

# The White King's Favorite

By Jenny Fox

## Chapter 1-5

### Intro

The Dragon Empire.

A very old empire that had seen centuries pass by and never flinched. From the Northern barbarians to the pirates of the

White Sea, and then the vain attempt of the Eastern Republic, nothing had been able to scratch within an inch of their strong

borders. The long line of its rulers, always covered in gold and Imperial purple, only ever feared their own progeny, for it

seemed each heir was stronger than their father. Their only notable conflicts were internal wars between the fierce brothers, all

hoping to claim the golden throne as theirs.

However, for over two decades now, no man had been seated on the large, golden throne of the emperor. This vast

empire was thriving, now more than ever, with an empress at its head.

The man had tried to study as much as he could to prepare himself.

It was no easy task. His country had been at odds with the Dragon Empire for centuries, and their cultures were too

different. He had tried to collect scraps of information, here and there, to get ready for this very special day. A day that would

be recorded in history, perhaps. He took a deep breath, his eyes on the Imperial Palace as he stood in the long line of people

wishing to be granted entry.

The Imperial Palace itself was as vast as a small city. For centuries, it had been the house of the emperor and his large

family: his children, the empress when there was one, but most importantly, all of the concubines. The long line of the Dragon

Emperors had mostly continued through the many children those emperors had fathered. Those large families needed to be

housed in the Imperial Palace; thus, that place had only grown with time. As an emperor thrived, he had his concubines, and his

children often had their own concubines and children... Of course, it was also practically cleared out with each new emperor

taking over. No smart man kept his rivals close; hence, said siblings were usually all killed in a matter of days before the new

emperor sat on the throne, had his own children and concubines take over, and that circle of life and death would start all over

again. However, no concubines were currently residing in the Imperial Palace.

The Empress did have male concubines, but none of them were allowed to live there.

Within her first year as the new

ruler, she declared that she wouldn't have any children to succeed her, and instead, her nephew would be the new heir apparent.

Strangely, he couldn't understand why this decision had been welcomed. That nephew was the son of the Empress' brother, the rumored War God. Yet, why would she allow her brother's son to inherit her throne, instead of having her own children? There had been no proof of the Empress being sterile, and according to the locals, she had actually taken medicine to prevent pregnancy for years before she even fought to rise to her position. ...Did she feel like she owed this to her brother, who had helped in her ascension? Then, why not let the War God himself become emperor? Surely, this would have been much simpler than establishing a woman on the golden throne... This was a mystery he hadn't solved yet.

"Next!" yelled the Imperial Guard.

He had to hand over his papers quickly and explain the reason for his visit. The guard raised an eyebrow; not many foreigners made it all the way here. Eventually, the man in silver armor scoffed and gave him his papers back.

"Good luck with that!" he laughed.

His papers shoved back into his hands, he nodded and made his way inside. He knew he had come with no easy request, but it was of the utmost importance that he succeeded. The future of his kingdom depended on the outcome of this audience with the Empress...

Following the long line of people walking in, he was a bit lost inside those high walls and long corridors. He had to ask the Imperial Servants for directions twice. Thankfully, he had studied enough to know the servants in this place traditionally wore green clothing. Although the Empress had abolished the centuries-old Imperial Decree behind a lot of the rules on the different casts' clothing, the Imperial Servants most likely wore green out of tradition. Some wore little accessories or pieces of clothing of different colors, but green was still prominent. The man internally congratulated himself for having chosen a simple blue attire. This was the color of scholars, officials, and educated people in general. Everyone showed him respect despite his poor appearance.

The journey there had taken a toll on the old man.

He had lived over half a century and seen many things, but this may have been the journey of his life. He had always dreamt of coming to this amazing country. Where he came from, many saw the Dragon Empire as a ruthless land with barbarians preying on the weak and monstrous man-killing beasts were allowed to roam free. No foreigner had been let in for a

long time. The only ones who could walk into these lands were people of tribes or merchants who wouldn't be so foolish to get close to the Capital. Things have changed in recent years. The borders weren't as tightly closed as before. A lot of the cities were now thriving, whereas before, it seemed everything was solely happening in the Capital. Since the death of the late Emperor, his daughter had been making more and more changes every day... Now, the man was trying to brush some sand out of his hair and beard, and wipe the dust off his clothes. Compared to the other people waiting to see the Empress, with their perfect attires and gold jewelry, he looked like a beggar... Strangely though, the line was getting shorter, fast. People who walked inside the throne room didn't seem to spend more than a few minutes before leaving. Oddly enough, the people who came back were often in a curious state. He saw people coming out furious, in tears, or with a lot of joy on their faces. Some... didn't come out at all. He couldn't come up with any reasons as to why, as the main room seemed totally soundproof. They only heard something when the door would open, either to welcome the next guests or for the Imperial Servants going in and out. When he was finally the next one in line, the man took a deep breath, mentally preparing himself. He couldn't be more prepared, but he was still very unsure about all this. His only piece of luggage was his bag, in which he was preciously carrying a little chest he had been protecting with his life throughout this journey. When the doors opened, the man stepped inside, as nervous as an old man like him could be. An Imperial Servant came to greet him. "Please follow me, and do not speak a word until the Empress has authorized you to. You shall not look at Their Highnesses until they speak to you, either. No weapons are allowed inside the throne room, and you shall be killed immediately if you've brought any without informing us." The man nodded, but he couldn't remember having been searched, which had surprised him. The Imperial Guard had mentioned weapons were forbidden inside the Imperial Palace, but... that was it. The security seemed a little lax, in his opinion. He could have gotten this far with a sword and no one would have stopped him. Still, that wasn't something he'd do. His query was way too important to be put at risk like that... He walked slowly, hoping not to make any mistakes that would offend the Empress. He kept his eyes on the impressive, white marble floor, but he could still tell how spectacular this hall was. Each sound resonated throughout, and there had to be

large windows for it to be so sunny and warm too. He could almost smell the sunshine coming from left, right, and above.

There was a light scent of incense being burned and fruits.

The one thing that struck him, though, was the continual strange noises. He had already heard some of them before,

while he was waiting outside, but now, the man was getting more curious about those unusual sounds. It was loud, like drums,

something resonating inside a huge cave. It was... terrifying. He didn't dare look up, but the man could tell he was walking right

toward whatever was making that scary noise.

He was preceded and guided by an Imperial Servant, but even without them, he could have easily followed the simple,

straight path that took him right to the throne.

More precisely, he was asked to stand a few steps away from the first step of a flight of stairs that most likely led to the

rumored golden throne.

"Empress, this man claims to have come from the faraway Eastern Kingdom to request an audience with you."

He heard a chuckle.

"The Eastern Kingdom?" said a feminine, imperious voice. "Does that mean those brats next door are finally done fighting?"

The man nodded, but was he allowed to answer? He heard that arrogant chuckle again.

"Interesting... You learn something new every day. How long has it been already?"

"The new King rose to power five years ago, Empress," answered a male voice.

"So it took him five years to get them all to sit down and stop shouting? Hmpf, the kid didn't waste his time... I don't

really care for their stupid Republic, though. They were all pretending to be so smart and thought of us as barbarians. I guess a

bit of fresh blood will do them some good... some that boy didn't spill."

The man took a deep breath. Did he have to endure the Empress insulting his King?

Nothing in her words was wrong,

though... The former Eastern Republic had endured a cruel defeat against the Dragon Empire twenty years ago. What was more

aggravating was that the Republic had started the war. Some of their leaders had been convinced by the Empire's Second

Prince, a cunning man with large ambitions, to agree to this nonsense attack. He had only failed to mention that the Third

Prince, the one known as the War God, would stand in their army's way so fast...

In the end, the Eastern Army had been sent home, its pride wrecked to pieces, and a lot to deal with in the aftermath;

those who had agreed to this attack had to come up with some explanations. Those conflicts added to their people's anger after

so much death, poverty, and famine, which threw the Eastern Republic into a long civil war. After several attempts at

reconstructing themselves, the rise of a new king was the hope he was willing to do anything to protect.

“Fine. Let’s hear it then. What does the brat have to say?”

The man took a deep breath. Now was finally the time. He had to be very careful with his words...

“Our King reigns alone and his Queen’s seat is still empty, Your Highness. Now, I have come forth with the hope to...

find a suitable partner for him.”

“...What was that?” said the Empress.

“They want to establish a good relationship with our Empire through a wedding, Your Highness,” said the male voice.

“Why do we need that?” asked the Empress with a chuckle.

“For good relations with our neighbors, Your Highness.”

The Empress stayed silent for a couple of seconds. He could hear her fingertips tapping on her golden throne. It was

hard to keep his eyes on the floor when he was dying to look up. He finally heard her sigh.

“What do we need that for, again?”

The man was speechless. Was the Empress playing dumb on purpose? Was she mocking them? He heard the chuckles of

two other women, but the man that was speaking like an advisor, or a close counselor, let out a long sigh.

“Now that their situation is stable, we should look to establish good relationships with our only neighboring nation,

Empress. Good relationships with our neighbor means cheaper prices on the imported and exported products, Your Highness.

Cheaper prices means less taxes, and the less we tax our people, the happier they get.”

The Empress brutally slammed her hand, making them all jump.

“Oh, so this is why!” she said with a chuckle. “Less yapping from them. Alright, let’s do it then. You. You can raise

your head. I feel like I’m going to watch your neck break if you keep standing like that.”

The man finally lifted his head with relief, his neck indeed a bit stiff.

He had gotten authorization to look at the Empress, but he certainly wasn’t prepared for what he was about to see. The

golden throne was higher than he had imagined, and much, much more impressive.

That mountain of gold destabilized and

blinded him for a second, until... until he realized it was moving.

The throne itself was a very large seat, so large that almost two people could have sat there. It was stuffed with purple

cushions as if to fill all that space. However, behind the large throne was this mountain of... golden scales. The man swallowed

his saliva, realizing this was the source of those terrifying sounds from earlier. It was one of them. One of their... dragons.

Of course, he had heard about the Dragon Empire’s actual dragons. Those magnificent, mythical creatures were no myth

in this Empire. The dragons were the mark of nobility, and also why no mere mortal had ever been able to take an emperor's seat. Their people only acknowledge the Dragon Masters, and Dragon Masters were only born into the Imperial Family. There was no real explanation as to why they had been blessed with such incredible companions. One possibility was that it was in their blood, and until recently, only the male heirs of the Emperor were blessed with a dragon alter ego, a companion for life.

They were no mere pets, though. He had heard terrible stories of manslaughter caused by one of those ferocious beasts on a whim, and now, as he witnessed the size of this thing, he sure believed them.

He didn't stare at the dragon for long, though. Inside the golden throne sat another one of the most terrifying creatures of

this Empire: the Empress herself. She was a tall woman, with dark skin and the black hair and eyes typical of their people. The

only thing that made it known that she was the Empress was the impressive amount of gold in her hair, clothes, and jewelry.

Her dress was purple, but since it was sleeveless and the skirt was slit to let her legs through, it looked like she was wearing

more gold than fabric. There was even gold embroidered into her dress. Still, her attire was strangely simple for an empress of

the wealthiest nation known on this continent. If it wasn't for her sitting on the throne, he might have wondered which one out of

her or the other woman dressed in purple was the Empress.

There were actually two other women present, instead of one. They were both seated on the stairs below the throne,

just a few steps away from him. The first one was obviously a close relative of the Empress. She was beautiful, with her very

long, black hair in hundreds of braids falling over her shoulders, and just like the Empress, she wore purple with some gold

jewelry. The other woman was probably a simple Imperial Servant, although she was allowed to sit there for some reason. She

was merely embroidering some purple piece of clothing, and she didn't have the looks of someone who was even from that

place. Her white skin shocked him for a second. Never had he seen someone with such light skin, like some white jade. She

was looking at her work, so he couldn't tell, but from her chestnut hair and pink lips, she was definitely a foreigner.

Trying not to stare too long at either of the women, he looked up at the Empress again. Next to her was an elderly man

in blue clothing. He glared when their eyes met, so the poor Eastern man had to look elsewhere again.

"...Did the King specify which princess he was hoping to marry?" the servant woman suddenly asked.

"N-no, Your Highnesses..."

“So cunning,” hissed the Empress. “That brat sends only a servant, after all this time, and now he asks for one of my nieces to be sent to him? Isn’t he quite cocky?”

The man next to the Empress rolled his eyes at her language.

“I-I have some gifts for the Dragon Empire and... the princess,” quickly said the man.

“They are not much, but... I hope this will be taken as a token of—”

“Stop talking and open that chest,” ordered the Empress.

The man nodded and quickly opened his chest.

The truth was, he was very aware of how little this treasure was. Any of the Empress’ bracelets she was wearing were

probably a lot more valuable... He was completely at his wits’ end, though. If the Empress laughed and sent him back, he had no idea what he’d do...

To his surprise, the white-skinned woman put her embroidery aside and stood up, coming to take the chest. Had the

Empress given an order he had missed? He didn’t say a thing, though, as she took it. She looked through it and, to his surprise,

there was a slight smile on her lips.

“...There are some books in here,” she said, taking the only two little books included.

“Y-yes, Your Highness... Those are very ancient books of our nation...”

She smiled and turned to the Empress. She hadn’t touched anything else in the chest.

“What do you say?” she simply asked.

The man was shocked. She was allowed to address the Empress so casually?

However, the Empress shrugged.

“It’s your daughters this is about. You take responsibility for it.”

Her daughters... The man suddenly understood. He had been completely tricked by her outfit. This woman was no

servant and no foreigner. She was the one and only War God’s wife, the Empress’ sister-in-law, the mother of the Crown

Prince. The most adored woman in this Empire!

Imperial Princess Cassandra, the Water Goddess.

## Chapter 1

“Do you like tea?” she asked softly.

“Ah... Yes, please.”

The man was still stunned.

The woman before him was a legend in this Empire. She was adored like a living deity, perhaps more venerated than

the Empress herself. Yet, from where he stood, just a couple of steps away from her in this tiny kitchen, she seemed like any

ordinary woman, simply pouring tea with a soft, serene smile on her lips. She wasn’t even especially beautiful. Her chestnut

hair was held in a high and large ponytail, but still so long it fell down to her lower back.

She wore no makeup, except perhaps

some for her rose-tinted lips, and was actually a bit skinny. Her green dress wasn’t any better than those of the servants here,

and she only wore a couple of gold jewelry items too. Moreover, he just couldn't get used to how pale her skin was. He'd heard of tribes, in the south, with white-colored skin, but he had never witnessed it himself...

"You look tired," she said, presenting him with a cup. "It must have been a long journey."

"It was, Your Highness," said the old man, taking it. "It took me over a month to come here, Your Highness."

"You may call me Cassandra," she chuckled. "Your Highness is a bit too ceremonial for me... What should I call you?"

He stood a bit more upright, trying to forget how dirty he ought to look right now. He had no money to buy clean clothes

and wore the same thing for days. Most people would have treated the old man like any beggar, with his messy beard and tired

eyes. Yet, this woman didn't even show any sign of discomfort.

"This old man's name is Yassim, my lady. Yassim Hemelion the Wise."

"Well then, Yassim the Wise," she repeated with a gentle smile, "please tell me about the Eastern Kingdom."

The man's hands froze on the cup. He had followed Lady Cassandra, the Water Goddess, outside the throne room, a bit

relieved to escape the arrogant Empress' gaze, but he had no idea of their real destination or why she was even listening to his

demands. She had first stopped by this small kitchen to make the tea. Seeing this living deity pouring tea in a kitchen didn't

seem to surprise anyone, as all the servants coming in and out acted as if this was a regular thing that happened, quickly bowing

before moving on with their tasks.

Now, his cup still in his hands, he kept following her a bit helplessly as Cassandra walked out, back to one of the large

corridors of the palace. She was walking slowly, and clearly waiting to hear his answer...

The man took a deep breath.

"...Our King is still young, Lady Cassandra. He is a brave, young man, but he didn't become our King easily. After so

many wars and battles, our people were famished, angry, and lost."

"It must have been hard."

"Yes, my lady," sighed the old man. "Very much so. The civil war left many cities in ruins and our roads stained with

blood. We are struggling to bring all our systems back to a functioning, let alone flourishing, state. Commerce, finance,

education, everything has been shattered, and we hope to build something better out of what was previously destroyed. But it is

hard. Even five years after our young King rose to power, bandits are still roaming free, terrorizing our already traumatized

citizens..."

"Isn't it a bit strange that a king would look for a queen in a situation like this?"

Despite Cassandra's gentle voice, the old man frowned. He knew this woman was probably too smart not to have

understood already.

“...We are hoping to confirm our young King’s power with a strong lady by his side, Your Highness.”

“A strong lady from the Dragon Empire... A lady with a dragon,” she whispered.

The old man kept his head low.

Of course, any sovereign would have been delighted to have the power of a legendary beast to assert their authority.

The young King of the Eastern Kingdom, among all, was in dire need of such power. He was a bit more nervous now that the lady clearly knew some of the intentions behind his arrival here. He hadn’t intended to hide it, but he did hope this wouldn’t come to light so soon. Now he was probably looking like a desperate and shabby old man with big demands...

He stopped, his hands tight on the little cup.

“Forgive me, Your Highness. You must think I’m a shameless man to have come here without even a decent present for your daughter and make such a demand.”

Honestly speaking, everything he had heard previously about the Dragon Empire had made him think he was lucky to

have kept his head on his shoulders this long... Yet, to his surprise, Lady Cassandra chuckled, and he dared to look up. She was

looking at him with that gentle gaze of hers. There was something invisible yet incredible about that woman. How young was

she? Perhaps fifteen or twenty years younger, at least? Yet, she was looking at him as if she had seen the whole world with

those emerald eyes. Yassim had always considered himself a scholar and well-educated man, but he felt like a child in front of

this young woman. She gently put her hand on his dirty shoulder.

“I think you’re a very brave man,” she said, “and someone who deeply loves his country.”

Those few words hit Yassim hard. For a second, the man felt his throat tighten a bit, as if he was about to cry. In a few

words, she had said everything that made his trip worthwhile. Even more than that, he felt like he was somewhat

acknowledged; all the hardships he had endured to come here felt like a painful but distant memory. He was an old man who

had thought this trip might be his last, and now that he was at his destination, he could find a bit of relief in the words of a

stranger...

“Thank you, my lady...”

Cassandra smiled and turned around, resuming their walk. Wasn’t she going to tell him they would refuse and send him

home? Where were they going now? Yassim had the faint thought she might have simply indulged this exhausted visitor, but

now, he was reminiscing about her discussion with the Empress. Would the Water Goddess really be willing to give away one

of her daughters? Yassim knew she had many children, but all those he had interrogated also said the Imperial Family was closer than ever in this generation...

"Did he mention which one?" she asked softly.

"W-which one?"

"Which one of my daughters your King wanted to marry."

Once again, he lost his confidence. What should he say? Should he lie, and try asking for any? Or should he simply pretend it was up for them to decide? If the Water Goddess knew the truth, she would probably not agree to this...

Still, seeing how he was taking his time to answer, Cassandra let out a little sigh.

"...I see."

What did she see? Yassim was worried. Had he been exposed already? She was definitely a smart woman; how dare he lie to a living deity! Who was he to come all the way here and ask for a princess to go back with him...

Cassandra didn't add anything, but she kept walking in the same direction. She didn't even look offended in any way, but as calm as she was before she had asked the question. Yassim kept following her, still stunned a bit more each second by this woman. All the servants were politely bowing and greeting her, and she'd reply with a smile or a polite answer, very differently from the arrogance he had been prepared for from the Dragon Empire's people.

They finally arrived in what seemed like a large garden, a very, very large garden within the palace's walls. This Empire's Palace seemed as large as a small city from the outside, but Yassim had never imagined it would be so vast it could actually have such a grand garden; it even had a lake! The place was lovely, though, and the grass was very green despite the sun and heat. There were a few trees here and there, and under one of them, nearest to the lake, a group of young people were seated.

Cassandra was walking toward the group, and Yassim immediately noticed the striking resemblance between her and...

some of those children. There were only two young women, circled by several younger children on the grass. From what

Yassim could see, only one of the two young women had the same green eyes as the Water Goddess. She was young, but already a true beauty, captivating the young ones as she read them a book. She had long hair, just a shade darker than her mother's, and darker, tanned skin; so pretty, a bronze color, almost golden under the sunlight. The contrast with her green eyes was absolutely striking and beautiful.

Her back against the tree, she was reading the book she had in her hands to the rest of the group. She had a very

pleasant voice, almost as if she was singing, and all of the other children were visibly deeply involved in her reading, sitting with their bodies leaning toward her, or on their stomachs.

"...And the young man ventured for days alone in that desert. He was thirsty, and the scorching heat was terrible to bear, burning his skin. Yet, he kept putting one foot in front of the other, bravely. He knew he had to go through this trial if he hoped to save his family. He spent many, many days in the desert, and could only rest a few hours, once the sun set and the gentle moon rose. Each night, the beautiful moon reminded him of his lover's beautiful white hair, and gave him courage again for the next day. So, each morning at sunrise, he rose like the sun, and resumed his long, long journey through the desert."

"...And on the fifteenth day," said Cassandra. "He found an oasis."

All the children looked back, only noticing them now.

"Mommy!" shouted two of the boys in the group.

They suddenly stood up and ran to their mother. Neither of them looked older than ten years old... The older one of the

two arrived first, hugging his mom's legs, while the younger one grabbed her hand.

"Mommy, Cessi was reading us a great story!"

"I know, I love that story."

Yassim was baffled. There were a dozen children there, and from what he could see, half of them had light-colored

skin! Not as white as the Water Goddess', but definitely lighter than any other person's skin in the Dragon Empire. He was

dying to ask if all six were her children, including the two young women. Aside from the older boy who had run to his mother,

only one of the boys and one of the girls on the grass also had green eyes; all the other children's eyes were dark. But the fact

that the one holding her hand had black eyes meant not all her children had inherited that feature...

"Children, this is Yassim the Wise. He came from the Eastern Kingdom."

All the children suddenly turned their eyes to him, and for a second, the old man felt a bit panicked. However, things

didn't turn out at all like he had expected. Actually, the children with darker skin stood up and bowed politely before leaving

the grounds. ...Were those children of servants? The ones with lighter skin that remained were obviously related to the Imperial

Family, and they all wore purple or green clothing...

"From the Eastern Kingdom?" said the other young woman, sitting next to the one who was reading. "Really?"

She bore a close resemblance to the girl next to her, but she had dark eyes, freckles on her nose, and her hair was cut at

an unusual shoulder length. She exchanged a look with the young woman next to her.

"Yes, my lady," replied Yassim, bowing.

“This young woman is Tessa, my niece,” said Cassandra. “Next to her is my oldest daughter, Cessilia. Then, there’s my third-born daughter, Sadara...”

Sadara waved shyly at him, her big green eyes sparkling with interest. Next to her was a boy about the same age as her

and, unlike his younger brothers, he hadn’t moved and was frowning instead.

“Mother, what does he want?!”

“This impolite child is my third son, Shenan. And those two are his little brothers, Kassein and Sepheus.”

Yassim kept nodding, wondering if it was important he remembered all those names. He was trying to do the math in his

head to understand how many children the Water Goddess had. With five boys and three girls, it meant... at least eight children?

“Where are Kiera and Raissa?” she asked the two young women.

“Raissa is with Mom,” answered Tessa. “Kiera... was with us until an hour ago, I think?”

Cassandra sighed.

“She probably ran off somewhere again... Did she leave Kiki here?”

The two girls exchanged a look.

“I’m not sure...” finally muttered Tessa.

The Princess’ mother didn’t look too happy with that answer. To Yassim’s surprise, she turned her eyes toward the sky

and the walls of the garden, as if she was looking around for something.

“Krai!” she suddenly called loudly.

Yassim froze, hearing a sudden, loud noise one second later like an earthquake, as well as a gust of wind. He could tell

something big was moving on the other side of that wall, something very, very big. A fright chilled the old man’s body, as a

shadow suddenly grew in front of them. Something dark and incredibly huge...

“There you are,” sighed Cassandra.

The gigantic Black Dragon stood with all its might, grabbing the top of that wall with its claws as if to support its

humongous weight with it. Yassim was struck both by the magnificence and scary size of that creature. Its scales were shining

like onyx under the sunlight, and its big, red eyes were like ruby jewels, both gleaming and frightening. It moved its body with

surprising grace considering its size, and its movements were akin to a snake or a feline. Its front paws landed one after the

other in the grass, and Yassim couldn’t help but take a step back as this creature was now in the garden, headed in their

direction.

“Krai!” exclaimed the two younger boys, running toward the beast.

It was terrifying to see such young children run fearlessly toward the Black Dragon, but no one else seemed shocked.

Instead, Cassandra crossed her arms and the Black Dragon kept coming forward, its gigantic tail whipping the air around. Krai

growled softly, a growl that echoed throughout the area and left Yassim wondering how big that mouth was... and those fangs.

"You... You let Kiera leave again, didn't you?" Cassandra scolded the dragon. "Did she feed you meat, Krai? You can't let the children trick you with treats each time!"

The Black Dragon laid down in front of the human woman, its head between its paws, and growled again, a short one this time. The two boys immediately began climbing to play on its back. Yassim was astonished. A huge creature like that, with such sharp claws, was lying like a house dog in front of the Princess? No wonder that woman was considered a living deity!

"You're supposed to watch all the children, you know," Cassandra added. "...Were you napping?"

Krai turned its head to the side, visibly ignoring her scolding. Yassim was truly unable to believe his eyes. Was it only

an impression, or had the dragon purposely turned away to... pout?

Cassandra sighed, putting a hand on her hip.

"Fine, I guess I can use the good old method then... Call the little ones, Krai, please."

The dragon rose its head, this time glancing toward the lake, and let out a long, more high-pitched growl. Yassim had a hard time keeping his eyes off the majestic yet terrifying creature, but a myriad of little sounds coming from the lake convinced him to glance in that direction next. The water was moving, making small swirls at the surface. ...Fish? The waves seemed too large to be the work of mere fish...

"...You should step away from my aunt, old man," said Tessa.

Realizing she was talking to him, Yassim carefully distanced himself from the Water Goddess, who was walking

toward the lake. All of a sudden, something jumped out of the water at full speed, splattering the grass around, and began running in the Water Goddess' direction. For a second, Yassim mistook it for a gigantic snake, but it was way too fast. This

thing obviously had limbs, four of them, and... a pair of wings. Another suddenly jumped out of the water, of a different color,

and another one after that. In a few seconds' time, no less than four little creatures with scales of various shiny colors were running on the grass at a scary speed to get to the Princess.

Yassim couldn't believe his own eyes... Those little ones were all tiny dragons! Baby dragons!

The man was completely baffled. He knew the Dragon Empire had dragons, but he didn't think he'd see so many of them at once, from so close too!

Just a few seconds later, the Princess was surrounded by those small creatures, all trying to climb over her or making high-pitched sounds at her feet. They were moving around a lot, but thanks to their very different colors, Yassim counted four of

them. The biggest was a black one, about as big as a large dog or a snow leopard, but including the tail, it was the length of two of those. It was rubbing its body like a cat against the Princess' leg, and this dragon was a lot like the large one she had called Krai, but with a smaller tail and wings, and a longer body. It was arching itself in Yassim's direction, with glowing sapphire eyes and some faint growling. Another one was next to it, also moving around the Princess, visibly trying to approach her without climbing over a light-green dragon, which was just a bit smaller. The two smallest were the ones climbing all over the Princess, trying to get around her shoulders or in her arms. They were both still a bit too big to be there, and were flapping their wings and kept bickering to get more space, even growling at each other in annoyance. One was a bright orange-red color, while the other was dark blue, and it was only thanks to the difference in color that Yassim could follow their bodies, flying around and bickering, until Cassandra clicked her tongue.

"Enough, you two!"

As soon as she did that, both of the small ones jumped down on the grass, a bit quieter, but still rushed beneath their

older peers to rub themselves against her ankles too, like angsty kittens.

Then, a fifth dragon came out of the water, more shyly than the others. This one was gray, and even bigger than the black and blue-eyed one. Yet, it looked like it was almost afraid of the Princess, and tried to slither away.

"Kiki."

The dragon froze, and Krai suddenly growled at this little one too. As soon as the big Black Dragon had growled, all

four of the little dragons quickly scattered. The two small ones ran to the little boys, hiding behind them, while the other two

went to the elder sister, Cessilia, curling up next to the folds of her purple dress, one on each side, and put their heads on her

lap. She chuckled and petted them, but they all had eyes on poor Kiki.

Cassandra sighed and walked up to the Gray Dragon.

"Kiki, go find your owner. And you'd better stay with her this time!" she said.

As soon as she was done talking, the Gray Dragon flapped its tiny wings, and although it looked like they wouldn't be

strong enough to carry its weight, the little one managed to get itself above the wall.

Even after Kiki was gone, Yassim was still

unable to process what had just happened, what he was seeing. Dragons! Baby dragons everywhere!

"Children, go see your Aunt Phemera for a little while," Cassandra suddenly said. "I need to talk with your older sister."

They all obeyed immediately without a complaint, apparently happy to go see "Auntie Mera", their little dragons

following after them. Once those four and their dragons were gone, only the two older girls and the huge Black Dragon were left in the garden. Calm befell the garden and Cassandra smiled at her daughter.

“Cessilia, this man has something to ask you.”

Cessilia exchanged a look with her cousin.

“...Is it alright if I stay, Auntie?” asked Tessa.

Cassandra nodded gently, and the two young women stood up, Cessilia keeping her book tight against her chest. Once she was standing, Yassim noticed that the young lady was obviously tall for her age... perhaps another family trait, from her father’s side this time. He had heard rumors about the War God being as tall as a giant... Although he had expected the rumor to be a bit of an exaggeration, Cessilia was definitely not a petite woman. She had her mother’s slender figure, though, but more defined muscles, which he could see from her exposed arms. Perhaps because she was a young woman, she wore a bit more jewelry: bracelets, earrings, and also a wide-band golden choker around her neck, covering most of it.

Tessa briefly glanced toward her aunt before her dark eyes went to Yassim. Now that he was seeing her from a bit

closer, her cousin also had a hint of green in her eyes, although it was very faint.

“Cessilia is my eldest daughter, she’s eighteen years old,” said Cassandra. “She and Tessa were born in the same year, which is why they are so close.”

“...Auntie, what is this about?” asked Tessa, frowning.

Yassim could see the defiance in her cousin’s dark eyes; she was probably well aware of their nations’ bloody history

together. She didn’t bother to hide her frown and acted somewhat cautious, with a hand on her hip. Unlike most women he had

seen in the Dragon Empire, Tessa was wearing pants and a cropped top that flattered her flat stomach and curvy figure better

than a dress would have, and she wore only green too. Although, she was also wearing several items of gold jewelry, even in

her long braids. Yassim also noted how she stood slightly off profile, as if she was ready to step in between him and Cessilia

at any moment. Unlike her, though, Cessilia looked much more relaxed, just a bit curious and surprised.

Cassandra glanced his way, so Yassim understood she was expecting him to explain himself alone. He nodded and

bowed once more to the two young ladies.

“Good morning, my ladies. I am Yassim the Wise, a close advisor to His Highness, King Ashen the White.”

“...K-King Ashen?” repeated Cessilia.

Yassim was a bit taken aback by the Princess’s visible surprise, but he nodded, thinking she ought to be shocked by the reason for his visit after all.

