10. Sand Storm

"No, thanks," Astrea gave the Rogue King her most charming smile and pretended to be focused on picking some fruit for herself,

"It goes against our traditions to wear scarves at the dining table." She heard Fenrir's mocking voice and paused. Her research of the former Eastern Kingdom had no such restrictions described anywhere. Why the rogues would have such a silly rule was beyond her. It made no sense.

"Since when?" Bash asked the reasonable question, confirming her suspicions, and she heard a distinctive sound of a kick under the table, which made Astrea straighten her back instantly.

So, Fenrir remembered something.

She prayed for her blood not to rush to her cheeks to avoid giving her away.

Luckily, she was prepared for such a turn of events, too, and immediately looked Fenrir in the eye without a shade of confusion or hesitation.

She couldn't make a big deal out of the stupid piece of fabric because she had to make his suspicions disappear.

"Oh, excuse me. I had no idea." She stood up and unwrapped the scarf, throwing it around the back of her chair as if she had nothing to hide. "Any more rules like this would be very useful to know."

The love bite was still covered with make-up, so she stretched her lips into a broader smile and sat back, meeting the Rogue King's gaze.

It was possible that he remembered something and doubted whether it was a dream or reality. Her current task was to ensure he came to the right conclusion that it was all an illusion of his drunken mind.

"Yeah, those rules would be good to know for all of us," Devoss chuckled, shooting a mocking glance at his leader.

"I will send you the list," Fenrir c****d his brow at his friend. "It starts with no bright colours in my palace."

The jab was clear because today, Devoss was wearing a bright green suit, looking even more dazzling than before. His long dark hair was gathered in a tail at the back of his head, and once again, Astrea mused that this wasn't how she imagined rogues at all. The ones she’d met before were very different from this bunch.

"Which one?" Devoss smirked, and Fenrir cast a stern gaze on him. The little interaction caught Astrea's attention.

"Do you have more than one palace?" she asked, and Bash coughed, Kara hitting him on his back as hard as she could, almost making him end up with his nose in his plate.

Something was off.

"Yeah, dozens!" Fenrir snorted, devouring his food. "The whole desert is peppered with my palaces, didn't you know?"

"How could I," she stabbed some fruit she didn't recognize on the display before her without looking. "I am new here. I need that tour to get to know this place, remember?"

"We'll arrange that, won't we, Fenrir?" Devoss was definitely trying to smooth the edges between them.

"Sure," the King smirked, and his eyes found Astrea immediately. "Anything for our dear guest."

"That's very sweet of you." She didn't buy it. The glint in his eyes was too mischievous.

"I had a dream about you," he suddenly announced loudly, and everyone stopped doing whatever they were busy with, paying their full attention to him now.

"About me?" Devoss tried to deflect as he sat next to Astrea, but she knew very well who Fenrir was talking about.

"No, about our Southern guest." His King leaned over the back of his massive chair with a smug smile.

"Oh, really?" Astrea fluttered her eyelashes at him innocently. "Was it good? Did we make that alliance after all?"

"You came into my room late at night wearing next to nothing and offered yourself on a platter," he stated calmly, testing her, fishing for a reaction that she was not going to offer.

"Oh, my!" she giggled. "So, it was that kind of a dream! I am flattered. So unexpected, to be honest."

"Yeah," he chuckled. "I was shocked!"

"I would be, too!" she hummed, dipping her flatbread into some delicious-smelling paste. "So unrealistic, though!"

"Very," he agreed, not taking his piercing gaze off her. "We kissed."

"Moon Goddess!" she gasped matter-of-factly as if to let him know she wasn't impressed at all, and as soon as she said those words, he frowned.

"I marked every inch of your body with my tongue," Fenrir went on, reaching for a tall metal glass before him and taking a sip.

"I think I am done!" Kara stood up abruptly, letting her heavy wooden chair screech over the tile floor as she moved it, an expression of annoyance on her face.

"Leaving so soon?" Devoss sneered at her.

