

4. To The East

Astrea was in agony, and it was worse than anything she'd ever experienced before. An invisible needle from hell itself pierced her skin, sending excruciating pain rippling down her body. Her wolf, Nova, was howling inside, and that was heart-breaking considering she hadn't recovered from their previous torture yet.

It was taking forever, and after a while, it started to feel like it would never end. She could barely keep standing, now leaning her head against her hand on the cold glass.

Soon, even the ability to scream left her. She wasn't sure what was going on anymore, concentrating on trying to keep holding her dress in place as hot tears streamed down her cheeks. This was like nothing she had ever gone through before, and Astrea couldn't blame it on a lack of experience.

Joran did not stop and did not give her a break, although she clearly needed one to come to her senses. This was a new form of punishment from him, and she knew it.

She deserved it.

The only thing she wanted now was to withstand it. Preferably with some dignity left to her, but as the darkness started to close in on her making the area she could see smaller and smaller until there was just a tiny dot left, Astrea knew she was failing miserably.

"Almost there, Dragony," Joran's voice rasped in her ear as he continued his torment, now touching her collarbone, and it felt like he was piercing her neck with knives. "You are doing well. As always. My brave little dragony..."

She tried to breathe, but it felt like some kind of force was strangling her now and that tiny dot of vision disappeared as the darkness took over, the last of her strength leaving her.

Astrea stretched in the bed, the soft silk caressing her body like a cool breeze. She turned to hug the pillow the way she always did, and only then did the memories of the previous day ood her brain and make her open her eyes.

The light from a glass wall blinded her, but despite that, she knew exactly where she was. Her Teacher's bedroom. The black sheets, the golden pillows, the leather headboard, and the mirror wall next to the bed... this place was easy to recognise. She had been here just a few times when the Teacher called her late at night to give her a new task or praise her when he was in the mood for it. She felt really out of place each time, trying to leave as soon as possible. They never had the kind of relationship that would require her to stay here longer than their conversations would last.

Today was different because she was actually in his bed with no idea how much time she had spent here and what had happened. A quick check showed that her dress from yesterday was still on, though the diamond necklace was still unclasped, causing the fabric to fall down to her waist when she tried to sit up. This was the wrong time to remember that the trainees from yesterday failed to bring her any kind of underwear.

Astrea hissed as the movement brought back the pain to her neck. Her skin felt scorched and unbearable to touch.

She still wanted to get up because she had to see what he had done to her.

"Easy there," Joran strolled in, wearing nothing but a pair of loose, black silk pyjama pants, every muscle on his body carved to perfection. "You are going to need some rest after that."

She wanted to stand up, but somehow, he was 4 right next to her faster than she anticipated and gently pushed her back to the bed.

"What did I tell you?" he asked in a reproachful tone, lacing his ngers through her hair to comb it out of his way. "Rest. You are not going anywhere today."

Astrea did not like the sound of that.

"I- I can't stay here!" she protested, and his jaw tightened.

"I am afraid you will have to," he informed her matter-of-factly. "Your new tattoo has to be looked over by me to ensure it takes on well and doesn't hurt you."

"It's ne!" She tried to brush the whole situation off, but pain subdued her whole body the moment she dared to move again.

"Do you have to be so stubborn?" he sighed and traced his ngers over her neck. She was ready to shudder from the pain, but his touch brought her soft, cooling sensations, eliciting a whimper of relief from her. This made her mentor smile. "See?" he taunted. "I am only doing what is best for you."

After he hurt her rst. She still had no idea what it was on her neck.

"Thank you, Teacher." Her voice sounded so lifeless and dull, but she knew this was exactly what he wanted to hear. They'd learned each other well during the years they spent together.

"No," he shook his head, and his hand moved to caress her shoulder, making her whole body tremble, chest rising and falling at a sharp rhythm.

"No?" Astrea arched her brow, and this time, he trailed his thumb over her chin, although she could tell there was nothing there to check.

"You've disobeyed me far too many times now to call me your Teacher," he said, their gazes locking. "Use my name from now on."

"I- can't," she confessed, clutching her dress to her chest. That felt so weird. Unnatural even.

"I am afraid you will have to. It pains me to hear you call me Teacher when I know you don't mean it."

"I will try to mean it... better," she replied awkwardly, knowing that it sounded silly and he wasn't buying it.

"Astrea, just when did our relationship get this way?" he laced his ngers through her hair, playing with her long locks and clearly enjoying it.

"Somewhere between you ordering the other Firstborn to hunt and kill me and throwing me to the silver pit for months," she admitted, nally managing to sit back up, "accidentally" obstructing him from entertaining himself with her hair.

"If I issued the order to kill you, you would be dead. You know this," Joran retorted and sighed. "As for the silver pit... what choice did I have exactly? You had to die for your crime, and I... I wanted to protect you instead."

She did not respond to that. It didn't feel like protection to her, but she knew better than to say that out loud. She wanted out, and to do it... she had to play the game.

However, he wouldn't believe her if she wasn't smart about it. She had to be in her character still.

"Did it have to be so long?" she asked, turning away, and he caught her cheek into his palm, making her look at him again.

"It had to. I had the other Dragonies petitioning me daily to kill you as I was supposed to. After all, you did kill Amber." Joran looked her straight in the eye, and she knew that at least that part was true. Amber was the other spy sent together with her to the Northern Kingdom, another Dragony who hated her with passion, and the moment she realised Astrea's plan to escape, her life was over. Leaving her alive wasn't an option.

"I didn't murder her in cold blood." Astrea swallowed uncomfortably. "We fought, and it was an honest ght."

"You know she had no chance against you, though," he sneered at her.

