

2. Battle Of Wills

When Astrea opened her eyes, the first thing she saw was an old wooden ceiling, giving her a vague idea of where she was.

One of the Trainee Firstborn houses.

The problem was she wasn't sure why they brought her here, what happened, and how much time had passed. This included the time she spent lying in this bed and the time she had endured, collared in the pit. From the looks of it, it had to have been a few months, at the very least. Her hair had grown longer for sure, and winter was now gone.

Astrea's whole body ached, but not as badly as she expected. However, a needle in her arm with an IV attached to it quickly explained it. Her Teacher knew how to mend his broken warriors. It was an art form here on the island. After all, the Firstborns had to be broken many times to ascend. Not everyone survived the training.

Her head still felt dizzy, but Astrea knew she had better be prepared for whatever was next. Her punishment was far from over. Just when she thought of that, three women entered the hut, and she recognised only one of them. It was another Firstborn in training. She lived with Niki in the barracks, but her unfriendly expression killed the desire to ask questions. They all hated her.

The women did not speak to her much, but she did not care. That wasn't important now.

They helped her undress, carefully working around the marks on her skin from the chains she'd worn for months. Then they bathed her not leaving her alone even for a moment, and Astrea wondered what that was about. What kind of torture was ready for her next? Why did they want her clean? The ideas that came to her head were not nice, but she knew that the Teacher never allowed anything like that in the camp. However cruel he could be, even he had boundaries.

It became even more confusing when they brought her food.

"Is this poisoned?" she asked one of the trainees she didn't recognise. Something simply had to be off here.

"They wouldn't waste good poison on you!" The girl sneered, the corners of her lips tilted downward. Clearly, she didn't find joy in serving food to a traitor.

Astrea was too tired to play these games. It wasn't like the end was going to be different. Traitors weren't spared. Ever.

"I still think I'll pass!" She knocked the plate off the table, glaring at her captors deantly, but they just cleaned everything quickly and walked away, leaving her alone. They came back in the evening with a dress for her.

Astrea gulped when she saw it. A diamond-studded snake necklace collar was holding together a few pieces of black silk fabric. This was an evening gown, and she didn't know what to do with it. Were they dressing her up for her execution so that it looked more spectacular? Now that was something her Teacher could enjoy.

Either way, she had no power to fight now, and the dress was better than the towel she had been wrapped in for hours.

She hissed when she moved, her regeneration still slow, and the other women helped her to dress, even though none of them was thrilled with this task. They also did her long white hair, leaving it mostly down but arranging a few braids into an intricate pattern, nishing it off with natural makeup, which was even more confusing now.

Astrea looked at herself in the mirror, her blue eyes looked like they had lost their glow, but the rest of her looked stunning, despite the red marks showing.

"What is going on exactly?" she asked to receive no response.

In the end, Astrea decided to just go with it because she had already spent months in that pit where all hope to ever get out was lost. At least all this was some sort of entertainment for her. No matter how it ended, it wasn't like she could change anything now.

They led her into the main mansion, and for the first time in years, Astrea felt a chill running down her spine as she entered the space. She used to live there, she even had her own private room upstairs and now... now, who knew what awaited her here.

While she was guided to the dining hall, she tried to get her emotions under control. It was the only way to win against her Teacher. People away from the island preferred to call him the Serpent for many reasons; one of those reasons was that he could feel people's fear. And the moment he did, he could own the person. So, this was an advantage she was trying not to give him.

The doors to the dining hall opened, and she entered the silvery-grey marble area, her heels clicking and her head held high. If she had to meet Death itself today, she would do it with as much self-respect as she could muster.

The Teacher was sitting at the head of the long table, and just two places were set for the meal. His and the one right next to him.

"Finally." Joran Nathair, the mentor who taught her everything she knew, gestured at the empty seat. "Please, join me."

Astrea did not want to play this game and moved to sit in the chair opposite him, the one at the end of this very long table and no plates.

"Thanks," she offered him an unamused smile.

Joran's lips pressed into a thin line. There was one thing he hated the most. Deance. Not to mention that he wasn't used to getting it from her. But she was already in deep trouble, and it couldn't possibly get any worse.