“Yes, my lady. I have come to the Dragon Empire to extend my King’s request that they provide him with a... possible future queen for the Eastern Kingdom.”

“You want to send Cessilia as a prospective wife, Auntie?” asked Tessa, clearly shocked too.

“Only if she wants to go,” said Cassandra, very calm, her green eyes on her daughter. For a few seconds, mother and daughter exchanged a long look in silence. Some silent discussion seemed to be happening between them, between Lady Cassandra’s calm and gentle expression and that little spark in her daughter’s eyes.

Then, Cessilia turned to Yassim.

“D-did the K-King r-really ask for... for me as his wife, S-Sir Yas-...Yassim?”

Yassim was too shocked to answer her right away. This time, it couldn’t be a surprise. Her way of speech... The

Princess had read that book perfectly fine before, but just now... She was a stutterer?

As a man called wise, Yassim quickly hid his surprise and nodded politely.

“My lord still has no queen by his side, Princess, and he is actively looking for one befitting the position. He sent me

away to find for him a Princess of the Dragon Empire.”

Yassim knew he was in a dangerous position if he lied to the Princess or the Imperial Family, but the man was at his

wits’ end and was now betting everything on this moment. He already considered himself quite lucky he had made it this far

and that the Princess looked interested in his query...

“I s-see...” muttered Cessilia, looking down.

“You’re the only one of age, Cessilia,” her mother gently said, “but this is your decision.”

“We don’t have any obligation to comply with the King’s demand, right, Auntie?” asked Tessa, still frowning.

“Of course not.”

Yassim kept his head down. No, they didn’t have any. He was an old man and had come alone, to almost beg them to

agree to send one of their precious daughters to a kingdom they had been at war with for longer than they had been at peace.

Moreover, there was no discussion to even be held in terms of difference in power. The Dragon Empire was extremely rich,

prosperous, and had dragons to defend it. Whereas their Kingdom was barely recovering from the wounds of the past civil

wars, a broken system, and the loss of many of their own people. Even if they sent him back in little chunks with an insult

tattooed on his forehead, there would be nothing that could be done in retaliation, nothing.

Hence, Yassim the Wise was presently very happy to see that Princess Cessilia was actually contemplating his request.

He had come with nothing else to give other than a little chest full of cheap treasures and his good word.

“D-did you ask Aunt Sh-Shareen?” asked Cessilia, turning to her mother again.

"It's your decision, Cessi. Your decision alone. Your aunt allowed this man to meet you, didn't she?"

Cessilia's eyes went back to Yassim, and she gave him a faint smile. The old man was grateful but still surprised. Was the Princess seriously considering this? Going to a kingdom she knew nothing of to meet a complete stranger? As she remained silent a bit longer, he decided to take a little step forward, bowing again, and push his luck.

"Our King is young, my lady, but a very handsome and smart man. He is named Ashen the White King, and just three years older than you."

"Ashen...?"

"Yes, my lady," said the man, bowing deeper.

A silence followed, and Yassim wondered if he wasn't overstepping. Yet, none of the women said anything, until he raised his head and saw the Princess' conflicted green eyes.

"...Why is th-that his n-name? The White K-King?" asked Cessilia.

"That is because our King's hair is white, my lady, like the Great God in our lore."

"W-white?" she repeated, visibly surprised.

"Yes."

Cessilia sighed faintly. Her fingers were fidgeting against her book, and her eyes were looking vacantly at the grass.

"Cessi?" called out her cousin, seemingly worried.

"...You want to go, don't you?"

Cassandra's words surprised Yassim, but Cessilia's expression when she turned her green eyes back to her mother surprised him even more so. There was a strange glimmer of... excitement in her eyes. She bit her lower lip slightly.

"Yes, b-but... Father..."

"Are you scared of your father's reaction?"

"I'm n-not scared of F-Father, b-but... if he s-says no..."

Cassandra let out a long sigh and stepped forward, suddenly hugging her daughter gently. Cessilia's eyes opened a bit wider in surprise, but she hugged her mother back with one arm. When she finally stepped back, Cassandra smiled gently at her and caressed her long curls.

"Cessilia, do you remember what I told Kiera last week?"

"Th-that we all have an adventure t-to live, but K-Kiera was t-too impatient for hers?"

"That's right. I believe this is your adventure, Cessi. The one you have been waiting for, patiently. ...Unlike your sister."

Both women chuckled. Then, Cassandra tenderly grasped her daughter's chin with her hand.

"You're too cautious, as always, and too scared. Don't be... You're much stronger than you think, Cessi; you're an amazing young woman and very smart too. I think it's time you learn to bloom on your own, my love, away from the nest."

When she let go, her daughter was blushing, but smiling, looking a bit happier. Next to her, her cousin chuckled, crossing her arms.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “I’m not letting you go anywhere without me, and I’m actually curious about that neighbor of ours.”

“Are you going too, Tessa?” asked Cassandra, raising an eyebrow.

“Of course! I’m not letting Cessi go there on her own!”

“I don’t mind, but what will your mother say?”

Tessa suddenly grimaced.

“...Can’t you come up with an ex—”

“I am not lying to my own sister for your sake, Tessa,” interrupted Cassandra.

“But Mom will never let me!” protested the young woman. “She’s worse than a harpy and she will complain about me

not helping at the shop! She doesn’t care about me wandering around, but if she hears I’m going to the other side of the frontier,

she will drag my butt back and lock me up! You know she’s able to!”

“You forget about your dad,” chuckled Cassandra. “What about him? Anour will be worried sick if you disappear out of the blue...”

Tessa stayed silent for a second, then her eyes lit up.

“Alright, I’ll send word to Dad then. He’ll be so much more terrified to tell Mom the truth, it will give me at least a

week before she picks up on something.”

“You’re g-going to be in tr-trouble...”

“Don’t worry, Cessi, my dad will probably take half of my mom’s wrath first...”

“Poor Anour...” sighed Cassandra. “Alright then, I will talk to your mother later... but you girls should go to the Onyx Castle first.”

“What ab-... about my b-brothers?” asked Cessilia, looking a bit worried. “If they know...”

“Your father sent them both to train in the mountains, they aren’t there at the moment.

That’s why you should go see him

now before they come back.”

Cassandra stepped forward to hug her daughter, and then her niece, and Yassim suddenly realized they were already saying goodbye.

“M-my ladies, I know it is a long journey to the Eastern Kingdom,” he said, “but there really isn’t such a hurry...”

“Oh, we’d better get out of here before my mom finds out,” retorted Tessa.

“It’s alright,” chuckled Cassandra. “If you fly there, it will only take a few hours. Cessilia can come back any time she

wants, even tonight, if she doesn’t like it. Moreover, she should leave before her younger siblings take notice too; otherwise,

you will have four more dragons following you. I think even for His Majesty, that would be a bit too many guests at once...”

Yassim was astonished. The Dragon Empire's people really thought differently! Not only was the Water Goddess fine with sending her daughter away, but she was sending her... right away? He glanced toward the majestic Black Dragon next to them. From what he had seen, all the children had their own dragons, so it made sense that Princess Cessilia could indeed fly wherever she wanted, anytime she wanted... Still, Yassim was a bit worried. What if, once the Princess knew the truth, she prematurely decided to leave? He'd be losing his old head this time...  
"There."

To Yassim's surprise, without him noticing, some servants had arrived, one holding the little chest he had brought with him. The others were bringing two satchels for the young women. Cassandra took the little chest and handed it to her daughter with a faint smile, glancing toward Yassim.

"Sir Yassim came with these, as an offering for you."

"R-really?" asked Cessilia.

"Ah, yes, Princess," said the man, bowing. "All those are for you."

The Princess opened the chest, visibly a bit excited. Yassim's heart was beating fast. They were very small and humble treasures, but he had hoped the daughter would find something of worth in there like her mother had... Next to her, Tessa was grimacing while staring at the contents of the little chest, but she didn't say anything, even when Cessilia handed the chest to her as she took the books out.

"I had b-been looking for these b-books!" she exclaimed, staring at the old books in awe.

"Those are rare editions, my lady," said Yassim, a bit flattered.

"I know... They were m-mentioned once in another one I had b-been reading, and I was d-dying to find them... Even my

b-brother tried to find them for me b-but c-couldn't... Th-thank you, Sir Yassim."

"I'm glad they make you happy, my lady."

Yassim noticed how she stuttered a bit less when she was happy. The Princess' emerald eyes were sparkling with happiness as she held the volumes and kept caressing their covers with her fingers, obviously thrilled. He smiled too, unable to hold it back as her smile was so beautiful. Princess Cessilia seemed like a beautiful and intelligent young woman indeed. Yassim bowed again, praying loudly in his heart that the Princess and her dazzling green eyes could warm the White King's ice-cold heart...

## Chapter 2

"Ask Nebora if you need anything else," said Cassandra as Tessa took the bags from the servants' hands.

"I will. ...Are you s-sure this is f-fine, Mom?" muttered Cessilia.

Her mother smiled gently and caressed her hair a bit more.

“I have a good feeling. Plus, you’re going with Tessa. What should I be worried about?” Behind Cessilia, Tessa gave her aunt a confident nod and walked up to the Black Dragon, leaving the poor old Yassim in awe. It couldn’t be... Those girls were preparing to ride this beast? With him?! Cessilia lovingly hugged her mother, then walked up to Krai, gently patting its snout, while her cousin was already climbing onto the dragon’s back. Once on top, the young woman put down the two satchels and held out her hand to help Cessilia climb up.

“Hurry up, old man!” she suddenly shouted at Yassim.

“M-my ladies, you’re not expecting me to... mount this deity creature!”

“The deity creature will be twenty times faster than a horse,” sighed Tessa, “and I promise he won’t eat you unless we ask him to!”

Yassim let his jaw down without thinking and turned to Lady Cassandra.

“...The d-dragons really eat humans?”

“Don’t worry,” chuckled the Princess. “This one’s been on a low-human diet for a few years now.”

Yassim needed a few seconds to process those words, wondering if she was simply toying with him. They wouldn’t really have let a creature that could eat human beings near the Imperial Children, right? Seeing the two young ladies ready to go and waiting for him, Yassim had no choice but to move, and he did so very, very carefully. The old man took a long detour around the mighty Black Dragon, even though Krai visibly had no interest in him. Instead, it raised its head high for Cessilia to scratch behind its horns, making high-pitched sounds of satisfaction. Yassim had to gather all the courage he had left in his body to accept Lady Tessa’s help and set foot on the onyx scales. The height once on the dragon’s back was impressive, but he didn’t have time to look down. He was seated right behind Tessa, who quickly explained to him where to hang on.

“K-Krai, let’s go,” gently said Cessilia, patting its neck.

The dragon turned its head to Cassandra, who gave it a gentle pat on the hip before standing back.

Yassim was terrified, but he thought he was a blessed mortal to ever be given a chance to climb on a dragon’s back and ride it! The large black wings spread far on the sides, showing off the dragon’s unexpected width, and Krai flapped them twice before suddenly taking off. The climb was so sudden, it felt like the dragon had jumped up and forgot to fall back down.

Yassim gasped loudly and held on, frozen by fear. He was riding a dragon!

“Close your mouth, old man,” chuckled Tessa. “You won’t like it if something flies in!”

“Sir Yassim,” said Cessilia. “We can make s-stops if you need. D-dragon flying can be d-difficult for elders...”

“Our grandmother hates flying now,” nodded her cousin. “She always says she’d rather walk all the way from the Diamond Palace to the Imperial Palace than mount a dragon again!”

“I am alright, my ladies,” lied Yassim with a grimace. “I am honored to be allowed to... fly this wonderful creature. Ddo

you mind if I ask a few questions, though? The old man I am still holds much curiosity for the wonders of the Dragon

Empire, and now that I have seen this, I can’t help but wonder...”

“Ask away,” nodded Tessa. “Most people in this Empire don’t get to see the dragons often either, to be honest.”

“Only my little s-sister goes out with hers.”

Yassim nodded. He had understood the young Lady Kiera was one to run away, but it looked like the younger siblings

were usually watched by this adult dragon.

“M-may I ask about this... magnificent dragon? I wonder about the size difference with... the younger ones from earlier...”

“K-Krai is Father’s d-dragon,” said Cessilia.

“The dragons you saw earlier were babies,” explained Tessa. “Dragons don’t grow like humans; they undergo major

growth spurts when their master matures, around teenage years. We don’t know much about the reasons behind the size

differences from one dragon to another, but the stronger their master, the bigger the dragon. You saw Auntie Shareen’s Golden

Dragon earlier, right? That’s Glahad, our grandfather’s dragon. He’s getting smaller with the years because his owner

passed...”

“When I was a b-baby, Glahad was much b-bigger than Krai... K-Krai is still growing t-too.”

Perhaps from hearing its name, the Black Dragon let out a long growl, and Cessilia gently patted its neck.

Yassim was stunned. So this red-eyed dragon was the War God’s Dragon itself?

Moreover, if the Golden Dragon from

earlier used to be bigger, he couldn’t even imagine that mountain of scales moving! It was worth ten armies! The old man took

a few minutes to rethink everything he had ever learned about the Dragon Empire’s dragons, but he had just learned more in a

few minutes than in years of study. Somewhere in his heart, the old Yassim felt incredibly grateful to have lived to this day.

However, he couldn’t just be stunned by the moment and forget his mission... As beautiful and impressive as the

wonders of the Dragon Empire were, his heart was solidly chained to the Eastern Kingdom’s fate. Those dragons were a

magnificent gift, but a much more important creature was riding one at the moment. He ought to be sure of who he was tying his

fate to and perhaps his King’s too.

“Lady Tessa... M-may I ask how come you’re also... speaking as one of the former Emperor’s granddaughters...?”

“My father was one of his sons and Auntie Shareen’s half-brother,” Tessa explained, “but like our other uncles and

aunties, my dad abandoned his title as an Imperial Prince after Auntie Shareen took the throne to simplify the succession for

Cessi’s big brother. I have no title; I’m merely a relative of the Imperial Family and a merchant’s daughter, although Cessi and I are cousins from both our mothers’ and fathers’ sides.”

The two girls smiled at each other, looking as close as sisters indeed. Yassim was impressed. All of his teaching about

the Dragon Empire had shown centuries of bloody fighting between all the previous emperors’ many concubines and children

for the succession. For each new ruler, a long trail of blood had to be spilled for him to access the golden throne, his hands

dirtied by many of his siblings’ blood. It was no secret that most concubines weren’t afraid to kill to protect their progeny if

said progeny didn’t kill their own siblings themselves once they were old enough. Even Empress Shareen’s generation had

been the theater of an impressive war between her father’s six sons. Yassim thought he had come prepared, knowing that

Empress Shareen had been crowned despite three out of her six brothers still being alive, but now, it turned out this was all a

peaceful agreement between the remaining siblings? His scenario of the War God scaring his two younger siblings into

obedience was completely wrong! As it turned out, both had willingly forfeited their lineage for their nephew to become the

heir apparent? This was truly an amazing Empire!

“Isn’t... His Highness, your father, retaining any desire to return to the Imperial Palace?”

“My dad?” scoffed Tessa. “He’s better off away from it! He only goes once in a while to deliver our aunt her favorite

alcohol from our family brewery my mother established, and that’s it!”

Yassim was speechless. A former Imperial Prince was now a family man and an alcohol merchant? How unbelievable!

“Our turn to ask questions!” exclaimed Tessa with a big smile, brushing her flying hair and little braids out of her face.

“Tell us about your King that wants to marry Cessi. How is he? You said he’s young, isn’t he!”

Yassim’s expression fell before he could remember to control it, so he bowed as much as he could while riding a flying

mount to hide his face.

“Yes, my lady. King Ashen the White is young, but an admirable, young king. Our Kingdom has suffered many difficult

years...”

“Your Kingdom used to be a Republic, didn’t it?” scoffed Tessa. “We were taught about your civil wars too. You guys

fell for one tyrant after another, and you called us barbaric because we are an empire.”  
“T-Tessa...” muttered Cessilia, pulling her cousin’s sleeve.

“It’s true, my ladies,” sighed Yassim. “Our system was failing long before we sought war with the Dragon Empire; that is the truth. The gap between our poor citizens and the rich elites brought the Goddess of War upon our nation... Our once-wise leaders were no better than an assembly of greedy people back then, seeking to put the blame for failure on each other, with only a handful daring to take responsibility and find better solutions. And those who did were quickly blamed for any new failure to bring back the equilibrium and killed as an example until no one dared to speak anymore.”

“...Was there n-no leader to m-make a d-... decision?” asked Cessilia.

“There were leaders, my lady, but most were too worried about protecting themselves from our angry people to dare speak up and act! The issue with our former Republic was that once a leader stood out, he didn’t have enough power to carry his actions efficiently. Thus, all the good men who could have brought change found themselves powerless and were considered failures instead of given the support they needed!”

“But you still managed to decide to go to war with our Empire twenty years ago,” said Tessa.

“Yes, my lady. A lot of those leaders were... blinded by the promise of treasures and better days. Many of our famished citizens enrolled in that war hoping to get money to send to their families.”  
Yassim sighed, and shook his head.

“Once we lost the war and the army returned, utterly defeated, anger rose once again, and our Republic fell into the hands of the Goddess of Chaos. Our infuriated citizens attacked the noble houses to steal what they could, good citizens became bandits overnight, and no power was strong enough to stop the chaos. The... Goddess of Chaos kept her power over our lands for ten years like this, whilst many tried to stop the madness.”

“Ten years...” grumbled Tessa.

“That’s right, my lady. For ten years, our nation slowly fell into chaos. The fights stopped at times, everyone trying to find what they could of a normal life, hoping a new leader would emerge soon to bring back the peace, but... for many, the anger was too strong. The nobles who tried to seize power were overthrown one after the other by citizens who couldn’t stand to see their former masters wield the power again. Until, twelve years ago, a man who could finally lead us rose. He declared himself the new King, former General Ashtoran.”

“Ashtoran...?”

“General Ashtoran was no noble like the previous men who had tried to conquer our land. He had once been one of the

nobles' servants and had risen through hard work and devotion to his position. Hence, our citizens liked this man much better than the previous nobles, and when he took power, no one tried to stop him."

"To stop him?" repeated Tessa, frowning. "You make it sound like this General wasn't such good news..."

Yassim shook his head slowly.

"...To this day, this old servant still believes the price for bringing back peace was too costly. The General gathered many of those who had once been his men and created a new army with his own colors."

"You're saying he stopped the chaos through more violence, then."

"...Yes, my lady. The new King's rule was cruel, ruthless, and terrified our citizens into obedience. However, this new regime worked to stop a lot of the bandits who were constantly harassing the defenseless, so slowly, our people abided by it, fearing our new King as much as those he protected them from."

Yassim glanced toward the green-eyed Princess. She was obviously listening with a hint of sadness in her eyes, but in silence. Was it because of her speech impairment that this Princess was much quieter than her cousin? He could see in her eyes she was very captivated, though, as if she were listening to a fascinating story, breathing a bit more intensely... The old man resumed, his old heart still with the hope that this young woman could one day shift the fate of their Kingdom too.

"The... harsh policies of King Ashtoran brought him to more and more extreme ends. The image our new King had was extremely conflicted. Some saw him as a tyrant... others as a hero. Out of fear that civil wars and in-fighting would destroy our nation from within again, the new King let absolutely no mistake slip through. Some were grateful for how efficient his policies were at cleaning our streets, but others... tried to plead that the King was far too merciless. Any crime resulted in a death sentence, even the smallest thefts. As one of his servants myself, I witnessed the long, long lines of people being given their death sentence, every day. It didn't matter the age, gender, or wealth of the ones who had been accused of being criminals. King Ashtoran's men were judge, jury, and executioner, leaving no time for people to get back on their feet on their own. Many people only had the choice to starve or be killed as a thief..."

"That's depressing," grumbled Tessa. "...Alright, we get the picture, but how did that change from the General to your present King? You said the new one rose to power only five years ago. Is he his son or something? We're certainly not going if he's another blood-thirsty tyrant."

"King Ashen is the General's son indeed," Yassim slowly nodded, "but unlike what you think, our King didn't succeed

his father. A few years later in the General's reign, more and more people, seeing he couldn't be reasoned with and had no intention to bring back the democracy or republic system, tried to murder him. It was said... that one of his sons, Prince Ashen, was one of the victims of those murder attempts."

The two young women exchanged a glance.

"Wait. You're saying your King... died? Is this a joke?"

"No, my lady. Rumor has it that Prince Ashen died seven years ago. After his death, the King got even more ruthless...

and with more people protesting against him, new civil wars began, even worse than the first time. Our nation was torn

between the security provided by a tyrant leader and our desire for peace and freedom.

However, everything stopped five years ago upon Prince Ashen's return."

"He returned? From... the dead?" said Tessa, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes, my lady. The Prince came back, out of nowhere, after two years. He was the General's mistress' son and, if I'm

allowed to say such a thing, the only one of the General's sons our people had sympathy for or didn't care about at all. Yet, he

returned from the dead, his hair white like the Goddess of Death, and killed the General, his own father."

"He... did what?"

Yassim took a deep breath.

"That is the truth, my lady. After many fights had happened already, at dawn, a White King rose, on the castle's walls,

holding the tyrant's head, and threw it to the angry citizens' feet. That White King was the former Prince Ashen, as many

recognized him easily. That morning, he spoke loudly and said he had been sent to the gods, but the gods had only taken him to

their realm for the sake of the Eastern Kingdom's people. The gods themselves had trained him to become a worthy king for our

Kingdom. As proof, the gods had sent him back with his hair completely white, a legendary armor made of a dragon's skin, and

the strength of a god."

The cousins exchanged a glance, both visibly surprised and doubtful.

"...Well, congrats," scoffed Tessa. "It sounds like you guys traded a tyrant for a psycho."

Despite the young woman's harsh words, Yassim couldn't even answer anything to that. In a way, he knew his home

nation had traded the worst possible outcome for another, not much brighter one. Better than anyone else perhaps, he knew how

complicated and deep the situation was for the King of the East. The white-haired young man had returned, grown and much

more mature than the child everyone had remembered, with a gigantic, dark hole in his heart, and that rage that wouldn't leave

his eyes. The truth was, perhaps the new King would end up being worse than his father. In a desperate desire for another

leader and a different outcome, perhaps they had sealed their fate... Yet, when Yassim looked ahead at the young green-eyed woman, a light of hope appeared in his old heart. He had come here on a crazy bet, a silly idea. As old as he was, Yassim wasn't scared to die, if not in vain or painfully. However, this old man wouldn't be able to lie peacefully if he couldn't try, one last time, to do something for his country. It was too soon to tell the truth to the Princess, and he knew he'd pay the price later. But, if by an incredible chance, his assumption turned out to be right, this old servant would be truly grateful he hadn't made this journey in vain... "What's your relationship to the King?" asked Tessa. "He only sent one man to the Dragon Empire to fetch him a wife, isn't that too few?"

Yassim bowed as much as he could, while trying not to fall off.

"His Highness charged this mission to this servant alone, my lady. While the previous King was still alive, I was tasked with the education of the young Prince, and I taught him all I could, to the best of my abilities. I watched over this young man for many years, and I believe I am one of his closest aides. Our King is young, and due to the chaotic past of our nation, he still has many, many enemies. I am sad to admit, the people our King can truly trust are too few."

"A real nest of snakes, then... So, he sent you here almost on a secret mission, then?"

"No one else knows I was sent here," admitted Yassim.

It was important to him not to lie to Their Highnesses, at least to avoid it as much as he could. He was already

incredibly lucky that the Princess had agreed to this insane request, and he was mentally preparing for when the truth would be unveiled at any moment. He only hoped he'd get a chance to offer his apologies...

"Sounds like a lot of fun," chuckled Tessa, playing around with one of her braids. "Oh well, it will be entertaining at least..."

It was impressive how those young ladies didn't seem to fear anything, not even going to a different land to face a king who had allegedly killed his own father.

Yassim felt their countries, despite many similarities, were still two different worlds. He couldn't help but feel

saddened as the gigantic Black Dragon flew effortlessly above the lands and villages, the citizens of the Dragon Empire appearing like tiny dots far below. Those forests were green, their lands full of growing crops, the houses full of happy

families living their everyday lives under a stable Empire. The Eastern Kingdom knew little about their neighbor because they had too much to figure out on their own. How much would both countries have thrived if there had been any room to learn from

the other! As a wise man and scholar, Yassim could only feel disheartened by all that knowledge that wasn't shared, how so much hatred and doubt had been fueled instead of trust... She had no idea yet, but this young Princess might be the one to bring an incredible change to both nations' futures.

As the girls had mentioned, riding a dragon was bound to bring them to their destination faster than any horse. After a while, the landscapes below and ahead slightly changed, mountains perking up right in front of them. The villages and human habitations were getting rarer as well, and the temperature was getting colder around them. They had been flying for a while, and Yassim was glad he had brought a cape, but he was not ready for the north of the Empire. Unlike their Kingdom, the Dragon Empire was more lengthy than wide, hence, its northern regions were much colder than the Capital, and most of their lands.

From afar, he spotted the dark building. It wasn't just a black castle; the fortress was shining incredibly as the sun was setting in the sky. Was it getting late already? Yassim hadn't realized. He had arrived in the Capital that morning, waited a long time to see the Empress, and now, had spent even longer on a dragon's back. Neither the dragon carrying them nor the young ladies seemed in need of a break. While Krai was only flapping its wings lazily from time to time, the girls ate meat-filled buns from their satchels, giving Yassim one, and enjoyed the ride quietly, obviously used to this. The wind was getting stronger, colder, and louder, hence they couldn't speak much for now.

When the Black Dragon started descending, the old man felt most grateful to finally catch a break. Although the ride was rather stable, it was very uncomfortable to sit on a scaled and not flat seat... What he hadn't expected, though, was the actual size of that castle. He had been impressed by the incredible size of the Imperial Palace in the Capital, but he hadn't expected there would be any other big structures in the Empire. Yet, this castle was getting bigger and bigger, and they weren't close yet! He had been misled by the lack of other buildings or villages around to compare the size, but he really understood how he'd been fooled when he realized that what he had mistaken for a small statue was actually another full-sized dragon!

The beast was growling loudly as they approached, and Yassim was impressed by the mighty creature. This one wasn't as big as the War God's Dragon, but it was certainly the closest he had seen so far. Unlike the not-so-small ones from earlier, this yellowish-brown one was an adult size, as large and long as five horses, and just a bit smaller than Krai. Moreover, it wouldn't stop moving its scaly body around, growling loudly as they landed. "Hi, Dran!" exclaimed Tessa, jumping down as soon as Krai landed.

"It's my second brother's dragon..." explained Cessilia as she gently helped Yassim come down.

"Oh... So this is what Lady Tessa meant about the dragon's size earlier..."

Yassim was once again genuinely impressed, but also terrified. This dragon was an adult size, and very unruly,

growling and pulling on the chain around its neck to try and get closer to the girls. Its claws had ravaged all the soil around it.

Yassim was surprised to see one of the dragons chained. So they didn't leave those creatures completely free, after all?

Behind them, Krai loudly growled after Dran the Yellow Dragon, and both began exchanging deafening growls.

"Oh, he's probably being punished..." grimaced Tessa. "Don't get close to Dran, old man, he's a bit more dangerous,

and he's stupid enough that he'd bite you without thinking. Dragon teenagehood."

Yassim nodded helplessly, but even without Tessa's warning, he would have never been brave enough to approach the

reckless dragon of his own volition. This one was visibly younger than Krai, and much more agitated, growling and showing

its fangs, its tail whipping the air and knocking against the wall behind it. If it hadn't been chained, what havoc such a creature

could have caused! Yassim didn't even dare imagine. And this was only one of the many dragons they had!

Because he had been too captivated by the appearance of another one of those creatures, Yassim almost missed the man

coming out of the castle's gates. Not that he could be missed, though; he had never seen such an imposing man.

This couldn't be anyone else but the War God himself. He was moving like a deity among mortals, his impressive body

exuding an immeasurable strength and aura. His dark eyes were pinning the old man right where he stood, as if they mirrored

storm and chaos, ready to unleash hell. The man was wearing a thick, black cape on his shoulders, confounding his long, black

hair. He had strong features, a straight jawline, and a presence that imposed respect right away. Not even the most brazen

soldier would have dared step out of line. Yet, the young Princess smiled and ran fearlessly into this man's arms.

"Dad!"

The War God opened his arms right before his daughter reached him, and hugged her back, a slight smile appearing on

his lips as the girl disappeared in his embrace.

"Cessi."

One word, but a voice as deep as a volcano. Yassim felt a strange emotion surge in him as he realized that he was given

the chance to meet this living legend, and the old man bowed right away, very emotional. After the Empress, the War God

himself was standing before him! The old man was shaking a bit, but being intimidated was expected. What he had not foreseen, however, was how incredibly gentle and fatherly the War God was toward his daughter. He hugged Cessilia for several seconds and reluctantly stepped away from her to stare at her as if he hadn't seen his daughter in a while. He even caressed her hair and kept a hand on her back.

"Hi, Uncle!" said Tessa, waving at him.

"...Tessa." He nodded, greeting his niece before looking at his daughter again. "What are you both doing here?"

Cessilia briefly glanced back at Yassim, and suddenly, the old man felt the pressure of the War God's stare on him, and bowed again, worried sick. This man obviously loves his daughter. Would he be willing to let her go...?

"This is Yassim the Wise, Father. He came from the Eastern Kingdom..."

The War God didn't answer to that, adding to Yassim's anxiety. He had come to take this man's daughter to another country, he wouldn't even dare cry if he was about to get his head cut off!

"...Come inside."

While neither of the girls seemed scared at all by the living god, poor Yassim's legs were ready to give in at any minute, and if it wasn't for Dran's sudden growl behind him, perhaps he wouldn't have dared to straighten back up and follow them inside!

"Father, why is D-Dran chai-... chained...?" asked Cessi, holding her father's arm as they walked inside.

"He's being punished."

"That idiot destroyed a mountain!" suddenly answered a feminine voice from inside.

"Auntie Nebbie!"

A beautiful woman appeared, with long, dark hair and pouty lips. She was wearing a floor-length, green dress and a coat, and from the way she carried a pile of clean clothes, she was probably a servant here, but to Yassim's surprise, both girls greeted her like a family member.

"What did that idiot do?" laughed Tessa.

"The pair of idiots decided it would be fun to play between the mountains, until they broke several rocks and provoked a landslide," sighed the dark-haired woman. "Darsan is not to come back until he puts it all back up, and Dran is not allowed to help him..."

She sent a glare toward the yellow beast, who answered with a growl. Yassim was lost. It couldn't be that the War God

had sent his son to put the mountain back with... his bare hands only? What kind of young man could do such a thing?! It would take months, even if it was possible! Those people had to be living in a different world or holding some secret power he hadn't

grasped...

"What are you girls doing here?" frowned the servant woman. "...Did Kiera run away again? She's not here."

"We know," chuckled Tessa. "She probably ran to Grandmother's or somewhere in the Capital with her friend."

"...I need... t-to t-talk t-to Father," muttered Cessilia.

Yassim took note that the young woman did seem nervous, and it reflected in her way of speech... The big, hopeful eyes

she had on her father didn't match his kind expression while looking at her, which made the old man more nervous. Princess

Cessilia expected her father to be reluctant to do this.