"I have a lot of training planned for today for the new arrivals," the woman brushed him off. "And I've suddenly lost my appetite."

Astrea was grateful for this distraction Kara provided because she could feel her heart drumming in her ears after Fenrir's shameless remarks. He didn't mark every inch of her body! Maybe he did dream of her after she drugged him and left? The thought alone made her feel the heat all over her body. Heat which she had to suppress.

"And then, when I relieved you of your flimsy nightgown, I spread your–" The Rogue King did not seem to be done yet.

"Kara, wait up!" Warg was next to leave, hurrying after his friend and not even bothering to finish his food. "I'll help!"

Astrea pretended to be busy with a copper coffee pot she found, pouring herself what looked like the strongest and, at the same time, most aromatic coffee of her life into a small cup.

Would he stop already with the nonsense?

Everyone was silent for a while.

"So, you tore her nightgown and spread her what?" Devoss stirred his tea with a little teaspoon, and Astrea wanted to throw something at him.

"I think I am not hungry anymore," Bastian also stood up, irritation spilling off his tone. "See you all later."

"What a touchy crowd we have here!" Devoss scoffed and put the teaspoon aside, the corners of his lips turned upwards. "So, where did we stop, Fenrir? Luckily, I am an eager listener!"

"I think we got what kind of a dream that was!" Astrea decided to intervene. Enough was enough. "Spare us the details, please."

"Of course," Fenrir chuckled, returning to his food. "It ended abruptly anyway. I bit you slightly on your marking spot, and that snake on your neck came to life and tried to bite me back."

She halted. She didn't mean to, but for just a mere second, she did.

It was one thing for him to remember bits and pieces of their little encounter and to question it. It was completely another to talk about her tattoo, which was indeed alive.

"What a c*ckblocking tattoo you have, Astrea!" Devoss was the one enjoying this awkward breakfast the most.

"Only in Fenrir's dreams!" she retorted with a stiff little smile, downing the remnants of her coffee.

"Is that a challenge?" the King let out a confident laugh, and she was ready to swear at herself for teasing him. She needed to dial down that tension, not escalate it more.

"Anyway," she turned to finally look at him, "I would like to see the city and possibly have a tour around. I need to know what I am working with."

"I can arrange–"Devoss started speaking, but Fenrir stopped him with a motion of his hand.

"I'll take her personally," he said, shocking them both.

A wave of goosebumps ran down Astrea's spine. That man next to her meant trouble. Especially considering his suspicions.

And also, because you are afraid of what will happen if you find yourself alone with him again, Nova jabbed her without pity, and Astrea tried to push her back in their mind to have it clear.

"There is no need for you to do it personally," she smiled. "I am sure as a King you are busy and–"

"On the contrary, you are my number one priority at the moment, Astrea" Fenrir announced, and she swallowed, the air between them getting unbearably hot.

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She followed him out of the fortress, once again surprised by how empty it looked. They were supposed to have people to offer to the Republic, an army. But all she saw was an empty building and endless sand behind it. A big car with huge wheels waited for them, and Astrea started to wonder where it came from because she hadn't seen any vehicles around. Too many things in this place did not add up.

To her surprise, Fenrir opened the door for her and waited the whole time while she got inside. Moreover, when she was settled, he gave her a questioning glance.

"What?" Astrea's arms almost reached the bite mark on her neck he awarded her with last night, and it took all her willpower to control herself.

"Seat belt," he reminded her and her lips parted in disbelief.

"Seat belt?" She blinked at him, and he sighed heavily, taking the belt right next to her and leaning all the way over her to buckle it safely. He lingered on his way back, first inhaling her scent and then pausing right in front of her face, their noses almost brushing against each other. His warm breath caressed her skin, and she could almost remember how good he tasted on her tongue the other night.

"Safety first, Menace," his lips curled, and she licked her lips which were suddenly dry now. The action alone made his eyes a shade darker, while at the same time, the red in them looked ablaze.