"I knew, but she didn't think so," the assassin met her mentor's gaze. "If there was a choice, I would never--"

"See, now you know how I feel about not being able to protect you better," Joran caressed her cheek again, and she sighed.

"Thanks." Her voice was barely a whisper, but he heard her, and his lips curled into a smirk.

"That's much better." Joran stood up from the bed and offered her his hand. "Now, come and see my new gift to you."

She followed him, now trying to keep the dress on with just one hand as he led her to the closest mirror wall. Joran loved mirrors.

Her hair was covering her neck, and once again, her Teacher gently brushed his ngers through it, pulling it back.

"Like liquid stars," he murmured, but she did not listen. Her gaze was glued to what was on her neck now.

Frozen in shock, Astrea couldn't form a single word as she watched at an intricate curling snake tattoo around her neck. It looked like a fashionable necklace pattern inked on her skin, where the head was barely touching the tail, however, that thing seemed to be alive. The stunned girl tried to touch it, and it wriggled away as if it didn't wish to be disturbed.

"Do you like it?" Joran wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her to his chest from the back while his hand caressed the serpent on her skin. And this was the touch the snake did not mind. In fact, it loved it so much that Astrea almost moaned as the two connected, throwing her head back.

"What the--" she tried to catch her breath.

"Don't worry," he chuckled softly. "It's still sore and needs to get used to you, but soon you will be inseparable."

And that was exactly the problem.

"You said you would let me go," she reminded him, and he paused.

"I did, didn't I?" His lips curved slightly. He knew exactly what she was thinking. "Astrea, this is for your protection. While it's on you, I will be calm that you are safe. If you are in trouble, I will come for you. I wish I had created such a connection between us earlier. Maybe then you would have known that I wouldn't have hurt you if you simply came to me and told me the truth. I feel like- we have misunderstood each other lately."

"Will you know everything I do?" she found herself asking, voice almost broken. This was simply another type of collar, and she had just gotten rid of the one she'd worn for months.

"Would that be a problem?" he caught her gaze in the mirror and sneered at her, still playing with the little snake. "I thought you decided to be a good girl from now on."

"Good girls love some privacy too," she almost snapped at him, but at the last moment, offered a taunting smile to cover up her frustration.

"It's for protection only," Joran assured. "It will keep you safe and on the right path. I will be able to connect with you wherever you are and feel if you are in danger."

She wasn't sure she wanted to know more now.

"All that being said," he leaned lower, and it looked like the little snake sought him because it followed his every move, "even Serpents need to sleep. You will have enough privacy, but I am never losing you again. Not like the last time."

She felt his lips pressing against the wriggling tattoo and this touch made all the pain go away, the ink shining brightly until the little snake settled into its original position and froze. Astrea really preferred it that way.

"But my freedom--"

"It will be yours," Joran sighed and distanced himself away immediately as if he wanted to avoid that conversation. "All you need to do is complete your mission and return to me to claim it. Then, as I have promised, if you still want freedom, I will give it to you."

She felt like there was a catch, but it wasn't the time to annoy him any more. She was already dangerously close to his limit.

"Would you like some breakfast?" Joran asked as if they were an old married couple. Although in the past, they'd often have their meals together. She was his favourite Dragony, after all.

Now it felt awkward and out of place.

"I am a bit nauseous after the dinner we had." She quirked her brow up at him, pointing at her neck. "It will be a while until I can eat. So, I'd prefer to prepare for my mission instead."

He did not look pleased with her response but contemplated it nonetheless.

"I wanted you to rest for tonight," his eyes travelled back to the enormous black bed, and Astrea shuddered. He had never invited her to his bed or offered her anything more than guidance before, and she wished for that same treatment again. Purely a Teacher and his Dragony warrior.

"You just cured me," she pointed at the tattoo with a forced grin. "No need to waste time. And I haven't been training for a while. I feel a little rusty."

"No training today," he prohibited her at once. "You may study the research I prepared for you, you may meet with Alisha in your old room and prepare your wardrobe and any gadgets you may need. But that's it until I say so. You do not leave this house, you do not meet any Firstborns who are not invited here, you eat, you sleep, you take care of yourself. And you dine with me every evening. This is an order. Are we clear?"

It was hard to hide her disappointment, but she nodded. "Of course, Teacher."

"Joran," he reminded her how he preferred to be called now and she swallowed the lump in her throat.

"Jor- an." The words tasted bitter on her tongue.

"One more time," the Serpent, however, was enjoying this.

"Joran," Astrea repeated, condent this time as their eyes locked. She was a professional, after all.

"See, it wasn't as hard, was it?" the Dragon God let out a laugh, not taking his eyes off her. "This is the evolution of our relationship, Astrea. So many great things are ahead."

Gods, she really hoped it wasn't the case.

He allowed her to return to her old room, and the moment she was there, she felt like she needed to do something. All the while knowing that, at the same time, she couldn't do much.

She looked at herself in the mirror, panting and seeing the snake collar on her neck. Astrea hated collars, and now she was a proud owner of a permanent one. Or... was she the one being owned?

Her gaze fell on her long white silver locks, and Joran's words echoed in her mind, "Like liquid stars."

He sure loved playing with her hair, and right now, it was the only thing she could deprive him of.

So, Astrea took the scissors and cut the rst strand of hair off before she could change her mind. The snake on her neck curled angrily, and the sensation made her continue. Snip. The pain returned, but it only fuelled her anger. Snip. She could hear the sounds of footsteps. Snip. The last locks pooled at her feet, and the door burst open.

"What the hell is this?" Joran gritted his teeth as his gaze fell on the shining silver on the oor.