Noticing the exchange between those two, and her eyes gliding over the old man, Aunt Nebbie frowned, but Tessa

walked ahead, grabbing some towels.

"Aunt Nebora, should we make some tea first? And I have a few things to ask you to help us with..."

Taking her cue, Nebora nodded, and the two women quietly left, both sending worried or curious glances toward the strange trio left behind.

Poor Yassim was due for another dose of anxiety. He, along with the Princess, to explain to her father that he was about

to take her to his King, a ruthless, young man who had beheaded his own father and taken over the Kingdom by force? Even the

bravest man in the Empire would have begged the gods for mercy already! However, before the old man could lose the few

white hairs he had left, Cessilia and her father walked to a room, a little salon on the side. There was the biggest fireplace he

had ever seen, with a large fire easily warming up the whole room, and several huge cushions on a large carpet. There was

only one massive wooden seat, but neither Cessilia nor her father sat. The War God removed his cape and threw it on the seat,

and added wood to the fire with a dark expression. Cessilia was standing behind him, but after a while, she gently grabbed one

of his hands with hers.

"Father... I want t-to go t-to the East-... Eastern K-Kingdom," she muttered.

"Why?"

His question had come right away, with something strong in his voice. It didn't sound like anger, just... determination.

Yassim was surprised he hadn't even been asked anything yet, but for the War God, only his daughter seemed to be here. He

turned to her, and it was truly moving to see such an imposing and strong man have such tender gestures toward the young

woman.

"...I r-... really want t-to go," simply said Cessilia.

Although she had a tiny and hesitant voice, her green eyes were full of determination and unafraid to hold her father's

dark gaze too.

"K-King Ashen asked t-to see me," she resumed. "I... I want t-to go."

"To see you?"

This time, the War God's words were directed at Yassim, and so was his terrifying glare.

The old man bowed quickly,

his throat tight, but he ought to at least stay something.

"P-Princess Cessilia is invited by... His Majesty, in hopes of... standing as his Queen."

"...His Queen," repeated the War God.

His voice was deep, and his emotions even harder to decipher. Yassim was silently praying to every god and goddess

he knew, and hoping he'd be spared to see his plan succeed or fail. If only he could

bring Princess Cessilia to His Majesty,

then perhaps, there was hope... For now, though, the mountain standing before him

was no other than the War God and a father

who cherished his daughter deeply. Yassim was truly having a hard time understanding

what those people were thinking, but he

was already shocked that the War God hadn't yet kicked him out or killed him. Instead,

his eyes were still on Cessilia, perhaps

conflicted. Was his daughter's hopeful gaze making him really consider this insane request?

"...What did your mother say?"

"M-Mother said I c-could d-decide and live my own ad-dventure," quickly answered

Cessilia. "She a-... agreed. D-Dad,

please..."

The War God let out a long sigh, and it felt as if a gush of hot wind was running through the room to echo his frustration.

Yassim wasn't cold anymore; he was sweating profusely. However, the War God raised

his hand to gently caress his daughter's

cheek. Then, his fingers went down to her neck covered by her golden choker, and he

frowned even more.

"...Don't do anything you don't want to," he suddenly said.

"I know, D-Dad."

"Don't let anyone touch you, insult you, or annoy you. If they do, punish them. Do not be scared, Cessi. Even if you kill

him, it's fine. If you want to burn their whole country down, it's fine."

Yassim was on the verge of passing out from hearing this, but Cessilia simply chuckled.

"I und-derstand."

"...Take Krai with you."

"D-Dad, is it alright? It's your d-dragon..."

Her father didn't answer, but a loud growl resonated outside. Yassim couldn't believe what he was hearing. The Black

Dragon was not just going to take them there, it was going to stay with the Princess all along? The War God's legendary dragon

itself!

Yassim suddenly met the War God's eyes, and the dark gaze immediately changed into a life-threatening glare. The old

man froze in utter fear instead of bowing again.

“...If anything happens to Cessi, you’re all dead.”

He had said that with incredible calm, yet his ice-cold voice left no doubt.

The Eastern Kingdom’s fate now entirely relied on the well-being and future of that one young woman. Yassim bowed

and heard himself thank the War God, but in his heart, he knew he had sealed his own country’s future. Either his plan

succeeded, or they would now be doomed for real...

“...Are you planning to destroy them already, Uncle?” chuckled a feminine voice.

Tessa was back, carrying a large tray with tea and dried fruits. She put it down on the table, but her confident attitude

suddenly disappeared as she met her uncle’s eyes. Yassim was still trying to grasp the dynamics of that family, but it was clear

the young woman was also cautious in her uncle’s presence. She nodded slightly.

“I’m going with Cessi,” she said before he asked anything. “I won’t let anything happen to her.”

Cessilia stared at her cousin with a surprised expression, but Tessa was holding her uncle’s stare without fail. The

cousin’s dark eyes were suddenly shining with determination, as if she was making a very serious promise... What was this

about? Once again, Yassim felt like there was more meaning to her words than what he could witness. Was this related to the

Princess’ speech impairment? There was definitely something about her, and the way her family members reacted to her,

treating her very precious...

The War God didn’t answer and, instead, turned back to Cessilia.

“Just the two of you?” he frowned.

“And K-Krai,” smiled his daughter. “It will b-be fine.”

The War God let out a long sigh, caressing her hair once more. He was visibly unwilling to part with his daughter,

which was understandable. What man would send his daughter and niece abroad by themselves, to a country they knew almost

nothing of? The fact that he was sending her with his dragon spoke volumes.

The truth was, Yassim was a bit curious as to why Cessilia didn’t seem to have a dragon herself... or by her side. From

what he had seen, dragons could be away from their masters for prolonged periods of time, but it still seemed odd that she

wouldn’t be bringing hers, if she had one, with them to the Eastern Kingdom. Or was this as a precaution, perhaps? The old

man didn’t dare ask, for he feared they would have misunderstood it as him trying to invite a dragon owner, rather than a

princess. Plus, the War God’s Dragon would be coming along. How dare he ask for one more!

“...Stay here tonight,” suddenly said the War God. “You can leave tomorrow morning.”

Cessilia glanced Yassim’s way, and he realized she was asking for his opinion. He immediately nodded.

“Thank you for your hospitality, Your Highness!”

The War God slightly squinted his eyes, with no intention to answer.

“Take all you need,” he added.

“Oh, can I take some weapons from the armory, Uncle?” exclaimed Tessa, suddenly very excited.

He nodded, and the young woman squealed, running out of the room to wherever the armory was. Cessilia chuckled.

“I will ask Auntie Nebora for s-some food,” she said, “and warmer c-clothes.”

She turned to Yassim.

“It is c-colder there, isn’t it?”

“Yes, my lady. But not as cold as these lands. Because our Kingdom is crossed by many rivers, the weather is more humid, and the temperatures do not change as drastically.”

“Take as much as you need,” said the War God. “Gold too.”

Yassim couldn’t help but feel a bit hopeful as he heard this.

The Dragon Empire was much, much richer than their broken Kingdom, he had witnessed this fact many times over.

Their money was the same, but because gold was withheld in the chests of the wealthy back in the Kingdom, it wasn’t

circulating as much, and their primary currency was silver, which was getting rarer as well... Meanwhile, here, the noble and

wealthy wore gold as if it was nothing. Not only that, but they sold and bought luxury items such as gems, jewelry, or fabrics as

a perfectly fine way of trading too, while in the Eastern Kingdom, defiance had brought their people to only rely on the silver

change to buy only the most needed goods... Yassim had gotten used to it after several days of crossing the Empire, but the

Princess already wore much more gold on herself than he had witnessed in several years in the Eastern Kingdom. Even the

middle and lower classes here were already much wealthier than most of the Eastern Kingdom’s people, who lived day to day

with little to no resources. There was no common measure between their two nations’ wealth. In fact, he had even been

surprised by how sparsely decorated this castle was, considering it was a prince’s house, and one of the wealthiest men in the

Empire, at that... If Princess Cessilia and her cousin brought a bit of gold, it would be a dim light of hope in the Eastern

Kingdom if they were to spend it...

“I will,” nodded Cessilia. “I can have c-clothes made if I need t-too... D-don’t worry. I will t-take all I need, or b-buy it over there...”

The War God nodded, visibly satisfied with those answers. Just then, Tessa came back, carrying two long and sharp

swords with an ecstatic smile. However, Cessilia frowned.

“T-Tessa... Those are D-Darsan’s...”

"I know!" replied her cousin, excited. "And he won't know for a while that I took them! He's never let me take them, so this is his loss for being punished! Oh, these are amazing!"

"Is this r-really fine, D-Dad...?" muttered Cessilia.

The War God shrugged, visibly not caring much over his niece borrowing his son's weapons. Instead, he turned to

Nebora as the servant walked back into the room with a large fur coat in her arms.

"They will need more," he said.

"I know, my lord," replied the woman. "We're already gathering all they need for the journey and putting it with Krai.

Cessi, I prepared some of your clothes too, but feel free to take anything you want. And take some money! Oh, and jewelry too.

You should look your best if you're going there as our representative... A princess can't look too shabby!"

Yassim almost choked himself. Shabby? The Princess' cousin alone was already wearing more than enough to impress the whole Eastern Kingdom's court! Some of the nobles' ears would bleed if they heard this exchange... He didn't dare say

anything, though, and watched as Tessa took a seat by the fire, her fingers lovingly sliding along the swords' blades. Cessilia

went to pour the tea, just like her mother had done earlier, and her father sat down, closing his eyes and resting in the large seat.

"Y-Your Highness..." muttered Yassim, gathering his courage. "M-may I ask how come you're... residing here? Instead of at the Imperial Palace..."

The War God didn't even open his eyes or manifest in any way that he had heard the question. For a second, Yassim

worried he had overstepped, but to his surprise, Princess Cessilia answered instead.

"Father hates c-crowds... He d-doesn't want to live in the Imperial P-Palace with our aunt... Mom g-goes more often."

"When will she come back?" suddenly asked the War God, opening his eyes at the mention of his wife.

Cessilia and Tessa exchanged a glance.

"I d-don't know..."

The Prince grimaced and closed his eyes again, visibly unhappy with that answer.

Yassim glanced toward the two

young women, but neither of them looked surprised. Cessilia offered him some dried fruits, and the old man gladly took them, a bit hungry indeed.

"Is there anything else we c-could need?" she asked.

"I don't believe so, my lady. The Kingdom will provide you with everything you need upon your arrival... His Majesty will have a room for you in the castle."

"A room?" repeated Tessa. "Is she going as a future wife or a guest?"

Yassim almost bit his tongue, realizing his mistake, but before he could think of something to say, Cessilia shook her head.

"I haven't d-decided yet, T-Tessa... Getting a r-room for ourselves is b-better."

The young cousin, staring at Yassim with a suspicious expression, was about to ask something else, but her eyes met with her uncle's, and she didn't dare to.

"That's right," nodded Nebora. "You should see and take your time to examine the situation first. What wedding now..."

Tessa told me everything, old man. How dare he summon Cessi like that?! Is your King a good man? Because we are not going

to marry away one of our precious girls to some pighead!"

"P-p-pighead?" Yassim repeated, shocked. "My lady, I can assure you, King Ashen is not a... pighead."

There were a lot of other ways to describe his King, and although he certainly had some concerning strength of

character, to go as far as to call a monarch a pighead was too much! Moreover, coming from the mouth of a servant...! Yassim

was expecting the Empire to look down on their neighbor a little, but this was just too much!

"He'd better," scoffed Nebora. "Otherwise, you can be assured he won't last long. That girl's brothers will happily come and take her back home if needed."

"Auntie Nebbie..." muttered Cessilia.

"She's right, you know," chuckled Tessa. "As soon as Kassian and Darsan hear of this, you can expect them to come

and make a major fuss there... That's why we shouldn't stay here too long. I mean, evading the little ones is easy, but wait until

those two hear Cessi is in the Eastern Kingdom, it will be a show!"

Yassim was getting worried all over again. He had mistakenly thought the War God would be the biggest issue, not the

older Princes! He couldn't help but think about Dran, the Yellow Dragon outside. What if his master got mad at them for taking

his sister? Plus another one, the older brother at that? Two dragons would come to wreak havoc in the Eastern Kingdom! Not

only the War God's Dragon but two more! What had he done? His Kingdom would surely fall in no time!

"M-my lady," he gasped. "Your brothers wouldn't really... attack the Kingdom, would they? We have nothing to defend ourselves against dragons!"

"D-don't worry," said Cessilia. "They are not unreasonable..."

"...Unless it comes to Cessi," muttered Tessa, sending a chill down poor Yassim's old back.

"We won't tell them yet," said Nebora. "Kassian is still in the north, and that idiot Darsan will still be stuck for a few

more weeks to take care of that mountain. You have at least a few weeks until they come here and realize you're gone.

Moreover, they won't dare to make a ruckus in another Kingdom. The Empress would skin them alive."

Yassim couldn't think straight anymore. Every member of the Imperial Family sounded way too dangerous! Yassim had thought things would be over quickly once he brought the Princess, and he'd find out soon enough if he was to lose his head or not, but now, it was clear even if that didn't happen right away, the Princes would come sooner or later to punish his bravery!

The old man sighed without thinking, while Cessilia handed him a cup of hot tea.

"Are you alright, S-Sir Yassim?" she asked him.

"I am, my lady. I am just worried I have sold my poor head for taking Your Highness away from her family!"

"D-don't worry." She smiled. "My b-brothers are not b-bad."

It was heartwarming to see such a gentle young woman speak lovingly of her brothers, while he worried the young

Princes would destroy an entire Kingdom for her sake. Still, Yassim knew there wasn't much that could be done now. He could

only hope this reckless plan of his would turn out for the better...

After this, it was clear they were to dine in this same room, with Nebora bringing little plates of food for them to eat.

The meal served here may have been simple in their eyes, but to Yassim, it was truly a feast! There was a gigantic piece of

meat, dried meat, many types of fruits and vegetables, several dishes he couldn't even identify, cheese, and desserts. He was

glad to eat, but it was hard to swallow anything in the War God's presence. Although he didn't say much, the man would

sometimes take some meat to eat, and go back to resting.

Cessilia had moved to sit on a cushion against her father's legs, her arms and head resting on his lap. He was caressing

her long, brown curls from time to time, using his other hand to eat.

Both young women had many questions for Yassim and kept asking him about the Eastern Kingdom relentlessly. It was

obvious Cessilia knew more than he had thought already. The young woman had read dozens of books, some about lands even

farther away than theirs, and she was mostly asking to differentiate tales from reality, while Tessa had heard from folks more

than books, as the little they knew about the Kingdom was brought by the few goods and people who did travel across the

border.

It was strange to think that the border had been open for many, many years, yet only a handful of people dared to cross it

each year. There were good reasons for it, though. On one side, the people of the Eastern Kingdom were scared of the Dragon

Empire, with its strange customs, dragons, and, most importantly, higher costs. On the other side, the Dragon Empire citizens had no reason to cross over; the Kingdom was much too poor, didn't have goods worth trading that couldn't be found in the Empire, and the years of tyranny or civil war had convinced them it wasn't worth the journey. Yassim himself had been baffled at how easy of a journey it was, but how hard it had been for him once inside. The prices were too high for him to buy much more food than he had brought, and his savings were quickly depleted when he had no choice but to use them. Hence, he was more than grateful for each free meal he was given, like tonight.

"...So, most of the system already changed anyway, didn't it?" sighed Tessa. "The rich people got overthrown and robbed, and what was true a few years ago changed when your new King came to power, then."

"Yes, Lady Tessa. King Ashen got rid of his father's policies right away, and chased or killed all of the former supporters of King Ashtoran. He only kept people who swore allegiance by his side, including this humble servant."

"Good spring cleaning," scoffed the young woman, biting into a piece of juicy meat. "As of today, there are only nine lords allowed in the court, and His Majesty's people. Those nine lords are the richest, most educated people of our Kingdom, and those our people trust. Each one of them either took a stand against the former King or pledged allegiance to King Ashen once he took over the throne. They have lands, people, and money behind them, but they are all also highly educated and respected. I believe they are the equivalent of your Empire's scholars."

"Our Empire has seventy scholars," retorted Tessa, "and they aren't that rich, either. ...And our aunt barely listens to any of them."

"...Do they t-trust the K-King also?" asked Cessilia.

Yassim smiled. This young lady was smart indeed...

"On the surface, they are his loyal servants, my lady. However, each one of those lords hopes to secure their position, and King Ashen is known to be quite... particular in choosing his allies. To be honest, he doesn't trust any of them, my lady.

Yet, he needs them to content the people, and prevent further fighting. Not only that, but my King also needs all nine lords to get along, which is... quite difficult, at times."

"Nine rich people in a room to learn to share? Yeah, good luck with that," scoffed Tessa.

"Not just nine, my lady," sighed Yassim. "Each lord represents his family, and at times, their wives, siblings, or children can hold as much power as they do. We talk of nine lords, but for some of them, they hold a small clan behind them.

Yet, those nine are... essential in maintaining balance. They all hold a dominant power in one or more domains our Kingdom needs to be strong in: military, trade, finance, education, farming, science... Those people will help our young King shape the future of the Kingdom, or we are bound to repeat the same mistakes over and over again."

"How about you? Aren't you a lord?"

"I'm nowhere near any of those people, Lady Tessa. I am merely an old, wise man that this King was nice enough to keep by his side..."

Yassim felt very sad, pronouncing his words. Indeed, he had been lucky to stay alive until now, given his history, but...

his King wouldn't be so benevolent upon his return. It didn't matter whether he got to keep his head or not, though. As long as he could bring the Princess to him, even his death would be worth it.

"Alright, Yassim the Wise," yawned Tessa. "Well, I hope you're as good of a guide as you are a storyteller,

then, because now I am quite excited to visit that Kingdom of yours!"

"Let's go t-to sleep," agreed Cessilia, glancing toward her father. "We should leave early t-tomorrow..."

The War God nodded, looking a bit tired, and he got up from his seat, gently offering his large hand to help her up.

"...I'll send you off at dawn."

## Chapter 3

For an old man like Yassim, being able to sleep on a thick, comfortable mattress was a luxury. He certainly hadn't

expected to be so well received in the Onyx Castle, the War God's residence. That servant woman named Nebora had shown

him the bedroom he was to stay in after dinner, and he had been shocked to see such a nice room prepared for him, in such a

short time, with even a fireplace bringing its dancing glow. Hence, it was no wonder he had fallen asleep right there,

completely surrendering to his own exhaustion.

He was woken up early by gentle knocks on the door, and it took him a few seconds to remember where he was, and

what he was doing there... The fire had long been extinguished, and the room was cold and dark.

"Good morning," said Nebora with a soft voice. "Did you sleep well? The girls are almost ready to leave, we wanted

to let you sleep for as long as possible, but I fear time is up. You can still join Tessa for breakfast, though."

"Ah, yes, thank you, Lady Nebora..."

The servant woman nodded and went to open the windows, but for some reason, Yassim found she was a bit cold

toward him. He quickly grabbed his coat to put it back on with a shiver and washed his face with the little basin of warm water

she had brought, brushing his beard quickly and trying to arrange the few white hairs scattered on his scalp.

“Your King...”

He was surprised to hear her address him all of a sudden. The woman approached him with a severe expression.

“He’d better be a good man,” she said. “I’ve watched those girls grow up, I helped their mothers raise them. I love them like my own. I may only be a servant, but trust me, your King should fear me as much as those dragons if anything happens to either one of them.”

“I-I understand, my lady,” muttered Yassim.

After she was done talking, Nebora put back on a polite smile with an impressive calm, and walked out of the room, leaving him stunned. The women of the Dragon Empire were clearly as fiery as the dragons!

Yassim let out a short sigh but quickly prepared himself, as he was worried about making the young ladies wait for him.

He only had his coat and shoes to put back on, but as he did, he felt a bit nervous.

Since they were flying back to his Eastern

Kingdom, he couldn’t help but wonder if he would make it to the end of the day. A lot of things were bound to happen, and he could only pray for a better outcome...

Preventing himself from thinking too much, he walked out of the bedroom, noticing how dark the castle was despite the sky being lit by the moonlight. He hadn’t really paid much attention before, but the walls were as dark as the castle’s name...

Could they really be onyx though? He didn’t even dare touch it to test his theory.

Resolute, Yassim found his way back

downstairs, noticing his muscles weren’t so sore anymore. Truly, a good night’s sleep was the best remedy at his age...

“Morning!” exclaimed Tessa when he stepped into the large salon from the previous night.

Just like Nebora had said, the young woman was having her breakfast, a large selection of dried and fresh fruits, nuts,

and cereals displayed before her. Quickly greeting her, Yassim walked to pour himself some tea. He was too nervous to be

hungry, and could only sit on the edge of a stool, watching her eat ferociously.

“Everything is packed and ready,” she said, her mouth half full. “We’ll get going soon!”

“That’s great... What about Lady Cessilia?”

“She’s already outside. She’s talking with her dad.”

“I see.”

Yassim didn’t dare ask any more, so he quietly drank his tea, letting Tessa enjoy her breakfast in silence. He was a bit

nervous, but already grateful they had let him sleep. Judging how her outfit was completely different, a thicker one with a long black coat, the girls had been up for a while already.

He waited until Tessa was done eating to stand up with her and, without a word, they both walked to the castle's entrance. In the sky, the first purple waves were announcing the sunrise already. The Black Dragon was standing in the middle of the castle's courtyard, several bags fastened on his back, eating a large chunk of raw meat. This time, a couple of saddles had been put on his back, and Yassim realized this was probably meant for him. However, his eyes didn't stay on the dragon long; farther away, two silhouettes were cut by the first rays of sunlight. The War God was talking to his daughter, the two of them facing each other closely. Yassim couldn't hear what was said, but he could see the big, green eyes of Cessilia on her father, full of tenderness. As if he couldn't bear to part with his daughter yet, the War God had his large hand on her cheek, also staring at her with a serious expression. Yassim felt a little pinch in his heart seeing this. He had never had the blessing to conceive any children himself, but this scene brought this old man a lot of emotions, just by witnessing it from afar... He only had a little satchel for himself, but Tessa brought another bag to put on the dragon's back while he stood there, a bit unsure of what to do next. The large creature truly didn't seem to mind carrying all of that. Its long tail merely wagged a bit as the young woman climbed on its back to secure everything once more. "Did you take your thicker coats?" asked Nebora, coming out of the castle behind him. "It's going to be colder up there!" "Yes!" shouted Tessa, patting one of the bags. "This one is for you," the servant woman suddenly said to him. To Yassim's surprise, he had to open his arms at the last second to receive a thick, heavy fur cape. This was one of the most magnificent pieces of clothing he had ever received! This was definitely made of a bear's fur and held with some leather straps, yet they casually gave this to him? "I-I can't accept such a valuable gift..." he muttered, feeling the weight of that gift in his hands. "Just take it," said Nebora. "It's merely a little coat. With everything the boys hunt, we have dozens like this, so don't worry about it." Once again, he was astonished by the difference in wealth and strength. The War God's sons could hunt large beasts like these and gift away fur coats as if it was nothing? It was too impressive! In the Eastern Kingdom, the wars and fires had chased a lot of their fauna away from their former habitats, making such hunting prizes extremely rare and valuable... Still, he accepted the gift, bowing a couple of times, and put it on his back. This was indeed very warm, and heavy on his old bones!

A few steps away, Cessilia hugged her father one last time, giving him a quick kiss on the cheek. Then, they slowly parted, the War God's hand falling.

"Mother will be b-back soon," she promised in a whisper.

"...I know."

She gifted him with a smile and slowly walked up to Krai. There, she met poor Yassim, a bit lost in this situation.

"Let's g-go," she said, climbing up.

Yassim was definitely nervous to ride the Black Dragon again, but as they said, the second time could never be worse

than the first... Hence, he did his best to climb up behind her on the mighty creature, trying to imitate her movements, until he saw Tessa's hand extended to help him up.

The three of them were finally on the Black Dragon's back, and Yassim was brutally reminded of how tall the creature

was... From there, the War God seemed a bit small all of a sudden. The Prince walked up to his dragon, suddenly grabbing its

snout and pulling it to him. The creature had still been busy licking and curating the last bits of its meal just a second ago, and

growled. The War God stared at the creature, and the next second, the red eyes got a bit less intimidating, staring at its owner

with curiosity.

"Watch over them," simply said the War God.

The dragon stayed quiet for a couple of seconds, before letting out a long, high-pitched growl. Then, the Prince's eyes

went up to meet his daughter's again. Seated at the back, Yassim couldn't see what Cessilia looked like but, the next second,

the Black Dragon suddenly jumped up in the air.

If he hadn't already been holding on to the saddle, Yassim would have been thrown off.

The dragon climbed fast and

high, its large wings violently flapping the air around as it rose higher and higher. The cold morning wind slapping his face

suddenly had Yassim realize how grateful he was for that thick coat... The two girls in front of him also wore similar ones,

although theirs were made of precious snow leopard fur, white with the characteristic black prints. Yassim also suddenly

understood their change of hairstyle: Tessa had bound her little braids around her head to keep it from flying in all directions,

and Cessilia too had several little gold chains circling all around to keep it down.

Because they were flying higher than before,

the wind and cold were much stronger. When he finally dared to look down, Yassim recognized the Onyx Castle as a little

black point below.

"We're right on time for sunrise!" exclaimed Tessa, excited.

Indeed, they were. Right ahead, the tip of the sun had just appeared on the sea, glowing brightly and sending warm

colors into the sky ahead. Yassim was struck by this view. He had seen the sunrise before, many, many times in his life.

However, never had he been able to witness such a view from the sky.

He could see the miles and miles of sea ahead, its deep blue shades scattering all around the lands. Even more amazing,

he was able, for the first time, to see his homeland from the sky. It was extraordinary. It was like looking at a living map, and

he could actually recognize the lines many cultured people had tried to accurately copy on those maps. The various rivers that

crossed their Kingdom, scattered like a spider's web into thinner or thicker blue trails.

"This is our first time flying above your country," said Tessa. "We were never allowed to go past the border before..."

"...Welcome to the Eastern Kingdom, my ladies," nodded Yassim, a bit proud.

"C-can you t-tell us more about it?" asked Cessilia, sitting at the front.

"Of course. There are three main rivers crossing our lands. The one most north is called Pseha. Then, the second one,

in the middle, is the one with the most ramifications, Soura. And then, the one at the bottom, the largest one that continues to

your Empire, is Riva."

"Riva?" repeated Tessa. "It's called Keriva in our Empire, and one of the most dangerous ones. All the places around are swamps..."

"Oh, not many of our people live in the south either. Our villages are mostly gathered around the two other rivers. A lot

of our diet revolves around what our fishermen trap there."

"The villages s-seem localized by the sea..." Cessilia noticed, her eyes looking down.

"Yes, my lady. We even have many islands farther east, although not many people live there. They get submerged when

the Sea Goddess rises, but we use them to teach our children how to swim, bring our cattle to eat, and put traps to hunt bigger

prey."

Yassim suddenly pointed farther down below them.

"See that island, in the Soura bed? It is where our King's Castle is, and our Capital, Aestara."

"Aestara..."

The island was growing bigger, as Krai was slowly starting its descent. They could now see the very, very large river

bed and the many little islands in it. It wasn't the sea, as there was a clear line following the coast, showing where the sea

actually started. Miles and miles of beaches, yet, there was a clear opening where Soura started, as if the ground had been split

apart to let the river through. Among all the islands present, it was easy to guess which one was the Capital: it was the largest,

and the one which all the other buildings seemed to be turned toward. However, for a few seconds, the girls didn't understand

where the castle was actually located until they understood.

It wasn't just an island among the others; this one was actually topped by a mountain-like city, like a large cone, with many buildings in the lower parts, and at the very top, a castle.

"It's... a t-tidal island?" asked Cessilia.

"Exactly, my lady. Centuries ago, our ancestors took notice that this rocky formation looked like a mountain rising from the sea, and would be a perfect place to defend ourselves while also surveying our lands all around. They started by building a watchtower, but, as time passed, and we relied more and more heavily on the rivers, the tower was made part of a castle, and more buildings appeared all around."

Cessilia could see that watchtower. Actually, despite the magnificent castle built all around, in white stone and large windows, the tower was fiercely standing out, its arrow proudly pointing at the sky. Even the colored glass windows didn't seem to outshine the golden arrow at the top, glowing even more under the sunrise.

"...It's b-beautiful," she whispered.

"With your capital so far away, who knew you guys would have dared to come all the way to wage war with us!"

scoffed Tessa.

"We still have quite a few buildings closer to the border," admitted Yassim. "Some are still used as the army's main

base, but it has changed greatly over the... last couple of decades..."

Although a bit too blunt, he knew the young woman was perfectly right. They clearly had no interests near the border, as

they had focused most of the population, commerce, and cities to the southeast corner of their Kingdom, away from the western

border. However, it was a horrible decision that had been made by the wrong people in dire circumstances. Two decades ago

or so, their Republic was completely drained of resources. The Dragon Empire couldn't have known about the diseases, the

drained rivers, and the hunger that had driven their people mad. Those two girls had probably never experienced hunger

themselves...

Yet, Yassim was surprised by the way Cessilia was looking down at the land below them. It looked like she was

learning, analyzing each river, each piece of land silently... He had already felt that upon meeting the young woman, but she

didn't seem as candid as one would have expected a lady her age to be. Sometimes, there was a strange loneliness in her eyes,

and the impression of someone who had gone through a lot, rather than a young, sheltered princess.

"Old man, where do we land?" asked Tessa over her shoulder. "This guy needs a large spot to go, or we're going to

scare everyone in the middle of the city plaza!"

“Head to the tower,” nodded Yassim. “On the lower left side, there’s a little courtyard with a lot of ivy leaves and a mosaic on the floor. There should be enough space for the... for us to land.”

“Got it!”

He realized Tessa and Cessilia had been directing the dragon all this time, with small taps or words. Once again, Cessilia leaned forward, whispered something to the dragon, and it changed direction, heading for the spot Yassim had indicated.

As relieved as he was to be home, poor Yassim was also getting more and more nervous, as if riding a gigantic, mythical creature hadn’t been enough emotions already for that morning. Below them, life in the Eastern Kingdom seemed to be going as it should be, with the people slowly waking up to another morning. Perhaps some would get a fright upon noticing the dark silhouette of a dragon in the sky...

Finally, Krai softly landed in that courtyard that was actually just big enough for the dragon. Tessa helped Yassim

down, and Cessilia got down on the other side. They were in a pretty courtyard with, as Yassim had described, lots of ivy climbing up the walls and little pillars all around them. There was a little water fountain to the side, and Krai went to drink some of it right away while Cessilia patted its neck.

“It d-does feel d-different from home,” she said. “More... humid.”

“Well, we are surrounded by water, my lady. This area is actually where some of the future doctors come to study, and I live here myself.”

“This is your home?” asked Tessa, surprised.

“Well, the castle is home to all of His Majesty’s entourage, including the Counselors, like myself.”

“Oh, so you’re like our Aunt Phemera,” nodded Tessa. “She’s our Empress’ advisor too, and she lives in the palace because of that...”

“Yes, my lady.”

Although, from what he had observed, the Imperial Palace of the Dragon Empire was at least three or four times bigger than this castle... Yassim was glad it was too soon for any student to be here. Their arrival probably hadn’t gone unnoticed. He let out a long sigh while the girls took off their coats, leaving them on Krai’s back among their other belongings.

