

9. Love Bites

This couldn't be happening.

Panic rushed through Astrea's bloodstream. Her neck had a mark on it, and it wasn't the one that every shifter girl dreamed of.

It was a problem.

A big freaking problem for her.

Because she had a big, bright hickey where a mate's mark should go. Bright red, almost raspberry in colour.

"What is it, Astrea?" Joran sounded impatient and she received a cold shower of reality, realising he was still on the line.

Tell him you are on your period, Nova suggested "helpfully", and Astrea was really close to blocking her wolf for a day or two. Nova knew what she was thinking, of course. It has always worked in the past and you know it! She added.

Bye, Nova! Astrea closed the mind link as she didn't have the mental capacity to deal with it all now and needed to be concentrating on the man who still had power over her.

"It's--She didn't know what to say to her Teacher. For some reason, the truth seemed like a bad idea." Sorry, it's nothing. This place is just a hell hole in general. Cockroaches are watermelon-sized here."

"You don't like the East anymore?" Joran asked with a voice void of emotions, but she knew he had to be gloating inside. He sent her here on purpose. Probably to prove to her that this wasn't the place for her. Little did he know this was never the final destination.

"There is nothing to like!" she said, grateful that this wasn't a video call. "It's a desert. We live in some ancient building. Everything is old here, and even showering is an ordeal in the East."

"Did you take a shower there, then?" the Serpent questioned, and she did not like where this was going.

"At night," she told the truth. "When no one was around."

"Are you sure about that?"

Joran's question startled her.

"Yeah, why?" she scratched the damn hickey again and noticed the snake tattoo moving on her neck.

Swearing under her breath, she rushed to the bags.

"Astrea, I want to make sure you are ne. Switch to video," Joran suddenly suggested, but luckily, she was ready.

She wasn't stupid. She realised quickly that he knew at least partially what had happened yesterday, so she threw a hoodie on to cover the evidence and only then switched the camera on, showing her Teacher an indifferent face.

"You look tired," Joran stated after observing her for a few seconds.

"Well, it's not exactly a vacation. Is it?"

"It is not," he agreed, and silence reigned once again. "Take off the hoodie."

The order was unexpected, and the Teacher had never asked anything like this from her before, so Astrea's lips parted in shock.

"Why?" she demanded, brows furrowed.

"Do you need a reason to obey an order? You are still my Dragony," Joran insisted. "Are you not?"

"I am," she sighed and placed the phone on the desk, using her makeup box to prop it up. She ensured he could see her and slowly pulled the hoodie off, angling her body for the camera to hide the mark on her.

"Closer," he commanded, and she took two steps forward.

Joran was silent, and she didn't like it. Astrea wanted to be done with this.

"Slowly turn for me," he said, and she sucked in a sharp breath.

"What are you searching for?" She decided to ask him bluntly and not beat around the bush.

"Hidden wounds. Yesterday I felt that someone was hurting you, and I am afraid that you would hide it from me if this was the case," Joran admitted coldly, and she couldn't hold back a chuckle.

Whatever Fenrir was doing yesterday couldn't be classed as hurting her. And the hickey on her neck was hardly a wound.

Yet she didn't find it in herself to object or share this with Joran, so she slowly spun around, hoping that he wouldn't notice anything.

She was wrong.

"What is that on your neck?"

Astrea stopped, not knowing how to respond. She suspected that he already knew everything because there was no way he saw the little spot from the crappy phone video, but of course, there was no point in confronting him.

"Show me closer!" Joran snapped and the snake on her neck tightened uncomfortably.

She did as she was told simply because it was faster and that battle was lost already lost.

"Is that a... love bite?" The question did not take her by surprise, but it didn't make it any easier to answer, either. Joran was far away from her, but she could feel the waves of anger he was emitting right now.

Astrea knew one thing for sure. He did not like it when anyone got too close to her.