"I would prefer you to sit closer," he said, voice void of emotions, but she knew he must have been fuming.

"And I would prefer to make my own decisions," she retorted. "Since I am going to die, anyhow."

He drummed his fingers on the surface of the table while his eyes burned holes in her skull.

"Is that what you think? Astrea, if I wanted you dead, you would have been dead a long time ago," Joran informed her.

"But you chose to torture me instead!" she huffed a dark laugh.

"To educate you. You needed a lesson in humility." As always, he saw it through a prism in his own light.

"Some lesson that was," Astrea shook her head with a disappointed smile on her face. "How long was it? Three months? Four?"

"Four and a half," he told her, not looking guilty at all. "I aimed for half a year."

"Gee, I feel so lucky to be let out early," she met his gaze deantly.

"Take your seat," he repeated in a calm tone that did not fool her.

"I am here, thanks." She tried to match his tone, the two of them staring at each other across the long table in this grand room. Astrea felt it was another test, but she was too tired to play the role he wanted her to play. While she lay at the bottom of that silver pit, in a collar with barely enough food and water to survive, something broke in her. It was an irreversible change, probably deeper than when she made a choice not to kill the Northern royal family and their friends.

"I have to say I am really disappointed in you." He took the ring off his napkin, still not looking bothered too much by her behaviour. "After everything I did for you, this is how you chose to repay me!"

She felt a wave of guilt wash over her. Denying that this man saved her from death early in her life and gave her a home, education, and purpose would be a lie. She knew she owed him, but a part of her felt like she had already repaid him for everything.

"It wasn't right." She lowered her head. Talking about all this was too hard for her. "They were good people. They didn't deserve to die."

"Sometimes good people stand in the way of the greater good," Joran sighed heavily, back leaning over his chair. "This was the case here. They had to die so that many other people could live well."

"Doubtful!" The words left her mouth faster than she could process them.

"Just because you failed to see the bigger picture doesn't mean it's there, Astrea. I thought I'd taught you better than that."

"You did," she admitted because it was the truth. Her training was hard, but it had impeccable results. It wasn't her training that failed her. It was the emotions she felt on that mission, the people she met. The Northern Queen and others had become her friends. Or at least the closest thing she had to friends. Then, she met the Western Queen, a beautiful pregnant young woman who felt so sweet and familiar that Astrea couldn't possibly kill her and her unborn baby. All this was too much even for someone like her.

"So, why did you defy my order? Why did you betray us?" he still appeared calm, cold even, but it did not fool her.

"Because I just couldn't do that! It was not right! Like that pregnant Queen— she was the kindest person I've ever met. And her baby... I can't kill children! I told you that before!"

"You could have poisoned everyone but her then. I could have forgiven that!" Joran's jaw tightened. "But you made me believe you completed your mission, setting me up for failure. Do you know I lost someone I cared about because of what you did?"

She didn't know that. She didn't even know there was someone he cared about.

He continued as if he heard her thoughts. "There were just two people dear to my heart. One of them died, and the other one is a traitor now."

For some reason that hurt. They'd spent too many years together for her not to care. However, she didn't have any illusions either.

"So, where do we go from here?" Astrea asked quietly.

"Take your seat and we will talk," he cut her off, still seeking to bend her to his own will.

"I am here." She crossed her arms over her chest.

"So, you choose to stay stubborn," Joran sighed, and she could feel his anger rippling through the air even if nothing in his appearance gave it away.

"What now?" she asked, tired of all this. "Are you going to kill me or not?"

"Kill you?" her Teacher scoffed, chuckling darkly. "Astrea, why would you think that? I would never hurt you. I simply can't. You are my Dragony."

She almost wanted to laugh at that, considering her hands and neck still had traces of the silver chain and the collar he put her in.

"We need more wine here, please!" Joran raised his voice, and a young girl with dark hair walked out of the dark passage, making Astrea choke on the air.

Niki. It was Niki, probably the only person she cared about in the world.

Her ward poured wine into Joran's glass and paused before the second glass.

"Excuse me," she asked quietly, knowing her place in the hierarchy very well. She was still a trainee, and the Ascension was before her. "Should I take the glass to Astrea?"