"You– have a very unusual eye colour," she mumbled while he rested his well-trained arm on her seat right next to her head, unwilling to move away.

"So I've been told…" He studied her and his gaze alone felt like a lover's caress.

"As if someone set ice on fire," she went on, not sure where she was going with it and why she couldn't just shut up. "Not that it's possible."

"You'd be amazed to know what is possible," Fenrir said and sighed, pushing off her seat as if it pained him to do so. He closed the door and walked around the car, took the driver's seat and immediately started the car, driving into the never-ending sands drowning in the sunlight.

"I have to say, you must be a pretty adventurous person to volunteer to come here, Astrea," he praised her as she was captivated by the scenery. It looked very different from the sky, but she loved the change from her usual surroundings.

"I didn't volunteer!" she rolled her eyes at the thought alone. Who in their right mind would volunteer to go into a rogue territory?

"A punishment then," he chuckled, and she bit the inside of her cheek, shocked by how perceptive he was.

"Something like that." She decided to be honest this time.

"Was Jor the one who came up with that?"

Her head darted at him, but Fenrir seemed unfazed, his eyes behind sunglasses focused on the sands before them.

"You know him?" she gasped.

"Among others," he replied as if it was not a big deal.

When it clearly was a big deal. Very few people in the world could boast of knowing Joran Nathair other than the ones who belonged to him.

On the other hand, they had to know each other. After all, they struck the alliance somehow. Or were about to do it.

"The question is, how well do you know him?" Fenrir's lips pressed tightly the second he finished the sentence, and she noticed how veins popped on his arms from the pressure he was applying now to the steering wheel.

"Just a working relationship." Astrea shrugged her shoulders and turned away to look out of the window. She couldn't tell him more, nor did she want to.

"If you are ever in the market for a new job–" he said all of a sudden and a smile appeared on her face.

"Are you offering me a job now?" she grinned at him.

"If you are desperate enough to work for rogues," he chuckled, his resounding laugh vibrating through the air and Astrea caught herself on the thought that she loved the sound of it.

"Not quite there yet," she giggled playfully. "But I will keep it in mind. Let's see how our collaboration works out."

"Wanna have some fun?" That question took her by surprise. It could mean anything. It could mean things she hoped it didn't mean. It probably did, considering the "dreams" Fenrir was having.

"No offence, but I think our ideas of fun are very different," she replied dryly.

"Wanna bet?" he smirked, and she didn't like that expression on his face.

As if he had something on his mind and knew she wouldn't be thrilled about it.

A sharp turn of the steering wheel and the car flew off in the air, Astrea barely managed to grasp the handle next to her head for stability.

"What are you doing!?" she squealed as he turned the wheel in the opposite direction to the maximum and held it there, making their car spin, surrounded by clouds of sand around them. For a moment, it became dark inside, and this was when he stopped, letting the dust settle.

Her heart was racing, pulse drumming in her head as she stared at the rogue beside her with an I-am-going-to-kill-you glare.

"I told you the seat belt was a must," Fenrir adjusted the sunglasses on his nose and winked at her over them with his lips curved upwards. "Ready for more?"

"No!" she protested, but he was already pushing the life out of the gas pedal and the car drove off again, quickly getting up to speed.

She searched frantically for something to grasp on to, not quite realising it was his thigh. Although, she didn’t care at this point what she was gripping as Fenrir made their car slice the air again and land on the sand that didn't seem so soft and safe anymore.

"Goddess!" Astrea panicked. Never say never. Of all the ways to die, a car accident was not very high on her list. She was used to dangerous situations but she usually had, at least, some form of control."

"The Moon Goddess is not allowed in these lands," Fenrir said in a dark, deep tone that was still calm for some reason. "You need to find other gods to worship. Or better yet, simply believe in yourself."

"Gosh, you are so deep, Fenrir!" She gritted her teeth, her words soaked in sarcasm as she wished to hit him with something heavy. "How about we discuss this calmly as soon as you stop the damn car?"

