

3. Branded

A chill crawled down Astrea's spine. Her Teacher's deals never ended well for the ones who took the bait. The whole Firstborn army was proof of that. They were not called Firstborns for nothing. Once upon a time, each of their parents struck a deal where they promised their firstborn children to Joran in exchange for something and her Teacher collected without delays. Most were brought here by the age of eight.

Astrea was the only exception.

"No," she said in a tone that took no objections. "I don't want any deals with you."

"That means I taught you well," he chuckled and placed his large palm over her delicate hand on the table. "However, this time, it's the deal or nothing."

"I'll take the nothing then." She gave him another deant look, which only amused him more.

"I would like more wine." He accentuated the last word, and Niki appeared instantly. He clearly made a point and reminded his favourite Dragony that she had already lost that argument and being stubborn wasn't in her favour.

Niki disappeared again, and Astrea shot him an irritated look.

"You know she is your best trainee, right?" the woman arched her snow-white brow. "You don't have a better Firstborn trainee and haven't had anyone better since—"

"Since you. I am aware," Joran conrmed nonchalantly, brushing his hand through his dark blonde hair.

"She should be preparing for the Ascension and not pouring wine into glasses!" Astrea spat the words out, regretting them almost instantly. She didn't need to draw even more attention to Niki.

"And she will be. Once we are done with this nonsense." Her Teacher wasn't bothered at all. "It's all up to you."

"Then stop pretending that I have a choice!" Astrea was losing her patience fast.

"You do have a choice," he corrected. "It's just that it's not unlimited."

"What's the deal then?" She decided not to beat around the bush.

"See, that wasn't so hard, was it?" Joran let out a celebratory laugh, and when she did not react, his grin widened. "Anyway, nothing too dicult this time. Not for you, at least."

She did not buy it. He wouldn't be asking it of her if it was easy. There had to be a catch somewhere.

"I'm listening." Astrea wanted to be done with this conversation quickly.

"You need to know that, thanks to you, my previous plan failed, and we did not conquer the Northern Lycan Kingdom," he informed her, and she frowned, secretly happy. In truth, she wanted to grin at him but knew better than this. A display of emotions could cost her. "So, now I need you to x your mistake."

"You want me to conquer a Kingdom?" she snorted loudly. This was ridiculous.

"I want you to help me nish what I started," Joran looked as serious as ever. "Moreover, I will give you what you so desperately desire."

"Freedom?" she taunted, getting braver by the minute. He was not going to kill her, and she felt like being a brat to him. This was the only bit of joy she still had, trapped in his clutches again.

"I will give you your freedom if you succeed," he taunted back, and her arrogance faded.

"You're joking!" Astrea was sure it couldn't be true.

"I am not," he assured her, a smirk spreading over his face slowly. "Interested now?"

"Me and Niki," she said at once. It wasn't like she had a lot to lose. She could try to save her ward too.

"No," Joran replied rmlly. "What do you think this is? A charity auction where I sell lives? This deal is for you and you alone."

She bit the inside of her cheek, trying to calm herself. The adrenaline was rushing through her. She could think of saving Niki another time. If she got out and then caught Niki on one of her future missions, she could help her ward ee.

"Don't tell me it's going to be a problem for you," her Teacher was enjoying this. "You've already left her behind once. What's the problem with doing it again? You abandoned us pretty easily."

Us. Not just her.

"There was nothing easy about it," Astrea locked her eyes with him, seeing an ocean of emotions in this usually cold man.

"Oh?" he tilted his head, watching her intently. "I am pleased to know that."

"When I couldn't follow your order, I knew I was doomed," she confessed honestly. "I just took the last chance I had to ee and survive."

"You could have come to me," he interrupted, but a laugh escaped her when she heard it. He gave her a glare, and she bit her tongue. It wasn't the time to make him angry.

"What was the mission again?" she decided to return to the original topic, avoiding dangerous grounds.

"I want you to go to the East," he replied dryly. "That's where you were headed, weren't you? Well, there you go. Your wish is granted."

"Why would you need me there? That kingdom is long gone. There is nothing to conquer, nothing to gain. Only rogues live there now and—" She stopped talking when the realisation hit her, eyes darting at her mentor in shock.

"I see you are already on the correct path of thinking," Joran nodded at her with the corner of his lips tugging upwards. "I want to use the rogues in the upcoming war. They should ght on the side of our Southern Lycan Republic."

"They don't ght for anyone," Astrea retorted, taking a gulp of the wine as her head buzzed. "Not to mention that the Republic would never accept rogues as allies. They are the ones who fought against them for so long. They kill or kick out anyone who isn't part of a pack, never letting them back into their territory. The rogues would They'd never work with the East!"

"This is where you come in," Joran smiled, and she felt how chilly the room got.

"What can I possibly do about this mess?" Astrea blinked.

"I have been having negotiations with the East for a while. They are ready to work with us for the benets I am ready to provide. Now, your task is to go there and make the benets irresistible to them look presentable for the Republic."

He nished talking, and she couldn't nd a word to say.

When he nally cleared his throat, she came to her senses from shock.

"Excuse me?" She knitted her brows together. "You want me to make ROGUES presentable? I have to make them go dress up and behave? Don't you think that this mission is already impossible?"