"Of course, not!" Joran's lips curled, "Astrea is joining me here. Aren't you, Dragony?"

It was a threat. A warning. Niki was here for a reason, and every cell in Astrea's body screamed that it was a new sick trap. He couldn't bend her will in any way, so he found leverage... She thought that no one knew they had gotten close. She tried to make it look like a regular mentor/ward relationship.

Of course, he knew. The Teacher always knew everything. She was stupid to think she could outsmart him.

"Of course," she replied, trying to hide the venom in her voice. She rose as gracefully as she could, at least not giving him the satisfaction of seeing her emotions.

As soon as she sat next to him, Joran's mood improved. Victories affected him like that, and Astrea already knew she'd lost their first battle in minutes. How stupid was she to think she could last longer? She couldn't let Niki die or get hurt in her stead.

Their food was served less than a minute later, but she couldn't find it in herself to touch anything. She felt trapped again. This wasn't the bottom of the silver pit, but somehow, it was just as bad.

"Eat something," Joran told her lazily. "You need to regain your strength. "The steak looks especially good today. Just the way you like it."

"I haven't eaten normal food for months," she replied curtly. "If I start shoving meat into my stomach, I will only make myself sick."

Everyone was gone, and it had been just the two of them now. Joran took her hand and brought it closer to his face, examining the marks on her wrists.

"I am sorry you had to go through this. You know the rules. I am already breaking them by letting you stay alive, but you are the only one I would ever do this for." He brushed his thumb over the red welt, and she hissed as it was still too fresh. However, a wave of relief rippled through her the next moment, soothing the pain and making it disappear completely together with the marks. "That looks better. Now eat."

She indeed felt better, her physical strength replenishing from a single touch of his. She'd known he was a deity of sorts for years but it was rare for him to demonstrate it like this.

They ate in silence, and she was lost. He wasn't going to kill her; he'd made that clear. But she also couldn't trust her anymore. What was this dinner for? What was his plan for her? Too many questions she couldn't ask directly because she wasn't sure she wanted to know the answers.

"You think I am too cruel," he said out of the blue when their plates were taken, and the serving trainees brought the dessert. "I am disappointed you feel this way, but I feel that it's partially my fault. I still can't process that you believed I would let you die."

"I know the rules," she responded quietly, trying not to move her hands to show him how stressed she was by the whole situation. "Every Firstborn who disobeys you dies."

"But you are not just every Firstborn!" he slammed his fist over the table, making the glasses on it bounce and skitter precariously. "You are my Dragony! My one and only disciple. Why do you think I taught you everything I could?"

"To make me your weapon," she responded bluntly, and he threw his wine glass against the opposite wall, smashing it to pieces. Niki immediately appeared to clean the mess, and Astrea couldn't help but feel nervous. She did not like that her ward was so close when the Teacher wasn't in a good mood.

"Is that what you think?" he caught her hand, making her look at him.

"Why else would you train me?" she snatched her hand from his grasp.

His green eyes gleamed with fire in them.

"To make you strong! To make you what you are today." His response shocked her, but she tried not to read too much into this. "Don't tell me you never knew how special you are, Dragony."

"You have three Dragonies," she reminded him, averting her eyes from his heavy gaze. "I wasn't that special."

"They are there just to be your team when you need one. I only keep them for you and only call them that so that outsiders don't know which one of you I really care about."

Astrea didn't know what to do with this information. It wasn't what she wanted to hear but a part of her felt happy he'd said those words. She knew she had to squash that rising hope of reconciling and returning to her previous life. Her Teacher wasn't a good man. This wasn't a healthy relationship, and if he wasn't training her to be his weapon, then she didn't want to know why she was here in the first place and why he needed her to be that strong.

"I want out," she said, knowing this was the only rational decision she could make. She couldn't pretend that everything was fine, she couldn't act as if she was his good little obedient Dragony anymore. She had changed, and if she had to die for it, at least she would die true to herself.

He was silent for a while, and she was afraid that he would tell her off now, return her to the pit or worse - kill Niki in her ward's direction. The latter would be the most painful, so she tried really hard not to look in her ward's direction.

"Let's make a deal then," Joran said in a calm voice which echoed through the marble halls, and her eyes darted at him, lips parted in shock.