did not break his stare as she rose deliberately from her chair, hands clenched on the table's carved edge.

“*You* are not yet recovered from blood loss. Your shoulder is also not fully healed. It needs to be worked, stretched. You would be a hindrance, not a help. I am going. *Alone*,” she snapped, her hands glowing white as Power fed on her anger, ready to split the table in two.

The chair crashed to the floor as Caelan stood, hands shimmering green. A vine outside broke through a windowpane, twisting itself through the hole and creeping up the wall. Astraia clenched her teeth, watching his mouth open with a retort, just as the dining hall door flung open.

Draven waltzed into the room, halting mid-stride when his eyes landed on Astraia's, then flickered to Caelan. His eyebrow rose as he assessed the scene unfolding before him—two Starborne ready to unleash their fury over the breakfast table.

“Should I even ask?” he drawled, ignoring the glare from Caelan as he sat down in the chair nearest Astraia. He grabbed an apple and leaned back as he ate, unperturbed.

Astraia huffed before she sat back down, pulling on her tether to allow her bond to calm. Caelan hesitated, clearly irritated at the interruption, but reined in his own bond before resetting his chair and sitting.

“Traia wishes to leave on another scouting mission to find the wraiths. *Alone*,” Caelan muttered, staring into his teacup, refusing to make eye contact with her.

Draven peered up from his apple, eyebrows lifted as he looked at her.

“Tell Draven about your men's report from the scouting mission.” She glared at Caelan, spearing a poached pear with a fork far more aggressively than necessary.

He glared back at her, clearing his throat. “The men we sent east did not discover any new wraiths or evidence of burning villages. It appears the wraiths had attacked the village south

of Asynjur and moved west toward the first village we encountered. Keyser and Taurus were able to evacuate the people in time, but the entire village was razed to the ground. Burned with shadow and fire. Then the wraiths just vanished without a trace..." His voice trailed off, a flicker of regret in his eyes. She knew he harbored remorse for any deaths and destruction, though it was not his fault. A guilt she knew too well.

"All the more reason to seek more information. We cannot allow this evil to spread unchecked. They will not stop with Virellia. They will consume all of Astradeon. And I cannot let that happen. *Will* not let it happen," she stated calmly, resolutely, rebuking any challenge. Sitting straighter in her chair, hands resting on the armrests, she narrowed her eyes at him. "The Stars are with me. Are you, Lord Vireaux?"

Caelan turned three shades of red, mouth agape, then snapped it shut. His mouth pressed into a thin line as he sat stunned. Draven smirked, sipping on his tea as the room became very quiet.

Seconds passed until Caelan finally sighed, slumping back into his chair. "Fine. But at least take my men with you."

"I will go with her," Draven interrupted, casting Caelan a sideways glance.

Caelan opened his mouth to counter, but Astraia put up her hand in protest.

"He's going with me. No other men. We cannot risk being seen by the wraiths. And you cannot risk your men. I fear there will come a day when you will need every able-bodied man in Virellia to defend against the evil seeping into the realm. But today is not that day."

She stood, the scrape of her chair across the marble floor echoing through the hall. Giving Caelan a curt nod, she strode from the room without another word.

Astraia stood poring over the maps of Virellia she had unfurled across the library table. The smell of old books and

parchment made her heart ache for a time when she would escape from Elion and Caelan, burying herself in the pages of ancient texts. She ran her finger along the Njord River, retracing the path of their previous failed mission.

“So, care to elaborate on your plan, Starborne?” His husky voice filled the room, causing her skin to pebble and heat to rush to her face.

The tension from their unfinished conversation of the previous night hung in the air. She still had questions, a lot of them, but for now, they would have to wait.

“I believe I told you once that you do not get to be privy to my plans.” She smirked, casting him a sideways glance.

His gaze was already locked on her, ablaze with more than just the anticipation of their hunt. She swallowed, her throat suddenly dry.

“Given your plans always end in bloodshed and near-death encounters, I would rather save myself the trouble of saving you again and have some insight as to what I should anticipate.” He smirked back at her, arms crossed.

She rolled her eyes, refocusing on the map. “You are embellishing, but I will humor you.” She pointed to Asynjur on the map, just over the Njord River that bordered north Virellia. “Caelan received correspondence from Asynjur weeks back about wraith sightings. It was sent from someone called the Bear. He has not been heard from in weeks. Caelan does not know who this mystery informant is, but I believe we start there. Perhaps we can corroborate his claims and see what he or anyone else at the fort may know about the origins of the wraiths.”

Draven only nodded, peering down at the map where she plotted their course. They would take a different route than the previous scouting party to save some time, cutting straight across the Virellian hills northeast to Asynjur, rather than following the river. It would take a little over a day’s journey to get there.

“We will need to be cautious. The Shardborne bandits are known to lurk in the mountains closer to Asynjur. They can be almost as disagreeable as you,” he added, glancing over at her, a tendril of his hair falling across his forehead. She had the urge to either move it behind his ear or tear it from his scalp.

“You truly know how to make a woman feel exceptional,” she quipped, yanking the map away from the table. She turned and made to walk out of the library only to feel a tug on her arm, a rough hand wrapped around her wrist.

She stopped, turning to look at her wrist, then at Draven.

His eyes were wild as he closed the distance between them. She attempted to pull away, but he only held her tighter. She tried to control her breathing, willing her lungs to inhale and exhale slowly, but it was no use. Just his scent alone made her feel faint.

He tugged her toward him, all her willpower evaporating at his touch. His lips grazed her ear as he whispered, sending a shiver down her spine.

“One day, Starborne, you will finally wake up and realize how exceptional you truly are. And I hope I’m there to witness that day. When not even the Stars would question your glory.”

Her heart stopped. The air between them heated, and her bonds screamed, begging to be set loose.

Draven pulled away from her, standing only a hand’s breadth away. Astraia could see the end of his tattoos peeking out of his shirt collar, the faint pink lines painted along with the black—mysterious scars that marred his beautiful skin. A small tick on the side of his neck pulsed, his heart beating just as fast as hers.

Her gaze landed on his lips, smooth and soft, parted ever so slightly, and finally, she met his stare. Longing stared back at her, pure and unfettered. She leaned toward him, overwhelmed with the desire to feel his lips on hers, to feel exceptional by his touch.

A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth, then he dropped her wrist. “Someday soon, I will make sure you never second-

guess your worth again.” Moving away from her, he strode for the door. Hand resting on the doorknob, he turned his head back toward her. “I will meet you at the stables.”

The door clicked closed, and air rushed back into her lungs. She gasped, bracing herself on the table. It took several moments before she could no longer feel her heart beating wildly in her chest and her skin cooled. Her body was a symphony of exhilaration and undeniable desire, but her mind was a storm of frustration and uncertainty. The combination of both only led her to one conclusion: Draven was more dangerous than she thought.

Cursing under her breath, she left to gather supplies.

CHAPTER 32

“Luxterra has been overrun. His Royal Majesty, King Illias, Ruler of the Celestial Court, King of Astradeon has fallen. Do not send the Drakari and Dreng. Save your people.”

GENERAL DUXADA OF THE CELESTIAL GUARD



ORION SNORTED AS ASTRAIA NUDGED him into a walk, leading him along the dirt road out of Volpes toward the hilly countryside. It was mid-morning when they had finished gathering provisions for the journey to Asynjur and set out from the manor. Their path led them close to the Virellian military training grounds, and several Empyrean guards had stopped their sparring to watch them pass.

A few of the guards saluted Astraia, no doubt due to rumors of her fight against the wraiths. She nodded back at the young men, giving them a small smile in thanks. She could have sworn Draven stiffened in his saddle as she did.

As they passed the last outlying buildings of Volpes and entered the forest, she breathed deeply, dampening the sliver of fear that threatened to split open her resolve. Glowing red eyes seemed to flicker behind every tree while the shadows morphed into black cloaked demons. A shudder ran down her spine, her knuckles turning white as she gripped Orion’s reins. The weight of her bow pressed into her back, and arrows knocked together in her quiver.

She eyed Draven by her side as he rode. His face was unreadable, placid. The black iron broadsword was strapped to his back, nearly the length of her entire body. How he managed to wield such a blade was beyond her comprehension. In the sunlight, the faded scars on his arms and neck shone, only a small representation of the rest of the scars she knew carved his entire back and chest.

“See something you like, Starborne?” The insufferable smirk pulled at his mouth as he looked at her.

She rolled her eyes, straightening in her saddle and refocusing her gaze ahead. “Do you enjoy provoking me to anger?”

“Immensely.”

“If I asked you how you got those scars, would you tell me the truth, a half-truth, or a lie?” she asked, glaring at him.

“If I asked you about your life before your brother died, what version of the truth would you tell me?” he countered, tilting his head to one side, a challenge in his eyes.

“Very well. One truth for a truth,” she replied. Even if he told her the honest truth, she was still uncertain she could believe him. There was a lot of his nature and past she had not unearthed. Yet a small voice in her mind whispered through the waves. It was a voice she had not heard in many moons, begging her to allow him through the wall she had taken years to construct. A wall fortified by grief, guilt, and betrayal—a wall of nightmares.

The voice of hope.

“Hmm.” He paused, running a hand through his beard, then looking back at her. “Fair. But my story is not a pleasant one. You’re certain you can stomach it?”

“Yes.”

Draven straightened in his saddle, rolling his shoulders back. He glanced around them, checking their surroundings before he spoke. “My fate was determined before I could learn how to dream, much like your own.” He stared ahead, lost in old memories she could sense had not been unearthed in some time. “My father was a very influential figure to my people, one whose voice commanded any room. He led legions of soldiers into battles, annihilating our enemies with the wave of his hand. So he would not have a son any less fearsome.”

He paused, letting the silence stretch onward until it was nearly suffocating. She almost screamed at him to continue before he took a deep breath, his voice lowered as he spoke. “I

was trained to destroy any threat. Many scars were won from those fights. But if I was not the perfect warrior, my father made sure I remembered my failures. Strike for strike.” He flexed his jaw, tensing his shoulders as if to stretch the skin pulled tight by the scars.

Anger simmered under Astraia’s skin, her teeth clenched as she imagined Draven’s back laid bare and blood pouring from his wounds—wounds inflicted by his own father.

If we was not already dead, I would kill him.

The dark thought surprised her, making her inhale sharply. There was no logical reason for her to care. Yet the idea of anyone or anything harming the man at her side made her instantly vengeful.

“Who is your father?” Astraia asked smoothly, trying to mask her fury.

“No, no, Starborne. One truth for a truth, remember?” He smiled smugly.

Huffing, she readjusted herself in her saddle, an ache already settling in her backside. “Very well, what is your question?”

“Your life before your flare. What was it like?” His tone softened, as did his gaze.

She allowed herself a moment to bask in the sunlit pools staring back at her. The fluttering in her stomach intensified, the fiery warmth returning like a lost friend to her spine, flooding her senses. The waves in her mind stilled, a peaceful calm settling over her thoughts.

For a moment, she was sitting on the banks of the sand dunes near her home. Only this time, it was Draven sitting next to her instead of her lost brother. She breathed deeply, blinking to clear the vision, then set her eyes forward on the road.