She could never forget the time on the Firstborn Island when a young Dokkalifar elf called Steffen, one of the last of his kind and undoubtedly hard to obtain in a deal, started showing her signs of affection. He helped her on an obstacle course in front of everyone, something Firstborn never did. Astrea lied to herself for a long time that it was a coincidence that the places of their battle practices and their schedules changed so that it was practically impossible to meet one another. She tried to forget how she thought that the fact that Steffen's training became more dangerous and barely survivable was for his best, that Teacher only wanted to make him stronger.

One day Steffen found her when she was learning about poisonous herbs in the woods and took her to his favourite place in secret. He was her first kiss, and she could still remember how embarrassed she felt and how his pointy ears tinted when he leaned to capture her lips.

She also remembered how Joran tore him off her the next moment and threw him against a massive tree. His eyes were full of ames, and he shifted into his dragon form in front of her, grasping the already defeated elf with his claws and ying away...

She never saw Steffen again.

She never let any other Firstborn get close again. Not that they tried to get close to her after what happened... She was singled out. A taboo. The one not to be touched.

The Teacher's favourite.

The Teacher's Pet.

Astrea shivered remembering all this. She always hated that nickname even though no one dared to use it to her face.

"Who placed it on your skin, Dragony?" Joran asked again, voice menacing and demanding.

"Just some drunk rogue." She shrugged, hoping to de-escalate the situation. "I handled him."

"In what way?"

"I put him to sleep with a drugged needle," she said calmly since she didn't have to lie this time. "He would think it was all a dream."

"Do you have love bites in other places?"

Dangerous. This question was too dangerous.

"Show me," her Teacher commanded, and Astrea's eyes widened. Surely, he wasn't serious.

"There is nothing anywhere else on my body!" she stood her ground, clenching her sts.

"Show. Me." She could see him adjusting himself in his seat back in the mansion on the island.

"Teacher-- Joran," she looked at him through her lashes, xing her mistake quickly. "There is nothing. I wouldn't let--"

"You let a rogue touch you," he interjected. "He could have bitten your marking spot."

"But he didn't," Astrea insisted. "Because I know how to handle myself. Even here."

"They are rogues!"

"I know that, and so did you when you sent me here!" She was surprised by how open this conversation turned out to be.

"You know why I sent you there," Joran leaned forward. "Don't change the subject, Astrea."

"Fine!" She gritted her teeth and removed one strap, standing straight before the camera. Her breathing was hitched, and anger was rising within her. She had to control that anger because Niki would be paying the price for if she didn't.

Astrea hated how her fingers trembled when she hooked the last strap holding her lacy nightgown in place. She raised her chin high because she refused to take this as humiliation. She had nothing to be embarrassed by here.

"Stop." Joran's voice changed, and she exhaled loudly in relief, darting her eyes back to the screen. "I'm sorry, Astrea. I trust you. I shouldn't have asked. I just hate that some dirty rogue put his hands on you."

"It's all right," she heard herself saying, still shocked that she received an apology in the first place.

"Did you meet the one they call King?" The Teacher changed the subject abruptly.

"Yes," Astrea pulled the strap back up and slipped the hoodie over, angling herself better.

"How did you find him? What is he like?"

"Rude and unwilling to communicate. He wanted me to leave and I don't think he is a big fan of the alliance," she reported, not mentioning that he was the "dirty rogue" who put his hands on her.

"Do you think you can handle him?" Joran rubbed his chin, watching her every move.

"I'm here, am I not? He obviously changed his mind." Astrea smirked and went to pick an outfit for today. She couldn't bear standing before him anymore, even if he was just on her screen.

"I want you to tell me everything you can about--" Joran wanted to continue her questioning, but a knock on the door silenced them and Astrea quickly retrieved her phone from the desk.

"Who's there?" she asked, still not hanging up.

"Just the most handsome and stylish Perished Kingdom citizen," Devoss announced with admirable condence. "I came to take you to breakfast."

"Oh, great! I'll be just a sec!" Astrea yelled and gestured to her Teacher that the conversation had to be ended. She noticed how his jaw tightened, but he still nodded, letting her hit the disconnect button.