“What now?” asked Tessa. “Will you give us a tour, or—”

She didn’t get to finish her sentence, and instead, turned toward the ruckus that was happening at one end of the courtyard. Despite their outfits being different from the ones used in the Empire, those men were clearly guards. Yassim

swallowed his saliva, while six men lined up, taking out their swords in a defensive stance.

“Former Royal Counselor Yassim, the King requests your immediate presence in the throne room! You shall explain yourself for your return upon your exile ordered by the King, as well as bringing in foreigners, and their... their b-beast.”

The man’s eyes went to Krai, filled with fear. He was doing his best not to show it, but as soon as the dragon’s red eyes

went on him, he couldn’t help but slightly change his position, ready to step back or protect himself. Krai didn’t care much,

though; the dragon was busy sniffing one of the pillars and its climbing plants.

Meanwhile, Cessilia and Tessa both turned toward Yassim, the latter putting her hands on her hips.

“...Forgot to tell us something, old man?” she groaned.

“My ladies,” sighed Yassim. “From now on, I will have to rely on your understanding...”

For someone who was getting arrested right in front of them, Yassim seemed suspiciously calm and composed. Cessilia

and Tessa exchanged another glance. They had tried to stop the soldiers with Tessa taking a step forward, but Yassim had asked

them not to. It looked as if the old man had already anticipated all this, and was surrendering willingly, although it was odd.

Moreover, none of the soldiers were actually acting rude to him or had even tried to bind him in any way. They simply flanked

the former Counselor, a hand on each of his shoulders and the other on their spears.

There was obviously some respect there,

perhaps because Yassim was obviously not going to resist them in any way.

“My ladies,” he said very calmly. “I am sorry for deceiving you. However, this shameless old man would be very

grateful if you could accompany me again.”

The two young women once again exchanged another glance with each other. It was obviously all part of his plan. From

the way those soldiers had arrived right away and focused on Yassim rather than them or even their dragon, there was

something at play here... Cessilia nodded. She already trusted Yassim, although it was clear he had deliberately hidden some of

the truth from them. She was also curious to see why he had risked everything just to bring her here.

“C-Captain,” whispered one of the men. “What about the... that...”

He was obviously sending worried glances toward the dragon behind the girls, although Krai didn’t seem to care at all.

The soldiers were visibly confused, and not prepared for such an issue. Tessa chuckled, crossing her arms.

“What? Never seen a dragon before?”

Meanwhile, Cessilia turned around and walked back to Krai, gently petting its neck. She then whispered something to

the dragon, who took off with most of their luggage still on its back. The girls only had time to unload one bag each, but that wasn't an issue for now. Turning around, she smiled gently at Yassim, bringing some relief to the old man.

The soldiers were confused by the situation here and were exchanging glances. The six of them were already doing an impressive job at trying to do their job while faced with a dragon just a minute ago and the arrival of the two foreign women with an exiled counselor... Sparing them any more questions, Yassim gave them a gentle smile and joined his hands together like a benevolent grandfather.

"Alright, gentlemen. His Majesty should be holding the morning court right now... Shall we get going?"

"Counselor Yassim, those women..."

"These ladies are my guests, and I believe His Majesty would like to meet them also."

The soldiers were troubled, but at least, they knew what to do next. Would the King really be happy about the exiled old man coming back with strangers? They had no idea what gave him so much confidence, but they were willing to roll with it. It wasn't their heads that were at risk here...

The little group began moving, the six soldiers staying close to surround all three of them. Tessa was sending glares each time her eyes met with one of the soldiers, or they inadvertently came too close.

Cessilia was more absorbed in the architecture around them. Unlike the Dragon Empire's Imperial Palace, this castle was mostly composed of large, gray stones and small spaces. The first corridor they walked through to get inside was surprisingly narrow to them, but it still had small little windows of tinted glass every three or four steps, which let plenty of light in. Unlike the white marble she was accustomed to, this castle had the same stones for walls and floors, and at times, a long jute rug would appear to cover the uneven stones. Everything in there felt foreign to the two young women, and they started walking close to each other without even noticing. Cessilia was surprised how little water fountains would sometimes appear randomly on a wall, or in a little sculpture in the middle of a crossway between corridors. The ceiling was lower than the high ones of their home, but it sometimes had strange openings, like a balcony, that would give a little view of a floor below or above.

At some point, they walked into a corridor that had the right wall half-open and showed a large, square room below. A handful of people were there, working at desks in what seemed to be a little library or study. It was very silent, and none of them even raised their heads as Yassim's group walked above. It was obvious everyone was used to those little balconies, but

it fascinated Cessilia. In her aunt's palace, all the corridors were very wide and had arches so one could see the gardens on either side of it, and the rooms had a ceiling high enough that no man could reach... Here, it felt as if her father would have only had to raise his hand to touch it.

"I'm very sorry I wasn't as honest as I had hoped to be with you, my lady," suddenly said Yassim. "There are circumstances... I am grateful for your benevolence."

Cessilia didn't answer. She understood that Yassim only meant to apologize, but wasn't asking for her forgiveness. It

was too soon for her to judge. Instead, the young woman was a lot more curious about what was going to happen next.

Finally, the guards stopped in front of a pair of large, blue doors. Although they clearly led to an important room, they

still looked small to the two young women, and Tessa frowned, wondering if two big, wooden panels were actually meant to

protect anything... They could hear what was going on inside too. Some people were loudly shouting at each other, apparently

trying to make a point. The soldiers hesitated for a little while, waiting until there was a bit less noise to bang on the doors and

enter.

They hadn't expected to see such a grand room after all they had seen so far. Yet, this was obviously the heart of the

castle. A big, round room, with large windows of blue-colored glass, and an impressive mosaic under their feet. Their entrance

caused everyone present to suddenly go quiet.

There were only nine beautifully sculpted, dark wooden chairs, arranged in a circle, and two of them were empty. Only

seven people were seated, but each had a little group behind them, from two to as many as seven people. It was clear the

people present were all some sort of nobility, or at least wealthy in some way. Tessa glanced over their wooden or silver

jewelry, the colored fabric of their clothes, and the few fur capes. Yassim clearly hadn't lied about the wealth difference. The

two young women were like walking treasures compared to everyone else who was present. Aside from theirs, the only gold

items in the room were a couple of rings, a necklace, and a bracelet, all worn by the same group of people.

Everyone was staring at them in awe as they walked into the center. Tessa wasn't afraid to hold their gaze either. Their

appearance was causing a commotion, and those people were already watching in amazement, glaring and whispering

conspicuously. Because they were standing behind Yassim and four of the soldiers, they could only see more and more of the

room as they walked farther in. Unlike her cousin, Cessilia was more absorbed in the architecture around them than the dozens

of stares they were getting. This was the only room with a high, round, and vaulted ceiling, and the mosaic up there, similar to the one under their feet, was a breathtaking piece of art.

“How dare you come back?!”

The deep voice resonated throughout the room, sending a chill down everyone’s back. Tessa and Cessilia stopped walking and glanced at each other. The King. They couldn’t see him because he was straight

ahead, and their vision was blocked by the five men in between. Yet, even without seeing him, they could feel the weight of his

presence in everyone else’s reaction. Cessilia glanced around them. Everyone in the room was tense, and suddenly looking

down, as if they had been scared to make eye contact with the King, even by chance.

Only the people seated were looking in

their direction, their eyes going on either Yassim or the two girls, visibly worried.

But worried for whom...?

“Greetings, my King,” said Yassim, sounding strangely composed.

“You were banished,” hissed the King, his words as sharp as blades. “How dare you defy your King and come back?!”

“This humble servant didn’t disobey, my King. I merely followed your own orders.”

“Ha,” scoffed the King. “Then, who is it? Are you aware you brought a woman to be killed by my hands, Yassim? Do

you think I’d indulge them for the sake of you?”

Tessa put a hand on her bag, where her blades were hidden, frowning. In any case, she was ready to defend her cousin

and kill that King if necessary. She wasn’t scared of these people... However, as she glanced to her right, Cessilia’s expression

didn’t seem to hold anything like fear either. Instead, she had her green eyes riveted right ahead, looking almost... expectant.

Her cousin’s chest was rising up and down with her accelerated breathing, and her lips were slightly open. Tessa released her

fingers on the bag, wondering what was going on...

“My King charged me with the heavy task of finding him a prospective wife. Your Highness, you said this old

Counselor of yours was allowed to bring one, and, if she became Your Majesty’s Queen among all the possible candidates, you would spare my life and retract my banishment.”

“I didn’t think you’d dare try, you senile old man. So you’ve chosen death.”

“I believe I have chosen to try and remain by my master’s side, my King. Please, will you allow this senile old man to introduce his candidate?”

“This is inadmissible!” suddenly shouted one of the men seated. “How dare this traitor come back?! Your Majesty, you

don’t have to listen to this decrepit traitor! The candidates have already been chosen! This—!”

The man suddenly went mute as he turned his head toward the King, and his eyes opened wide in fright. He immediately

went back to looking down, visibly terrified.

They all heard a scoff.

“See, Yassim, no one wants you here. Did you think I was being kind to you because I gave you a reason to be allowed back? Fine, then. Let’s see who was insane enough to follow your lies all the way here...”

Yassim bowed slightly, and every soldier stepped aside, letting the two girls appear. Only Cessilia stood forward, unafraid. She walked ahead, past all the men, and to the center of the room, facing the King. She was stunning in her own way, standing tall and facing the sovereign, unafraid. Her skin was lighter than anyone else in the room, and yet it was a warm, beautiful, brown-copper shade that contrasted with those amazing, green eyes. Not only that, but she wore a striking purple dress under a white fur coat, and all that gold... All eyes turned to the King, waiting to see his reaction to the foreign woman. It wasn’t anything like they expected.

Ashen the White was seated on the simplest throne in the room, although his was in silver metal, without any decoration, cushion, or embellishment of any kind. The King himself didn’t wear any jewelry, crown, or expensive fabric. He was even half-naked, the scars on his exposed torso visible to all. Yet, he was standing out more than anyone else in the room.

His white hair, as white as snow, was falling in irregular waves on his large, muscular shoulders, a striking contrast to his dark skin. His face was sculpted with thick lines and a square jaw with a few spikes of a growing beard sticking out. Despite him looking no older than thirty, there was something scarily deep and ancient in his dark eyes. The dark circles beneath them made it even worse, burying his irises deeper in the shadows. He didn’t seem human, or like he was the same kind as the other people standing in the room. He exuded an aura of death and danger like a resting predator. The silver chair may as well have been a god’s throne... a god of death. Anyone with any experience in battles could tell he was a warrior and a merciless killer.

The way all the other people in the room physically reacted to his presence reeked of sheer terror.

Cessilia was the only one not to display an ounce of fear.

Instead, as she appeared before him, the King’s previous irritated expression fell. An incredible silence befell the room as if they had all been transported to a sacred place. In fact, they were witnessing an epic scene, a living painting. There seemed to be no one else but those two people, and all the others were quiet witnesses. No one could understand what was happening, but it felt breathtaking. The complex emotion on the cold-blooded King’s face, and the Princess’ pure, candid gaze she held without fear.

Even Yassim was shocked by what he was seeing. Before any of them had realized, the King was standing, his eyes riveted on the young woman as if he couldn't believe his eyes. There was something happening between those two people, something deep, complex, and... personal.

"Y-Your Highness," mumbled Yassim, "this is Princess Cessilia, daughter of the Dragon Empire, niece of Her Highness the Empress."

The King didn't reply. In fact, it was as if he hadn't heard the old man at all. His eyes were still riveted on Cessilia as if he was seeing a ghost, or a monster.

The Princess was the first to react. Very slowly and gracefully, she bowed, her long hair sliding down her shoulders as she lowered her head to him.

"K-King... Ashen," she simply said in a delicate voice.

That was it, yet those words looked as if she had slapped the King. In utter shock, his subjects saw him take a step back. Something felt wrong about all of this, something no one else could understand.

However, the King didn't reply to the

Dragon Empire's Princess. He clenched his fists, and instead, directed his furious glare toward Yassim.

"You cunning old snake..." he hissed, looking like he was about to murder the elder.

Everyone in the room was trying to make sense of this situation. Was the King sparing the Princess because of the

Dragon Empire? Why was that young woman completely unafraid? How was old Yassim even still alive after daring to do such

a thing? More importantly, what was that reaction earlier...?

"Y-Your Majesty," said one of the nobles. "You don't have to add the... Princess to the candidates. If you refuse her, we can... send the lady back to her homeland."

As he said that, the man had looked at Cessilia, but she hadn't reacted at all. In fact, he should have watched his King

instead. Ashen suddenly turned his murderous glare to him, and the man felt his lifespan vanish at once. Normally, after that,

there would have been no way to keep his head on his shoulders. Not when the King was visibly about to have him pay for those words with his life.

Yet, nothing came. The King looked stuck where he was, unable to unleash his usual display of complete violence.

"...She stays," he hissed between his clenched teeth.

Everyone there was once again rendered speechless. What was wrong with the King?

He could have obviously refused

Yassim's offer, sent those women back where they came from, and killed the old man once and for all! In fact, that was the most

optimistic ending everyone had foreseen the minute Yassim had reappeared!

Being unable to grasp the King's reactions was certainly scarier than his usual murderous ones. Everyone in the room kept staring, in utter dismay. No one dared to say a thing anymore. Instead, they were trying to make sense of this, or ready to give up as long as they'd keep their heads. Even Tessa, a few steps behind her, was staring at her cousin and the King in confusion. She had known Cessilia since they were children, and she found something unusual in her cousin's behavior. She had never been one to step forward like this or stand out at all. Yet now, she was dominating the room, almost equal to that ruthless King. Even more intriguing was the way that ruthless King was staring at Cessi...

With everyone deeply involved in this odd situation here, and those two people who kept staring at each other as if a world belonged between them, they all failed to notice the new appearance. She silently stepped out from the shadows behind the King. Her red dress floating around her, the young woman walked with a smile on her lips, stepping fearlessly next to the King. She had deep red hair, a hint of sharpness in her black eyes, and was amazingly beautiful. Her chuckle resonated as she stood very close to the King, her breast almost touching his arm. With a smile on her red lips, she leaned to whisper in his ear.

"Do we have guests, my King?"

The King didn't react or answer her, but she didn't seem offended at all. Instead, she kept a perfect smile, and put a hand on his shoulder, staring at Cessilia with him.

Cessilia had stopped staring at the King to shift her green eyes to the woman standing next to him. It wasn't just that woman's attitude that was shocking. It was her olive skin tone.

The two cousins exchanged a quick glance, both disturbed. They had never seen anyone with a skin color this close to their mothers' before. There had been a brief trend about women trying to lighten their skin, but it wasn't anything like they were witnessing now. This woman by the King's side was clearly mixed, like them, and more fair-skinned than dark. Although her hair was more likely to be artificially tainted, she couldn't fake her skin color so easily, nor how her traits were reminiscent of a long-forgotten race of people, the same race both Tessa and Cessilia were descendants of.

The Rain Tribe.

"Welcome, Your Highness," she said with that beautiful smile, "...and... I suppose I'm talking to the famous traitor, Sir

Yassim. It must have been a long journey back from the Dragon Empire."

The way she spoke, in a gentle and whispery manner, was troubling. Something in Cessilia's mind told her this woman

was acting polite, but not friendly. Even her attitude as she stood next to the King spoke volumes. She had no fear and displayed her pride and self-confidence without an ounce of hesitation.

Tessa glared at Yassim, hoping they'd get an explanation for this too, but the old man looked baffled. From that woman's speech, he had visibly never met her in person. However, anyone could see how familiar she was with the King. If it had been the Dragon Empire, she surely would have been some sort of concubine, but here, the girls were unsure. Everything was new; they couldn't be sure of anything. The rules and customs ought to be different from their homeland...

Instead, Tessa glanced around. In fact, all the nobles present were either ignoring that woman or looking upset by her.

So, she wasn't too popular with anyone here... Yet, she stood by the King's side like this?

Meanwhile, Cessilia was still staring at the odd couple facing her. Her expression had changed, and her green eyes showed something bitter compared to before.

As a few seconds passed in silence, the red-haired woman sighed.

"Looks like I ruined the mood here. I am Jisel, the King's attendant..."

Tessa raised an eyebrow. Attendant? This woman was clearly the King's mistress.

The King suddenly sat back on his throne with a sullen expression. He was still staring at Cessilia and hadn't reacted at

all to Jisel's appearance, but it didn't seem to matter. The red-haired woman kept her perfect smile on and took a step back, standing just one foot behind the throne, her hands behind her back.

"Enough," groaned the King. "Resume."

In just two words, the whole atmosphere changed, every noble in the room eager to please. The soldiers that were

flanking Yassim quickly moved aside, leaving the old man free for now. His shoulders visibly relaxed, but Yassim didn't forget

his primary mission. He was about to gently guide Cessilia and her cousin to the side when Jisel spoke up.

"Ah, the guests should take the empty seats. We aren't waiting for anyone."

Although that seemed like an innocent and considerate couple of sentences, both girls noticed how Yassim's expression fell while hearing this, and the other nobles looked down too. Neither Cessilia nor Tessa moved, waiting for the old man to

indicate how to react. Yassim silently clenched his fist and nodded painstakingly.

"...I see."

"I'll s-stand," suddenly said Cessilia.

All eyes turned to her, visibly surprised not by her stutter, but by how openly she defied the King's woman's offer. She

didn't even look her way and wasn't looking toward the King anymore. Instead, she simply stood behind old Yassim as he had moved aside, actually standing next to those two empty seats.

Tessa nodded and did the same, both young women standing behind Yassim. They weren't so blind as to ignore what was going on completely. There were nine seats in this room, aside from the King's, and Yassim had mentioned nine lords during their trip there. Judging from his shattered reaction and Jisel's words, they could easily imagine what had happened, and why they shouldn't sit in those seats. The reactions of the nobles weren't all the same this time. Some kept staring at them, clearly intrigued, some subtly nodded, and some shook their heads.

"As you wish," chuckled Jisel.

One of the nobles standing sighed, and stepped forward, taking the middle spot of the room they had stood in just before.

"Your Highness, with the addition of Princess Cessilia from the Dragon Empire, this now makes a total of ten candidates as to who your future Queen might be."

The King wasn't looking at the old man at all. Instead, his eyes were still fixated on the Princess, unblinking, with a frown on.

Cessilia, however, wasn't staring his way at all anymore. She was slightly leaning toward Yassim, who had just whispered to her.

"This is Counselor Yamino, an old friend. He is a good man."

Tessa and Cessilia slightly nodded, listening to Counselor Yamino's words.

"I shall repeat the agreement for the Princess of the Dragon Empire. According to the rules agreed by the... seven noble families, each family and Royal Counselor is free to introduce any young woman of marriageable age as a King's Candidate.

Each candidate and her family shall receive ten thousand silver coins as compensation."

Tessa silently smirked, glancing to the side to see which of the nobles had reacted to that sentence. So some of them had probably traded their daughters for some money...

"Each candidate will receive a room and stay for at least a month within the castle.

During the time spent here, the candidates are free to access any area of the castle they please and use their free time as they will. However, they have the obligation to attend all the social events organized by the Royal Castle, the official meetings like this one, and obey each of the King's orders. Any refusal or absence to any of the aforementioned rules will result in the elimination of the candidate, who will be sent home and have all the previous rewards confiscated."

Cessilia grimaced, and so did her cousin. They had to obey all of the King's orders?

This rule felt horribly ominous...

"His Majesty will select his future bride among the candidates. The family of the chosen candidate will receive, among

other presents, ten thousand gold coins and eternal glory. The new Queen will be the official Queen of our Eastern Kingdom, and mother to all the official heirs to the throne. She will assume all the responsibilities of her rank and position, and be the King's left hand in all but military matters."

Another rule that the War God's daughter and niece did not appreciate at all. All but military matters? Now that they looked around them, all the women present looked very fragile and delicate. None of them looked like they could lift a weapon...

The Counselor took a deep breath, briefly glancing toward Cessilia before resuming. "Today is the final call for all the selected candidates. If any candidate or her family wishes to withdraw, this is the last chance before they are officially entered. No punishment will be held against those who choose to retract now. I will call the names of each candidate and have them confirm, as well as their families."

One by one, the Counselor called out each of the candidates. Surprisingly enough, they all answered loud and clear their will to partake in this competition to be crowned Queen, but only half of the said candidates seemed to actually be present here, aside from Cessilia. In each case, a member of the family gave an excuse for their candidate not being there, claiming she was ill or still on her way, and no one objected to this. Cessilia felt out of place listening to this. She hadn't thought she was walking into a competition with other women... and she didn't like it at all.

"Cessi, we can go home," whispered Tessa as the Counselor was still calling out the others. "This is ridiculous, you're a princess, there's no reason for you to compete for that crazy guy..."

Cessilia knew where her cousin's opinion came from. This indeed felt very foolish. However, now, it was clear her fate was intertwined with Yassim's. Moreover, there were still too many questions pending, including why Jisel wasn't called among the candidates. Cessilia had listened. For each candidate, they mentioned her name and her family's, but Jisel never spoke, and everyone seemed to forget her for a few seconds. She wasn't among the competitors...

"...The ninth candidate is Lady Naptunie, introduced by myself, and my niece is willingly partaking in this, she will arrive tomorrow. Finally, uh..."

Yassim glanced toward Cessilia. He knew his life was in her hands, and so did she. Their eyes met, and the young woman nodded slightly. The old man didn't hide the wave of relief in his eyes, instead looking infinitely grateful. He turned to his former colleague, and stepped forward.

"The tenth candidate is Imperial Princess Cessilia of the Dragon Empire, introduced by myself, former Counselor

Yassim.”

“...Princess Cessilia,” called out one of the seven lords, “are you really going to participate?”

“Yes,” nodded the Princess.

She hadn't stuttered, nor was she hiding from their gazes. Instead, all the nobles quickly tried to glance the King's way.

Ashen had his hand covering his mouth, but his eyes were still fixated on the Princess.

It was hard to understand what he was

thinking, except for the way his fist was clenched on his throne...

“Well, we have ten candidates then,” nodded Counselor Yamino.

Suddenly, the King stood, and all the nobles seated stood one second after him. It was like a storm had suddenly broken

into the room, putting everyone present in survival mode. Some were frozen by fear, others looked ready to run away. There

was a general movement of stepping away from the throne and the man standing a step in front of it. However, Ashen didn't say

anything. He stood there for a couple more seconds, like a statue of ice with eyes of fire. After one last glare in Yassim and

Cessilia's way, he suddenly stormed out of the room.

No one said a word, and it took a couple of seconds after he was gone for anything to be heard, anyone to dare move. It

had all happened so quickly, not everyone had understood what had happened.

The only one who could still keep a smile on was Jisel. If she had been shocked by the King's sudden outburst, no one

had seen it. She still had her little smile on, and her eyes met Cessilia's. The Princess already didn't like that woman, like a

lioness who knew she was faced with a rival. Jisel gave her a little wink and quietly walked out while everyone else still

seemed stunned.

The second person to react was Yassim. He turned around and looked at the two women.

“Let's go,” he quietly muttered.

They both followed him as he quickly left the room, visibly needing to run away. They had barely walked out when a

loud banter exploded inside, many people shouting after the old man and calling to him.

Yassim didn't pay any attention to them and guided the two women out instead. He looked like he finally could control

the situation a bit and was guiding them away, through the corridors and farther away from the previous room. After a little

while, they seemed sufficiently far enough, although it was only one floor below. He let out a long sigh, a bit out of breath after

this speed walking.

“What was that?!” exploded Tessa, clearly unable to hold it in anymore. “A competition to be that crazy bastard's wife?”

Old man, I should be the one to cut your neck right now!”

“T-Tessa, c-calm down,” muttered Cessilia.

“Cessi, I’m not going to calm down! That old schmuck lied to us, and now you have to compete with nine other crazy girls, most of which were probably forced to do this? And you guys think we are barbaric! Our fathers don’t even dare take concubines, and you want to make Cessi beg for this tyrant to marry her while he’s already got that red slut on the side!”

“I swear to the gods I had no idea about that woman,” said Yassim. “I... I had heard rumors the King had taken in a mistress after I was dismissed, but I never met that woman before.”

“She’s not a c-candidate?” asked Cessilia, ignoring her furious cousin.

“One needs a strong backing to be appointed a candidate, my lady,” said Yassim. “All the women presented before belong to the strongest families of the Kingdom, and even the two Counselors who also introduced candidates are very wealthy men. I wouldn’t have been able to pick anyone but you.”

“So you came to our Empire to trick Cessi into this mess,” groaned Tessa. “Now you’re really going to lose your neck, old man. Just you wait until our family hears the—”

“T-Tessa,” said Cessilia, suddenly stepping up to her. “S-stop, please. I-I am fine.”

Because Cessilia asked her to calm down so frantically, her cousin frowned, tilting her head. She crossed her arms.

“...Cessi, why did you agree to this?”

But instead of answering, her cousin stayed mute and slowly shook her long locks.

Tessa noticed her green gaze.

This was the glance Cessilia would make sometimes, when there was something she couldn’t say. It was a look she

knew all too well, but it broke her heart each time. Ever since that had happened to her cousin, Tessa could tell there was

something horribly sad and dark buried in her cousin’s heart, trapped in a chest Cessilia always refused to open. Each time she

got close to that chest, Cessilia did this. Those sad eyes, and her voice that disappeared... as if she was asking her not to ask

anymore. This had to be related to what had happened with the King just before, in that room... Tessa was the first one shocked

by it. She thought she knew almost everything about Cessilia, but never had she seen her like that. For perhaps the first time,

something had happened to that glass shell. A crack, perhaps. A little, shy opening into that tightly closed chest...

Tessa took a long breath, trying to keep it in and calm down.

“...Fine,” she grumbled, “but I’m going to make you pay for that later, old man. Or I’m just going to wait for Kassian

and Darsan to hear this and come and slice you, and watch.”

“Thank you for your benevolence, Lady Tessa...” muttered poor Yassim. “And once again, I apologize for lying to you

like this, Lady Cessilia. However, please know I didn’t do this to trick you, but because I had good reasons to believe my King

would... have special feelings for someone from the Dragon Empire.”

“What?” muttered Tessa, confused.

Yassim kept staring at Cessilia, visibly expecting something, but the Princess remained mute. If she wasn't curious to know what he meant like her cousin, it meant she probably knew the truth... and his theory was right.

“Alright... Let's move to your new room,” said Yassim, understanding he wouldn't get an answer now. “I am a humble

ex-counselor, but I am sure Counselor Yamino will help me arrange something decent for the Princess and Lady Tessa. You two

are technically of higher standing than any of the candidates, after all...”

“It won't be necessary,” suddenly said Counselor Yamino's voice.

The man had just appeared, looking a bit out of breath too. He took a second to catch his breath, as he was much more

massive than old Yassim. In fact, Yamino was so large his belly almost touched both sides of the corridor. He did look like a

good, nice man, though, with his head as round as his belly, and his little, white, curly goatee.

“Counselor Yamino!” exclaimed Yassim, visibly happy to see his friend again.

“You sure still run fast, Yassim,” sighed Yamino. “You're one crazy old man, to come back after making His Highness so furious... and from the Dragon Empire too.”

“You know me,” replied Yassim with a little smile. “I will never give up on our dear homeland.”

“Ha... If only our young King could still find mercy for old antiques like us. Anyways! The Princess and her...”

“Cousin,” said Tessa. “I'm Tessa, by the way.”

“Oh, nice to meet you, Lady Tessa. And of course, Lady Cessilia, as well. I am Yamino, the oldest Counselor, and the

last one mad enough to still be friends with Yassim... or perhaps, lucky enough, seeing he's still got his head on his shoulders...

I came to tell you the ladies are welcome in the Cerulean Suite.”

“The Cerulean Suite?” repeated Yassim, surprised. “But... it's the best room in the castle! No one has been allowed to

use it since the previous King's favorite! How did you manage to—”

“Oh, I didn't do anything! It's an order from the King himself. He ordered the servants to prepare and give that room to the Princess... to Princess Cessilia.”

## Chapter 4

The two Counselors kept exchanging intrigued glances, even as they were leading the way to the Cerulean Suite. There

was definitely something going on between the King and the Princess. Was he simply trying to act polite to a foreign princess

by giving her the best room in the castle? Was it an attempt to show that they could still rival the Dragon Empire's luxury? No,

it couldn't be. Perhaps, if it had been anyone but their King, they would have seriously considered such a theory, but... this was King Ashen they were both thinking about. The cold-blooded, heartless King with no consideration for anyone. He didn't even treat any of his vassals with that much consideration, not even his oldest servants! Why would he suddenly give the best room to Princess Cessilia...?

Neither of them had even been allowed to see that room. The rumor was that it was the most beautiful place in the whole castle, prepared by the previous kings to welcome their favorite wives or mistresses. Yet, rather than that devious, redhaired woman, the King was giving this to a young woman he had supposedly seen for the first time today...? Yassim kept frowning and trying to think, but he was still thinking this had to do with his initial theory about his King and the truth about his death. Unfortunately, it was still way too soon to confirm any of it...

Two young servants were waiting when they arrived in front of the blue gates. In fact, those blue gates were already

very eye-catching, painted in a magnetic cerulean blue, with gorgeous arabesques of a shiny, white surface that Cessilia first thought to be some polished marble, but it was shinier than what she knew.

"Welcome, Princess," saluted the two servants, who appeared to be identical twins. "We were sent to serve you."

They were both wearing white outfits, and a bob haircut with bangs, but their eyes couldn't be seen while they continued bowing.

"By whom?" immediately asked Tessa, defiant.

"By His Majesty," answered one of the twins. "The three of us will be at your service from now on."

"Th-three?" repeated Cessilia, confused.

"Yes, Your Highness, our sister is already inside," said one of them, stepping forward.

"We shall open the gates to the

Cerulean Suite for the Princess now. The Counselors aren't allowed to enter unless the Princess requires them to."

Cessilia and Tessa exchanged a glance, surprised. They were the ones to say if Yassim and Yamino could enter? They

were the guests here, and those two old men were obviously Royal Counselors, how could they be the ones to decide whether they could enter or not?!

"Ah, please don't be surprised, my ladies," said Yassim, noticing their confusion. "In our Kingdom, no man can enter a woman's apartment unless she agrees to it first, regardless of his position. The only one allowed to do so is the King, to whom no door shall remain closed."

Tessa made a grimace. That was one distorted way to say things, but she understood the general idea. Basically, just

like in the previous ways of the Dragon Empire, any man of noble or Imperial title could take any woman as a concubine.

However, the Empress had abolished that rule, and put new ones in place to protect young women against rapists.

“The C-Counselors are allowed in for n-now,” said Cessilia.

“Understood,” nodded the two servants.

Then, they each pulled one of the doors’ golden handles, opening it wide for Cessilia. She was stunned by the vision inside. This room felt like a completely different world from the rest of the castle. In

fact, it reminded her of those magical places described in her books. The floor was suddenly so well polished that all of the

round pieces of rock were completely even and smooth under her feet. She shyly walked in, her heart beating a little bit faster.