“From the moment I was able to run, I was trained to be a weapon. My father did not believe in weakness, neither did my mother. They forced us to condition our body and mind, both Elion and me. I knew how to shoot a bow by the time I was

eight and could outshoot most of the men when I was twelve. We ran for miles every day, sparred, warped our bodies into soldiers. When we weren't pushing our bodies, we were honing our minds. We learned literature, history, warfare, and above all, the bonds of the Stars." She paused, sighing as she recounted her childhood to a man who wanted her in chains only a week ago. "My father desired nothing more than for us to be selected as Starborne. He would sit at his desk, scheming all the ways he would use our destructive bonds to his advantage."

She laughed, wiping a stray tear from her eye. "How ironic that I was chosen by Sacrifice. The day I turned twelve, the lumenmark appeared, and my father cursed the day I was born. He said I was a disappointment and a waste. He stripped me of my childhood, carving me into his creation, then when I did not meet his expectations, he cast me aside." Her voice quivered, but she gritted her teeth, forcing the lump in her throat down. "When the Stars never bonded with Elion, my father lost all his senses. He went mad with his craving for power. He even went so far as to experiment with Starshards. That's when Elion and my father argued. The night they fought, the night I flared, was the night Power bonded with me, and that night..."

She trailed off, unable to finish the story. Darkness simmered along the precipice of her mind, slithering along the edge, coaxing her to jump—reminding her of her failure.

It is because of you that he died. His blood is on your hands.

Her chest tightened, and her mouth went dry. Spots danced across her vision as she struggled to remain upright in Orion's saddle.

"Traia, breathe. Listen to me. Breathe. In and out," a low voice called to her, muffled and soothing.

She obeyed the voice, taking deep breaths through her nose and out through her mouth. The road ahead cleared, and the sounds of birds chirping and hoofbeats were crisp once again. Grabbing her canteen with shaky hands, she drank until her mouth no longer felt like desert sand. When her lungs felt like

they would no longer collapse, she looked over at Draven, expecting pity.

But he stared at her, brows furrowed and jaw clenched. “If your father lived, I would take pleasure in killing him slowly then burning him from the inside out so not even his ashes remained,” he growled as small pillars of smoke bloomed from his skin and glowing red veins pulsed up his arms. His eyes flashed golden, rays of sunlight pouring over her.

Her eyes widened, but the red veins dissipated, and his eyes mellowed with every breath he took.

“You are stronger than any bond. Worth more than any bond. And I am sorry your parents could not see that. Just know that I see you, Traia. I see you.” His gaze bore into her, piercing her soul with not only his eyes but also his words.

Despite warnings from her past, the faint whisper of hope that had blossomed in her mind grew brighter. She extended a hand to the whisper, clinging to it desperately.

“Thank you,” she said, grinning at him.

He smiled back, a small, swift gesture that lit her body on fire. The pull toward him intensified, leaving her to wonder if she would drown in the fires of Rage.

The ride northeast was blissfully uneventful with little more than a few weary travelers on the road passing them on their way to Volpes and a few deer spooking the horses. Astraia thanked the Stars that they had not crossed paths with any wraiths, despite their main objective to learn more about their origin and hiding places. No matter how hard she tried, she could not eliminate all the dread of facing another demon of Dominion.

Draven had been quiet since their first conversation on the road, offering only a few jests to enrage her. His mind was clearly preoccupied, but despite her burning curiosity, she did not press him. Instead, she focused on the road and their surroundings and occasionally reached out in her mind for her golden thread—the tether to the Stars. In spite of the light

floating in the expanse of her mind, there remained a nagging fear that one day she would call out for her tether, and the Stars would once again disappear.

By early evening, they had reached over halfway to Asynjur and were approaching one of the only towns along their route. Altair was larger than the outlying villages, nearly the size of Aquarian. This part of the country was lush and the ground fertile, making it ideal for farming. The town also happened to be the nearest town to the mountains along Virellia's eastern border, where stardust was mined. The miners and their families lived near Altair, making it a melting pot of working Virellians, the backbone of the province.

As they entered the town, Astraia ogled the number of people bustling between shops as vendors bellowed out prices from nearby stands. Even at this time of day, the streets were crowded, with all manner of townsfolk milling about. Some wore high-end fashion pieces, resembling the garb of Volpes, while others were covered in stardust from the mines and wore overalls.

Children laughed as they played around the shops, weaving between horses and people. It made Astraia ache for a time of laughter she missed more than Starlight in the sky. When Elion would act ridiculous just to incite their father and then laugh about it while they snuck sweets from the kitchen.

Draven motioned ahead, gesturing toward an inn with stables beside it. She steered Orion forward, leading him into the stables, then dismounted. She groaned, rubbing her low back as she stretched and patted Orion's neck.

A stable boy, no older than ten, bounded up to her, beaming. "Hello, miss. Can I help you with your horse?"

"Yes, please. His name is Orion," she replied, handing him Orion's reins.

Glancing around, the stables from the Capri Inn in Aquarian flashed in front of her eyes. A memory of burns and sloughing skin and butchered men in furs roared to life. Her pulse jumped, and she felt the world fade to black around her.

“Breathe. You are safe,” a soft low voice whispered in her ear.

She took three deep breaths, closing her eyes, and focusing on the scent of pine and wood smoke that lingered behind her. Her heartbeat slowed, and blood returned to her face as she blinked.

Draven was handing his reins to the stable boy, eyeing her warily. He nodded at her, then walked out of the stables.

Astraia followed, focusing on the movement of her legs, the feel of her toes in her boots, anything than on the memories that threatened to consume her. As they rounded the corner of the stables, she noticed people hurrying up the street ahead of her. Several children ran, shouting for their friends to follow, and her skin crawled with uneasiness.

Daven shot her a warning glance, but it was too late.

She veered off the path leading to the inn and followed the throng of people congregating at the end of the street, in front of an old temple.

“Traia! Stars help me!” she heard Draven shout, but she paid him no mind as she marched toward the ruckus.

The closer she came to the temple, the more congested the street became, bodies pushing together to get as close as they could to a man perched on the temple steps.

The temple was in ruins, columns crumbling, and the ceiling half collapsed on one side. Dust coated the once pristine white marble floors, stardust fainting glittered on the entire structure’s surface. It was an homage to the Shattering—faith faltered when the Stars fell. There were few priests left who still honored the Stars and spoke of a second coming, one of retribution and restoration. Most forgot the Stars as much as the Stars had forgotten their own.

The man standing on the highest step of the temple was shouting, moving his arms wildly, pointing to the crowd and to the temple around him. His hair was shaved along the sides, but longer along the top and tied back on top of his head. He wore a white linen shirt and brown linen pants with a sash tied

around his waist, and a curved saber sword dangled from its sheath on the side of his hip. A white bandanna appeared to have been pulled down from his face and was looped around his neck, revealing years of exposure to the elements. His expression was cold, calculated, and fierce.

She tried leaning forward in the crowd to hear what was being said, but something else caught her eye.

A figure stood in the shadows of the ruined temple, leaning casually on a worn column, eyeing the man and surveying the crowd. A woman with skin as dark as the starless skies, her head and face shrouded in a dark green cloth, revealing only her mesmerizing eyes. A few black curls of her hair peaked from behind the shroud, bouncing in the breeze. On her back, Astraia could just make out the hilt of not one, but two swords, the gold inlay in the hilts subtly visible. She was clothed in similar garb as the man speaking—a linen shirt, pants, and sash around her waist. The casual demeanor of the formidable woman was a farce, that much was certain. Her aura screamed ruthless, killer without remorse.

As she studied the warrior, her brown eyes locked on Astraia's, and she froze, fearful to move too suddenly. But the woman only nodded and resumed scanning the crowd.

Astraia shifted uncomfortably, just as the man shouted louder. She was finally able to hear what he was preaching to the people.

“We cannot continue to wait for the Stars to save us! We do not know when they will awaken!” He looked up to the heavens then back at the crowd.

Several people murmured around her, agreeing with the man, while others scoffed and spat on the ground in disgust.

Raising his voice again, he bellowed at the masses, “We must take action against those who seek our ruin, who sit behind stardust walls and slumber with full bellies, while our own starve!”

Several men and women yelled in agreement, and townspeople around her clapped.

“For too long we have allowed the Celestial Court and the upper class of Volpes to dictate our lives, to determine who lives and who dies. The king now demands those chosen by the Stars to be imprisoned or killed. He thinks himself higher than the Stars while his people shed blood for his coffers!”

More roars from the crowd echoed in the street. They were becoming more animated and restless with every word that poured from the man’s mouth—words that sounded similar to rebellion.

Shardborne.

They were members of the Sharborne rebellion. A league of bandits that lived in the Shardlands as desert nomads, seeking to overthrow and dismantle the monarchy.

She broke out into a cold sweat as she backed away from the crowd. Lowering her face and pulling her hood over her head, she edged away from the congregation of rebellion sympathizers. She gritted her teeth, silencing her bonds that sensed her wariness and retreated until her back hit a wall.

Twisting around, she came face to face with an irritated bounty hunter. “It never ceases to amaze me how efficiently you can put yourself in danger.”

“I was not in danger,” she snapped, brushing dirt from her cloak.

He scoffed. “So says the one who has nearly died more times in my presence than soldiers do in a lifetime.”

“Insufferable.” She glared at him, fighting the urge to flare her Power bond and knock him halfway across the courtyard.

He only smirked at her, then his eyes hardened as he looked over her shoulder. His body tensed, and he grasped the hilt of the dagger at his side.

Her bonds jerked awake, pounding on the latch of their cage, alerting her to danger.

“Now, what do we have here?”

Astraiia turned, placing a hand on her own Celestial blade. Her heart skipped a beat when she met the eyes of the desert

warrior staring back at her.

The woman was more intimidating up close, with the appearance of an assassin but the demeanor of a queen. Her voice was like silk, smooth and alluring, but her eyes cut through shields, flaying your deepest secrets open for the world to see.

“What business is it of yours?” Draven asked, deadpan.

“When two armed travelers appear suspiciously, I make it my business,” she sneered, narrowing her eyes at them both. Her face might have been shrouded, but this made her threat no less menacing.

“We are passing through, nothing more,” Astraia snipped, crossing her arms.

“Sure...” the woman replied, unconvinced. “If you are not gone by morning light, I will assume otherwise. Now move along before I turn you into a visual demonstration of the meaning ‘paint the town red.’”

Astraia stood her ground, feet planted ready for a fight, but Draven snorted behind her and walked toward the inn, completely dismissive of the warrior. Stunned, she cautiously turned and strode past the woman, casting one last glance over her shoulder.

The woman stared after her, crossing her arms with her back to the crowd.

CHAPTER 33

With the fall of Luxterra and the death of King Illias, the realm crumbled. Wraiths overran the provinces, burning villages and slaughtering thousands. Only Virellia and the Skyforge Peaks were able to withstand the assault. Virellia, it is said, was protected by the Star herself, Desire, though this is only speculation.

BROKEN: THE CELESTIAL WAR



“STARS, SAVE ME,” ASTRAIA GROANED as Draven unlocked the door to the room and swung it open.

It was quaint, with a small fireplace already lit for the evening, a large window overlooking the woods outside the town, and a small table in the corner with a vase holding a bunch of wildflowers. The room was slightly larger than the room they had shared in Aquarian, but there was a glaring similarity—one bed, one chair.