"After you took part in the Luna Trials and got so far, I think you are the only one with the required experience." Joran swirled the wine in his glass. "I need you to prepare those rogues to meet the Alpha Convocation in a few months. They need to know what to say and, most importantly, what not to, for us to be able to form an ocial alliance with them."

"And the catch is?" Astrea gulped her wine too. Suddenly it felt like she needed it.

"I want you to see if they are really trustworthy. How many men they actually have, what is the training method and so on. I heard they want to form a new Eastern Kingdom again. Find out if that's true, and nd out everything there is to learn about them. I want every single detail. The only way I will accept their kingdom is if they become the vassals of the Republic. Once this alliance is made, I will grant you your freedom. If you would still want it, of course."

"Why wouldn't I want it?" She nished her glass and placed it back on the table.

"Anything can happen." Joran looked smug for some reason, but she couldn't quite decipher him yet.

She would have never agreed to a deal with him if it was a choice. However, right now, she had to be wise. This was a game of survival, and she was still in. As long as she was alive, it wasn't over yet. And who knew, maybe Teacher would keep his word. He never broke a single promise he gave her as of yet. She had to give him that.

Not to mention that escaping from the Eastern Perished Kingdom would be easier than from this island. So, if everything went wrong, she had other options.

"Will there be any killings involved?" she wanted to clarify.

"That will depend on the kind of information you bring me," Joran smirked. "Is that a problem for you?"

"No," she replied without delay. It really wasn't. She could kill rogues if it were needed. For her freedom and potentially for Niki.

"Glad we are on the same page," Joran stood up. "And now, to the important part. Your tattoo."

Astrea shivered at the thought. The people who got on the island trained for years in the camp, and then they had to undergo the ceremony of Ascension. What that meant – they were sent to the woods lled with deadly magical beasts and traps, and only those who came out alive were then called Firstborn and granted a special gift by Joran. This was also when they could stop calling him Master and started calling him Teacher. It was part of the privilege they shared. Although, Astrea always had the pleasure of addressing him that.

The said gift was a tattoo lled with divine magic. It multiplied whatever powers they had tenfold, and it could only work on the rst child of shifter parents. This was the reason Joran was only interested in them. The perfect way to build the strongest army out there.

When Astrea ed after tricking everyone, she burned the tattoo on her skin so that Joran couldn't track her by using his own magic in her system. Sadly, werewolves regenerated quickly, and the tattoo was back after some time, making her repeat the burning over and over again. Even in the silver pit, she used its walls to remove it.

"What about it?" she gulped when he was already towering over her, his ngers brushing over the lines of the shiny dragony on the back of her shoulder, eliciting a rush of goosebumps.

"You tried to destroy it so many times that I think you need a new one," he mused, and her blood froze in her veins.

"A new one?" she jerked away, leaving her seat. His dry chuckle followed. "Why a new one? The old one came back as a charm every time!"

"Because I want to ensure you can't burn it off or cut it out anymore," Joran smirked. "Come here."

He went toward his oce, and she followed him, knowing she'd better not prolong this.

"Where do you want me?" she asked absentmindedly when they both were inside, and his lips curled. She decided to take it like the soldier that she was and be done with it quickly.

"Window," he told her, and she obeyed, her knees shaky.

"Hands on the glass," Joran stepped right behind.]. Knowing that if real tattoos hurt, the divines ones were hundreds of times worse. It was another thing some of the trainees couldn't survive.

She was different, though, and she could take it for the second time.

Joran slowly removed her long hair from her neck, lacing his ngers through it and brushing it to one side.

"When I touch your locks, it's as if I am touching the starry sky," he murmured, and she paid no attention to that. Her Teacher skilfully unclasped the snake necklace on her neck, making the fabric fall. She barely caught it with one hand to stay covered and save some dignity.

"Now, where do I place it?" Joran examined her skin as a map, stopping to trace the dragony tattoo shining brightly on her shoulder. Then his ngers moved to her neck, creating more goosebumps as they went until they wrapped around it, making her throw her head back.

Joran was in complete control.

"Remember that this is necessary not only for tracking you down but mostly for your protection," he whispered into her ear. "When I lost you the rst time and didn't know where you were, my biggest fear was that something bad happened to you. It was so bad that I made crucial mistakes in the war. And I never make mistakes. You know it, Astrea."

"Sorry." She said it because she knew he wanted it, not because she felt it.

"That's okay now," Joran sighed, and his second hand touched the available area at the back of her neck. "We are going to x it all together. And then— then we will see how it goes. If you want to leave me and be free, it's ne. But if you would like to return to my side at any moment during or after this task, I will always take you back. I want you to know this. You are very special to me, Astrea."

She did not respond to that.

"So, this is the new agreement between us. Deal?" he asked, his hot breath burning her skin.

She could feel the magic pulsing in the tips of his ngers.

"Deal," she breathed out, and the next moment, a ash of searing hot pain ran along her, piercing her whole body and making her blood boil as if it had turned into acid within her.

Astrea screamed, quickly breaking her voice and losing her mind. It seemed to last an eternity, but in that agony, she felt Joran letting go of her neck. However, the second he did, something else wrapped around it.

Terror struck, Astrea couldn't form words. What did he do to her?