The room was in the shape of a comma, with a large round area, and a little corner on the left, with a large canopy bed with cerulean blue sheets and light wood. There was another door a bit further on the wall, blue too, but for now, she was too busy processing everything else she could see. The tall columns were supporting a stunning vaulted ceiling, with an incredible

mosaic of iridescent, dark little pieces that Cessilia couldn’t identify, just like the white one on the door earlier. Moreover,

everything was shining incredibly, with all the colors her eyes could catch, reflecting the little movements of the water around

her. Similar to what they had seen in the corridors, there were little streams of water crossing the room, all leading to the side

opposite the door. And in fact, there was no wall opposite to them. Instead, there were more of those columns, in wide arches

with a breathtaking view of the sea beyond them.

Cessilia lost her breath as she walked closer to see. There was a little balustrade made of sculpted redwood to keep

her from falling, but as she stood there, it was clear that half of this room was a balcony, with an amazing view of the sea, in

which the water streams were falling several feet below her. She could smell the gentle, salty breeze of the sea, caressing her

cheeks and freshening up the whole suite. She could hear the waves crashing against the foundations of the castle and going

back gently into the large river stream. Her eyes could even spot a colored fish at times, before it quickly swam away. This

room showed her the edge of the Eastern Kingdom, beyond the island they were on, the vast sea with no known end.

“T-This is... inc-credible,” she muttered, amazed.

“By Glahad’s butt...” whispered Tessa, somewhere behind her. “You weren’t kidding, this place is gorgeous.”

Cessilia chuckled and turned around. Just like her, the two old Counselors looked a bit lost and amazed, gazing all

around as well. All the furniture showed great taste and was made in light wood, with pieces of cerulean fabric here and there.

In the morning, she could just imagine the amazing sunrise they would witness that would light up the whole room...

The three servants, obviously triplets, advanced forward to bow to her again.

"I'm Nupia," said one of them. "I am the oldest of the triplets. The second is my brother Rupio, and the youngest of us is Lupia."

"Nice to meet you," smiled Cessilia.

"Nice to meet you guys," added Tessa, putting her hands on her hips. "We'll have tea, dried fruits, and meat buns for breakfast, thanks!"

"T-Tessa!" protested Cessilia.

"What? I'm starving! Isn't it their job...?"

"We will bring it right away!" said Nupia with a smile.

Indeed, Rupio and Lupia quietly walked out. The triplets looked exactly the same, had the same black eyes and hair, the same dark skin shade, the same bob haircut and bangs, the same body build and white outfit, and had no distinctive feature to distinguish one from another. They seemed to be young, just at the beginning of their teenagehood, and with their thin features, it was impossible to even tell which of the three was a boy...

"This room was prepared on short notice, Princess," said Nupia. "If there is anything you dislike, it will be changed right away."

"Is th-that really alright?" asked Cessilia.

"Of course! All of the candidates were given dedicated servants and assigned rooms.

This one was prepared in a rush, but we are happy to do anything you need to make it more agreeable!"

Nupia seemed very enthusiastic, but Cessilia was still a bit taken aback. They had only just landed this morning, and seen the King not an hour ago. This room had truly been prepared in record time...

"Well, I guess we know where we'll stay from now on," said Tessa, sitting down in one of the large armchairs. "Now, will you two explain what the heck this competition thing is? Yassim?"

The two Counselors exchanged a glance and sighed, coming to sit with the young woman. Unlike them, Cessilia was still standing, absorbed by the white, iridescent material on the columns. She slowly caressed it with her hands, surprised by how smooth and cold it was.

Tessa didn't seem surprised by her cousin's attitude, so the Counselors focused on her. In fact, Yamino let out a long sigh.

"I have to admit, I was shocked to see you after such a long time, Yassim. I really thought His Majesty had killed you,

you old fool... but it turns out you ventured to the Dragon Empire, to bring back a princess no less? What came to your tortured mind that made you return like this?"

"I have to apologize to the ladies," sighed Yassim. "This is exactly as you heard earlier. I... I didn't lie about being a

Royal Counselor, I have been by the King's side for a very long time. However, I... fell into disgrace a few months ago. I

believe the King spared me in the name of everything I taught him over the years and the fact that... I did save him once.

However, he banished me from our Capital, threatening that if he ever saw me again, he'd cut my throat. When I begged him to

reconsider, he said I could only return if--"

"You brought a new chick for his coop?" scoffed Tessa. "Why Cessi, though? Why come to our Empire? You should

have just remained hidden and saved your damn neck!"

"I... I am an old man, Lady Tessa, I do not fear the Goddess of Death. However, I did fear to leave our damaged

Kingdom in the hands of an even more damaged man. I believed that... if I could bring the right queen to his side, perhaps, then

him sparing my life would have had some sort of... fateful meaning."

Tessa rolled her eyes, a bit upset.

"You made one dangerous bet, Yassim..." sighed Yamino. "However, I'm happy to see you. To be honest, I was worried

about what was going to happen to all the candidates."

"Aren't you trying to have your niece become Queen?" asked Tessa, frowning.

"Naptunie is a very smart young woman," nodded Yamino. "I thought it would be better if there was another alternative

among the candidates... However, now that I have seen Princess Cessilia, I will suggest she supports you. Naptunie has little

ambition of her own, so I believe she will be happy to support Lady Cessilia if... she wants to."

All three pairs of eyes turned to Cessilia, who was still absorbed by the ceiling. She had to be listening to them

because she was close by, her hands were joined and fidgeting a bit. Still, she took a little breath in, her green eyes still stuck above.

"S-Sir Yassim, what are th-those?" she finally asked.

"The ceiling and the columns are made of nacre, my lady. It's a material made of polished seashells. The one used on

the ceiling is dark nacre, while on the columns and doors is white nacre. It's considered a precious material here, and used

mainly for decorations, dishes, or jewelry, a bit like silver in your country."

"...It's b-beautiful." She smiled.

"Cessi," pouted Tessa. "You do know this is all about you? What do you think of this competition thing?"

Her cousin finally turned her eyes to them.

“C-Counselor, who are the other candidates?”

“Most were introduced by the s—seven noble families,” said Yamino. “Because of the current situation in the Kingdom, they are all desperate to be the family of the next Queen... and perhaps, get along better with the King.”

“Old Yassim here did mention he wasn’t exactly playing nice,” said Tessa.

Old Yamino sighed, patting his huge belly. It was so round under his white toga, it looked like he was about to pop out of his chair at any moment.

“Did you notice the empty chairs?” he said with a sorry voice to Yassim.

“The Cheshi and Kunu Lords... What happened?”

“His Majesty got extremely mad, just three weeks ago, over an argument with the Kunu Tribe. They were arguing about the battle at the border; as you know, this is still a sensitive matter. The Kunu always refused the King placing the Royal Army there instead of Kunu warriors... You know how proud and violent the Kunu Tribe was. They said the wrong... thing, and the next thing I saw was a bloodbath. He... killed the head and all of the Chieftain’s family. After that, the Cheshi Clan stopped attending as a protest. They were never fond of the Kunu Tribe, but they said the King’s ways couldn’t go on anymore. I can’t blame them... They haven’t attended a single meeting since then, but the King has yet to say anything about it.”

Yassim’s expression had fallen a bit lower at each word his friend said. The old man did look very shaken about the empty seats before. Cessilia came to sit beside her cousin.

“Th-the other f-families?” she asked.

“There are- I mean, were, nine lords, each at the head of a tribe, powerful family, or clan,” explained Yamino. “I myself was born in the Dorosef Tribe, but I renounced my privilege when I became a Royal Counselor.”

“The Yekara Clan is the most powerful,” nodded Yassim. “I’m not surprised they are presenting two candidates. They have many lands and a lot of warriors. They took part in all the previous wars of the Kingdom, and turned on the previous King to pledge allegiance to King Ashen.”

“Sounds like people our grandma would love on her bad days...” scoffed Tessa.

“The Dorosef Tribe is very peaceful,” said Yamino. “They were once travellers, but they settled in the Kingdom as fishermen. They aren’t seriously participating in this, and neither are the Hashat Family; they are too new among the lords.”

“The Sehsan and Yonchaa Tribes are among the oldest of our Kingdom. They are probably participating to try and make themselves more valuable to the King. They are not aggressive, though, so I don’t think their candidates will fight too hard for this...”

“I’m more worried about the Pangoja,” nodded Yamino. “That clan is the richest, and very secretive. They have many businesses all across the Kingdom, a lot of informants, and an eye on all the trades...”

“Now that sounds like my kind of people,” smiled Tessa. “So, if I can remember all those names correctly, we have the warrior Yekara Clan, the Dorosef, Sehsan, and Yonchaa Tribes, that shady Pangoja Clan, the somewhat sulking Cheshi Clan, and the already dead Kunu people... Who am I missing again?”

“The Hashat Family, but they aren’t participating. Although, Counselor Oroun is from that family and nominated his own daughter. The ninth family is the Nahaf, and they also have a candidate. I don’t know them too well, they rose at about the same time as our King...”

“Great, now I’m going to have to take notes,” grumbled Tessa. “What about that red-haired woman? She had... light skin, like me and Cessi. Where the heck does she come from to look like that and act like that? I already can’t stand her attitude.” Yassim was intrigued too. He hadn’t thought he’d return to see his King had really taken a mistress... He felt horrible about it, after he had brought Princess Cessilia all the way here. That woman was the worst outcome he had imagined in his plan, and he also didn’t like her already... He turned to Yamino, who rubbed his round cheeks with a sullen expression.

“Ah... That Jisel woman, I am not too sure, to be honest with you. I heard rumors about her here and there from the servants, and then I began seeing her in the castle. She’s... just acting as if she had always been here. She greets us, but I’ve never seen her talk with anyone but His Majesty. She’s most often by his side, to be honest. I quickly found out she’s been with him for a while now, but no one seems to know where that woman came from.”

The two cousins exchanged a look.

“M-Mother said there were other p-people from the Rain T-Tribe...” muttered Cessilia.

“Yeah, she and my mom searched for some of them, but she only found a handful of slaves scattered in the Dragon Empire...”

“Rain people?” repeated Yamino.

“White-skinned people,” said Tessa, “like our moms.”

“Oh... I have never seen white-skinned people, but... people like you, I do.”

“Seriously?!” exclaimed Tessa, slamming her armchair and making the old men jump.

“Y-yes,” mumbled Yamino. “W-well... I mean, their skin isn’t as fair as yours, but the Hashat Family’s heir is... definitely closer to your skin color than mine. They haven’t met the King yet, but I met the Hashat’s Lord’s heir at a party not long ago. I almost thought you were his people until Yassim spoke earlier...”

“Hashat,” repeated Tessa, turning to her cousin again. “Hashat, Hashat... Cessi, didn’t Auntie use to sing that old song,

when we were kids, remember? She taught us those lyrics from her native language, and *hashe* was definitely the word for..."

"...It *m*-means rain."

The two girls remained quiet for a little while, seriously shaken by that news. They had always seen their mothers

trying to find more people from the Rain Tribe who had survived the slaughter three decades ago. Each time they had found

other white-skinned women or their mixed children, their mothers were seriously shaken and thrilled. Both Tessa and Cessilia

knew how much it meant to find people of that supposedly exterminated group.

"C-can you t-tell us more about th-those p-people? The Hashat Family?" asked Cessilia.

"Of course, my lady," nodded Yamino, a bit surprised by their reactions. "Although, there isn't much. The Hashat were

never a very powerful family, but they did get more noticeable following the previous civil war. While a lot of our Kingdom

was ravaged, their people became famous as miraculous healers..."

Cessilia felt her heart stop upon hearing this.

"Their medical knowledge is the most advanced in the land," nodded Yassim. "Their tribe went from village to village

to help heal the people, and thus, they made a reputation for themselves. They never earned much for it, but their will to save

even the poorest of our citizens became well-known throughout the land. It is known that the Hashat will heal even those who

can't pay, as long as no one is hostile to them."

"Once the war ended, His Majesty rewarded them for their good actions. They were gifted a lot of money, and some

lands that had been confiscated, although they decided to remain an itinerant tribe. I believe they have a couple of houses in the

Capital, but they never stay long. Only a handful stay to partake in the nine lords' meetings, but the leader's heir and oldest son

is usually traveling with the rest of their family..."

"It is probably also for their safety," nodded Yassim. "A lot of people were upset that a nameless tribe suddenly got so

much money and land from the King..."

"Well, for once, your King sounds like he did a good thing," said Tessa, crossing her arms. "But that medical

knowledge is something the Rain Tribe was known for. My guess is that the Hashat became so good because they took in some

of our Rain Tribe's people."

"C-can we meet them?" asked Cessilia.

"Of course, my lady. As I said, their leader resides in the Capital. I can ask Counselor Oroun to arrange a meeting with

them; they are very kind people, only a bit secretive, for obvious reasons..."

Cessilia nodded with a little smile.

Yassim was always surprised at how polite, quiet, and gentle the young Princess was.

In fact, despite their very brief

meeting, he could see a lot of her mother in her. He could easily see why her cousin was so outspoken, in comparison, and always ready to jump to her defense. Despite her size, Cessilia seemed rather fragile on the inside...

"...Do you have any other questions about the other families and tribes, my ladies?" asked Yassim, visibly a bit nervous.

How will the competition go?" asked Tessa. "I imagine it's not like there's going to be a sword fight or something?"

"Oh, no, my lady. In fact, there won't be any open competition. It's only about inviting all the candidates, and His

Majesty will choose one to be his wife."

"Nice, so we don't actually need to kill the others to win?" asked Tessa, raising an eyebrow.

A bit shocked to hear a young woman say such a thing, Yamino glanced at Yassim, his mouth open. Did he just hear

this? Yassim chuckled nervously. After all, Lady Tessa was also the War God's and the Empress' niece...

Thankfully, two of the triplets returned then, and they had actually already gathered everything Tessa had asked. They

poured some tea for all four of them, and Tessa jumped on the meat buns. They hadn't eaten since leaving that morning, so the

four of them gladly ate some breakfast while the triplets happily served them.

"...I want to visit the C-Capital, if possible," said Cessilia after a little while.

"Of course!" said Yassim with a smile. "I'll personally walk you around this morning, my lady. It's actually a market

day, so it will be even more thriving than usual."

"Lady Cessilia," said Yamino, licking his fingers after his third meat bun, "I would like to introduce you to my niece,

Naptunie, if you'd agree. That child grew up here in the Capital, she'll escort you as well, if you'd like. I'm sure she will be

able to show you the young people's favorite places."

"I'd love that," nodded Cessilia.

She had a little smile on her lips that she couldn't hide. Cessilia was a bit impatient to explore more of this Kingdom.

In fact, she had never been the adventurous type, and her family had always watched her a bit more closely. She lived her life

between the Imperial Palace and her father's castle, sometimes visiting her grandmother too. But she had only accompanied her

brothers to the North Camp once, and she rarely went anywhere without her family. She wasn't like Kiera, who couldn't stand

being watched and would flee anytime she could. Perhaps because she was the oldest daughter, Cessilia was always very

obedient. Only once had she broken the rules. She had betrayed her parents' trust just one time and paid a heavy price for it...

“Shall we start with a tour of the castle?” offered Yamino, patting his round belly. “This way, we can go see my niece, and then you younglings should be off to the Capital!”

“...What about the rest of your, uh... luggage, ladies?” asked Yassim, suddenly remembering the Black Dragon.

“Oh, he’ll be back when he’s full,” shrugged Tessa.

“K-Krai likes to g-go hunting first th-thing in the morning,” smiled Cessilia. “He will nap somewhere and c-come bback later...”

Yassim tried to smile a bit awkwardly. He was a little bit worried as to where the large Black Dragon would set its new hunting ground...

“Oh, let’s go now,” announced Tessa, standing up and stretching. “I need to walk to digest all this. I’m curious about this castle too. It’s so tiny!”

Yamino and Yassim felt a bit defeated by the young woman’s honesty, but she probably had very different standards, considering where she came from. Yassim had witnessed himself that the War God’s residence was about as big as their King’s...”

“We can take care of your luggage if you want!” quickly offered one of the triplets, running to the bags they had put down at the entrance.

Before she could put her hands on it, a knife flew right by her fingers, missing them only by an inch. The cutlery stabbed the wall next to her. Nupia froze and fell back in fear, her eyes wide. Her younger siblings, who were respectively holding the teapot and a full fruit plate, glanced at Tessa, both just as shocked.

“If you touch our things, I’ll cut your fingers off,” said the young woman.

“I-I’m sorry!” quickly said Nupia, backing away from their bags.

The two Counselors were in awe. Not only because they had barely seen the action, or that this kitchen knife had been thrown with such speed, strength, and precision that it literally got stuck in a wall, but also because Cessilia had barely reacted to this. In fact, her eyes had quickly gone to each of the triplets before she had taken her teacup to sip quietly as if her cousin’s action was completely normal.

“M-my lady,” said Yamino, a bit confused. “There’s nothing to worry about, all the castle’s servants are trained since childhood to serve well—”

“Th-they are not just servants,” suddenly said Cessilia.

Once again, the two old men were utterly confused, but the young Princess’ green eyes were on the two younger triplets.

It was as if her previously gentle gaze had turned into an emerald-colored stare. This time, Yassim could clearly see something

of her father in Cessilia's eyes. She didn't look so fragile anymore, all of a sudden, but she had the piercing gaze of someone who knew how to watch out for threats.

"I-I am sorry," mumbled Nupia, bowing again and again. "We are really just servants, my lady..."

"D-do you t-train servants to f-fight?" asked Cessilia, her eyes going to Yamino.

"Of course not!"

"Then they are not j-just servants," she quietly said.

The triplets kept exchanging glances, visibly confused. Yassim was also trying to understand. Cessilia seemed so sure, but the triplets also seemed genuinely shocked, and the look of fear on their faces too... Still, the young woman was the War God's daughter.

"How do you know, my lady?"

"The b-boy didn't flinch when T-Tessa sent that knife, neither d-did Lupia," she simply said.

Yassim was astonished. He glanced aside, but... indeed, it made complete sense. If the triplets had really been shocked, they would have very briefly lost their grip on the dishes they were holding. The knife had flown close to them and almost injured their older sister, so they should have been at least shocked. Some of the contents of that teacup held on the plate would have been spilled, and those grapes on top of the fruit bowl looked like they were just about to fall, yet still there. If she hadn't said anything, Yassim wouldn't even have noticed their lack of physical reaction, and been floored by their acting. They were both faking their surprise so perfectly, but Cessilia had been able to notice it. Not only that, but... she even could tell those two apart? Since they had left the room and returned together, Yassim just couldn't tell which one was the boy or the girl, but Cessilia obviously had no doubt.

A shiver went down the old man's spine. There was definitely more to that young woman than meets the eye.

Realizing they were discovered, the triplets exchanged glances, and immediately got down on their knees, apologizing together.

"Our apologies for deceiving this Princess! We were told to quietly and secretly watch over the Princess, we would never try to harm the Princess!"

"...Who sent you?" asked Tessa, who was playing with another knife already. "Don't you lie, I'll really cut your tongue if you do. I only need one of you to talk."

"The King, my lady! It's the truth!" quickly said Nupia.

As she was repeatedly bowing and hiding her face, Yassim had no idea how to tell if the triplets were telling the truth,

but Tessa and Cessilia were visibly satisfied with that. Tessa glanced toward her cousin and put the knife down.

“K-King Ashen t-told you to p-protect me...?” repeated Cessilia.

This time, she wasn’t doubting the triplets, but there was surprise in her voice. Tessa frowned subtly too. What was

going on there... The triplets nodded quietly again, visibly still afraid of the cousin’s dangerous knife-throwing ability.

“...I see.”

That was all Cessilia said, and no one dared to ask anything else. Instead, as she slowly stood up, they all did, and she

put back on a gentle smile as if all of that hadn’t happened.

“Is it alright if we g-go now?” she asked Yamino.

“Of course, my lady! Nothing better than a little digestive walk, right?”

“You three are coming with us,” immediately said Tessa, glaring at the triplets.

All three immediately complied and cleared the table in record time while the girls took out their coats.

“Maybe we should wear something d-different?” suggested Cessilia.

She had probably noticed the difference in clothing from the rest of the nobles.

“There will be plenty of clothes in the market if you ladies want to buy something,” nodded Yassim. “They may not be

as luxurious as the Dragon Empire’s fabric, but we have some of the best clothing shops of the Kingdom in the Capital.”

“Oh, for sure! Naptunie will happily take you, Princess Cessilia,” nodded Yamino. “My niece loves going downtown.”

Their little group soon got ready to leave the room, and Cessilia did notice how Nupia carefully closed the room

behind them and walked back to her, handing her the key.

“From now on, Princess Cessilia, you are the only guest allowed in the Cerulean Room and the only one to decide who

will be allowed in or not. The sentence for trespassing is death, my lady.”

Tessa scoffed.

“I hope you’ll remember to let me in, Cessi.”

The two cousins chuckled but did not mention anything about allowing the older Counselors in again. Instead, their little

group walked out and back into the corridors. This time, Yamino was leading them, while the triplets followed behind.

Cessilia was a bit excited to get out of this castle. She found this place a bit sad and stuffy; most of the corridors were bare and

the atmosphere heavy anywhere they went. The few people they walked into quietly bowed to their group and disappeared, out

of the way. Either the news of an Imperial Princess coming had quickly spread throughout the place, or those people knew they

should stay away from the guests; no one talked to them.

“My niece should be in the library,” said Yamino as they arrived at a lower floor. “She is a clever girl and loves

reading, she is a bit of an indoor flower, you see.”

“I know someone like that,” said Tessa, smiling at her cousin. Cessilia smiled back. Perhaps Naptunie could become a good friend indeed... Plus, now that he had mentioned it, she was a bit curious to discover that library. Cessilia had read almost every book she could find in all three of the palaces she lived in, and her grandmother even gifted her several books for each of her birthdays, just so she could have something new to read. In fact, in the Dragon Empire, it was rumored that the Princess’ love for books had multiplied the circulation of books within the Empire and inspired more of the youth to read, as she and her mother regularly donated books to the schools, orphanages, and charities. However, Cessilia found herself a bit disappointed when they entered the library. The room wasn’t as big as she had hoped, nor filled with books. In fact, some of the shelves were half-empty and seemed too large for their contents. The old oak wood seemed about to crumble, and the colored leather of some books was standing out too much among the decrepit ones. Seeing the disappointment in the Princess’ eyes, Yassim stepped forward, a bit apologetic.

“Because of the recent war, a lot of the books are now in the people’s private properties rather than in the castle’s library... They became extremely rare and valuable due to many of them getting burned too, so it has become harder to replenish these shelves. They were once filled with dozens of amazing books, my lady. All of the Counselors have been trying to bring more books back, but...”

“There are too many thieves,” sighed Yamino. “Because the books are so valuable, some are getting stolen every week, despite His Majesty putting some guards here.”

“Th-that’s sad...” muttered Cessilia. Slowly, she stepped into the library first, her green eyes going to the shelves without touching any of those books. This place felt... forsaken. It was as if a few people had tried to take care of it, then abandoned it. There was dust on the shelves, and only the books with the prettiest covers seemed to be properly taken care of. The oldest, ugliest ones had their back covers falling apart and were piling up dust. Cessilia’s eyes were reading one title after another, most of them completely unknown to her. She was still very curious to read each of these books, but her heart was pained when she witnessed their poor state. She grabbed one of the very old books.

“Anyone c-can take a b-book here?”

“Anyone, Princess.”

The voice had come from the other side of the shelf. Cessilia’s green eyes looked in between the books, and sure

enough, a pair of dark eyes appeared, with a smile on those red lips.

Jisel was staring at her from the other side, her eyes smiling.

"We meet again, Princess. What a coincidence..."

"...Lad-dy Jisel," simply said Cessilia.

"I'm flattered you already remember my name, Princess Cessilia of the Dragon Empire."

She slowly stepped to the side, her red dress floating around her. She was even prettier up close, but not strikingly

beautiful. Jisel had a pointy chin, a long nose, and thin eyebrows, and her long, red hair was flowing elegantly over her bare

shoulders, showing her collarbones and silver earrings.

"...You were right, Counselor," scoffed Tessa. "They really let anyone in here..."

"Oh, women are welcome to instruct themselves as well," said Jisel, "...even the whores."

This time, the smirk disappeared from Tessa's face. Jisel looked a bit amused at her reaction, as she had just shown that

such insults wouldn't hurt her at all. It was clear she was used to it, and not willing to take offense so easily. She seemed like a

very intelligent woman to Cessilia, but it didn't change how she just couldn't like that woman. Her green eyes didn't hide it,

nor did she shy away from the black eyes staring right back at her.

"I am not your enemy, Princess," said Jisel, tilting her head. "As you probably already know, I am not even a contestant

to be His Majesty's wife. I have no desire to fight you either. ...After all, aren't we almost relatives? I was surprised when I

saw you too... I had heard rumors. That the infamous War God had fallen for a white-skinned concubine... Looks like it was all

true."

Tessa frowned and clenched her fists, annoyed about Jisel's words. Even if it was true, she didn't like this woman

pointing out their common heritage.

Yet, to everyone's surprise, Cessilia smiled slightly. The Princess was just as calm and composed as the King's

mistress facing her. The tension between them was obvious, but there was also a clear intent from both women not to let the

other get to her. Never had the Counselors thought they'd ever witness such a passive argument... The green-eyed Princess

finally stopped staring at Jisel and grabbed one of the old books.

"You were r-right," she said.

"...About what?" asked Jisel, frowning.

She was clearly surprised by Cessilia's reaction, as was everyone else. Shouldn't she be annoyed at the King's

mistress? Yet, the Princess quietly opened that book, her fingers caressing the pages with a very calm demeanor. After a short

while, she closed it.

"...You're not c-competition," she said, without looking at the redhead.

Those words left Jisel stunned, and Cessilia turned around, ignoring her. Although she was a bit lost at what had just happened, Tessa felt a bit proud of her cousin, and followed her as she walked away between the shelves, leaving her rival there.

She held that old book against her chest, but Cessilia didn't look at any more books as she walked out. She just wanted to leave this room, and get as far away as possible from the woman that made her uncomfortable. The little group followed behind in silence, the two Counselors visibly awkward. For Cessilia to run into the King's mistress so quickly was among the worst-case scenarios. Even if nothing major had happened, both old men felt bad for the young Princess. However, Cessilia had acted strangely calm and composed all along, and even her stutter hadn't taken away her little win over the redhead. She had left her rival speechless and walked away before Jisel could find a comeback. In his heart, Yassim grew a bit prouder of the Princess each minute.

Cessilia wasn't as composed inside as she appeared to look. In fact, she just focused on walking, sealing and muting her emotions in the back of her mind, until she suddenly stopped, realizing she had no idea where she was.

She glanced around and turned to the two old men who had remained quiet the whole time.

"I'm s-sorry," she muttered. "Where...?"

"Oh, this way Princess," said Yamino with an honest smile. "We're very close!" Following them silently, Yassim was once again baffled. In just a few minutes, the Princess had gone from a fierce tiger ready to stand her ground against her rival, to now looking like a lost and inoffensive young lady again. Only Tessa didn't seem surprised at all, and just followed behind with a satisfied expression. Yamino was happily chatting with her about his niece's whereabouts, but Yassim knew his friend was probably as curious about the Princess as he was. He really couldn't trust his own eyes when it came to the Dragon Empire's people...

"Naptunie, sweetie?" Yamino gently knocked on one door.

He slowly opened the door, which led to a very small office. In fact, it was just large enough for two desks facing each other against a window, and another table full of piled-up books, parchments, and broken feathers.

"Uncle Mino!" exclaimed a young woman, almost jumping off her seat. "Look, I finished doing the math on..."

Naptunie froze as she saw that her uncle wasn't alone. She was strikingly similar to her uncle, with a very round face, very round body, curly black hair, and small eyes. Her skin was very dark too, and she was of a small but large build, with her

two high pigtails making her look even cuter. Cessilia was immediately reminded of those baby bear cubs her brother had found once, with her little upturned nose and small, pouty lips. She wore a very simple, long, blue dress, and for jewelry, two large nacre bracelets around her wrists, and similar hoop earrings.

"Hi..." She smiled, sending curious glances toward her uncle.

"Princess Cessilia, Lady Tessa, this is my niece, Naptunie. She's sixteen and a very bright, intelligent girl."

"Oh, Uncle... Wait, Princess?" she immediately opened her eyes wide and turned to Cessilia and Tessa. "You're the two ladies who attended court this morning? The Princesses! I'm so pleased to meet you! And you're so pretty too! Is your skin color real? Can I touch it? Oh, sorry, I probably shouldn't ask things like that... Oh, hi, Uncle Yassim! Welcome back... He's back for real, right? Is it alright to ask?"

She had a cute voice and spoke very fast, clearly not bothering to sort out her thoughts first. Cessilia thought to herself

she was a bit like Tessa as she spoke with little to no filter. Though in her case, it didn't seem like she did it on purpose. Even

right now, she turned her eyes to her uncle with a worried expression to ask for confirmation, realizing a bit late her poor choice of words. Yamino laughed and nodded, while Yassim stepped forward.

"Yes, Lady Naptunie, I am back for real. You've grown well."

"Oh, not so much..." immediately replied the young lady, blushing and patting her chubby cheeks, visibly embarrassed.

"I am happy to see you again. And the Princesses! Are you really from the Dragon Empire? You've never been here, right?"

"First, I'm not a princess," said Tessa. "I'm just Tessa. Second, yes, first time here, regretting it already."

Naptunie was very clearly more curious than afraid and kept adding questions to her previous questions without leaving the girls a single second to try and answer, to the point where even Tessa let her jaw hang after a few seconds, completely baffled.

"...I never thought I'd see a worse word mill than my sis... Seriously, never," she whispered to Cessilia, shocked.

"You n-never know," chuckled the Princess, amused.

"Nana!" suddenly shouted Yamino, obviously used to it but nevertheless exhausted. "I told the ladies that you would escort them downtown and show them around. You are about the same age and know the main streets better than Yassim or myself. Princess Cessilia and her cousin, Lady Tessa, are visiting our Kingdom for the first time. I think it would be best if you showed them around..."

Naptunie's eyes immediately sparkled as she smiled brightly at the two young women.

“Of course! I know all the best places to go, the best shops, and the best restaurants! You girls will love it! Oh, and we should go see my cousins, they have the best fish beignet shop! They even have the rarest ones, and the best sea powder cakes too!”

Tessa smiled awkwardly, but Naptunie’s bright optimism was shining and contagious. Cessilia nodded, feeling a bit excited to meet a young woman their age to guide them around this new city.

“Nice t-to meet you, N-Naptunie.”

“Oh, please call me Nana!” replied the young woman. “Everybody does! Oh, should I call you Princess? Or Your

Highness? This is my first time meeting a real Imperial Princess! Do you have a real tiara? Is it made of gold? You have so

much gold on you! Is it real gold? It has to be, right? Oh, one of my friend’s aunties has the best jewelry shop, we should stop

by and say hi! Of course, we will drop by my cousins’ shop first! Do you guys like fish? I’m sorry, I tend to talk a lot when I’m

nervous, and meeting new people makes me very nervous... “

“Who would have noticed...” muttered Tessa.

“You should go, ladies,” chuckled Yamino. “The weather is meant to be nice today, you young ones should enjoy it all

you want. Old men like us wouldn’t be able to keep up anyway, and the Capital is more enjoyable with people your own age!”