She walked inside the floorboards creaking with age, and stood in the middle of an ornate rug that covered most of the room.

Draven closed the door, then cleared his throat. “Right. Well, there were no other rooms.” He exhaled, rubbing the back of his neck as he looked at her. A faint tinge of pink flushed his cheeks, but vanished almost as soon as it came. “You can have the bed,” he said quickly before dropping his pack onto the ground by the armchair that was angled toward the fireplace. He stood staring at her, waiting for her retort.

Heat rushed to her face, and she bit her bottom lip to prevent herself from saying something sarcastic and slowly nodded.

His gaze fell, lingering on her lips, and her whole body exploded with heat. Her bonds rushed to her spine, pleading with her to escape and fill the room with Starborne light.

Draven raised his eyes to hers once more then blinked, breaking the magical hold. He cleared his throat then turned to the door. His hand rested on the doorknob, and he glanced over his shoulder at her.

“I’m going to find us something to eat. There’s a washroom across the hall.”

And before she could respond, he had closed the door behind him.

The heat from his stare was sucked out of the room as the latch clicked shut. The warmth of her cheeks faded as her bonds also quieted, leaving her shivering from cold. He was the sun to her starless night.

She shuffled around in her satchel until she found it—his tunic. The one she embarrassingly wore almost every night, except when she had it laundered. She unloaded her bow and quiver but kept her dagger with her as she crossed the hall to the washroom.

Locking the door behind her, she undressed quickly. She had no desire to loiter in the washroom as it was used by all the guests on that floor, and she was already shivering in the cold room. There was running water, but only mildly hot, and the tub was just large enough to sit inside, clearly meant for washing and not for soaking.

After just a few minutes, she had thoroughly scrubbed the day’s journey from her skin and pulled the tunic over her head. She ran fingers through her dark hair and scurried back across the hall.

As she made to open the door, the handle turned, and Draven stood in the doorway.

“Oh, sorry, I just finished,” she stammered, clutching her belongings to her chest.

The bounty hunter stared at her, running his eyes from her face down to her bare feet. She felt naked despite the fabric covering her skin. Heat rose to her face, and her breaths quickened. Swallowing hard, she cleared her throat.

He blinked, breaking the spell, and stepped aside, allowing her to pass.

“Thanks,” she murmured, gliding past him. She placed her clothes on the table and found a cloth with some meat, cheese, and bread laid out for her. She turned around to thank him, but he had disappeared. Bewildered, she sat on the edge of the bed and ate in silence. Moments passed, and with her belly full, sleep beckoned her like an old friend.

Unsure when Draven would return, she made sure the door was locked before she shimmied into bed. As her eyes grew heavy, she slid her hand under her pillow and grasped the hilt of her dagger tightly. The smooth curve of the metal fit perfectly in her palm, an extension of herself like her bonds. Comfort wrapped around her as she closed her eyes and thought back to the day when Elion gifted her the blade.

A bright light greeted her when she opened her eyes. Not the circular room she came to fear, but a brilliant forest. The trees glowed white, and their branches were dipped in stardust, glittering like a thousand suns. Above the canopy was a black sky, but it was not static. It moved, like an ocean in the expanse. Scattered in the rolling velvet were millions of brilliant stars, tiny dots flowing with the tides of the night.

She glanced down at her feet to find them bare. Her feet shifted on the soft dirt that squished between her toes like flour, and she noticed she still wore the tunic Draven had given her.

A muffled sound broke her inspection, and she snapped her head up. Slowly, she glided toward the sound. Her feet made no noise as she made her way through the glowing forest.

The muffled sound grew louder with each step until she could make out a voice. The forest cleared in front of her, and a temple of white stone materialized before her. Hazy figures robed in white stood in front of the temple, their faces blurred and voices muted. Another figure with an indiscernible face stood on top of the steps leading into the temple, a loud shout echoing from his lips. His voice remained muffled, as though speaking to the figures through a closed door.

The tall figure pointed at her with a glowing, ghostly finger, and the faceless crowd turned in her direction. The figures began to chant, words that were foreign to her blasted from their mouths. An ancient tongue, one that had not been heard in a millennium, filled her mind with chaos. She covered her ears with her hands, attempting to block out the chant, but it was no use.

Spinning around to flee into the forest, she stopped cold. The chanting immediately ceased, and the forest around her disappeared.

She stood surrounded by waves of blackness and glittering stars. Her feet faltered, finding purchase on the rolling waves, but her eyes stayed fixed ahead.

Standing in front of her was a man and woman, both clothed in white hooded robes and only their mouths visible. Their skin glowing with a radiance that could only be described as Starlight. Astraia's body went numb, her mind scattered, unsure what to do or what to say as she stared.

The woman's hands were crossed in front of her, hidden within the sleeves of her robes. Her lips did not move, but a light and airy voice broke through the darkness, echoing around her.

"Starborne," she sang as she stepped toward Astraia. "You have been chosen."

Astraia tried to speak, but words escaped her as if she had somehow forgotten how.

"The darkness is coming." The man spoke now, his voice like thunder crashing around a mountainside, yet his mouth remained closed.

Together they walked toward her, their steps slow and deliberate. The closer they came, the brighter they glowed. She squinted, trying to make out their faces. She expected to feel fear, but she only felt a welcoming peace wash over her.

As they stopped in front of her, they both outstretched a glowing hand and rested one on each of her shoulders. A

tingling sensation bloomed at their touch, filling her with euphoria.

“You must be strong now. And remember...” They spoke in unison, a melody blending together in perfect harmony. “You are Starlight.”

A smile curved on her lips, embracing the happiness and comfort that she yearned for in life. As she opened her mouth once more to respond to the figures, a shadow floated over their faces. The black smoke circled them, blotting out their glow and snuffing out the twinkling stars around them.

The woman squeezed Astraia’s shoulder once more, and her velvety voice whispered through the shadow, “Remember who you are, Starborne.”

In a breath, the figures were consumed in shadow, disappearing into pure darkness. Thick smoke pooled around her feet, caressing her skin and stealing all warmth and goodness from her. She struggled to move her legs, but the shadows held fast, spiraling up her legs to her torso. The shadows extended beyond her feet and fanned out into a pillar of swirling darkness until it began to take shape.

An eerie red glow split the wisps of darkness, and two slitted red eyes gazed back at her. An ashen face took shape next, red cracks glowing beneath the surface, and finally a mouth full of sharp, pointed teeth. The face hovered within the shadows, disconnected from a solid form, only vapor in the starless empyrean.

The silence shattered with a sound of hissing from the shadow demon, words spoken in an ancient heathen language. The sound made her skin crawl and set her teeth on edge. She had no way of blocking out the sound as her hands were now bound to her sides.

As the hissing reverberated around her, another low snarl slithered into her mind, speaking plainly. “You cannot stop the dark,” it whispered to her, luring her to the edge of her mind. “It can never be stopped. And you will watch, helpless, as it consumes everything and everyone. You are a waste, a disappointment, a failure. Your inadequacy *killed* him.”

Her father's voice blared through her mind, mirroring the words of the shadows.

“Waste. Disappointment. Failure.”

Killed him. She had killed Elion. Murdered him.

She swallowed a lump in her throat, fighting back tears. The black void of her mind reached out its hand, beckoning her to jump, to take the final step and embrace the shadow. It would be too easy, too simple, to let it consume her. For years she had fought blindly in the dark, struggling to catch her breath. She was so tired of fighting, tired of feeling empty.

She blinked, refocusing on the shadow form before her. His red eyes latched onto her, waiting for her to take the final leap.

Then warmth flooded her senses, bursting from her spine, enveloping her body and mind. Warmth and golden light covered her in a shroud of protection. A veil shimmered in front of her, cutting off the shadows that had ensnared her.

The red-eyed demon roared, his sharp teeth glistening in the golden light. Then light poured from her hands, surging for the shadow demon, but before it collided with his form, he vanished in a wisp of black shadow.

She reeled, gasping for air, and felt herself fall through the black waves. Her body was plummeting out of the sky. She tried to reach for her bonds, but all she felt was silence. Her arms flailed, attempting to grasp onto a stronghold, but the air kept whizzing by her.

A scream built in her throat, but before she could open her mouth, a voice was shouting in her ear.

“Traia, wake up! Stars help me, open your eyes!”

Her eyes flashed open only to find herself surrounded in white light. She blinked, trying to take in her surroundings, but she could barely see in front of her.

“Traia! Your tether! Find it!” the voice shouted.

It took her several moments to remember the voice belonged to someone she knew, someone she cared for. Someone who helped her.

A tether. I have a tether.

Diving into her mind, she opened her hand and groped in the waves. A golden thread slid into her palm, and she closed her hand into a fist. The thread tightened, extending forward until it attached to a shining spot on the horizon of her mind.

Stars. The Stars are my tether.

As soon as the tether anchored, the glow around her dimmed, and her eyes refocused. A blurry face in front of her began to clear, until she finally recognized the source of the voice.

“Draven?” she asked, her throat hoarse and dry.

His hands were on her shoulders, a look of panic in his eyes. He let out a breath, dropping his head.

“Are you okay?” he asked, his voice low and uncertain.

“I think so...” Her voice trailed off. “I had a nightmare. Only I have never had this one before. It felt so...so real.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

She paused and began to shake her head, but then remembered the man and woman who spoke to her in her dream.

It had been a warning.

She took a deep breath, then sat up next to Draven, her feet grazing the cold floor. Instinct told her to keep her walls of mistrust intact, but that small whisper of hope fluttered in her chest. So, she told the bounty hunter about her dream.

“I believe it was the Stars speaking to me, Power and Sacrifice. Their voices were the same as when I heard them become my tether,” she said as she finished telling him her dream.

“And the darkness?” he asked.

“I cannot be certain, but I believe it was...Dominion.” She shuddered, hugging herself as she realized the demon Star had infiltrated her mind.

“What would he want with you?” Draven asked, anger laced in his words.

“I do not know. But the Stars said I was chosen. For what? I am not sure. Perhaps he knows and would rather destroy me than let me find out.” Her voice softened as she spoke. She wrung her hands together in her lap, fidgeting as she sat on the bed.

A warm hand closed around hers, sending tiny sparks dancing over her skin. She dared to look up at his face as amber waves crashed into her. In a thousand lifetimes she could not tire of his eyes, and even longer still to get used to the way he looked at her. As if she were the last star remaining in a starless sky, willing to fall so she could remain.

“You are safe, Traia. I will never allow harm to come to you.” His tone was firm, resolute as he held her gaze.

She swallowed a lump in her throat, a small tear escaping out of the corner of her eye.

“You should rest.” He cleared his throat, beginning to stand from the bed, but she held fast to his hand.

“Please, stay with me.” Her pulse quickened, unsure what came over her, only that she did not want to be alone.

He nodded at her, and she felt her chest loosen. She slipped back under the covers and curled onto her side. A moment later, a warmth pressed onto her back as he lay down beside her. A strong arm wrapped around her waist, pulling her closer to him. Her breath hitched at the smell of pine and the way her body seemed to melt into his.

“One truth for a truth?” she whispered, breaths quickening.

“Very well,” he replied.