"Astrea," he gave her a knowing look through the tinted lenses. "Would you relax? This is a trust-building exercise!"

"Trust?" she scoffed, worried that he wasn't looking at the road anymore. Not that there was a road to look at… But he must be crazy doing this and speaking of trust.

"I am not planning to hurt myself or to look foolish in the presence of a beautiful woman who made me dream of her after one short conversation. This is how we entertain ourselves here, and if you relax a bit, you'll be able to enjoy it too."

He had a point. Fenrir did not look tense at all, and that implied that he knew what he was doing.

"I don't like feeling trapped," she confessed suddenly, shocking herself by opening up to him this easily. She wasn't that kind of a person. However, the next moment she felt his large palm covering her hand, their fingers entwining, his grasp on her firm.

"You are not trapped," he said as they drove towards what looked like a giant sand hill. The biggest one so far. "Tell me to stop, and I will."

She knew he was telling the truth. Astrea felt it on some deep inner level and tightened her grip on him.

"Hold on tight!" he chuckled, sending the car flying again. She could feel the gravity pulling them down, but at the same time, the feeling of freedom that one could only reach during a flight, however short, filled her as well, making her forget about everything.

She squealed with joy right before they landed back into the sand, kicking up clouds and clouds of dust around them.

Astrea lost track of time entirely as he entertained her, and when they finally reached a flat dry surface with the buildings visible on the horizon, she felt a bit disappointed that it was over.

She gently tried to slip her fingers from his grasp but only heard Fenrir chuckle at her feeble attempt. The man had no intention of letting her go.

"I am fine now," she told him.

"I'm afraid I will not be fine if you let me go," he knitted his brows pitifully when he gave her a sad gaze. "And you owe me one."

She closed her eyes, exhaling sharply through her nostrils at this man and his games, turning away to stare out of her window again. As if her hand was detached from her body, and it meant nothing that he had it in his possession now.

His thumb brushed over her skin, creating all kinds of sensations she tried to block, and Astrea had to bite her lip while she was at it to suppress any reactions threatening to escape her. This was the strangest car ride of her life.

They drove into the city if one could call it that. The car barely squeezed into the narrow, dirty streets.

It was exactly as she expected. Dull, overcrowded, underdeveloped. Too sad to look at. The good things that she noticed about it were created at least a few hundreds of years ago. Back when the Perished Kingdom was the official Eastern stronghold of the Moonrise Kingdom, where its inhabitants mixed with the people from the continent on the other side of the sea.

She saw men and women in clothes that had seen some life - tired, unhappy, most with no hope. Others looked like the only thing they had was hope.

Astrea's heart painfully clenched for all of them.

What was life here like? It could probably be better if they started rebuilding this place. This impoverishment was what she was expecting. Rebuilding was what she would have done in their place. Not that she was going to judge.

Astrea knew very well that rogues lose their humanity over time. Was that what was happening here? Was this why Joran wanted them to join the Republic's army and fight against the West and the North? He loved heartless warriors, after all. The rogues would be expendable to him.

She shivered at her own thoughts, trying to push them away.

However bad all that was, she had to save herself first, and then Niki.

Fenrir parked the car on a central square, and she noticed a market nearby selling used goods and some fruit she didn't recognise again. Where were they taking it from?

Fenrir gave her hand one final squeeze, bringing her attention back to him, and only then did he let go of her.

"Welcome to Raja, Astrea, the Rogue City." He gave her a half-smile that did not reach his eyes.

"Is this the capital now?" she asked.

"No, we don't have a capital anymore. It's just a city."

City… She couldn't agree with calling it that, but as a professional, she didn't say a word.

"Let's explore then!" She left the car before he could do or say anything, and he watched her going toward the market, feeling how his heart was getting heavier by the minute. The white fabric of her outfit was flowing in the wind. Just like her white dress did on the day they first met.

The day that he remembered as if it was yesterday.

While she didn't remember him at all…