“Please come back to the castle before the sunset, my ladies,” said Yassim, visibly worried. “If anything happens to you—”

“If anything happens to us, it will rain flames,” scoffed Tessa. “Come on, let’s go and enjoy ourselves. I feel like we will not have many days like this once this damn competition thing or whatever really starts...”

“Oh, I know exactly where to go first!” exclaimed Nana, walking ahead. “Have you ever tried fresh coconut juice?”

“No, and what in the world is a coconut...”

Cessilia chuckled, watching the two young women leave first, bickering in the corridor. She glanced toward Yassim

again, with a gentle expression.

“Thank you,” she muttered.

Yassim was a bit confused as to why exactly she was thanking him, of all people.

For bringing her here? This whole ordeal was nothing like he had promised. No, in fact, if it wasn’t for Yamino’s niece

offering them a tour of the Capital, he wouldn’t have known what to do or say to the young ladies. He still felt bad about all of

this, despite still knowing he had sincerely done what he thought he should. Because he had acted for the Kingdom’s sake, not

Cessilia’s. In just one morning, she had already met the King and his mistress, discovered the three spies placed by her side,

and been stared at with disdain by all of the most powerful people in this Kingdom. All that right after she had been taken away from her family, from her home she was perfectly safe in. In fact, Yassim was still at a loss as to why this young, brave woman that still looked so fragile at times would willingly go through all of this, and with such a soft smile too...

Walking down the corridor, Cessilia was oblivious to Yassim's considerations. In fact, she was even fine with ignoring the triplets still silently walking behind her, and instead, she was smiling at Nana's non-stop chattering and the faces her cousin was making. As someone used to having a very chatty sister already, despite her earlier complaints, Tessa could endure Nana's word mill spinning at full speed just fine.

Moreover, it wasn't just noise, she was actually providing them with a lot of information and turned out to be not only very chatty, but highly informed about pretty much anything an educated woman her age would be.

By the time they reached the ground floor, they already knew all about how she had six siblings she got along with, her family coming from a long line of fishermen and fish sellers, their pride as part of the Dorosef Tribe, and her own upbringing.

Even how she had been given books to keep herself busy since she was too precocious even for her parents to keep up, Tessa rolled her eyes multiple times at that part, and how she had begun her apprenticeship as her uncle's assistant just four years ago. Apparently, the only thing that could rival Nana's love for books and knowledge was her love for food. As they walked by the kitchen, she greeted all the cooks, calling them by their names and proudly introducing the two cousins as if they had been friends forever. In fact, Nana's blinding optimism was such that she didn't even seem to realize how many jaws dropped as the kitchen staff realized they were being introduced to an Imperial Princess.

"Let's go!" she quickly said as they walked out of the castle. "The earlier we go, the better our fish buns will be.

Normally, people start queuing before dawn for my auntie's fish beignets, the fresh ones are the best!"

"Fresh ones?" repeated Tessa, frowning. "You don't... cook the fish?"

"Oh, we love it half-cooked!" said Nana with a wink. "The inside is still fresh, and the exterior is slightly cooked with the hot dough! And those sea salt-seasoned vegetables, and the sea herb white cream that goes perfectly with it... Oh, I'm salivating just thinking about it!"

Although they had just had breakfast, right now, both cousins were inevitably curious about those delicious-sounding dishes. Nana took them outside the castle's gates, and Cessilia realized they were somehow still high up on the upper half of

the mountain they had seen from the outside. In fact, to get out of the castle, it just took three open arches, with two guards at each that sent them curious glances even as cheerful Nana greeted them, and that was it.

“...Wait a minute,” said Tessa, shocked. “That’s it? We are out of the castle? You call this security?!”

“Oh, going into the castle is easy,” chuckled Nana, “but the main security is at the Inner Capital’s entrance, farther down. No one is allowed inside the Capital without an official pass, so make sure to never, ever leave without one. Even if the guard is your brother, they won’t let you in without the papers. And trust me, it has happened to me and my siblings more than once!”

“...I d-don’t understand,” said Cessilia. “Why g-guard the C-Capital and not the c-c-castle?”

“Oh, this is the King’s idea. The Capital is extremely selective, so it has to be the safest place. Actually, where we are now is called the Inner Capital. It is the safest place in all of the Kingdom, after the castle itself. If we go lower down, about three or four levels, we will reach the Inner Gates, and past those, it’s the Greater Capital. The Greater Capital has more habitations, some cheaper shops, but it’s also a bit less safe. Then, there are the four bridges. Once you pass the bridges, you’re still in the Capital, but in the Outer Capital. Technically, it is still part of the Capital, but no more shops, just a few houses and private lands for cultivation, fishing, and so on. It’s where everyone who wants to get in the Capital has to stop once they pass the great walls.”

“Wait, there are more walls?” said Tessa, confused already.

“Yes, the very first step to getting inside the Capital is the Outer Wall... supposedly,” grimaced Nana. “In fact, about a fifth of it was destroyed during the previous war, so a lot of people clandestinely enter every day. That’s why security is more focused on the Inner and Greater Capital than on the outskirts or even the Outer Capital. They are working on rebuilding it, though, and arresting people who enter illegally.”

“I see... So the bridges are actually the main checkpoints?”

“Exactly! Wait, I’ll show you... Ah, there!”

She walked to the wall on their left, which was as tall as two men, but Nana was pointing out of a little window they could see through. Indeed, several levels below, down on the ground level, they could see a portion of a long and large bridge, with dozens of people on it, going one way, into the Capital. From the sky, Cessilia and Tessa hadn’t been given much time to see the details of the Capital’s architecture, nor how it really was conceived. The walls were just lines from up there, and

those bridges didn't seem so big either.

Once again, Cessilia was fascinated.

"It's imp-pressive." She nodded.

"Right?" said Nana with a bright smile. "Come on, let's go get those fish beignets! I'll show you all around the best streets of the city, and we can go anywhere you want in the Inner Capital! You know, most people in the Kingdom dream of living here, and some work hard their whole lives to get the papers to get in! ...Did you get in because you're Princesses?"

"I guess we don't really need papers. We have a... very convincing mount," chuckled Tessa.

She and Nana bickered for a while, as Tessa already loved teasing the young woman. Cessilia briefly turned around to

check, but sure enough, the triplets were still following them from a couple of steps behind, acting like silent shadows. She

frowned, a bit bothered by those three. However, before she said anything, something caught her attention.

She raised her eyes higher, trying to find that shine that had blinded her for a second.

She found it, hidden in the shadows of a window much, much higher. His silhouette was drawn by the long lines of his

white hair, his eyes riveted on her. Cessilia didn't shy away from that stare. Instead, she stared back, with a neutral expression,

as if she was waiting for something.

"Cessi! Are you coming?"

She smiled and turned around to join the two girls, pushing that stolen moment to the back of her mind.

## Chapter 5

Although it was still very early in the morning, the Eastern Kingdom's Capital was already bustling.

Following Nana closely, Cessilia and Tessa couldn't help but feel amazed by how different things were from their own

birthplace. This was also a capital, but it was nothing like the ones they knew. First, they were impressed by how much more

cramped everything was. In the Dragon Empire, each street was wide enough that several people could walk by without even

getting near each other. Here, their little trio had to stick to each other so they wouldn't run into another group. Moreover, the

road wasn't flat at all; unlike the dry, sand-like soil of the Dragon Empire, everything here was made of irregular cobblestones,

mostly in dark colors, so much so that they had to get used to walking a bit differently so they wouldn't trip. Cessilia was

grateful there was less sand, though. This place was much windier, and at each crossway, they could feel the wind blowing

from all directions, carrying the salty sea mist along. She could feel that strange, fresh layer of humidity caressing her skin, yet

making her lips a bit more dry than usual. Her hair was getting a few more curls than normal too, and she could see the stones, under their feet and on the walls, covered with a thin, shiny layer of that same mist. "Here!" exclaimed Nana, stopping in front of the small shops. "Let's start with fresh juice... Auntie, can we have three of the classic ones?"

While she happily chatted with the shop owner, Cessilia glanced over the dozens of fruits exposed in front of the stall.

She only knew half of them, while the other half was completely foreign to her. Even Tessa, impressed, couldn't stop herself from asking Nana over and over the name of various fruits. Eventually, she turned around, offering them a strange, roundshaped fruit with a little bamboo straw in it.

"Here! This is one of my favorites! The coconuts are imported from one of the islands farther south, so they have to transport them overnight. In a few hours, they won't be good! That's why a lot of people wake up early to get the freshest fruits!"

Cessilia was impressed. She knew the whole geography of the Dragon Empire enough to know wherever she went, she'd find pretty much the same fruits and vegetables in the shops. Only in the north were things rarer, but overall still the same. However, here, because the Kingdom included a lot of islands scattered around, they could also enjoy some foreign delicacies like this... As they continued their little morning stroll, it was clear only a handful of shops were selling those firsthand exotic fruits. In fact, most shops were still closed, or only just opening, while the ones already in business were those who had to sell out their fresh fruits or fish.

Nana's chattiness made her an excellent guide. Her uncle hadn't exaggerated her knowledge; she knew most people they crossed paths with and had an answer for absolutely everything. She could describe the process for woven baskets in front of a shop, the reasons for the various water canals they had to cross, how they used seaweed as dry or humid wraps for some dishes, and even the strange miniature houses stuck mid-height between the buildings. "Those are cat houses! A few decades back, we had serious rodent issues... So, a lot of people adopted cats, and let them roam the city to get rid of the rodents. Now, they know that if they bring dead mice or rats to the fishermen, they get free fish! Those houses are for them when they need to have kittens, or just if they don't like to live with humans. The fishermen even leave them the unsold fish at times, otherwise, they just steal it..."

"Th-that is impressive," nodded Cessilia.

"Right? Our family has two cats, but they aren't very good hunters anymore, they are too old. But at least they keep the

mice away, and they love cuddles too!”

Nana’s positivity was contagious, and Cessilia smiled while trying to sip her juice. It was good, sweet, and refreshing.

Not only that but wandering in a new city, completely foreign to her own world, had something vibrant about it. The sky was colored with bright pink and orange streaks, the sky getting bluer and bluer every minute. It was a bit colder than what she was used to. The Capital of the Dragon Empire would have been much hotter already at this time of the day, while her father’s Onyx Castle would still be hot from all the chimney fires, as opposed to the frost outside. She slightly regretted having left their coats back in the castle, but it was bearable.

The large rock they were walking on was a new kind of climate she wasn’t quite used to; not too cold, yet humid from the sea winds stroking her hair. Her dress was sticking to her body a bit, and she could feel the drops on her neck, although she couldn’t tell if it was her own sweat or just dripping from all the humidity. It really was a strange place...

“Thank you for the drinks, Nana,” said Tessa, “but we’re probably going to need our own money. Do you use the same as ours here?”

“Oh, we have different kinds of coins, but they will take any kind of silver! It’s too precious, so even if it hasn’t been changed to our currency, you can definitely use it, with the weight.”

Cessilia doubted they would have any money issues here. When Nana bought their juices earlier, she did notice how cheap it was compared to a drink in the Dragon Empire... In fact, the little silver coins she had handed over wouldn’t have been enough to buy a single drink in the Capital. No wonder the few people they had seen were helplessly gawking at her golden jewelry... Although it was a nice change for these people not to be as shocked by her skin color, it was definitely intriguing. Back in the Dragon Empire, her mother’s milk-white skin had long been a sign of slavery, while now, there wasn’t one person in the Dragon Empire who ignored that the Imperial Princes and Princesses’ skin color was lighter than most. Of course, she and her brothers and sisters came in all shades, but they definitely stood out wherever they went. Yet here, no one seemed as shocked by her skin or eyes as they were by her jewelry.

“N-Nana? Are mixed p-people c-common here?” she asked as they were queuing for another shop.

“Well, it’s definitely rare, but... not unseen,” said Nana, frowning a bit. “The Hashat Family is known to have mixed people with lighter skin than most, at least, so even if most people haven’t seen it, we know they do exist... Are all the Dragon Empire people light-skinned too?”

“No,” replied Tessa. “Our moms are white-skinned, but aside from them, there are only a few people like that in all of the Empire. That’s why we were shocked to hear about that tribe.”

“Oh... Well, we will probably see some in the castle! The Hashat Family lives outside of the Capital, but I know their leader comes to the King’s meetings, so...”

“Are th-there many p-people outside the C-Capital? F-from what we saw f-from ab-... above, there weren’t m-many villages...”

“Not that many,” said Nana with a sigh. “A lot of the Kingdom has been destroyed by the wars, and many villages are completely abandoned... Wait, what do you mean from above?”

“We will show you later,” said Tessa with a smile, gently pushing her forward in the line. However, Nana wasn’t satisfied with that explanation. She kept suspiciously staring at the two of them even as she ordered more food, this time letting Tessa pay for it.

“You are Princesses, my uncle said,” she insisted, “so, you’re related to the Empress? For real? Do you live in the Imperial Palace? ...Do you really have dragons in the Imperial Family?”

“You’ve never seen a dragon?” smirked Tessa.

“Of course not! I heard they are terrifying...”

“Oh, they are, and they love to eat chatty, little ladies...”

Nana pouted a bit, well aware Tessa was teasing her. The three girls were getting along as well as the Royal

Counselors had predicted, and Cessilia too couldn’t help but chuckle at her cousin trying to scare the young lady. Thankfully,

the food they had ordered this time was hot, little, caramelized fruit skewers that melted on her tongue and warmed her up from the inside.

“This is so good,” said Tessa, although she kept blowing out to get rid of the heat.

“Right? This is the best shop for grilled fruit skewers! She even has some that she flames with alcohol!”

“Why didn’t you give us that?!” protested Tessa.

“She can’t sell them in the morning, it’s way too early!” laughed Nana. “Alcohol selling and consumption is strictly regulated within the Capital, you can only have some during certain hours. Everything is much stricter here, but it’s to ensure people’s safety. A few years back, you could see so many drunkards here at any time of the day...”

“Is it the K-King’s orders?” asked Cessilia.

“Yes,” nodded Nana as they resumed their stroll in the streets. “He put a lot of new laws in place here to make the

Capital safer. At first, some people protested that it was too strict, but to be honest, it was needed. Most of our cities had

turned into lairs for thieves and criminals, but once the King used the army to repress them, the people felt a lot safer, and the

crime rate dropped too... When I was young, my parents never would have let me go in the streets like this, without at least my older brother or my dad. That's also why my brother decided to become a soldier."

"Why would people be against it?" frowned Tessa. "If it chased away criminals? I mean, our aunt is pretty strict too, but there's no one who's against rules keeping thieves and criminals at bay..."

As she said that, Nana glanced sideways as if she was a bit scared of people around listening. In fact, Cessilia and Tessa were both attracting a lot of attention with what they wore. She sighed, and gently pushed them toward another, emptier street. Once she was sure no one could listen, she still spoke in a soft voice.

"A lot of people felt the King's rules were a bit too... strict," she whispered. "For a while, even the smallest crimes resulted in the death penalty, and dozens of people were executed every day."

"Well, I don't like thieves, but..." said Tessa, frowning.

On the other side, Cessilia was the one who understood.

"P-people were s-starving," she whispered. "Those th-thieves p-probably didn't choose to b-be... thieves."

"Exactly," nodded Nana. "To be honest, it was hard for everyone after the war. The Capital now is the best I've seen since I was born, but when I was a child, most families struggled to survive. I remember our family sometimes struggling to have enough food, and when we could, we shared with our friends so no one would starve or have to steal. Our clan isn't the wealthiest, but unlike some, we know how to share with others. While people starved, some rich people kept their homes closed, and killed trespassers or beggars."

"So much for generosity..." grimaced Tessa.

"That's why a lot of the clans are still not getting along, and they don't like the King, either. He taxes the rich people to pay the military, offers free food to the most needy, and finances the White Houses."

"The... White Houses?" repeated Tessa, lifting an eyebrow.

"Oh, that's a great thing he did!" exclaimed Nana. "They offer free health checks and healing for the poor. Basically, people can come in and get a consultation from a doctor anytime. It's completely free, but the medicine has to be paid for. The doctors and their apprentices are all paid by the Kingdom, so no one has to pay. The rich people have their own doctors anyway, so it's mostly the poor who... What is it?"

Tessa was making a shocked expression, but she turned to Cessilia instead.

"Isn't that exactly the same system your mother created in the Dragon Empire?!" she exclaimed.

"Maybe he g-got inspiration f-from us..." smiled Cessilia.

Tessa kept frowning at her cousin's mysterious smile but didn't ask anymore. Between them, Nana, a bit lost, scratched her head and just shrugged.

“You have that too? That was a very nice change he put in place... In fact, that’s also one of the reasons the Hashat Family became so renowned; more than half the people working in the White Houses are from that tribe. Of course, a lot of the other clans are a bit pissed that the King basically gives their money to that clan, but they are the most useful to him, so it can’t be helped.”

“I do feel like your King pisses off a lot of people...”

Nana chuckled a bit nervously, not denying it.

They had just arrived at the seaport, where activity was buzzing. The strong smell of fish hit their senses, but it wasn’t so surprising, considering the dozens of stalls lined up with all the merchandise there. Most were, in fact, still alive, swimming in small boxes filled with water. Cessilia was amazed by all the varieties of fish.

Because her brothers hunted so much, she was more accustomed to eating meat than fish, and she mostly had a vegetarian diet like her mother. This was her first time at a real Fish Market, and it was a completely new experience. Tessa even seemed a bit scared as they walked by enormous ones, with their large, globulous eyes following their trio.

“You tease me about dragons, but this Princess can’t handle fish?” chuckled Nana.

“Is that thing even a fish?” protested Tessa. “It’s as big as a cow! ...And I’m not a princess!”

The young woman laughed, but walked a bit further up the stalls, greeting a lot more people on her way. It looked like she hadn’t lied about her tribe being deeply involved in the fishing market; Nana was on a first-name basis with absolutely everyone there, calling some uncle, auntie, or cousin. In fact, it was rather easy to recognize the people of her tribe; for some reason, they were all large people with plump cheeks, large smiles, and that upturned nose. The women also wore similar white nacre jewelry, probably very common around here.

“This Fish Market is the best and largest in all the Kingdom,” Nana proudly announced.

“Most of the people working here are part of our tribe, so we are doing pretty well on our own!”

“It looks like you have a lot of your people here indeed...” said Tessa.

“Well, our tribe was always located on the seashore, so we have been fishermen for generations! Due to many of the lands being burned during the wars, there isn’t enough land anymore to cultivate crops, have pastures, and raise enough livestock to feed everyone, so now a lot of the Eastern people buy fish and seafood instead! It is quite nice, to be honest. For a long time, our tribe was among the poorest because we have so many people and we share our wealth, but now, we’re doing pretty well.”

“Your p-people are good p-people,” said Cessilia with a gentle smile.

“Thank you,” replied Nana, blushing a bit. “I really love our tribe, you know. I don’t see myself marrying anyone other than a fisherman! I just haven’t met the right one yet! I’m sure I’ll find a perfect match to get married to. All my sisters are married or engaged already, but because I chose to focus on my studies, it’s a bit harder for me. Dorosef boys like girls who can cook well, and I don’t really... but I asked my aunties to find me a good husband, so I just need to be patient!”

“You should find a man who likes a woman with brains!” retorted Tessa, scoffing. “The man can cook too!”

“T-Tessa’s dad is a g-good family man,” nodded Cessilia. “He likes t-to c-cook for his d-daughters and my aunt.”

“Mom didn’t leave him much of a choice,” chuckled Tessa.

“How about you?” asked Nana. “Do you have a boyfriend, Lady Tessa? A fiancé?”

“Oh, I do have a few past ones, but I don’t like clingy guys. I’m waiting for a guy with brains, muscles, and who can be a good husband, or I won’t have any!”

“That’s a lot!” exclaimed Nana.

“M-maybe you’ll find one here,” chuckled Cessilia.

“I doubt it”, sighed Tessa, looking around at the fishermen.

While Nana tried to convince Tessa about the goodness of the Dorosef men, the girls kept walking around, often stopped by one of Nana’s relatives who greeted them. The Dorosef people did look very nice and humble. Unlike before, most of them didn’t even seem to notice her golden jewelry and were too focused on their merchandise instead. The customers were already lined up to buy the freshest goods, just as Nana had predicted.

“Nana!” called a younger woman on the side, who was carrying two large baskets full of fresh fish.

“Cousin Beli!” smiled Nana. “We came to buy your sister’s fish beignets! Could you give us some?”

“Nana, have you heard?” asked her cousin, running up to them. “Uncle Jupitan came back from his rounds around the cultures this morning, he said he spotted a dragon flying in the area! Uncle Saturu and Auntie Vena said the same! Can you believe that?! A dragon, here! They are sending our hunters to see if we can hunt it or chase it away from the cattle, everyone is panicking in the lands!”

Cessilia and Tessa immediately exchanged a glance.

“Uh-oh...” grimaced Tessa. “We probably should have told the big boy to keep a low profile...”

“I asked him t-to stay in the area,” muttered Cessilia. “I f-forgot about his meals...”

Having heard them, Nana turned to the two cousins.

“You two really came with a real dr-... dragon?!” she exclaimed.

Cessilia jumped to cover her mouth, a second too late. A lot of people had already turned their eyes to the little group

of girls, curious or doubting their ears, and her cousin's jaw fell too.

"You should shout it louder," grumbled Tessa, poking Naptunie's flank.

"B-b-but I thought you were just teasing me!"

"Who are you guys?" asked Nana's cousin, frowning and staring at the two of them from head to toe. "What do you know about the dragon?"

"S-sorry," said Cessilia. "He c-came with us..."

"More like we came with him," added Tessa. "...Did he hunt anything yet?"

"It sure did! That dragon killed three cows already!" exclaimed Beli. "And everyone is scared it will eat them next!"

"He d-doesn't eat humans... anymore."

"Anymore?" repeated Nana, shocked.

"He's n-nice," added Cessilia quickly, a bit embarrassed. "Anyway, we c-can t-tell him to stay away from the c-cattle.

He's j-just hungry... We will p-pay you for the c-cows he ate."

"Fine..." said Beli, her eyes on Cessilia's golden choker. "If you can guarantee it really won't eat anyone, I guess... I'll try to talk to the others. But can't it eat anything other than our livestock? We already don't have many!"

Tessa looked around them.

"Well, I guess as long as we give him enough, he probably can go on a fish diet..."

"N-Nana," said Cessilia, turning to her. "C-can we b-buy three really b-big fish like the ones we saw? The b-biggest ones should b-be enough for now."

Nana's eyes lit up right away.

"Of course! I'll ask my uncles to get them ready for your dragon!"

She immediately ran to talk to one of the men behind the stalls, explaining the situation quickly. Meanwhile, Cessilia turned to Beli again.

"I'm r-really sorry ab-bout that," she said.

"Oh, as long as it doesn't kill anyone and you can pay for it... You guys are from the Dragon Empire, then?"

Cessilia nodded, and Beli let out a little sigh, putting her baskets down to put her hands on her hips. She kept scrutinizing the two of them, their clothes, and jewelry, and wasn't hiding herself from it.

"I see. Well, if you buy those fish, you'll most likely be our biggest customers of the day, so we're even, I guess. A little piece of advice, though, you may not want to carry so much, uh... gold around. You're safe here, but if you go past the Inner Wall, you'll definitely get robbed, assaulted, or worse. We don't send our girls out because of all the criminals out there, and you two are walking around with all that on you... Not only that, but a lot of people aren't really fond of... your kind, you know.

Our tribe doesn't have many warriors, but we still know the War God of the Dragon Empire killed many of our men a couple of

decades ago. Whether that guy is real or not, some people remember and most aren't fond of the Dragon Empire at all... If

you're really from there, you two girls should seriously watch out."

"Thanks, but we are not defenseless," said Tessa. "We can fend for ourselves."

"Good for you, but Naptunie doesn't have a dragon," retorted Beli. "Our Dorosef Tribe is rather welcoming to

strangers, but honestly, not all the other tribes are as passive. And if anything happens to you, nobody wants retribution from the Dragon Empire..."

"We will b-be careful," promised Cessilia.

Beli nodded, visibly unconvinced, but she had said what she wanted to. In fact, Cessilia didn't mind her honesty. At

least, she showed some genuine concern for them, not just for her cousin. Beli was probably a few years older than them, and

from what they had seen, the Dorosef Tribe was indeed a large and caring family...

Nana came back a couple of minutes later, a bit out of breath and followed by a very large man, whom she introduced

as one of her uncles. He was also very tall, with an impressive braided beard, and a striking resemblance to Counselor

Yamino.

"Good morning, younglings," he said, nodding. "I heard you ladies want to buy our biggest fish for a... dragon?

Really?"

"Well, apparently it's either that or your cows," chuckled Tessa.

"Oh, for sure we'd rather have it eat our fish!" nodded the man, pulling up his pants.

"Where shall we deliver it to? We

can have our three best catches of the day ready within the hour!"

"C-can you have a c-cart ready?" asked Cessilia. "It's b-best if we d-deliver to him."

"You can't go out!" exclaimed Nana, panicked. "We need a lot of authorizations to go out and come in again, inside the

Capital's Inner Walls, like I explained earlier!"

"Nana, it's either that or we have that dragon land in the middle of the Capital," sighed

Tessa. "No offense, but he's a

bit too big, even for this plaza! And I don't think anyone else will volunteer to feed him, right?"

Nana and her uncle exchanged a glance.

Indeed, their people had only seen the dragon from afar, but no one would willingly approach it from up close,

especially not to give it its meal. They'd be too scared for it to want some human flesh for a dessert... The fisherman scratched

his shaved head with a grimace.

"Oh, well, I guess we can give you younglings one of our passes... Nana, are you sure?"

Since the two young women were strangers, he turned to his niece, but Nana visibly wasn't sure either. She had only

met Cessilia and Tessa just a couple of hours ago. She nervously touched her ear and her earrings, hesitant. Seeing that she

couldn't make up her mind, Cessilia put a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"It will b-be alright, I p-promise. K-Krai would n-never hurt us, and he d-doesn't eat humans, either."

"Unless they're very bad ones..." muttered Tessa.

Thankfully, only Cessilia heard that, and she kept smiling, ignoring her cousin's remark.

Nana frowned a bit, but she

eventually nodded and turned to her uncle once again.

"I will accompany the Princesses outside, okay? I will ask Sabael to accompany us, and we will be careful too. They

really are from the Dragon Empire, and Uncle Yamino asked me to stay with them. We will come back right away!"

"It will b-be fine," nodded Cessilia.

"Alright, then. Well, we can have our prizes ready right now, and I'll send one of the boys to meet you at the southeast

gate with the cart and the passes for you. Your brother's still stationed there, right?"

"Yes!" nodded Nana. "Thank you, Uncle."

"Yeah, yeah... As long as that thing leaves our cattle alone..."

"We will buy more fish to keep him fed," said Tessa, "so you might want to keep your large prizes for him in the next

few days. In weight, it should be enough if you keep aside... about five cows' worth of meat? That should keep him fed for two

or three days."

"Fine, you ladies can pay us tomorrow then," he said, his eyes going down on Cessilia's golden choker. "I'll tell the

boys to keep our biggest ones for your dragon. ...I can't believe we're fishing for a dragon now!"

The man waved his arms in the air and turned around, probably to go and make sure everything was ready. Nana turned

to her cousin this time.

"Sorry about all that, Beli. Can we grab some beignets before we go? I'll get some for Sab too!"

It seemed like the perspective of those fish beignets was enough to chase all of Nana's worries away, which made

Cessilia smile. Those beignets ought to be really delicious... Without any more

questions, Beli guided them the rest of the way

to her sister's stand, where, exactly as Nana had said, a long line of people were

queuing up for those famous beignets. Luckily

for them, though, Beli sneaked past all that, whispered something to her sister who was working and began preparing their

order herself. Cessilia was impressed by how simple and small their stall was for such a long line of customers. Everything

was indeed done right on the spot: the fresh fish Beli had brought was cut by a man at the back, and the chunks split into several

buckets depending on the species of fish. Then, a pair of young boys grabbed a handful of fish and rolled it into something that

looked like a flour mix, before Beli's sister covered it in several layers of dough and fried it in one large oil pan in front of her.

She was working incredibly fast too, pouring one after another and grabbing the ready ones with a pair of large chopsticks to wrap them in seaweed and hand it to the customers. Completing this human chain was a young girl, happily smiling at the customers while taking their payment and loudly announcing the orders to the rest of the family as they went. In the midst of all this, Beli dropped the basket of fish, went to the younger boys to get the fish, and squeezed herself next to her sister to get some ready for them.

Just like that, their orders were ready in a couple of minutes and handed to them by Beli.

"Here you go ladies, the best fish beignets in the Capital."

"Thank you!" exclaimed Nana, receiving her order and her brother's with sparkling eyes. Cessilia and Tessa were a bit excited to receive theirs too, and they thanked Beli before walking away. It was clear she

had to go back to work and help her sister sell those beignets, and Cessilia couldn't help but stare a little longer at the small family business, which doubled in speed as soon as Beli was in her spot.

Next to her, Tessa frowned and finally bit the beignet hungrily.

"Careful, it's hot!" exclaimed Nana.

"Oh, don't worry, we can handle the heat," replied Tessa with her mouth full. "...Damn, this is really good!"

"See? I told you!"

Cessilia smiled and took a bite of hers too. It was very good indeed. The dough was crispy, savory, and hot, and the fish inside was half-cooked, melting on her tongue with all the flavors of the sea. She already loved it, and for a while, none of the three girls spoke anymore as they focused on eating those beignets while walking down the streets.

Things around them were getting a bit busier now, a lot of people were either on their way to the Fish Market or coming back from it, while the smaller shops were opening. Cessilia noticed a couple of accessories shops she was interested in, notably the nacre jewelry she had already grown somewhat fond of. She also noticed some stones lined up, of different colors, with various uses as bracelets or necklaces, and asked Nana about it.

"Those are worship stones!" she exclaimed. "We believe that each god has a stone they channel their natural energy

into, and we purchase those stones for prayers. For example, those dark green ones are used to protect the houses from

malevolent people, and the white ones are a symbol of purity, for weddings! Most families have at least one of each nowadays,

but it is good luck to get one or two from the gods you choose to venerate the most! In my family, we like the Goddess of the

Sea, so we purchase those nacre stones! Oh, and my brother is a fighter, so he takes the black ones, from our Goddess of War!

You don't have those? How do you guys communicate with your gods?"

"...I guess you call him Daddy?" chuckled Tessa, glancing toward Cessilia.

"In our c-culture," said Cessilia, "our g-gods are humans or d-dragons. My father g-got his t-title as the War G-God

when he was young and won many wars. I b-believe our p-people worship d-dragons more, though."

"So they won't eat them, basically," added Tessa. "I think our religion is a bit more... practical than stones like that. All

of our gods did exist at some point, most often past emperors or princes that had dragons, or heroes of some sort."

"I think I like our gods better," shrugged Nana. "They are all still alive, and very powerful too! When we have a

hurricane, everyone prays for the Goddess of the Sea to calm down. My family even has a little temple for her!"

"That must b-be a p-pretty one," said Cessilia.

"It is! I will take you guys to my family house when you want! It is a bit crowded, but we will welcome strangers anytime!"