“My truth... I am glad you came back,” she murmured, allowing her wall to fall a little lower and the soft whisper of hope to inch closer.

“And your question?” he asked.

“Are you here to hunt me, or have you forsaken your king’s orders?”

She felt his body stiffen, then relax. Her chest ceased to rise or fall, stalled by words.

“As long as I draw breath, I will protect you. Even from the king.” He spoke clearly, barely above a whisper, without reservation. His arm tightened around her waist, as if shielding her from the world.

Her lungs moved once more as she let out a slow breath and calmed her fluttering heart. She felt his breath on the back of her neck, and his lips grazed her skin behind her ear.

“Now, sleep, Starborne.”

No nightmares plagued her as she slept, only blissful, dreamless peace as she lay in the arms of the king’s bounty hunter.

CHAPTER 34

The exact moment of the Shattering remains disputed. However, scholars and priests alike agree the moment the fallen Stars collided into Stellasaltus (now Celestial Wastes) was shortly after the wraiths also overtook the provinces. Thus, Dominion conquered not only the Empyrean but also the realm.

THE SHATTERING: A HISTORY



ASTRAIA WOKE TO AN UNFAMILIAR sensation of closeness and warmth as she lay in the bed. She opened her eyes, looking over at the char near the fireplace to find it empty. Curiously, she shifted her neck to scan the room only to find an arm looped around her waist, locking her against a solid wall.

She froze, eyes wide, then the memories of the night came flooding back to her, and she remembered who held her. Immediately, she relaxed and snuggled as close as she could into his chest. The strength of him covered her, making her feel safer than she had in years.

His arm flexed as he drew her close to him, and he inhaled slowly, his face buried in her hair.

“We probably should get moving,” she muttered.

“And why is that?” he groaned in a husky voice, barely awake.

“We wouldn’t want anyone to find us like this, now would we?” She smirked.

“Let them.” He squeezed her tighter, nuzzling his face in her hair and neck.

A thrilling chill ran down her body, making her skin pebble. A flush of heat raced to her spine and settled in her core. The

urge to turn around and kiss him was intoxicating, but she bit her lip to quiet those thoughts. Propriety had been dismantled the moment he had lain in her bed, but that was not what made her hesitate.

He might not care for her in the same way she had come to care for him. The idea of rejection if she acted on impulse made her stomach churn.

Begrudgingly, she wiggled out from under his arm as he groaned in protest. Her feet hit the cold floor, and she was jerked out of the blissful moment. Gathering her belongings, she crept to the door and opened it. She glanced over her shoulder, watching as the massive hunter lay sprawled in the small bed, taking up every available space. Soft beams of light from the window cast an ethereal glow on his bare chest, emphasizing his tattoos and scars. She smiled, knowing the truth he told her—he would protect her, even from the king.

With that thought, she opened the door and entered the washroom across the hall. She hurriedly dressed and splashed water on her face from the basin next to the tub. She had retrieved her dagger from under her pillow and sheathed it in the usual place on her thigh. Folding up the tunic she slept in, she shoved it down in her satchel and went back to their room.

Draven was standing next to the fireplace, fastening his belt with his dagger to his waist. He had slipped on his own shirt and leather armor, and his broadsword was lying across the chair. He paused when she entered the room, giving her a small smile, not his usual smirk, but rather a gentle tug at the corner of his mouth. It took her by surprise, and she could not help the smile she returned.

After gathering their weapons and snagging some bread and meat from the dining hall downstairs, they readied their horses for the final stretch of their journey to Asynjur. The town had not yet awakened, with only a few people milling about the street. The sun had just risen, and morning dew clung to the grass and trees. Astraia pulled her cloak tighter around her to block out the chill as she saddled Orion.

Draven led the way out of town, following the small dirt road that led northeast. They would travel roughly a league on the road before they would have to make their own way through the woods. The road would veer east to the stardust mines rather than toward their destination. She felt somewhat wary of blazing their own trail, but it was the fastest way to get to Asynjur.

They did not say much as they rode. Their horses' hoofbeats created a synchronous cadence, eliminating any awkward silence. She caught herself daydreaming several times. Sometimes it was of the beaches from her home, or of Elion—but mostly, it was of *him*. The way he held her tightly yet gently, the firm muscles of his chest pressed to her back, his breath on her skin. She would glance sideways at him, and every time, he was already looking at her too. Her cheeks would flush, and she would snap her head back, keeping her eyes glued to the road.

Draven stopped when the time came to depart from the road, eyeing her steadily. “Ready?”

She nodded, nudging Orion onward.

Hours passed without incident, much to Astraia's relief. Her head was on a swivel the entire journey, poised to fight whatever demons decided to cross paths with her that day. The crunch of the horses' hooves on the forest floor gave away their position to anyone or anything that crept in the woods. Yet the only beast they saw was a wild hog grazing on some overgrowth.

By afternoon, the trees had thinned, and they could see the Njord River in the valley below them. Just on the other side of the river was a town fortified behind a stone wall. The stone was darker than the white stone of Volpes Manor, but she could still make out a faint shimmer from the stones, likely stardust. In the middle of the wall closest to the river were two large wooden doors standing open with guards posted at either side. A monumental stone bridge spanned the width of the river, giving them a way to cross.

“Be careful. The people of the Peaks do not take kindly to others of the realm,” Draven said, guiding his horse toward the bridge.

“I am always careful. Besides, your demeanor does not exactly scream ‘friendly,’” she pointed out, trotting beside him with a smirk.

“Ah yes, you are the epitome of safe and cautious. How could I forget?” he jested. As they approached the guarded entrance to Asynjur, Draven lowered his voice and leaned close to her, whispering, “For once, listen to me, and let me do the talking.”

She scoffed, then rolled her eyes, but decided to trust him. She had never visited Skyforge Peaks, although she had read about their history and culture ad nauseum during her tutelage. They were a proud people, steeped in tradition. They believed all should learn to fight and defend themselves, so both women and men trained to be warriors starting at the age of ten. They were unmatched in skills with a blade and axe, able to cut down ten men to one. They were also incredibly loyal, living in communal villages where everyone supported each other, raised each other’s children, and defended their loved ones.

But perhaps the most mythical of legends surrounding the people of the Peaks was the unique bond between Drakari and Dreng. The Drakari had been loyal only to their constellation, Rage, but the Dreng gained favor with the Drakari and fought with them, creating a unique alliance. Although Drakari had not been seen in years, there were stories of winged beasts flying in the night through the realm, still protecting the Peaks.

Draven approached the massive double doors slowly, bringing his horse to a halt before the first guard. He waited as the guard, holding a spear, walked over to him and stood in front of their horses.

“What is your business?” the guard asked, narrowing his eyes on Draven, then on Astraia. His accent was thick as he spoke the common Astradeon tongue. His arm flexed as he held his spear, angling it toward Draven.

“Vér sókjum frænda,” Draven replied, gesturing to the town.

Astraiia gaped at him, eyes wide in astonishment. He spoke the native language of the Skyforge people, one that was not readily learned by even the most accomplished scholars in the Celestial Court.

“Hverr maðr?” the guard asked, taken aback.

“Björn,” Draven replied nonchalantly.

“Ah. Ja. Hann gengr til drykkjusalunnar.” The guard laughed, and the other guard behind him snickered. He lowered his spear and gestured for them to pass. “Ver á braut þína.”

“Takk. Langt megi yðar reykja.” Draven nudged his horse forward, Astraiia following close behind.

“Heilsa þér.” The guard nodded to them as they passed.

As they crossed through the gate, she rode up next to him and punched him in the upper arm, giving him a start.

“What was that for?” he asked, rubbing his arm and looking at her, bewildered.

“You could have told me you *spoke* their language,” she snapped, glaring at him.

“You did not ask.” He shrugged, trotting ahead of her.

She huffed, gritting her teeth. “So what exactly did you both say?”

“I simply told him we were looking for a friend who called himself the Bear. He told me the man lingers in the mead halls. That is all. Satisfied?” He kept riding without looking at her.

She huffed, gripping her reins tightly. “This discussion is not over, bounty hunter.”

As she contemplated spearing him with an arrow in his back, she looked around at the town as they rode down the cobblestone path. The architecture was vastly different from any other town she had seen before. The wooden homes and shops were all constructed of massive beams of wood, their roofs pointed at a sharp angle. Affixed to the top of the gables

were intricate carvings of Drakari heads, some with teeth and others breathing fire.

At the center of the town was a larger building, at least two stories tall and just as long as the massive merchant ships that delivered goods between the Hollow City and Tenebris. Smoke billowed from a chimney at the center of the roof, and a cacophony of laughter and shouting could be heard coming from inside.

Draven walked his horse up to the large building and dismounted, hitching his horse to a nearby post and Astraia did the same. Turning to the bounty hunter, she clenched her fists and forced her bonds down, which threatened to flare in response to her irritation.

“Before I go another step with you, I need answers,” she spat, tensing her shoulders.

He sighed, turning back around to face her and crossed his arms, chuckling. His indifference only vexed her further.

She saw red.

Stomping over to him, she unsheathed her dagger and thrust it under his chin, the point nearly breaking skin.

He quirked his brow and smirked.

She nearly flared, yanking hard on her tether to keep from burning the entire town to the ground. “I am tired of the half-truths. So, tell me how you know the language, or I’ll finish what I started in Tenebris.”

“There you go again, making demands when you have no leverage.” His voice was low, rough, intentionally riling her.

Her eyes flared white as she let the gates to Power open, pouring into her hands and down into the Celestial blade.

“I am tired of the games, hunter. You told me once you would protect me from the world. How am I supposed to trust you when you withhold information?” Her voice wavered, her eyes pulsing steadily as she gazed at him. The small voice of hope she had rekindled was shrinking back, her walls threatening to rise once more.

“Some truths cause more harm than good,” he countered, his own eyes glowing with a faint golden light.

In a flash, he gripped her wrist holding the dagger, the same one he had broken before, and twisted. She stifled a yelp as her grip released, and the dagger was thrown into the dirt, still glowing.

Furious, she formed a fist with her other hand and flung it at his face, but he was too fast. His hand clamped down on her attacking wrist. She cursed and tried to force her knee up between his legs, but he dodged her assault. A smile pulled on his lips as he pulled her wrists toward him, their bodies dangerously close.

“Good, but remember who your opponent is, Starborne,” he taunted, glowing eyes fixed on her own.

She scowled, flexing her hands in his grip, and licked her lips. His eyes flickered to her mouth, golden rays pulsing from his stare. He leaned in toward her, mere inches from her face. The pine and smoke aroma made her knees weak, and her heart pounded out of her chest.

Her spine was bursting with energy, bonds begging to be set free. She needed only to push up on her toes, and she would finally discover what she had only dreamed—the feel of the hunter’s lips on hers.

Taking a slow breath, she tensed her legs, ready to let him claim her, when the door to the mead hall burst open.

Two drunk patrons stumbled out onto the steps, falling down and laughing.

Astraia pulled on her tether, forcing her bonds back down, the glow of her eyes vanishing in a breath. Draven did the same, his amber eyes cooling, and dropped her wrists. His eyes lingered on hers, a flicker of regret on his face, then he stepped backward.

“Let’s go meet the Bear,” he said, turning and walking up the stairs to the mead hall.