Finally rid of one problem, Astrea found herself with another.

The hickey seemed to get bigger since the last time she saw it in the mirror, and it just made no sense.

"No!" she whined as she assessed her skin again. "Please, Goddess, no!"

Everything was going so well, and now this could potentially ruin everything for her. Fenrir couldn't see it.

"F*ck!" she swore under her breath.

I told you it was a stupid idea, Nova snorted in their mind. Now you are utterly f****d, my dear.

She said it as if they didn't share a body.

You know, I heard wolves are supposed to be helpful for their people, Astrea reminded her companion with a groan.

I tried, Nova chuckled. It's not my fault you are helpless. One handsome rogue was enough to make you lose your mind.

Astrea huffed a laugh. You were there, too, and I don't remember you objecting too much! In fact, I don't remember you objecting at all.

What was there to object to? her wolf smirked. He was one nice specimen and knew how to handle us well. Fenrir was simply perfect for the first time. Memories for life, you know.

Astrea rubbed her neck in the hope that it would help the love bite disappear.

It didn't.

"How is this even possible?" she exhaled in defeat. "It's just a hickey. It was supposed to be gone by now. Werewolves don't get hickeys for more than an hour, and it's been several."

Nova did not reply, and Astrea sighed, realising it wasn't important. She had to deal with it anyway.

She got her makeup out and used the best waterproof concealer and foundation to mask it, working as fast as she could since she knew they were waiting for her. She put on a white jumpsuit with a plunging neckline and a massive belt, pairing it with a longline kimono-styled jacket with studs adorning its edges to keep the owing fabric grounded.

Not thinking twice, she also added a white silk scarf to try and hide the mark on her neck in case the make-up wasn't enough.

She didn't have time to do anything with her hair, but luckily it had some natural curls in the hot and humid environment, nishing her look.

Devoss was still waiting for her when she walked out of her room and led her to the dining hall, which was simply one of the terraces of the long fortress, where all the rogues she had already met before were present.

Kara and Bastian frowned when they saw her, while Warg gave no reaction. Some Omega was serving them, and Astrea was a bit shocked by the abundance of food on the table. This wasn't how she imagined breakfast at a rogue table.

Beautiful colourful ceramic plates and bowls were full of fruit, nuts, cheeses, salads, breads and some dips that Astrea didn't recognize. The impressive spread before her looked and smelled delicious. She hadn't eaten anything since she left the island and it took all of her self-control not to throw herself at what was before her..

However, she forgot about the food the moment her eyes locked with the King of Rogues.

Fenrir sat at the head of the table, wearing another black shirt and still managing to look imposing with his dark hair reaching his muscular shoulders.

"Welcome to our modest table, Astrea," he raised a brow at her, and she waited for him to say something else. Anything, really...

But he did no such thing, and she took one of the seats, frustrated, choosing the one slightly away from everyone else.

"You stayed," Kara stated the obvious with no excitement in her voice. She looked both bored and annoyed beyond belief.

"Yes, and I am looking forward to our cooperation!" Astrea acted as if she didn't notice the resentment. She was good at it as she'd had a lot of practice in her past.

"So, what are your plans for us?" Devoss was the only one who seemed genuinely friendly and interested. "What are you going to do here?"

"I would like to start with exploring the East," she smiled. "I want to see the cities, meet the people, see how everything is arranged here before I can give my recommendations on what to do."

"So professional!" Devoss nodded, arranging his plate with the delicacies he liked. "Looks like you are going to need a guide here!"

"That would be very nice!" she grinned at him. "I was hoping that someone would volunteer to help me with this."

Fenrir cleared his throat, and her eyes went back to him involuntarily. It was incredibly hard not to think of what had happened between them the night before.

"Why are you wearing a scarf?" he asked, startling her. "It's a hot day, and it's only going to get hotter from here."

She stared at him for a few moments before replying. "It's there for decorative purposes."

The corners of his lips tilted upwards. "Beautiful. And now, why don't you remove it?"