As they kept walking, Nana described her house to such lengths that it felt like they had been there and knew every

room already. Cessilia and Tessa didn't interrupt her, though, as they were finishing their beignets while looking around. Their

trio was slowly but surely getting to the lower levels of the Capital, and now, Cessilia could only see the tips of some of the

castle's towers when she turned back, her vision blocked by all the buildings in between. In front of them, however, behind

some of the houses, a wall was starting to appear, and the closer they got, the bigger it grew. Before long, they were really

standing in front of the Inner Wall Naptunie had described. It was clear most of it had been recently built, and it was strangely

clean for something merely made of stones. Their little group was heading toward a pair of very large doors that were kept

open, but with four men in armor guarding it and checking everyone who went in or out. The process seemed smooth, but

Cessilia could see the long flow of people waiting to get in.

Nana, who once again seemed familiar with everyone they saw, quickly walked to one of the guards standing to the side

to ask about her brother's whereabouts. He pointed to a little house at the corner of the street, which was clearly some sort of armory.

"Just wait for me, I'll be right back!" she claimed before going in.

"Sure," said Tessa, a hand on her hip.

She turned to the gate, frowning a bit.

“Seems like we really got the easy way in,” she sighed. “Judging from here, people at the end of that line probably wait for at least an hour before they can get in... That’s quite impressive security, considering there are four guards. I wondered why we didn’t see many inside, but this is different from our Capital.”

“Everything is d-different,” nodded Cessilia, “b-but it’s nice. I think Auntie Shareen would b-be curious t-to see how they d-do things here...”

“I wonder. She was never fond of the Eastern Kingdom since they attacked us two decades ago. I’m even surprised she agreed to this at all. Now, well, it’s nice to be far from home. I’ve always been curious as to what was past our border...”

Damn, Kiera will be dead jealous once she finds out you were actually allowed to come here.”

Cessilia chuckled at the mention of her little sister. Indeed, Kiera’s unwavering passion for adventures had already

taken her pretty much anywhere she could go in the Dragon Empire, despite its considerable size. However, the Eastern

Kingdom had always been the limit. They definitely couldn’t get past the guarded border, and none of the dragons would fly

past it either, not without an order from the Empress or the War God himself. In fact, Cessilia realized she was the first one in

her family to come so far in the Eastern Kingdom since... probably a few generations ago. She knew from her deep love of

books, including the history ones, that the Kingdom and the Empire had once been united as one, but that was eons ago, a time

no one but old, dusty books could keep a memory of.

“I need to mention, though, how come everyone in her family looks that similar? I mean, you have seven siblings and

there aren’t two of you that look alike as much as Nana looks like her uncle or her cousin. It’s crazy! If it wasn’t for their

hairstyle and clothes, I wouldn’t be able to tell the difference.”

While listening to her cousin, Cessilia glanced behind them. Sure enough, the triplets were still there. They had been

following them all day, a few steps behind and as silent as shadows, but always on their trail. Because those three were rather

petite too, no one really seemed to notice them either. Unlike in the Dragon Empire, the servants of the castle didn’t have any

particular outfit it seemed, so she figured they could pass for anyone in the streets of the Capital...

“I swear,” chuckled Tessa, still going on. “Nana is as cute as those beignets, but if her brother is another male copy of

her, I’m going to laugh and ask how they do this... Do you think they can marry within their family here? I mean, I know no one

does that anymore in our Empire, but we know it used to be a thing, right?”

“T-Tessa, don’t b-be rude, p-please...” sighed Cessilia.

"I'm not! It's the truth! Wait and see. I bet her brother is going to be her physical twin. I'm buying Krai's next ten meals if he is... if he is... uh..."

The words just wouldn't come out as Tessa's eyes were riveted on the door Nana and her older brother had just come out of. In one glance, Cessilia could see why. Nana's older brother was defying all of her cousin's expectations, and in a surprisingly good way, at that. He was one head taller than his sister, very muscular under his armor, with long black hair that was tied low, a serious look on his face. His chiseled chin was covered by a short layer of beard, and his strong eyebrows were enhancing his beautiful eyes, one brown and the other one hazel. When he turned his gaze to them, as Nana showed him the duo of cousins, Cessilia very clearly heard Tessa's gasp.

"...I th-think you're p-paying for all the next meals, T-Tessa," she chuckled.

It looked like her cousin didn't even hear her at all. In fact, Tessa left her mouth open and her eyes wide open right until

Nana and her brother were just two steps away, and Cessilia gave her a little nudge with her elbow, keeping her from totally embarrassing herself.

"This is my older brother, Sabael!" proudly announced Nana, totally unaware of Tessa's reaction. "He is a guard of the Capital; as I mentioned, he will accompany us outside!"

"You're lucky I'm not on duty," retorted her brother, with an unexpectedly low voice. "Are you the Princesses she talked about?"

His eyes kept going back and forth between Cessilia and Tessa, visibly a bit unsure about the situation there. Just like everyone else, he seemed surprised by their appearance but still tried to remain somehow polite instead of too obvious.

"Yes," nodded Cessilia, realizing her cousin was still mute. "Th-Thank you for acomp-p... t-taking us out th-there."

"Yeah, I'm not too sure about that. Is this seriously related to that... to a real dragon?

We've been getting reports from the south since earlier. We weren't too sure, but no one could make that up... I'll be glad if it's nothing too serious, and you girls can really do something about it..."

"I told you, it's their dragon!" said Nana, enthusiastically. "Uncle Yobah agreed to it too, so we're just going out to feed their dragon, ask it to be uh... nice, and then we will be back here, I promise."

Her brother sighed, glancing toward Cessilia and Tessa with a doubtful look. Unlike his sister, Sabael looked a lot more distrustful.

"...Fine," he grumbled. "Since our uncle agreed to this, I won't argue. At least you asked me to come along, I wouldn't trust it if it was just you... Is it just the three of you?"

Cessilia glanced back, and Nupia stepped forward, bowing quickly.

"We are accompanying the Princess as well, by order of the King."

"By order of the King?" repeated Sabael, visibly stunned once again. "Alright... Fine."

He let out a little sigh, grumpily glancing at his little sister again before turning to

Cessilia and Tessa. However, he

seemed resolute now, and the presence of three Royal Servants appeared to convince him.

"I'm Sabael, guard of the southeast Inner Gate. I hope I wasn't disrespectful to the...

Princess," he mentioned, glancing

toward Tessa.

"Oh, she's the Princess!" immediately said Tessa, who seemed to have found her voice

again, and a bright, charming

smile with it. "This is Cessilia and I'm Tessandra, her cousin. But everyone calls me

Tessa. You can call me whatever you

want, handsome."

She held out her hand proudly, and Cessilia pinched her lips, as she was having a hard time not laughing. She knew her

cousin enough to know when she was overdoing it and trying to be as attractive as

possible... Tessa had always been very

pretty, but she could be a real temptress when she had set her eyes on someone.

Cessilia couldn't really blame her, though.

Sabael was definitely a very attractive young man. Next to them, a little group of young

women who had just walked past the

gates kept stealing glances toward the very handsome guard. Only Naptunie seemed

totally oblivious to the reactions her

brother caused among females, or perhaps she was used to it.

"We should be able to go soon," she said. "Uncle should have that cart here anytime now... Oh, there he is!"

Indeed, a younger boy was running in their direction, pulling a large cart with, as

promised, three enormous fish lined

up. He was surprisingly fast considering the load behind him, but Cessilia noticed his

cart only had two large wheels instead of

four large ones, and he was simply pushing a large sort of handle in front of him, the

weight being balanced effortlessly behind

him.

"Delivery for Nana!" he announced proudly, smiling at their little group with a missing tooth.

Nana quickly thanked him with a little coin, and turned to her brother, visibly expecting something. Sabael frowned.

"You're expecting me to push this?" he exclaimed. "I'm a Royal Guard, not your errand boy!"

"I won't push it," said Nana, crossing her arms with a pout. "This is too big for me. And the Princesses won't push it

either!"

"We can do it," immediately offered Nupia, stepping forward with her siblings already running to grab the cart.

Those three were clearly desperate to make themselves useful, perhaps to win Cessilia's trust. Seeing that neither Cessilia nor her cousin reacted to this, Nana nodded.

"Fine, then! I got the papers too. Shall we go now?"

Her brother sighed, now that the cart situation was solved, with two of the triplets taking charge of it, it was indeed time to go.

Just like that, their little group began moving. Sabael and the passes they had gotten from Nana's uncle easily got them through the Inner Gate, as promised. Once they stepped outside, Cessilia realized how things were indeed already a bit different there. As Nana had said, there were already fewer shops and more habitations, so even the main alleys weren't as busy. Moreover, the streets were a bit more narrow, as if people had tried to use all the space for their houses, while others tried to walk in between. This was so different from the Dragon Empire, where each house was far from its neighbors, or at least separated by its courtyard or a garden, and a fence...

The main difference, however, was the atmosphere around them. As soon as they had passed the gates, everything looked a bit gloomier than before. First, the numerous eyes on them, as they walked past the long line of people waiting to go in, felt a bit uncomfortable. Not only that, but people were clearly gawking at her jewelry, her skin tone, and the large cart behind them. Naptunie was also walking closer to her brother, and Sabael was glancing all around as if he was ready for something. However, nothing really looked more dangerous than a few curious glances. Everything was just a bit less busy than before, and people weren't as cheerful, either.

"Watch out for thieves," whispered Nana as they kept walking. "No one will dare commit a crime in the open here, but thefts are very common in this area. That's why there are a lot fewer shops too." Cessilia had noticed. That, and the fact that the doors had a few more locks on them, with some even having their windows protected by metal bars, was a very curious sight. She had never seen windows with bars unless it was a prison...

Still, their little group quickly made their way to the next gates without any issues. What Naptunie had warned them against ought to be a rare occurrence, unless the presence of a Royal Guard with them discouraged the few thieves around. Tessa had kept a hand on her knives all along too, but it seemed to be unnecessary, as they made it to the next gate just a few minutes later.

This time, the wall was much higher and even better guarded. There was only one door open, and people seemed to come much slower than before. Unlike the previous one, where Sabael had just quickly shown the papers to his colleagues, the

guards verified all the papers in detail, asked questions, and also checked the cart. While all this happened, Cessilia noticed how Nana kept sending nervous glances toward the gates. "I've only been outside six times," she explained. "Everyone wants to go inside the Inner Capital, but it's very hard from the outside, so we don't really go out either. Plus, it's rather dangerous out there, so most children who are born in the Inner Capital rarely go this far out... I have people from my tribe outside, so it's not like I can't, but... you know, I still feel a lot better inside."

Cessilia slowly nodded, but she was only growing more curious about what was really out there. She remembered the sights from their flight, but they had been so far above, she wanted to see for herself. In the Dragon Empire, they had always been free to go pretty much anywhere they wanted and didn't have to worry much about their security, either. Everyone recognized the Empress' nephews and nieces, and people genuinely loved her mother and father, so no one would dare lay a finger on her, not in the Empire. Yet now, she was also starting to feel a bit nervous, along with Nana, as they waited. Next to her, Tessa looked a bit bored, although she kept stealing glances at Sabael. "We're good to go," finally announced the guard. "It's not every day they see an Imperial Princess coming out to feed a dragon, but I think this is so unbelievable, even though they know we wouldn't dare lie about it... Come on, let's get going, the sooner we're done, the faster we will be back inside."

Tessa and Cessilia exchanged another glance, but quietly followed him as they passed the gate.

Just as they were allowed out, Cessilia was shocked to see the white bridge outside: it was long, right above the sea, and... surprisingly empty. Aside from them, not even a dozen people were currently crossing over or trying to. She quickly understood why: on the other side of the bridge, another wall with gates stood. This one was visibly much older, and probably the one Nana had mentioned as being in dire need of repairs. In fact, she didn't even have to look far to see it; in many places, the old, dark gray bricks had been replaced with new ones, visibly newer by their light gray color. Some people were even working on it as they walked up the bridge, craftsmen on both sides loudly shouting directions and showing places, or busy with their tasks.

"Is this th-the wall that was d-destroyed?" she asked Nana.

"Yes. They are almost done repairing it now, and they are making it higher than before too because a lot of people would climb over to avoid inspection..."

Cessilia could see why. Once they were done crossing the bridge, another set of guards was there, twice as many as the other side, and once they passed the gate, an impressive line of people waiting to cross appeared; it was clear that those guards were letting people in, the others letting people out, which made the flow of travelers easier to regulate. Several people were in fact arguing with the guards controlling them, over some unauthorized merchandise, or their papers not being appropriate for crossing over.

There were now a lot more buildings, but the main activity was right against the gates, where many groups of people seemed to be stationed while waiting for the authorization to cross. There were even large stables where the horses were kept, and almost all the closest buildings were inns and restaurants for the travelers to stay at while they waited for their papers.

Once again, their little group gathered some attention, with the gold on Cessilia, the huge fish behind them, and the Royal Guard accompanying them. However, Sabael and Nana quickly guided their little group farther away from the gates before anyone really caught on. They walked into what seemed to be the main road, with a bit of a crowd, a lot of shops, and one gigantic building with people lined up outside.

“The Travelers’ Office,” explained Nana as they walked by. “That’s the first place to go when people arrive in the

Capital, to get their papers. It’s always crowded like this, and very busy...”

“One of our cousins works there,” sighed Sabael. “The pay is good, but the paperwork is so nightmarish a lot of people quit after a couple of years...”

“Can see why...” grimaced Tessa as they walked by an even more impressive line of people than those they had seen

before, some of them even loudly fighting over who had come first, or their priority.

“It can’t be helped. Things really are tough out here, all those people think they can improve their lives if they move to

the Capital or open a business there, but it can only accommodate so much.”

“Don’t you have other cities out there? Or how about you expand the Capital past these walls?” asked Tessa, frowning.

“Our Capital is at least ten times bigger than this!”

Sabael glared back at her, which made Tessa stop her rant and close her mouth immediately. However, the Royal Guard

didn’t really seem mad at her, and he sighed instead.

“You guys haven’t seen what it’s like outside. Most of the other places were ravaged by the war, and a lot are still prey

to ruffians and bandits. Our King sends the army to relocate them one by one, but he can only do so much. A lot of people are

scared to go back, they think they might get attacked again. Everyone believes the closer to the King and the Capital they are,

the safer it is. A lot of people would rather starve here than go back.”

This time, Tessa didn't dare answer anything again; she had understood. Cessilia felt a bit sorry for this Kingdom's people. In the Dragon Empire, there was no such desperate need for security. Even the most remote cities were doing well without the Empress because her influence wasn't just physical; no one wanted to see a dragon show up to put back order in the streets... Nana and her brother still sped up through the streets, obviously trying to avoid any attention drawn to the pair of Imperial Princesses or their merchandise. A lot of people were staring, including some homeless ones that Cessilia spotted, more than she had ever seen in her life. Sabael didn't lie about a lot of those people being desperate...

“Hm... Where are we supposed to feed your dragon...?” Nana asked discreetly.

“D-do you have a p-place large enough for him t-to land?”

“It might be better to go to the southwest plaza then,” said Sabael. “I don't want to bring you girls any farther in the outskirts, it's too dangerous. That plaza is mostly abandoned, anyway...”

“We're not helpless, you know,” smiled Tessa. “I am one of the most skilled warriors of our Empire!”

“...They let girls fight in your Empire?” frowned Sabael.

Tessa's expression fell. She had obviously hoped to impress the Royal Guard, but his expression was probably not what she'd hoped... Cessilia glanced at her cousin and tried to speak up before she really got upset about that remark.

“It is more and more c-common, yes. D-don't you have any f-female warriors here?”

“Of course not,” retorted Sabael. “It is a man's duty to serve and protect. It is fine for a woman to work, but who would let their wife, sister, or daughter get injured?”

“So you do want to get married?” immediately asked Tessa, who had recovered quickly.

“And have children?”

“Someday, sure...”

Cessilia smiled and purposely walked a bit slower to let Tessa chat all she wanted with the guard. Meanwhile, Nana too went to her side. For a little while now, the young woman had been staring at the sky as if trying to spot something.

“So... uh... How do you call out a dragon?” she asked. “To be honest, I'm a bit nervous because I have never seen a real dragon myself, but I am a bit excited too! It must be huge, right? Since you came with it... Is it really not eating humans anymore? I mean, I am rather... appetizing, I think. It won't be tempted, right?”

“I p-promise, he won't,” chuckled Cessilia.

Luckily, they had arrived at the plaza before Nana could bombard her with any more of her endless questions. It was a large circular area, with white cobblestones and a couple of benches but, as Sabael had mentioned, it was mostly abandoned,

except for a handful of passersby who wouldn't even stop. In fact, Cessilia thought this place must have been beautiful in the past, although the trees around had dried out, and that old, decrepit fountain wouldn't even show a single drop of water...

Their little group stopped, and Tessa raised her arm to gesture for everyone but Cessilia to not step any further.

Meanwhile, her cousin slowly moved to the center of the plaza. It was big enough to hold the dragon indeed, as long as Krai didn't decide to move around too much. Then, she put two fingers in the corner of her mouth, and let out a long, complex whistling song.

"...You can call a dragon like that?" whispered Nana.

"Nope, that's just Cessi," said Tessa. "Krai knows how to recognize her voice and her song, he wouldn't answer anyone else the same. ...Trust me, I tried."

Sure enough, a shadow quickly appeared in the sky. Cessilia smiled and stepped back a bit, leaving Krai room to land.

In the back, Nana and her brother were both completely speechless and, of course, scared. If it wasn't for Cessilia's confident smile and Tessa not moving an inch either, they might have really run away. That dragon was gigantic, taking up almost all the space in a plaza that could have held two or three hundred humans, and getting bigger as it slowly landed in front of them.

Krai let out a low-pitched growl, its red eyes fixated on Cessilia. The young woman smiled brightly and walked up to the dragon, her hands behind her back. It turned its head to follow her, tilting it with curious movements.

"Krai... D-did you eat the c-cows?"

The dragon let out a faint growl and glanced to the side at the fish lined up, curious. Cessilia patted its snout, causing the dragon to lower its head again.

"You d-didn't even get a d-drop of b-blood on you... D-don't eat any ag-gain, p-please? We will g-give you fish now.

D-do you like fish?"

The dragon's eyes were still fixated on the cart, while Tessa sighed and went over to take the cart from the triplets.

Once she got a rough understanding of how the handle balancing worked, she effortlessly pushed it all the way toward the dragon where she toppled the fresh fish at its feet under the others' bemused eyes.

"There. Now, eat only that. Fish. Got it?" said Tessa, her hands on her hips. "No more cows, Krai, you're on a fishonly diet!"

The Black Dragon suddenly let out a very loud and aggressive growl, clearly not too happy about the new menu.

Somewhere behind them, Nana covered her ears, frightened by that growl, and her brother jumped in front of her. Even

the triplets had taken a step back, worried and lost. However, the two girls from the Dragon Empire were still standing up to the dragon, neither of them scared in the slightest.

“Don’t be so grumpy,” protested Tessa. “You haven’t even tried it yet, you glutton!” Krai answered with a puff of hot air from its nostrils, making both girls’ hair fly around.

The Black Dragon laid down heavily, blowing clouds of dust all around and putting its head between its large paws with a continuous, faint growl. They could see the large tail angrily flipping in the air.

Cessilia chuckled and stepped forward, putting her hand on its snout with a little smile.

“D-don’t pout,” she said. “We will b-buy the most d-delicious fish for you.”

“It’s not like you’re going to die from it either,” sighed Tessa, rolling her eyes. “Honestly, you’re one cow away from fat, big guy...”

The dragon puffed the hot air out of its large nostrils again, making her grimace. Next to her, Cessilia chuckled and petted it some more.

A few steps behind, Nana and Sabael were completely speechless, and they weren’t the only ones. A handful of

passersby who had inadvertently caught the scene were frozen right where they stood, unable to take their eyes off of the

dragon, in a strange mix of fascination and terror. Most of the people in the Eastern Kingdom had never seen a dragon

themselves, not even from afar or in books. They had very little knowledge about those creatures and had never been prepared

to see one. That dragon was huge, so huge its enormous, black-scaled body seemed to take all of the available space in that

little area. The beast was clearly capable of ravaging this place in a matter of seconds.

In fact, the sharp, terrifying claws were

already digging into the white cobblestones a bit, as if it was just butter. Its wagging tail was swishing around gusts of wind

and dust, threatening to hit a building at any moment, and no one could tell if the structure could withstand that blow.

Even more impressive were the two completely relaxed young women facing that beast.

They were joking and

conversing as if a gigantic predator wasn’t right next to them, not even two steps away.

If it decided to attack, there’d be no

time to run and nowhere to flee. It would be over in a matter of seconds between those terrifying fangs. However, their

impossible calm was what kept people from running away themselves. The two girls were acting as if they were with some

large dog or any other domesticated beast. The dragon too was acting very strangely.

Completely uninterested in the humans

around, the red eyes kept following the two girls with curious glances, the head even sometimes tilting a bit in an almost cute

way. It didn't even try to take a bite, only staring as if it could understand what was said. This was too much to process for all the humans present.

When a long and strange growl resonated, people shivered and took a few more steps back. In fact, curiosity was the only thing keeping them from running for dear life. Who else could ever boast that they had seen a real, living dragon? Most wouldn't even believe it!

"You must b-be hungry," said Cessi with a smile.

Krai growled at first, showing its teeth, and this time, half the passersby did run, thinking that was it.

"D-don't d-decide b-before you t-try it!" sighed Cessilia, putting her hands on her hips.

"C-come on, t-take a nice bbite."

Krai finally raised its head and came to sniff the large cart placed not far away. Tessa took a couple of steps back, crossing her arms and frowning. In fact, it would have been worrying and problematic if the dragon really didn't like its new diet...

Suddenly, Krai's head dove and a savage scene began. Cessilia had to take a couple of steps back so she wouldn't be splattered by the messy eater. That was quite a disgusting scene, seeing the dragon hungrily eat up its breakfast. There were scales raining down, and from time to time, a fin would loudly splat down too. It was obvious the dragon had rarely had fish for breakfast but was enjoying it plenty. Krai would sometimes throw a big chunk of fish in the air, and catch it in one bite before gulping it down with a satisfied growl.

Thankfully, the carnage was over in just a few seconds. Nana was horrified, and her brother didn't bother to close his mouth either. Cessilia and Tessa exchanged a look, but the older of the two kept sighing and shaking her head.

"I can't believe you made such a fuss, all for that!"

Ignoring her, Krai was meticulously licking its snout and paws, and sniffing around the cart, as if hoping to find a fourth fish hidden somewhere. Cessilia turned to Nana and her brother.

"K-Krai likes it!" she exclaimed happily.

"G-good..." muttered Nana, her body still half-frozen.

"Let's grab our stuff while he's here," said Tessa. "Now that we know where we will be staying, I don't want to have

to call that guy too often, or they'll start to think we're ready to barbecue their castle..."

Cessilia nodded, and the two girls had Krai lower its body again to grab their luggage. In fact, the cart they had brought

the fish with was put into use again to carry their bags and unload everything from the dragon's back. Luckily, they just had to

take off some covering layer to be sure their belongings wouldn't stink of raw fish. The triplets, doing their best to regain their

composure, helped the best they could and took charge of the cart once again. When everything was taken off of its back, Krai shook with a satisfied expression, and extended its large wings to the side, as if to stretch them. Still, the dragon didn't take off, and instead, lowered its head to Cessilia's level once again. The bond between them was so clear, it could almost be seen with the bare eye. Nana was surprised to feel a bit of jealousy while seeing such a magnificent creature completely subjected to the young woman's every move. She couldn't really understand what this creature really was or why it acted so obedient toward a mere human it could have killed in seconds, but the Black Dragon visibly wouldn't have touched a hair on the Princess' head, just as she had said. In fact, it acted almost like her cat at home, asking for attention and pets from the young woman, wrapping its tail and body around her.

"We can't keep him from flying around, but at least he won't eat your cattle now," said Tessa, turning to the siblings.

"Are you sure...?" asked Sabael, his eyes still on the dragon, visibly unsure.

"Yeah, he's learned to stay away from the humans' farms and such. He just probably went on a hunt because he was hungry and unfamiliar with the types you raise here. Back home, he usually hunts away from the human villages, or we find him his meat."

"M-maybe he will start fishing b-by himself now," added Cessilia.

This wasn't actually very reassuring to Nana. Not at all. Since childhood, she had learned the patterns of fishermen and how to keep the fish near their fishing zone without scaring them away, so there would always be plenty in their nets no matter what. She could only imagine what would happen to their fishing industry if all the fish in the bay realized there was now a predator this size in the area...

"We will feed him!" she exclaimed with a smile she hoped looked confident. "I-I will let my uncles know we need to keep some prizes for your dragon, and we can give him delicious ones too!"

"Th-thank you," smiled Cessilia, unaware of her troubles.

Nana nodded, relieved the Princess agreed to that small arrangement. Moreover, the Princesses looked like they had enough money to pay for a decade's worth of meals for the dragon! Perhaps they could keep the unsold fish of the day for the dragon, and get it used to that? Nana was already thinking of dozens of ways they could keep the carnivorous beast satiated, resolute to find a solution that would prevent anyone from being killed, or emptying their coasts.

"Alright, I think that's it," said Tessa as they were done, checking the cart to see if everything was secured. "I guess we can go back now."

"It would be better," noted Sabael, looking around. "I think we might have gathered a bit too much attention now, we should hurry back to the Inner Capital, it will be safer for us all."

Cessilia nodded, and turned to the dragon, gently patting its snout. Krai emitted a low, quiet growl in response.

"You should stay away from the human habitations, K-Krai. Alright? Go to the beaches or where they can't

see you. There's a coast under my room, you can visit me when you want."

The dragon growled back. Nana wondered if it was just in response to her voice, or because it could actually

understand the Princess' language...

Soon enough, the dragon pushed its snout against Cessilia one more time and sat up, looking around while spreading its

wings. Once it stood up in all its glory, that dragon was even taller and scarier. Nana felt her heart skip a beat. It was scary,

very scary, but also impressive and amazing. The gigantic creature flapped its wings twice before taking off, leaving a large

swirl of dust and wind behind. Cessilia looked up, protecting her eyes from the sun and smiling at the dark figure until it was

too far up, and going farther away. Then, the Princess casually walked back to the little group.

"A d-d-dragon!" a man on the side who had been petrified by fear all this time suddenly screamed. "A dragon!"

He ran away screaming a bit ridiculously. Tessa sighed.

"Sometimes I really forget they have this effect on people. And we only came with one..."

"Do you have a lot of dragons in the Empire?" asked Nana, whose curiosity had seemed to chase all the fear away.

"Just a few," replied Cessilia, "but Krai is the biggest."

"I see... Are they all black? Do they all fly? Oh, and are the others smaller because they are young then? Do you ride

them all whenever you want? How high can they go?"

While Nana kept her long list of questions going without rest, their little group began leaving the place, in the same

formation as before. Cessilia didn't mind Nana's questions at all and managed to give an answer here and there where she

could. It was a bit funny to follow their conversation, one's speech being incredibly fast and restless, while the other was

slowed down by her stutter, but did her best to answer happily and calmly.

Meanwhile, Tessa kept stealing glances at Sabael, walking closer to him with her hands behind her back, a mischievous

look in her eyes.

"So... You're the first of Nana's older brothers to become a Royal Guard instead of a fisherman?"

"Yes. I was the first in my family."

Sabael was visibly avoiding her glances a bit and tried his best to keep a serious but polite tone.

“I see... Who trained you?”

“The Royal Guards all go through the same training at the Royal Academy. We learn to use the official weapons and can graduate as soon as three years later.”

“I bet you were one of the early ones.”

This time, Tessa’s confident response surprised him, enough that he dropped his serious look to finally stare at her in surprise.

“That... How did you know?”

“You have good, lean muscles. If you didn’t have any before your training, they would be much more shaped than that. I

spent some time with my uncles’ warriors in the north, I know enough to recognize the changes someone’s body went through.

Plus, your tribe’s people have a fish diet mostly, and you do a lot of physical tasks every day, from what we have seen so far.

You probably already had the body for it, and just needed the training. With your kind of mindset, I’m sure you worked like

crazy to prove even a fisherman’s son could make it as a Royal Guard.”

Sabael was left completely speechless. Everything in Tessa’s analysis was perfectly on point. After a second and

realizing the idiotic expression he had on, he cleared his throat a little and averted his eyes. A bit too late though. The young

woman had a smile on, her win written all over her face.

“So, uh... Is it common for women to fight in the Dragon Empire?”

“Not really,” shrugged Tessa. “It was my mom’s belief that women should know how to defend themselves, so she had

my father teach me and my sister all we needed to know for self-defense, and I just liked it a lot. I wanted to learn more, so I

went to the north to learn with my cousins. They are far better than me, though; I can’t measure up to them at all. They wouldn’t

even fight me for fun... We have a very large camp in the north, it’s perfect for training.

We do have more and more female

soldiers now, though. The Empress has inspired many since she’s probably the second-best warrior in the Empire herself...

Maybe Cessi’s brothers could beat her now since she’s stuck in the palace all day long.”

“What about the Princess?”

“Cessi? Oh, she hates fighting. She is just like her mom, though, she is good with plants, and a master healer already.

While at the camp, she spent most of her time practicing on injured soldiers.”

Sabael nodded, his eyes going to Cessilia’s figure. The Princess looked very innocent in her gestures indeed, but she

had a well-toned and defined body, although skinnier than her cousin. She definitely knew some rudiments of fighting as well,

in Sabael’s opinion.

Next to him, Tessa frowned, a bit unhappy by the attention directed at her cousin instead of her. However, she didn't have time to say anything. While between two buildings, men suddenly came out from streets ahead and behind them, swords in their hands, to block their paths. Immediately, the triplets moved, two of them in front of Cessilia and Nana, the last one at the rear. Sabael too drew his sword.

"What's this?" scoffed Tessa, glancing at both sides. "An ambush?"

"Stay behind me, ladies," said Sabael, very serious. "These felons are experts at trapping people like this and robbing them of their possessions."

"You thought that gold wouldn't catch some attention?!" scoffed one of them. "Leave your possessions and the Dragon girls here and perhaps we will let the rest of you leave."

"Wait, what do you want us for?" exclaimed Tessa, putting a hand on her hip.

"The Dragon people have ravaged our Empire! We shall kill you and send your guts back to your wretched Empire!"

"...You do realize the two of us weren't even born back then, right?" scoffed Tessa.

"We heard you call the other woman Princess! A member of the Imperial Family, here!"

Tessa glanced up at where the voices had come from. There were four more men on the roofs... She grimaced, annoyed

that she had missed them. On the other side, Cessilia pushed Nana behind her, glaring at the men present.

"Cessilia, Nana, make sure you stay against the wall! Hey, handsome, how many of those do you think you can handle?

Need my help?"

"I can fend for myself!" retorted Sabael, immediately outraged. "I don't need a girl protecting me."

"I'm a woman, love. You'd better remember that for later. What about you, triplets?" she asked, swirling her swords in

her hands and moving to the front of their group.

"We can defend ourselves and the Princess, but we are not used to frontal battles..." admitted Nupia.

So those three were assassins more than fighters. As expected of the King's spies, thought Tessa. Still, she swung her swords once more before getting into position.

"Cessi, stay right where you are, okay?"

"D-don't k-kill them, T-Tessa," said Cessilia, visibly worried. "We c-can't k-kill people here..."

"I know," said her cousin with a smile. "After all, it's our first day here, it wouldn't be very... courteous."

Just like that, Tessa didn't wait one more second and jumped on the men ahead, incredibly fast.