Steeling herself, she took a deep breath before following him. The cloud of doubt still loomed over her. She would

either lose herself or lose her life to this man—maybe both.

CHAPTER 35

The consensus of Shattering scholars, including the esteemed Paxtus Libras, was that the realm not only implicated the Stars for the destruction of its lands, but also, for the desertion and degradation of the people post-Shattering. The result of this abhorrence was absent prayer, pitiful dedication, and ultimately dismissal of the Stars.

THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE CONSTELLATIONS



“WHAT IN THE STARS?” ASTRAIA gawked at the mead hall, trying to digest the scene unfolding around her.

In the center of the hall was a long firepit that was sunk into the ground. A boar was being roasted on a spit, the alluring smell of meat mixed with mead clinging to the walls. There were several long tables on either side of the hall with patrons drinking and laughing. On one end of the hall was an open space where two burly men were shirtless, circling each other as others jeered. One man landed a punch, knocking the other to the ground with a loud crash. The entire room cheered, raising their mugs of ale in congratulations.

Her boots stuck to the floor as she walked, caked in mead, and she stifled a gag when she noticed a man vomiting into a bowl at one table.

Draven strode through the crowd without hesitation, making his way to the barkeep at a counter on one side. Several men were sitting at tables gambling while serving girls sat on their laps, wearing clothes that left little to the imagination. A few of the women ogled Draven as he passed, batting their lashes and smiling at him.

It took all of Astraia’s restraint not to melt their faces off. She glared at each of them, flashing a speck of Power in her eyes. The women paled, shrinking back in their chairs or

falling off the men's laps. Astraia smiled, keeping her head held high as she walked behind Draven.

After speaking to the barkeep, Draven turned to her and shouted over the loud pandemonium, "He's there, in the pit."

He nodded toward the fighting ring at the end of the hall just as a roar went up from the onlookers.

Astraia took off toward the fight, pushing past drunkards and bar maids until she was at the pit. The crowd pressed around her, but she managed to wiggle between two men in furs who smelled of stale ale and urine. She scrunched her nose, but it barely bothered her—compared to the smell of rotting corpses from Plague, it was a perfume.

There were two men sparring, using nothing but their fists and intuition. Neither men wore shirts, their muscular frames exposed for the Stars and everyone to witness. One of the men was slightly larger and moved with the grace of a lame horse, his footwork sloppy and unsteady. The other man, a behemoth in his own right with longer dark hair that fell just below his shoulders, tattoos and scars riddling his tanned body, took advantage of the other brute's weakness. The dark-haired warrior sidestepped punches and spun out of reach, far quicker and more agile on his feet than his opponent.

The crowd goaded them both, screaming for one to finish the other. She could not decipher what they said, but she did pick up "Bjørn" being shouted multiple times toward the dark-haired man—the same name she heard Draven speak to the guard. The Bear was clearly the more proficient fighter in the ring.

The oaf opposite him sprang forward, throwing a side punch, but the Bear was too fast, evading his punch and rebounding with an uppercut to his jaw. A blood-curdling *crack* rose over the howling crowd as the man's jaw broke and blood splattered the ring. The injured man groaned, falling backward with the force of the punch, and hit the ground with a thud.

The Bear did not waver. He jumped on top of his opponent and began to punch him relentlessly with the force of a

hammer driving in nails. The man tried to shield his face, but it was no use. Blood sprayed from his eyes, mouth, nose as he took the beating. The crowd was in a frenzy, some shouting for the oaf to move while others were cheering on the Bear.

Astraiia watched as he delivered one final blow, and the man on the ground went limp, eyes closed. Blood began to trickle out of his ear, and without even looking for the rise of his chest, she knew he was dead.

Another man stepped into the pit, grabbing the Bear's fist and raising it high in the air. The onlookers cheered, men clapping each other on their backs, women screaming his name.

It made her ill.

The Bear stood, sweat dripping down his back, blood coating his hands, and walked out of the ring without looking back at the man he just killed.

She watched him stride over to a corner table, slumping down in the chair. A woman brought him a pint of ale, and he downed it instantly, wiping the blood off his hands onto his pants. He gestured for more ale and flung his head back, resting it on the wall behind him.

Now was her chance.

She pushed back through the throng of people, toward the corner where the Bear sat. At first, she was worried the crowd would follow her, eager to congratulate their champion, but another set of brutes had entered the pit, and they had already forgotten the life taken for their sport, moving on to the next victim.

Taking a deep breath, she brushed her hand over her tether in comfort. Marching up to the Bear's table, she pulled out the chair across from him and sat, leaning back against the wooden frame.

His eyebrows shot up as she sat down, then his face turned into a scowl. "What do you think you're doing?" he snarled in the common tongue.

This caught her by surprise, but she ignored him. She picked up the mug of ale the barmaid had just delivered and took a sip, the liquid burning her throat as she swallowed.

“You’re the one they call the Bear?” she asked, narrowing her eyes on him as she set her mug down on the sticky worn table.

“Depends on who’s asking.” He lowered his voice, challenging her.

Before she could answer, her bonds leapt to her core, dry, soothing heat wrapping around her waist and flowing into her hands and feet. There was no need to turn around to know who had walked up behind her.

“Watch your tone, or I’ll give you a fight you don’t walk away from,” Draven growled, looming over her.

The Bear eyed him, then stood, bare chest glistening in the firelight from sweat and blood as he stalked over to stand toe to toe with Draven. Astraia’s breath hitched, and she stood, prepared to flare if need be. The two warriors stared each other down, their lips pressed into a firm line.

The Bear’s arms moved, but before Astraia could intercept, he clamped his hands on Draven’s upper arms as Draven did the same.

“Good to see you, Arcas,” Draven said, a smile on his face.

“And you. It’s been too long, brother,” the Bear, or Arcas, replied, then pounded Draven on the back. “Sit. Drink.” Arcas gestured for them both to sit and waved down the barmaid for more ale.

Astraia’s mouth dropped, then she snapped her mouth closed, fuming. Another half-truth the bounty hunter kept from her. At this rate, she could fill the Aetherdeep Sea with the secrets of this insufferable man. She slammed her hands down on the table, heat rising to her face as she stared at the pair of them.

“Stars help me, if someone does not tell me what is going on, I will murder both of you and make it look like Dominion took you,” she snarled through gritted teeth, holding tightly to

her tether, ready to unleash fury on them both and watch their grins boil off their faces.

Arcas chuckled, reclining in his chair. “Who’s this lovely creature?”

“My name is Traia, but you will call me Deathbringer if you don’t answer me,” she retorted, casting Draven a loathsome look.

“Sit down before you cause a scene, and we’ll talk,” Draven replied flatly.

Seething, she lowered herself into the chair and crossed her arms. Power banged on the door in her mind, feeding off her irritation and aching to tear apart the mead hall. She bit the inside of her cheek to refocus her mind and calm her bond.

“I’m waiting,” she murmured.

“Arcas and I fought in many battles together. I have known him for years,” Draven explained. “When you told me about the Bear being your informant in Asynjur, I had my suspicions it was Arcas.”

“You could have just told me.” She raised her voice, unable to control her indignation.

“I told you some truths can be dangerous. I wanted to be sure.”

“Wait...” Arcas interrupted, leaning forward in his chair. A few tendrils of his hair fell in front of his face as he eyed her in disbelief. “You are the contact in Volpes?”

“Well...secondhand. Lord Caelan has been the one receiving your messages.” She held his stare, refusing to succumb to whatever egotistical game he was playing.

“Perfect. An entitled elite has been my contact.” He threw his hands up, slamming them down on the table.

“That *entitled elite* has been scouting and hunting wraiths with the information *you* sent him. So, I would watch your tone, Bear,” she snapped, absently feeling for her dagger in case she needed to rid him of his tongue before he said anything else that vexed her.

His fingers curled inward into fists, his knuckles white as he clenched his hands.

“Easy. We don’t want trouble. We just want information,” Draven interjected, glancing between her and Arcas. “Six wraiths riding Nyrekh were found on a scouting mission a few days back. Four of them were killed. But we still do not know where they are coming from and where they disappear to. When your correspondence stopped coming, we set out in hopes of finding you to see what else you knew.”

Arcas paused, staring at the table, then he blinked and looked directly at Astraia. His dark eyes were foreboding, eerily similar to the starless skies that blanketed the realm every night. “My correspondence stopped arriving?”

“Yes...we assumed it was because you did not have more new information,” she replied.

He cursed, rubbing a hand over his face, dried blood still caked his knuckles. “I’ve been sending falcon correspondence. They must have been intercepted along their route. Someone who does not want me to share what I have discovered...” He trailed off, muttering to himself.

“What do you know?” Astraia lowered her voice, leaning closer to him.

The crowd behind her at the pit drowned out any other sounds from the hall, and she hoped it was loud enough to muffle their conversation as well.

“The wraiths are multiplying. I do not know how. But more are pouring into Virellia, the Peaks, everywhere.” His voice was just above a whisper, only loud enough for the three of them to hear above the commotion. “They are coming from the Celestial Wastes.”

Astraia’s heart sank.

The Wastes were uninhabitable, a destroyed forest from the aftershock of the Shattering, burned to ash. There were petrified trees and stumps that served as tombstones for the Starwood groves, but nothing else remained. The only place

that fared worse was the Shardlands, the point of direct impact when the Stars collided with the realm.

It would be nearly impossible to find the horde's hive.

She could see Draven's mind working out the same issue that she had, his brows furrowed in concentration. They would have to find another way to intercept the wraiths and destroy the horde. Infiltrating the Wastes was not an option—it was a death march.

“How do you know?” Draven asked.

“I've been following them. Tracking their movements. They're attacking small outlying villages, probing the protection of the different provinces for weaknesses. They never linger long, disappearing into shadow, but they reappear right along the northwest border of the Wastes and Skyforge Peaks. That's when I'll see them ride across the border and disappear again.”

Arcas took a long swig of ale, sighing as he set his mug down. It was quiet for several moments, each of them mulling over what they had discovered. Then Draven stood, sticking out his hand toward Arcas. Arcas rose to meet him, grasping his arm at the elbow in a sacred embrace of warriors.

“My thanks, Arcas,” Draven said, nodding.

“Kom heill, bróðir,” Arcas replied, a softness to his tone.

Draven only stared and sighed.

“Langt megí yðar reykJa.” Arcas shook his head and released his grip.

“Heilsa þér,” Draven responded and gestured for Astraia to follow him.

She paused when she rose from her seat, grappling with what to say to the warrior.

“My thanks, Arcas.” She smiled, nodding.

He dipped his head back at her, his face expressionless.

She turned and followed Draven out of the pandemonium of the mead hall without a second glance back. As she mounted

Orion and they made their way out of the town, she could not help but feel they were leaving more than just the Bear behind.

CHAPTER 36

Thus, stewards are gifted with abilities and far longer years, to protect the Starborne and oversee the realm, as commanded by the Constellations.

THE EMPYREAN SCROLLS (REMNANTS OF THE HOLY
TEXT)



THE SILENT RIDE OUT OF Asynjur smothered Astraia with unspoken half-truths, which was quickly becoming the bounty hunter's modus operandi. She had labored under the illusion that one day he would open his mouth and every single truth, whether evil or good, would spill out. But she knew better than to expect the extraordinary. There was one fact she had learned from her years of pain and torment: trust was not earned; it was sharpened into a blade—then buried in your back.

Heat flooded her face, and this time it was not from her bonds, nor was it from his closeness. Frustration bubbled beneath her skin, making her grip her reins tightly. She tried to take deep breaths, to calm herself before her bonds ripped open. His actions and secrets should not vex her as much as they did, but no matter what falsehood she told herself, she knew the real reason she reacted with such intensity.

She cared.

She cared whether he lived or died.

She cared if he trusted her or lied to her.

She cared about his past, present, and future.

She cared that she was part of his life.

And it tormented her.

Because everyone and everything that she had ever cared for had been ripped from her—her identity, family, home, friends,

purpose. She was like the Plague, to be avoided at all costs and deadly if allowed too close.

Her heart beat faster, the realization of her feelings for the man sent to capture her overwhelming her senses. Unable to hold back her emotions, her bonds burst to life in her spine and flooded her arms and legs, making them feel weightless. She closed her eyes and pulled on the golden thread of her tether, willing the Stars to quiet the bonds. The taste of metal coated her tongue, and she blinked in surprise. She had not realized she was biting her cheek.

A low rumble vibrated across the late afternoon sky, silencing the internal battle she had waged in her mind. Craning her neck, she peered through the canopy and noticed dark rainclouds gathering above them, rolling fast with the western wind. Lightning flashed in the distance, followed by louder thunder seconds later. Orion snorted, his ears lying flat as the storm rolled in.

“We should take cover under those trees,” Draven called back to her, pointing to a large oak tree a few paces away.

The tree was enormous, with roots breaching the soil like sea serpents, then burying themselves once again under the soil. The trunk was as wide as a horse, with curves winding through the bark, mimicking the tumultuous waves of the Aetherdeep Sea.

But the tree branches were what made Astraia gape in awe. They spread out from the trunk in a thousand directions, aimed at the sky. It gave the appearance of a priest extending its hands toward the heavens, palms open to catch the falling Stars. The leaves were deep green and blanketed the branches, creating a massive shield over the forest floor.

Dismounting from Orion, she was apprehensive to step foot on what she was sure was holy ground beneath the oak tree. It had to be as ancient as the Shattering, or maybe older. How it had survived the fall and aftershock, she was not sure. Perhaps Desire took favor on the tree as she did Volpes and protected it from annihilation. Whatever the reason, Astraia was thankful for the protection during the looming storm.

Just as they hitched their horses to one of the lower hanging branches, the rain began to patter on the forest floor. Within seconds, it had turned into a downpour, and Astraia shivered as she pulled her cloak tighter over her head. A few drops managed to slip through the oak tree's canopy, but astoundingly she remained mostly dry.

Draven was leaning against the tree, looking out on the curtain of water that fell around them. The sky darkened as the thunderhead came to rest directly above them, casting eerie shadows from the contorted oak branches.

"Are you hungry?" Draven's low voice was barely audible over the pouring rain.

She nodded, her stomach rumbling in confirmation. They had not eaten in Asynjur, eager to depart before drawing too much attention to themselves. She realized she had not eaten anything since the meager breakfast of bread and meat from that morning.

Draven pushed off the tree and walked over to his saddlebag. Opening the flap, he dug around in the bag for some food. And that was when she saw it. A glimmer of iron beneath the clouded sky.

The manacles.

"Why do you still have those?" She barely choked out the words, drawing out each syllable in disbelief.

He froze, his back to her. His shoulders tensed, and he lifted his head before he turned to face her. Shame was plastered on his face, and regret filled his eyes. Slowly, he began to step toward her, but she backed away.

"Traia, it's not what you think. Let me explain." He held up his hands in defense, halting when she took yet another step backward away from him.

"You *promised* me. You said you would protect me from the world. Even from him," she muttered to herself, her eyes fixed on him. She placed her hands on either side of her head, pressing forcefully, as if she could squeeze the betrayal out of her memory.

Lowering her hands to her side, she clenched her teeth and closed her eyes. Her hands trembled, and she forced them into fists, her nails biting so hard into her skin that she felt blood trickle into her palms. Power surged to her core, and this time she did not push it aside.

She opened her eyes, white light blasting through the canopy. Power flared through her, pulsing across the forest floor, sweeping away leaves. Birds twittered and scattered from the surrounding trees as the light cut through the rain. She took a step toward the bounty hunter, eyes unblinking.

“Maybe who I need protection from is *you!*” she accused, unable to hold back her anger and frustration at lies that poured from his mouth like sweet wine. “Was this your plan all along? To lure me into your trap? Make me believe you cared if I lived or died? Then when my walls were finally broken down, slap the manacles on me and drag me back to the king? Knowing that you would destroy me in a way death never could?”

She fought back tears, forcing her anguish into her bonds. Sacrifice bloomed with her pain, healing her palms, but she knew the deepest pain would leave scars.

“Traia, stop!” Draven roared, his eyes flooding with Rage, and golden light blared back at her, unyielding to her own flare. His skin began to smoke, and red, molten veins pulsed to life along his forearms, traveling up the side of his neck. Raindrops sizzled when they fell on his skin, evaporating in seconds.

“No! I want the truth!” she yelled above the rain, thunder booming around her, shaking the ground.

“The truth?” he shouted, glaring at her, and in two steps he closed the gap between them. Their faces only inches apart, illuminating the forest with their bonds. “The truth is dangerous.”

She did not blink as she unsheathed her dagger and whipped it toward his neck, pouring every ounce of strength and her bond into the strike. He jerked his hand up, catching her wrist, but the point of the dagger had nicked his skin. A drop of

blood rolled down his taut neck, turning pink as it mixed with rain.

Astraia's eyes flicked to the blood, then back to his stare. "Tell me the truth, Draven, or so help me, I will burn you and let the storm wash away your ashes."

"Fine. You want the truth?" His glowing eyes flickered then dimmed to pools of amber as he pulled on his bond, dampening Rage. The fire dying in his eyes caught her off guard, but she held onto her bond and her blade.

"Yes, no more half-truths. No more lies," she snapped.

"The truth is you have *ruined* me, and I can't make it stop... I don't want it to stop," he breathed, his voice wavering.

Astraia froze, her bond quivering beneath her skin. She blinked, and the white glow in her eyes ebbed, as if a cold bucket of water had been poured on her. She relaxed her hand, still holding the dagger angled at his neck.

But Draven ignored it, continuing to speak as if he might never get the chance again. "You decided from the day we met that you would not be caged. Not by me, not by the king, not by anyone. And it was from that moment I knew... I knew you would be the fire that consumed me. I tried to resist it, tried to tell myself you were a mark, a task, nothing more. But every time I stared into the oceans of your eyes, I knew. I knew you would be my undoing."

Her pulse quickened, and her breath hitched. She was staring wide-eyed into his, unable to speak or move.

"The truth is that I want *you*. All of you—the blades and the softness, the fury and the fear. I want to show you exactly how exceptional you are every day for the rest of your life. Not because you need me, but because *I* need *you*." He paused, tucking a small strand of her loose hair behind her ear, his other hand still holding her wrist, the blade flirting with his neck. "For you, Traia, I would forsake the Stars. I would worship you until you no longer question your worth."

The forest stilled. The only sound was rain continuing to fall around them, dripping through the canopy. Lightning flashed,

answered by the boom of thunder as the bounty hunter and Starborne stared at each other.

She opened her hand, letting the dagger fall to the ground with a thud. Draven looked at her, eyebrows raised in confusion as he released her wrist. She lowered her hand, afraid to breathe.

Then he kissed her.

This was no soft, questionable kiss. This was a kiss of claiming. Heated, passionate, fervent as he wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her tightly to him.

Her mind screamed to run, to forsake the feelings that had been building inside her for days. But she ignored all logic. She flung her arms around his neck, sinking deeper into the kiss, letting herself get lost in his desperation.

Heat blazed in her core, a combination of her bonds and her own desire rippling through her. She could feel his body against hers, their chests rising and falling fast, breathing heavily as they warmed the air around them. His tongue grazed hers, and she felt like she might die of bliss.

The world fell away, and all her mistrust and anger disappeared.

She might have ruined him, but he consumed her.

Lightning cracked around them, making her hair stand on end, but she did not care. Nothing mattered anymore. Not the thunder booming in her ears, not the rain soaking her hair, not the wraiths, not the Stars. Nothing.

All her defenses fell, the wall in her mind crumbled. That once faint whisper of hope was screaming into the ocean of her thoughts, rebuilding every failed truth.

Power and Sacrifice beckoned at her spine as his warm lips crushed hers, so she opened the door. White and blue light glowed from her hands, weaving ribbons of light around them. From behind her closed eyes, she could feel warm sun rays on her skin and knew Draven's own bond flared with hers. The intertwined lights painted a kaleidoscope of color in the dark stormy woods—two Starborne shattering darkness.

Draven had said that she would not be caged.

But little did he know she had given him the keys, capturing her forever.

CHAPTER 37

*But if both blaze and neither fall...The thirteenth
light shall rise from all.*

**HOLY PROPHECY OF THE TREDECIM, ZEALOT SECT
OF THE SHARDBORNE NOMADS**



ASTRAIA HAD NEVER HEARD OF anyone dying from happiness, but she might be the first reported casualty.

Her lips were swollen and hair disheveled when they finally broke their embrace beneath the old oak tree. When he looked at her, fire swirling in his irises, she felt weightless, like she was walking among the Stars in the heavens.

Then he smiled, a true caring smile, and she nearly fainted from ecstasy. She smiled back, wet hair clinging to her face and neck, and he grabbed her face in both of his hands, kissing her once again.

This kiss was softer, gentle and calming. Despite his tenderness, her pulse quickened, and she forgot how to breathe. A shiver ran down her spine as he caressed her face, running a hand through her hair and tipping her head back.

A loud crack of thunder made Astraia jump, breaking their trance. Her lips fell away from his, and he chuckled, placing his forehead against hers and breathing hard.

Her cloak rustled around her feet as she grounded herself, letting the world around her stop spinning and her legs quit shaking. It took longer for her mind to formulate normal thought, words and rationale still beyond reach.

Draven's hand grasped hers, and he brought it to his lips, pressing a faint kiss to her pale skin. The warmth of his lips zapped her strength, and her cheeks flushed at the simple claiming mark—she was his, and he was hers.

He did not drop her hand as he led her toward the horses, wrapping his calloused fingers around her cold ones. The distant rumble of thunder snapped her back to her surroundings, and she noticed the rain had stopped. Only the soft patter of lingering raindrops was what remained of the heated storm of wordless desire.

Stopping in front of Orion, he kissed her once more, steam rising from the intermingling of their breaths. Before they became entangled again, Astraia withdrew, smiling at him. He smirked back at her, and for once, she did not feel like slapping the look off his face.

Together they mounted their horses and made their way through the last small piece of the Virellian forest before they found the dirt road that led to Altair. The sun was low in the sky, but thankfully this final stretch of their day's journey was less than a league.

Astraia rode next to Draven along the road, stealing glances every few seconds. Either she was not very subtle, or he never took his eyes off her because his amber stare met hers every time her gaze wandered in his direction.

Probably the latter, she thought.

As much as she wished this day would stretch on forever, the idea of a warm shower and a comfortable bed sounded like heaven to her. That, and the fact that a certain hunter would be with her. The promise of never facing another day without him sounded like a childish girl's wish, but she clung to it like the air she breathed. Now that her walls had crumbled and he consumed her thoughts, allowing hope to flourish in her soul, she had never felt so alive.

A fleeting memory of Elion flashed before her mind, and she wondered what he would think of Draven. Maybe he would scold her for being so reckless. But likely he would smile, his green eyes twinkling as he looked at her, and wish her all the happiness in the world. That if Draven cared for her and kept her safe, that was all a brother could hope for.

She swallowed a lump in her throat, blinking back tears at the thought of her brother seeing her happy. Her joy was his

reward. It was a symbol that a cruel, fallen world had not claimed them both—that death had not won.

Astraia looked over at Draven and smiled, watching him ride beside her. The sun's setting rays behind him cast a golden glow around his silhouette, making him appear angelic. Fitting, as his eyes echoed the sunbeams.

Just ahead, Altair came into view. Townspeople and travelers still rambled through the streets, closing shops and exchanging pleasantries. They passed by the first shop, and her gaze drifted to the dilapidated temple at the center of the town. No Shardborne were visible, but the memory of the people shouting in unison at the man's words still replayed in her mind. As did the fearsome woman who had threatened them.

They turned the corner and made for the same inn from the previous night. Astraia slid from Orion's saddle and adjusted her bow and quiver. She handed the reins to the same stable boy, flashing him a smile. The boy grinned sheepishly and took both of their horses.

Draven walked next to her, his hand grazing the back of hers, making her stomach flip.

As they walked out of the stables, her bonds blasted to life, filling her arms in seconds. She broke out in a cold sweat, the hair on her arms standing on end.

Something was wrong.

“Halt!” a loud voice shouted down the street behind them.

Astraia stopped mid-step, bonds screaming for release.

Draven grabbed her hand, squeezing, then cast her a sideways glance. He shook his head slowly, a wordless command to stifle her bonds.

“Turn around!” the man boomed, his voice closer to them.

Draven dropped her hand, and they both turned.

Standing in the square, in front of the old celestial temple, were twenty Celestial Guards, their crossbows aimed at them both.

One man stood at the center of the regiment. His head was shaved, and he held a sword with a golden hilt drawn at his side. His silver armor glistened in the fading sunlight, and a red cloak billowed behind him. Astraia recognized his red cloak as a symbol of a captain.

Glaring at them, his lips curled into a vicious smile. “We have been looking for you, *Starborne*.”

CHAPTER 38

Despite the destruction of the Celestial War and Shattering, the provinces survived. Some, like Tenebris and the Hollow City, suffered far greater. Even now, their people still suffer with poverty, disease, poor living conditions, and untold disparities.

A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF ASTRADEON



THE CAPTAIN'S GAZE BORE INTO Astraia's as he spoke to her, his words like ice in her veins.

"You can come quietly, or you can go painfully. Your choice." He spoke plainly, his command reverberating against the stone archway of the temple and bouncing off the town buildings.

A few loitering townspeople scattered when they noticed the Guards, slamming their doors shut and some drawing curtains closed over their windows.

"On what charge?" she shouted back at him, grounding her stance, prepared to flare at the first sign of movement. Power thrummed just beneath her fingers, her fingernails glowing subtly.

"By order of King Maelrik, all Starborne are considered dangerous to the realm and are to be captured to stand trial and receive just punishment for their treason!" he yelled, shifting on his feet.

"You mean to be put to death!" she roared, staring him down, challenging him.

"You *will* be brought before the king," the captain sneered, narrowing his eyes at her.

"Like hell she will," Draven growled, unsheathing his broadsword faster than she could blink. He looked at her and

nodded.

That was the only confirmation she needed.

Power exploded from her hands, blasting the air around them and catapulting the Guards into the air, throwing them backward against the temple steps. Several of the Guards did not get back up.

Fire and smoke erupted in front of her, forming a wall between them and the Guards. The fallen men clamored to their feet, shaking their heads from the impact of her flare.

The captain was fuming, bellowing orders at his men. “Get them!”

Draven grasped his sword with both hands then channeled fire into his blade, the metal sizzling with heat and sparks flying from the edges.

“Cover me!” he shouted at her.

She slung her bow off her back, ripping an arrow out of her quiver, and channeled her bond. White light erupted from her hands, traveling down the length of the arrow into the tip. With a breath, she let her senses heighten as Power flowed through her.

She took aim at one of the Guards armed with a crossbow and released. Light crackled around her as the arrow split the air, parting the fire wall with the force of its velocity.

Another beat, and the Guard was struck in the neck with the arrow, Power exploding on impact, spraying blood in all directions.

Astraia did not wait to see if he fell. She had already drawn another arrow, unleashing her fury on the attackers. Arrow after arrow, she pummeled them. Amplified by Power, her aim and force was unparalleled.

As she downed two more Guards, Draven appeared out of her periphery. He was Rage reincarnate. His blade sliced into the abdomen of Guard, fire flashing into the wound, boiling him from the inside.

The Guard screamed, falling to his knees, trying to hold in his intestines spilling over the wound.

Draven did not give him time to beg, spinning around and bringing the burning blade across his neck, severing his head.

Seconds passed, and half the Guards were destroyed, burning where they stood, either from her light or Draven's flames. She did not stop, would not stop, until every Celestial Guard was delivered to Dominion.

She took aim again with her bow, nocking one of her last arrows. Holding onto her tether, she channeled Power once again, deepening her breath to steady her hands.

Then a coldness washed over her, draining all the color from the world.

Her anger evaporated along with her bonds as a deafening *click* pricked her ears.

She looked down at her hand holding her bow to find a manacle snapped around her wrist. A hand gloved in armor wrapped around her arm above the manacle and twisted.

A crack cleaved the air as her arm broke, bones displaced, and pain erupted up to her shoulder. She screamed, dropping her bow and arrow and grasping her shattered arm.

More pain exploded down her arm as gloved metal hands grabbed both her arms and pinned them behind her back. The heaviness of cool metal wrapped around her opposite wrist, securing the manacles in place.

Before she could scream again, armored boots hit the back of her legs, and she tumbled to the ground onto her knees.

A roar from across the wall of fire vibrated the windows of the shop beside her. She raised her head, peering through the flames as Draven fought his way to her. He cut down one man in front of him, kicking his body aside.

But another Guard took his place, colliding with Draven. Two other Guards came up from behind, a set of manacles dangling in one of their hands.

“Draven! Behind you!” she screamed, panic welling inside her.

But it was too late.

The Guards came from his left side, clamping a manacle onto his wrist. The glow of his sword vanished, as did the wall of fire in front of them.

Draven did not yield, slinging his arm out of the Guard’s reach and spearing the other with his blade. Two more Guards crowded him, blocking her view, and her heart pounded out of her chest.

Another roar, and then silence.

Astraia stopped breathing. She almost shouted for the Guards to move, but then they stepped aside, and she saw Draven on his knees, alive. His hands were behind his back, chained with manacles. His face was bloody, his eyebrow split open, as he strained his neck to look for her.

Once again, she was falling into amber pools. Only this time, he was no longer the hunter, yet she remained the prey. She stared back at him, trying to pour every word she meant to say into her gaze. He kept struggling against the manacles and the Guards holding him down.

“Traia!” he shouted, fury and panic on his face.

“It’s okay, Draven,” she whispered, watching his eyes widen.

Then the world went black.

CHAPTER 39

But what is light without the dark? It is nothing. For what then can it cast away? Nothing. Light cannot be without the dark. But not so of the dark. For what is dark without the light but deeper, richer, heavier? For dark does not cast away. It invites.

STARLESS NIGHT



DEATH SMELLED LIKE IRON AND dirt.

That was the first thought Astraia had once the blackness took her. Her body jerked, pain searing into her arms. She bit back a scream, puzzled as to why she had pain after death. Then a rumbling sound and men shouting jerked her awake.

Her eyes flew open only to realize it was still dark. They throbbed with a headache that threatened to split open her skull. Taking a deep breath, she steadied her nerves and tried to gain her bearings.

She was lying on her side against a hard metal floor. She attempted to stretch out her legs only to find her confinement was not as long as she was. Reaching for her bonds, she felt nothing, not a flicker of Power or Sacrifice. Her mind was still, no waves or ripples across the surface. The golden thread of her tether was also missing, though she could faintly make out the Stars in the horizon of her mind, just out of reach.

Moving her arms, she felt the manacles slip around her wrists, the cool metal grating against her skin. The memory of Draven kneeling in the dirt, aching for her and the Celestial Guards ambushing them came flooding back.

Draven...where was he?

“Draven!” she croaked, her voice hoarse and throat dry.

But no one answered.

Her face knocked against the metal floor again as her body jostled inside the cage. She was moving. The cage was moving. She shivered on the floor, noticing her cloak was gone, as was her dagger and bow. She was totally defenseless.

Angling her face upward, she could see a small slit in one side of the rolling cage, light flickering through. She just needed to sit upright, and she could see through the crack. Rolling onto her stomach, she pulled her knees in, sliding them across the metal floor until they were under her. Using her core, she managed to sit back on her feet, lowering her head so it did not hit the low ceiling. With one last grunt, she bent her legs to the side and finally was upright, sitting on her rear. She gasped from the effort, biting on her cheek against the pain lancing her broken arm.

Leaning forward, she pressed her eyes up to the slit in the metal box, blinking to clear her vision. A man near the cage shouted, and the box jerked to a halt.

Astraia nearly fell over from the sudden stop. Cursing, she readjusted herself and tried to peer through the opening again, but the side of the box in front of her was yanked open.

Blinding light struck her, and she closed her eyes, looking down at the ground instead.

A hand grabbed her good arm and dragged her out of the box, forcing her onto her feet. Her legs wobbled, but she found her balance as she tried once more to open her eyes.

“Move!” a rough voice commanded, pushing her from behind.

Absently, she walked forward, letting her eyesight adjust to the stone walkway below her first before raising her gaze ahead. A massive set of ornate double wooden doors were closed in front of her, two Celestial Guards flanking either side. One of them nodded to the Guard behind her, then the doors were being pulled open.

The doors opened up to a colossal room with arched ceilings adorned with crystal chandeliers. The walls and floors were made of glistening black marble, inlaid with stardust, giving it

the illusion of a starlit portal to another realm. Firelit sconces along the walls illuminated the floor with dancing firelight, and at the far end of the room were floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the Aetherdeep Sea. The waves in the distance crashed, unforgiving as they lapped the shore.

But it was not the waves that caught her attention, nor the ebony room before her.

It was the black wooden throne with intricate stars cut into the wood, and the man sitting upon it, that made her see red.

“Move!” The Guard pushed her again in the back, grazing her wounded arm, causing her to gasp from the pain.

Putting one foot in front of the other, she stepped onto the marble floors, her heels clacking on the hard stone. She picked up her head, rolling her shoulders back as she marched forward.

The man on the throne glared at her, his dark eyes brewing with detestation. A golden crown adorned with glittering Starlight crystals sat upon his head. He wore a robe of furs, the sleeves widening at his wrists. His hands rested on the arms of the throne, flexing with every step she took toward him. Evil coursed in the air around him as dark shadows crept around the throne.

The clanking of the chains from her manacles echoed off the marble walls, and the Guards near the man tensed, arms resting on their swords. They were afraid of her.

Good, she thought, smirking at them.

“Stop!” the Guard behind her ordered, yanking on her manacle chain.

Her arm screamed, but she bit down on her cheek until she tasted blood.

“Bow!” he commanded, pulling her downward with the chain.

Her feet faltered, but she managed not to topple over as she was forced to her knees. She kept her gaze fixed on the man before her, piercing him with daggers.

“Leave us!” the king shouted, looking at the Guards next to him.

They hesitated, hands still resting on their blades.

“Now!” he yelled, face red.

The Guards scurried away from the throne, exiting through a door behind her. The Guard behind her shifted but did not move as he loomed over her.

She smirked at the man on the throne, unblinking. “Hello, Uncle.”

Maelrik clenched his teeth, gripping the arms of the throne—*her* throne—so tight his knuckles paled. “Astraia Solenne. Alive, I see.”

“Sorry to disappoint.”

“You were always a disappointment,” he snapped. “No matter. A minor inconvenience that will soon be remedied.” He looked over her head, at the Guard behind her, and gestured for him to come forward. “Levi, you have served me well. You have delivered the most dangerous traitor to me, and you will be greatly rewarded.”

Boots rang out on the marble as the Guard stepped from behind her. She felt heat rushing to her face, knowing this Guard had a hand in her capture and likely the capture of Draven. She had not seen signs of her hunter, and her stomach dropped at the idea that he might be dead. She gritted her teeth, pushing damning thoughts deep down into the abyss of her mind, where her darkest thoughts stayed.

Her chin tipped up. She would not allow herself to spiral. Breathing slowly, she stiffened as metal armor moved next to her, preparing to memorize the Guard’s face so she could tear it off him one day.

As the Guard came into view, his head was covered with a helmet, obscuring his face. He knelt before the false king, bowing his head.

“Rise, Levi. Stand at my right hand. You have earned it.” The king gestured toward the side of the throne, and the Guard

stood, walking over to his new position. “And remove your helmet, Levi. I wish the traitor to see her captor before she is thrown into Pyrgos so she may see your face in her nightmares.”

Astraia paled, her stomach plummeting. Pyrgos was the tower of the forsaken. The stone dungeon on the farthest part of the castle. Where men and women were tortured into madness or locked away until the world forgot their names. The stone tower was endued with stardust, making it impenetrable from the outside or inside—and he was sending her there. Death would have been more merciful.

Her gaze drifted to the Guard. His hands hesitantly rose, sliding off his helmet.

And amber pools looked back at her.

Astraia could not breathe. Her heart cracked in her chest. Her pulse froze in her veins. The room around her closed in, and she was suddenly hot, sweat beading on her forehead. She began to list to the side, her body slackened as she fought off unconsciousness.

“Astraia Solenne, you will be taken to Pyrgos, where you will give the remainder of your pathetic life in service to the Crown, finishing what my brother started.” The king grinned, his black eyes glistening in the firelight. Shadows appeared to lurk behind him, ready to strike at any goodness left in the world, sinking fangs into noble intentions.

The condemning sentence rang in her ears, but she was unmoved. It made no difference to her now that heartbreaking truths were unveiled.

Her entire soul stared into the eyes of the one man she had broken walls for, healed broken pieces for—only to have them shattered again.

The waves of her mind were a hurricane, forcing the whisper of hope into submission and driving it deeper and deeper until it could not breach the surface for air. The walls she built solidified once again, spiraling up and up until only the Stars could climb them. And her heart, the one that cracked

years ago and was mended by breathless embraces under an oak tree—that heart turned cold.

The hairs on the back of her head stood up as fury and hatred seeped into her soul, her heart, her mind. The edge of the cliff called out with shadowy whispers, compelling her forward to the brink of the dark abyss. She peered down into the void, balancing on the precipice of total abandon. Just a single step, and she could forsake the shred of light she clung to.

But a gentle voice broke her trance, drawing her back from the cliff. A voice that she had accepted as finite and had stored safely in the depths of her mind. A voice she had not heard in days.

She followed the voice, treading in the waters, pulling her fingers through the murkiness as she searched. A glowing orb of light bounced along the waves, washing over to her. Hand outstretched, she grabbed it and held it tightly, letting it send a small sliver of warmth into her body.

“You are Starlight, Astraia. You will not fall.” Elion’s bright face flashed before her eyes, his voice a melody to her ears.

Steeling herself, she refocused on the false king. She straightened her spine and slowly, cautiously, planted one foot in front of her, pushing herself from the ground, and stood upright.

The king’s eyes bulged, watching her rise from the jet-black polished floors and stand to face him. There was no hint of fear in her eyes as she stared at him, daring him to do his worst.

Without a word, she turned her fierceness onto the real villain. The one who made promises of trust, offering her an elixir of healing only to poison her instead. She might not have access to her bonds, but she still pierced Draven with her eyes, praying her glare blinded him.

She could have sworn she saw his jaw clench, but she did not care if he harbored regret. She prayed to the Stars that his regret bred demons in his mind, consuming him with

nightmares that left him screaming in the night with no one to offer him solace.

“Will that be all?” She ground out each syllable, her tone dismissive. She spoke directly to the hunter, not bothering to shift her attention to the king.

“Levi, get her out of my sight!” the king spat, his shout bouncing off the marble walls as he surged from his seat. “And this time, do not kill any more of my Guards, or you’ll be in a cell next to her.”

The Guard nodded and replaced his helmet, his amber eyes disappearing behind a shroud of betrayal. He marched over to her, grabbing her manacles by the chain, and drove her forward, away from the king.

CHAPTER 40

The Courtesans, they whisper as if I cannot hear, always plotting my demise. But was it not I who slaughtered my enemies at the gate? Was it not I who crushed those who dared to bring turmoil and chaos to my realm? Was it not I who brought the Starborne into my fold? Let them whisper. For soon, their lives will be nothing but a whisper carried to Solrend.

**PERSONAL JOURNAL OF QUEEN VIRTUS, RULER OF
THE CELESTIAL COURT, QUEEN OF ASTRADEON IN
THE FORTIETH-YEAR POST SHATTERING**



FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE the alleyway in Tenebris, Astraia did not question the hunter as he pushed her through damp, dark hallways on the far side of the castle. Minimal torches dotted the walls along their path, making it hard to guess which route they were taking.

Growing up in the castle, this was one place she was never permitted to enter and was patrolled night and day by Celestial Guards. Elion had tried to drug the Guards on one occasion so he could see what kind of evil lurked behind the walls, but the captain had caught him and made him run five miles every morning for a week as punishment. He had only been twelve years old.

The halls felt more ominous now that she was the one deemed evil.

Perhaps she *was* evil. Maybe her murderous sins had finally tainted her soul with no hope of cleansing the blemish.

You killed them. You.

She shook her head, driving the darkness back, focusing on her breaths and the image of Elion she had left open inside her thoughts.

Her footsteps faltered as she reached a black iron door. It was tall and thick with no handle and reeked of death. Guards stood on either side, a sword sheathed at their hip. Behind her, she felt a hand wrap around her uninjured arm, a familiar warm, calloused palm grazing her skin.

But no heat licked her spine. Desire curdled in her stomach, turning into vile malice as he pulled her toward the door.

“Prisoner for level one,” Levi snarled.

The Guards saluted, nodding at him. Then they both took a key from around their neck and placed each into two separate holes in the middle of the door. Simultaneously, they turned the keys in opposite directions, and a loud, grating noise responded. With a loud clank, the door opened just wide enough for one of the guards to pull on the jam with both of his hands. With a grunt, he slid the door open wider, the hinges groaning in protest.

Pitch black stared back from the doorway.

Astraia’s breath hitched, her heart thundering in her chest as she stared into oblivion. The hunter grabbed a torch from the wall near one of the Guards and pulled her through the threshold—into the bowels of Dominion.

As they crossed, the door behind them creaked and slammed closed, a ratcheting sound blaring in the silence as the lock engaged, entombing them in the massive tower. The firelight from the torch illuminated the stone floor beneath them, and she could just make out a set of stone steps on their left, curling downward into the depths of the tower. To her right, she could see another set of stairs spiraling upward.

The hunter let go of her, walking to another torch on the wall next to them, lighting it. This torch was larger, perhaps endowed with magic, because the flames flared to life, casting a more revealing glow across the tower.

They stood on a stone landing, and a wrought-iron fence was all that separated them from falling down at least an entire story. She looked to her right and saw a wall of prison cells, iron bars covering the openings. Craning her neck, she could

make out more prison cells stacked on top of another landing as well as more below her. The cells curved, angling in line with the shape of the tower. A single stained-glass window was cut into the stone just above the main door, without any way of reaching it as a means of escape.

It was eerily quiet. Not a cough or a cry permeated the air. Either there were few prisoners left alive in the tower, or their will had been tortured out of them—probably the latter.

“Let’s go,” the hunter said, his face still hidden beneath his shining helmet.

He grabbed her left arm, pulling her with him down the stairs into the belly of the tower. Their footsteps echoed on the stone steps, each step stripping away another strand of her freedom. Step by step they kept descending into the dark. The smell of dirt and mildew became stronger and she realized they must be underground at the lowest levels. Her breaths quickened, the air too thin, and the walls constricted, threatening to crush her.

Before she could calm her panic, she was jerked to a stop in front of an iron door on her left. The hunter pulled a black key from around his neck and put it into the lock on the door, turning it with a sharp clank. The door creaked as it was pulled open, likely the first time in decades it had been forced to move.

The rough hand around her arm loosened, and she felt the manacle fall away from her wrist. For the first time in hours, maybe days, her arms were allowed to relax, and her shoulder slumped forward. Before she could relish the small victory, her hands were pulled in front of her, and the other manacle was replaced, clicking into place around her wrist.

“In,” he said flatly, pointing to the endless dark inside the cell.

Her heart beat wildly, pounding in her ears, but she would not allow him the satisfaction of unsettling her.

With a slight inhale, she stepped through the iron gate, into her cage. The door creaked and slammed behind her, the sound

vibrating her skull. Boot steps sounded as the hunter stepped back from her cell, and she whipped around, mustering every ounce of boldness left in her bones.

“One truth.” Her voice echoed in the deep, bouncing off the walls and flying back into her face as she narrowed her eyes on her captor.

He stilled, armor clanking as he halted midstep. Slowly, he turned and removed his helmet with one hand. His golden hair was muted in the firelight, but his molten eyes blazed.

A lump formed in her throat, but she choked it down, straining against her dry throat. Funneling her anger into her gaze, she braced her hands against the cell bars, gripping the cold steel within her chained hands. He stared back at her, his face barren of remorse or empathy.

“And this time, I won’t even request one truth in return,” she snapped.

He walked closer to her, careful to remain an arm’s length away from her cage.

“I hate you, bounty hunter. I curse the day I met you. And I swear on the Stars...” She paused, pressing her face against the numbing bars. “I will be your reckoning. Even if I have to *burn* to take you with me.”

THE END

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Stars Keep You.