Naptunie was worried but before she could panic even more, a hand appeared to cover her eyes.

"It will b-be over soon," gently muttered Cessilia's voice.

Nana grabbed her hand for comfort but didn't push it away. She couldn't see, but she could hear some of what was going on. Indeed, things were going extremely fast in that little alley. Following Cessi's instruction, Tessa was careful not to kill those men, although she knew those ruffians wouldn't have this much restraint toward her. Still, this was an easy fight for her. Using the flat part of Darsan's blades, she quickly made sure to knock the men out, or send them flying toward the wall opposite her cousin. She grimaced when the second man's skull made a sickening sound.

"I forgot their walls are made of harder stones..." she grimaced.

She didn't have time to check if he was alive or dead. The four men on the roof jumped down and Tessa moved to be

ready to welcome them, glancing to the side to check the rest of her surroundings. As promised, the triplets were doing a decent

job of protecting Cessilia, Nana, and the cart. At the rear of their group, Sabael was just as impressive. His style was

definitely a bit stiffer, and following some precise movements, Tessa could have learned just from observing him, but he was

doing a great job against those inexperienced men. She smiled, a bit enticed by the sweat on his biceps, his serious expression, and his sharp attacks.

Sadly, she didn't have much time to gaze at Sabael's superb figure during this fight; a fraction of a second later, another

sword was thrown at her, and she had to focus to block it.

"You guys are ruining our first date," she hissed at them.

Pissed, she was even more dangerous and faster too. Tessa perfectly balanced her fighting style between the two

swords of her cousin, while keeping a feminine elegance to her moves, flying and spinning around as if it was a deadly dance.

In fact, Cessilia noted with amusement what her cousin missed: the couple of times Sabael glanced her way, probably more

impressed than he'd be willing to admit. More enemies had appeared in front, and since he was supported by one of the

triplets, his fights were over before Tessa's. That allowed him a few seconds to observe her perfect twin-swords fighting skills

before she finished, not a graze on her, and all her enemies knocked out on the ground. Tessa slowly caught her breath and

removed some of her hair from her cheeks, where they were stuck by sweat. She glanced back up, watching out for more

thieves on the roof, but everything seemed quiet.

"I think it's over," she said to Nana and Cessilia. "Those idiots... To think they'd be able to attack us. If one of my

cousins had been here, they'd be dead!"

Cessilia lowered her hand and Naptunie dared to look around, still a bit afraid. She wasn't used to violence at all; in

fact, it scared her a lot just watching her older brother train. She was thankful Cessilia had covered her eyes in time. She took several deep breaths while the Princess walked over to the men, looking at their unconscious bodies.

"T-Tessa, you used a lot of s-strength," she noted, glancing at the one knocked out against the wall.

"It's Darsan's swords," grimaced Tessa. "They are heavier than I'm used to, I need to use more strength to wield them, and without thinking I... Oh, well. At least we managed not to kill them... I think. What do you want to do, handsome? Shall we tie them up and bring them to your post or whatever?"

"No need," Sabael shook his head. "We don't arrest people here, we just... try to stop them like this."

"...Excuse me, they tried to rob us," protested Tessa. "Isn't there some sort of judgment that's supposed to happen? Are all your prisons full or something? If it was the Dragon Empire, they would not just get to walk away like that! ...When they wake up that is. Cessi, can you check if that guy is alive? I'm freaking out a little..." Cessillia chuckled, but walked to the man to check if he was still breathing. He would have a very serious headache at the very least... Sabael sighed.

"We're in the Outer Capital, there isn't much we can do here. If we had been on the other side of the wall, sure, but... there are just too many criminals here. We don't arrest them anymore, since we discovered some people got arrested on purpose to get to the other side. Normally, we kill them right on the spot if they really are dangerous and citizens are encouraged to... defend themselves by any means too. Since we knocked them out, though, I don't think we should kill them now... I think they are mere thieves, lured by the Princess' gold."

"Wow. That sure saves some paperwork..." scoffed Tessa, putting her blades back. "If I had known, I would have cut their hands off, or at least a finger or two. It's the usual judgment in the Dragon Empire." "You guys are barbaric..." muttered Sabael.

"And you're lazy," retorted Tessa.

While the two of them bickered some more, Cessilia smiled, amused by their banter. All these men were alive and would survive this. She sighed. In fact, she didn't feel too good about what had happened. Those men had attacked them although they couldn't have missed the presence of a dragon nearby. They had to be really desperate for money... and lured more by the gold than their own lives' values. She knew her home country wasn't responsible for this Kingdom's misery, but they sure hadn't done anything to help, either. Cessilia stood back up and walked back to their little group, one less gold ring in her hair.

“We should head back quickly before something else happens,” said Sabael, glancing around with a frown. “I wouldn’t be surprised if more people noticed your presence here.”

They all agreed to hurry back with the cart to the gates. Cessilia noticed how Nana stayed close to her, instead of her older brother, all this time. In fact, Sabael had some blood on his armor, as his fight had been messier than Tessa’s. He wasn’t injured but certainly didn’t look as well put together as previously. Luckily, with the passes from the Dorosef Tribe and Sabael vouching for them, they had no issues crossing the gates to get back inside. The Royal Guards didn’t even dare go through the Princess’ belongings as soon as Nupia stepped up to forbid them from it. It seemed like a Royal Servant’s words could outweigh a Royal Guard’s authority... Once they stepped on the bridge and were on the way back to the Greater Capital, Nana looked a bit more relaxed and smiled again. It seemed like the fight from before had really frightened her, but now, she felt safe enough to glance up at the sky, as if she was hoping to spot a dragon flying.

“Nana,” said Cessilia. “C-can you show me around your favorite b-boutiques later? I really like your b-bracelets.”

“Oh, of course! I can show you the best ones in town and even where to get the prettiest dresses, jewelry, and shoes!

One of my cousins also just began her collection of shell boxes, they are so pretty! I’m sure you will love it!”

“We need to drop by the castle to put all that in our room,” sighed Tessa, pointing at their cart, “and I guess we need to send the cart back to your family.”

“If you stay within the Inner Capital,” said Nupia. “My younger siblings can take it back to the castle for you, ladies. Is the Royal Guard going to stay with us...?”

She glanced at Sabael, strongly hinting that he should. Tessa jumped on the occasion to get next to Sabael with a bright smile.

“Of course, he will! Two guides are better than one, right?”

“I don’t know,” he muttered, trying to step away from Tessa. “I had hoped to train today...”

“You can train as a princess’ bodyguard,” she retorted. “From what I saw earlier, you could get better at it and it’s not

like we will be completely safe in the Inner Capital without a proper escort, right?”

Sabael blushed, but despite his pride being a bit hurt by her words, he had nothing to answer to that. In fact, he felt a bit

defeated that Tessa’s fighting skills were obviously better than his and he couldn’t beat a girl against ruffians after all he had

said previously. Hence, he decided not to answer and just nodded, a frown between his eyebrows.

“It’s settled, then!” said Tessa, obviously the happiest about his decision. “By the way, can you get me a room too? I get Cessilia’s place is grand but I only saw one bed, and I could use some privacy too. Like, without you three around.”

“I understand,” said Nupia, visibly impervious to Tessa’s snarky remarks. “We will make sure the closest room to the Princess is ready for you.”

Then, they separated from two of the triplets, who left on their own to get back more quickly to the castle. While they

weren’t yet at the Inner Gate, Nana had begged them to make a detour by another of her cousin’s shops for food again. While

they walked up to the said spot, Cessilia discreetly got closer to her cousin.

“D-didn’t you p-plan to st-tay with me?” she asked in a whisper.

“From what I’ve seen, not everyone will be as welcoming as Nana. I don’t like the idea of someone staying next door

to us, namely those other candidates, when that castle is so freaking tiny. Also, what if that King does get closer to you? I don’t

want to have to close my eyes and ears!”

Cessilia chuckled at her cousin’s exasperation, but Tessa did have a point. It would perhaps be better to make sure no

one could wander to her apartments and she knew the triplets would find a close room for Tessa, as they had seen a couple of

doors on their way there. However, she did have a hunch that Tessa’s sudden interest in getting her own room wasn’t about her

cousin’s relationship with the King but about her own interest in a certain Royal Guard...

Still completely unaware of Tessa’s vivid interest in her brother, Nana showed them where to get some smoked fish

rolls with cream and that seaweed they had already tried before. Once again, the tastes were completely new to their palates,

which made the young ladies happier. In fact, more than the food, Cessilia was deeply intrigued by all the uses those people

had for seaweed. She had even seen shops selling different varieties, some dried or not, even as flakes and powders. She

interrogated Nana about this while they were waiting to pass the Inner Gate.

“Oh, we use a lot of seaweed!” exclaimed Nana. “Well, we have plenty of it and some families have specialized in

seaweed farming too!”

“You have farms of seaweed?” repeated Tessa, surprised.

“Yes! They are used for food like here, but a lot of people also buy them to make other things like nets, fertilizer, soap...

Oh, I heard they use it in some beauty products too, but those are expensive. Ah, and there are some medicinal uses too!”

“In m-medicine?” repeated Cessilia, immediately intrigued.

“Yes! I don’t know too much about it, though, and medicine is heavily regulated... but we can go to one of the

apothecary shops and ask around! I’m sure they’ll know plenty!”

Cessilia nodded in agreement, very interested to hear more about this. Her undying love for knowledge was easily triggered by information such as this, and since seaweed wasn't common in the Empire, she was twice as curious as usual.

Although, since Nana wasn't particularly knowledgeable on the matter, they agreed to find an apothecary to visit later.

It wasn't like they had to do everything the first day after all, but Nana did seem pretty enthusiastic about taking them

everywhere she could. In fact, as soon as they were back inside the Inner Capital, she guided them for a long, long shopping

tour around the streets. It was as if she really knew each and every citizen living there, and the products they sold in their

shops. Some she only showed them, and some she insisted they tried. A lot of those were food, though, so both Cessilia and

Tessa had to soon beg her to not feed them anymore, for they were already very full.

Luckily, there was a lot more than just food offered among the many shops. Aside from all the delicacies, the shops had

many choices of jewelry, pottery, woodwork, embroideries, fabrics, plants, skins and furs, and clothes. Nana proudly

introduced them to all the elite craftsmen of the Kingdom, for the greatest ones were inevitably selling their best products in the

Inner Capital, where the wealthy population was. As soon as they spotted Cessilia and Tessa and their attire, a lot of merchants

were trying to have them visit their shops, delivering their best sales speeches in hopes to get some of that gold. In fact, this

was when Nana proved to be the most helpful. She would get upset as soon as she heard of how the sellers were inflating their

prices to trick the two women or lying about their products, and she didn't let anything through.

"You lying old trout!" she shouted after hearing one man's speech to Cessilia. "Brand new what? That pattern was

already outdated three years ago! You're only good at copying other popular patterns from the best shops! Come on, Lady

Cessilia, let's get out of here. You should be ashamed, you smelly whelk!"

"What in the world is a whelk...?" muttered Tessa to Cessi as the young woman pushed them both outside.

"I can't believe it!" Nana kept groaning once they were back in the street. "This is the eleventh time I've caught one of

them lying to your faces! Cunning sharks! Just because you're rich strangers, they are multiplying their prices by two or three

times what they'd normally sell it for and selling you those bad products! What kind of image does it give you of our Kingdom?

So annoying!"

"It's not that b-bad," said Cessilia.

"No, Nana is right," said Sabael. "Your outfits and gold are bringing too much attention, a lot of people here are

desperate for any money they can make.”

“Nana, c-can you have some nice c-clothes made for us?” asked Cessilia. “It would perhaps make th-things easier...”

“I don’t like this,” grumbled Tessa. “I like my clothes, I don’t want to have to change...”

“We will have less t-trouble that way. For Nana t-too.”

Although she was still upset, her cousin shrugged, not wanting to oppose Cessilia on this. Next to them, Nana nodded.

“For sure! If you want really pretty dresses, I know exactly which shop we should go to!

They work fast, and are

renowned for their work too! If we get your measurements to them today, I’m sure they can have something ready in just a few

days.”

“Alright,” sighed Tessa. “Let’s go there to get them done as soon as possible, and then go back to the castle. If someone

tries to scam us again, I might really take a finger or two...”

Nana grimaced, probably wondering if Tessa would seriously consider amputating someone, but she didn’t dare ask.

Their little group went to the shop Nana had mentioned, which, fortunately, seemed much more honest and welcoming. While

Sabael stood guard outside and refused to enter, the three girls were all treated like princesses. The shop workers were visibly

used to prestigious customers, and their attitude became twice as polite when they saw Cessilia’s jewelry. They offered them

tea while Tessa stood first on the little stool for her measurements to be taken, two young girls jumping around her with their

rulers and announcing numbers while an older lady took notes.

“I want something pretty,” declared Tessa. “...Nana, does your brother have a favorite color?”

“Sab?” said Nana, looking surprised. “Uh... I don’t really know... Why?”

“Nevermind,” sighed Tessa. “Just make it comfortable to move around, please. Nothing too tight or impractical.”

“What is this?” a voice suddenly came from the entrance of the shop.

“Lady Safia, I’m very sorry, but since you didn’t come at your appointed time, we thought—”

“Excuse me? Are you pretending this is my fault? I had an appointment, and it turns out you gave it to someone else?

Who the heck dares to...?!”

The woman vociferating abruptly walked into the shop, glaring at Tessa where she stood. Then, her eyes went to

Cessilia and Nana. Immediately, her expression changed into a scornful look.

“Ha! You’re saying these miscreants are the ones who took my appointment? How dare you serve those crummy

foreigners before me! I’m Safia of the Yekara Clan, daughter of the Clan Leader himself!”

“...And queen of loudmouths?” scoffed Tessa.

The woman did not appreciate Tessa's snicker. She immediately turned her black eyes to her, furious. It was obvious she came from a very wealthy family, from her luxurious dress, the two servant girls following her, and the many pieces of silver jewelry displayed on her neck, arms, and hair. Her hair was very long, down to her thighs, and styled into dozens of thin braids. She wore simple makeup and was undoubtedly pretty even without that. However, right now, her face was distorted by anger, her lips in an annoyed rictus.

"You should learn to show respect, foreigner girl," she hissed. "This isn't your country, you're nothing here! No one wants you here, either!"

"Seems to me you're the unwanted one, you tardy bitch."

Cessilia sighed. She had no intention to get into a fight with any of the candidates, she hated those kinds of catfights and attitudes. Tessa, however, was prone to react to insults, and surely wouldn't remain quiet about this... Despite her seemingly calm tone, she could tell when her cousin was really pissed. This could get out of hand if she didn't watch it. Next to her, Nana looked a bit worried, her eyes going back and forth from one woman to the other. The one most panicked by the situation was undeniably the shop owner; the poor woman almost ran to Safia's side, looking on the verge of tears.

"My deepest apologies for this situation! It is entirely our fault for assuming my lady wanted to cancel your appointment. Lady Safia, please, we will happily take you now, if you can just wait a few minutes..."

"You want me to wait?" scoffed Safia. "Are you seriously thinking of serving these women while we wait? Are you daft? Have you forgotten who I am? What's my family's name?"

Tessa rolled her eyes at her and let out a loud sigh, exasperated.

"No, no, no, of course not, my lady. We will serve you right away. Let us take you to the other room, and..."

"I am not going to any other room," said Safia, crossing her arms. "I want this one, and those foreigners out. Now!"

Her shrieks echoed in the room like a raven's squawk. The poor shop owner was visibly doing her best to please both customers but also terrified to anger either. Seeing how calm Safia's servants were, this wasn't a rare occurrence either. As

she kept screaming, Cessilia sighed and stood up.

"Let's g-go," she said calmly.

"B-but..." mumbled Nana, visibly upset about the situation as well.

Cessilia gently helped her up, showing she was resolute in leaving that place. Back on the stool, her arms still crossed,

Tessa rolled her eyes, but still followed Cessilia's lead, and began taking off the fabric she was trying on.

“That’s right,” scoffed Safia. “You scam, and don’t you come into my sight again!”  
“Or what?”

Cessilia’s strangely composed tone took the woman by surprise. Not only that, but she had stopped walking on her way out, when they were crossing paths, to stare right at her with those frank, green eyes. In a second, the Yekara woman felt an instinctive surge of fear and stepped back. Something in the foreigner’s eyes had just triggered her most basic survival instincts and made her move away from the Princess. ...However, Cessilia was not showing any sign of aggression, and she immediately regretted stepping back without thinking, wondering where that had come from. She tried to regain her composure, but the Princess was still staring, visibly waiting for an answer. Safia cleared her throat, trying to regain her former arrogant attitude.

“I’ll get rid of you,” scoffed Safia. “I’ll make sure you can never step foot in the Inner Capital again. My family is the Yekara Clan, the most powerful of all. This is not your Empire, a little princess like you has no power here!”

A silent second passed, and Nana stepped forward, getting angry this time.

“You can’t use your family’s power against a foreign princess! How dare you talk to Lady Cessilia like that, Safia!

Your family’s only good at bullying people and extorting money!”

“And what is your family good at?” she retorted with a smirk. “Gutting smelly fish? Selling fat beignets? Just shut up and fuck off, Dorosef girl.”

Nana clenched her little fists, and Tessa clicked her tongue, annoyed. However, Cessilia, to their surprise, simply took

Nana’s hand and walked out without giving that girl another glance. The three of them left the shop, hearing Safia’s shouting at the shop owner even from outside.

Sabael, who had been waiting outside, walked up to them frowning. He had probably heard the situation but decided not to intervene.

“What in the world was that?!” stormed Tessa, furious. “What an arrogant bitch! Cessi, you should have let me cut that big throat of hers!”

“You really shouldn’t,” sighed Nana. “She was telling the truth, earlier. Her family is so rich, they own a lot of the shops around, and they have so much money, they scare everyone. Safia is always using that power to get everything she wants, and since she’s the family head’s only daughter, they are forever spoiling her. She’s known for throwing tantrums like this wherever she goes...”

“If you managed to ignore her, that’s great,” added her brother. “Several people have already lost their shops because

of that girl. She just needs to complain, and the rent will be increased tenfold so the people have no choice but to leave... I've seen it happen many times."

"I hate those types of people the most," grumbled Tessa. "Abusing her power and money to get her way... She's just a rich brat with no manners! If this was the Dragon Empire, she'd never get away with that kind of attitude! Who does she think she is, she's just using her daddy's money to scare people! And to think we abolished slavery. Looks like some people still hold the whip around here!"

This time, Sabael's eyes were wide open, the young man visibly impressed by Tessa's words. Cessilia wondered if he had thought of them as just a duo of willful princesses... Sadly, Tessa did not catch the soldier's gaze on her, once again. She was glaring at the entrance of the shop, shaking her head as they could still hear Safia mistreating the workers. She kept her hands on her swords as if she was dying to go back inside and teach a violent lesson. "...Why did we let her get away with it again?" grumbled Tessa, finally turning to Cessilia.

"We d-don't need t-to fight her. Nothing t-too b-bad happened... Let's not c-cause issues for the p-people here."

She slowly walked away from the shop first, and without looking back, headed in the castle's direction. Behind her, Nana and Tessa exchanged a surprised glance, finally understanding. Cessilia had stepped down because of the shop owner and their workers. It was clear the woman was torn between the customers and trying to treat the foreign Princess decently despite Safia's tantrum. Cessilia had simply chosen to not risk someone else's business... Tessa glanced at Nupia, who had been quietly following them all this time, silent as a shadow. It was clear she wouldn't get involved unless the Princess was in danger, otherwise, she would have said something earlier. Still, the servant probably hadn't missed anything from the earlier scene, and perhaps she would relay it all to her real master. There was no way Cessilia hadn't noticed that as well... Seeing her cousin's lonely figure ahead of them, a smile already back on her lips, Tessa finally let go of her swords, and shook her head.

"Ever your mother's daughter," she chuckled to herself.

A bit less unsatisfied now that they both knew Cessilia's reason for letting Safia get the upper hand, Nana and Tessa joined her, and the three girls made their way back to the castle, Sabael and Nupia behind them. Without realizing it, their little outing to the Outer Capital and all the wandering around the shops had taken almost a full day. The Capital of the Eastern

Kingdom was smaller than the one they were used to, but also more packed. They had seen many, many different streets and visited a lot of shops in just a few hours, with less walking needed than if they had done the same amount in the Dragon Empire. It was high time they got home, indeed, since they had promised the Counselors they'd be back by dusk. However, as they finally reached the gates, Sabael stopped, clearing his voice a bit loudly.

"Uh, well, I have to go now, ladies. Nana, let me know if you want to go outside the Inner Wall again, alright?"

"Got it! Thanks, Sab!" answered his little sister with a big smile.

She was already waving at him, but it was a bit too soon to part for someone else...

"Don't you want to have dinner with us?" offered Tessa with her brightest smile, the previous ordeal already forgotten.

"No, thanks. My next shift begins soon, actually. But, uh... It was nice meeting you... I mean, accompanying you, ladies.

Escorting, you. That's right, meeting and escorting you, uh..."

Seeing Sabael mumble and struggle to answer Tessa's disarming smile was unbearably cute. Both Cessilia and Nana

kept exchanging glances, the first one amused and the other one a bit confused, although she seemed to finally realize the situation that was going on there. The soldier was making no movement to actually leave and Tessa was still there, visibly hopeful. The two of them were so awkward it was almost painful to watch. Finally, Cessilia faked a little cough to get their attention.

"T-Tessa, d-didn't you want t-to see their armory?"

"Oh, right!" exclaimed her cousin. "Hey, can I see the soldiers' armory? Please?"

A bit flustered, Sabael seemed to ponder his answer for a few seconds, but Tessa wasn't leaving him much room to say

no. Even after sweating a bit from their fight earlier and running around all day to shop, Tessa still looked incredibly pretty,

with her green dress and captivating smile. Eventually, he nodded.

"I guess it's fine... if it's just for a bit..."

"Great!"

Before he could even react, she turned to Cessilia to give her a little wink, mimicking a thanks with her lips, and then

grabbed Sabael's arm to pull him back downtown. For a little while, Nana and Cessilia stayed there, watching the two leave, one a bit more enthusiastic than the other.

"So... is Tessa interested in my brother, by any chance?" finally asked Nana, a frown on.

"I b-believe so," chuckled Cessilia.

"Oh... Oh, good luck to her, then. Sabael is really stubborn, and I've never seen him with a girlfriend yet... Although he

is really popular, you know. My sisters' friends always want to try to get with him, but he rejects them every time. He is too serious to date, I think."

"Well, maybe T-Tessa will help change his mind about d-dating?"

"That would be good!" nodded Nana. "Oh, let's go now! I can ask my uncle to make us dinner, he's a very good cook, you know! That's why my auntie married him."

"Your uncle seems t-to b-be a very nice man," said Cessilia as they walked back inside the castle.

"Oh, he really is the sweetest, and my favorite uncle too! I was the only one of my siblings to like books so much, so my uncle was the one who helped me read more and always gifted me tons of books. He taught me a lot himself, and convinced my mom to let me be his apprentice! I would have probably liked to work in one of my family businesses too, but I do really love a good book... I think snacks and books are my two favorite things in the world!"

"I love b-books t-too," nodded Cessilia.

"I will show you around the Royal Libraries later! My uncle and I are always there... but let's let him know we're home first! Otherwise, he and Uncle Yassim will worry..."

As promised, the two young women went in search of the Counselors; however, it seemed Yassim had left already.

Cessilia was a bit worried to hear that, but Yamino promised the old man would be back soon, although he didn't explain why the other Counselor had left, nor mention where he'd gone.

Naptunie quickly told her uncle everything that had happened, although it probably took much longer than if she had stuck to the most important facts rather than detailing everything they had seen, eaten, or drunk... Eventually, her uncle managed to have her stop by promising he would indeed cook them dinner as soon as Tessa would return, and asked her to get him a couple of ingredients from the kitchen. When the young woman happily left, the old man let out a long sigh.

"Oh, I love that child, but she's got way too much going on in that pretty head," he chuckled. "I hope you enjoyed today's outing, Princess. Yassim and I were curious to hear your thoughts."

"It was nice, th-thank you," nodded Cessilia. "Nana and her b-brother were very k-kind t-to show us everything..."

"Sab's a nice boy for sure. I looked exactly like him when I was younger!"

"R-really?" chuckled Cessilia, thinking about her cousin's date...

"Oh, for sure! I had a dream of becoming a knight too, but it's harder than it seems, and I'm much more suited for books! Anyway, my lady must be tired after all this. I'll let you go and catch some rest in your room before dinner, I promise to keep Nana occupied so you can rest quietly!"

"Th-thank you, Counselor."

Cessilia found it adorable how Yamino spoke so fondly about his niece. In fact, she was already beginning to miss her own family a bit... It became even more true as she walked back silently to her room, with only the sound of Nupia's steps behind her. She had almost grown accustomed to the servant's shadowy presence behind her, but it still inconvenienced her a little.

When she put her hand on the doorknob, Cessilia froze.

"N-Nupia."

"Yes, my lady?"

"I want t-to b-be alone, for now," she said.

"...I understand. I'll see if Lady Tessa's room is ready..."

Quietly, Nupia walked back in the opposite direction to leave her.

Her hand still on the warm handle, Cessilia let out a faint sigh, her heart beating a little faster already. She slowly opened it, a bit nervous.

Her room was almost as she had left it, except that their stuff had been left by the bed, clearly for them to decide what

they wanted to do with it. The Princess took a few more steps inside, something still making the back of her neck tingle.

Beyond the balcony's rail, the sun was already starting to set behind the sea. It gave her a marvelous vision of the sky taking

new shades of yellow, orange, and purple, but Cessilia couldn't enjoy them right now.

Her green eyes went around the room until she finally saw him. Standing opposite her, almost in the shadow of one of

the pillars. His manly figure was standing out in this perfect room, the shine of his armor reflecting the sunlight and sending

colors around the room, against the shimmery nacre. His white hair made him impossible to miss. He slowly stepped forward,

and Cessilia's heart rate helplessly went up again. Something appeared in her throat, a painful knot she couldn't get rid of. A

lot of feelings surged inside but none could reach her lips. There was something between them, just like before, in the throne

room. Not even the sunset could be as beautiful as the way they looked at each other, and yet, they were both scared to

approach, like two young animals wary of one another.

Finally, he took a step forward. Cessilia was torn between running up to him and running away. The look in his eyes

was much too complex to decipher. Something like anger, confusion, and... pain.

"...You shouldn't have come here," he hissed.

Cessilia took a deep breath, his voice reaching her like a cold blade in her heart. She had made her decision long ago,

and she was holding on tight to that resolve to face him. Her lips were twitching helplessly, and she could feel that familiar,

scary tingle in her fingers. Her shortness of breath, that sensation climbing up her neck, all too familiar. Still, she struggled, all

she could, to get that word past her lips.

The things she wanted to say, all embedded into one, unique word.

“...Ashen.”

His eyes twitched slightly, and the trouble could be seen in his expression. He reacted to his own name being called

with a frown. Something in his eyes was a bit scary, but also fearful. He didn't know what to do with her, and the anger in his

eyes wasn't as convincing as he had tried to make it, either. His fists, clenched by his side, were slightly shaking as if they

contained too many emotions for him to handle.

With difficulty Cessilia tried to clear her throat a little; however, the knot didn't go away.

“Ashen...” she repeated again, about to step forward.

“Don't call me like that.”

His cold answer stopped her in her tracks, and she froze, feeling the tension and anger in his voice. He was really

glaring at her this time, his lips pinched with a disdainful expression.

“Don't call me that,” he repeated. “What are you doing here, Cessilia? Why did you come all the way here?”

His question came like a hammer, echoing in the room like heavy accusations of a crime. She tried to take a deep breath

in and answer him calmly.

“T-to see you.”

“Don't you lie to me. You made it clear you didn't want to see me anymore when our paths diverged, didn't you? Or

should I remind you what happened that night?”

Cessilia felt a blow to her heart and the pain of that memory. She knew why he was angry, and she knew he was right to

be. It didn't change her feelings though.

Ashen averted his eyes, staring outside instead as if he couldn't bear to look at her anymore.

“Why did you come here? Does your father know?”

“Yes...”

“Ha,” he scoffed bitterly, “I should have known. Why the hell did he send you now, Cessilia? What does he want? To

keep me in check, after what he did to me? Is he afraid I'm going to attack your Empire again? Is that what it is? He sent you

here to taunt me?”

“N-no!” shouted Cessilia, panicked to hear him speculate so fast. “N-no, Ashen, I swear, th-that's not what it is.”

“Don't lie, Cessilia, not to me. Why would you have come with his dragon, then? Why Krai? ...Where is Cece?”

She stepped back as if he had hit her. His accusing look wasn't enough to scare her, but it was painful. Yet, not as

painful as that name. She slowly shook her head.

“She d-didn't c-come...” she painfully muttered, short of breath.

She couldn't even utter that name. She hadn't heard it in a long time, and she hadn't pronounced it at all for even longer... Each time, she didn't want to remember it, to go through that pain again. Her heart was beating so fast, wreaking havoc in her chest and making her feel a bit dizzy. Cessilia helplessly shook her head. She mentally cursed her stuttering that kept her from explaining to him, from telling him the truth, that she had only come here for him, and with her dad's blessing. Not to wage war at all, but instead, see if there was still a bond between them... that bond that had been broken a long time ago.

"Ashen, I p-promise, I d-didn't--"

"Stop doing that!" he yelled.

"W-what?"

"That thing, with your voice. Are you trying to make me feel pity for you? What the hell is wrong with your voice, it

wasn't like that before... No, I don't want to know, I don't want to hear it."

"Ashen!" she shouted, frustrated.

It was getting a bit harder to breathe, and she felt like crying. This wasn't going the way she had hoped at all... He was

wary of her, and she knew it would happen, but she could barely talk. She couldn't stop stuttering enough to explain herself,

and the more nervous and frustrated she got, the worse it would be.

He sighed, visibly calming down, and a little light of hope appeared in her heart. If he could just listen to her a bit... But

Ashen slowly shook his head, brushing his white hair back with a tired expression.

"Enough, Cessilia. You should... You should go home. I don't think I can handle you being here anymore. Please, just...

go."

He turned around, to avoid looking at her, directing his steps toward the door.

Everything was happening so fast in her head. She had to do something to stop him.

She didn't want to go home; not

now, not today, not so soon. She still had so much to explain to him, and she didn't want to go back to before. She couldn't

stand the idea of losing him again. Not this time. She had promised herself so many times, dreamed a thousand times of when

they'd see each other again. Sometimes it felt like a fleeting dream that would never happen, and sometimes, it felt like she just

had to cross that border between their countries. She had thought him to be dead, so many times too. Back then, all she could

think of was that she'd be satisfied if he was alive and well. Now that he was here, and alive, she knew she had lied to herself;

this much just wasn't enough.

She stepped forward, fighting that knot in her throat with all of her strength, to get out those words. Something, anything

to hold him back. It wasn't coming. It was stuck in her tight throat and in her twitching lips, her mouth numb. She wanted to cry

and shout in frustration, but even that felt cruelly hard. He reached the doors, his back about to disappear. Then, something broke in her, snapped in two by all the distress she was going through.

“D-don’t you love me anymore?” she asked, almost a cry.

Ashen froze with one hand on the handle. The door wasn’t opened yet, he was just about to push it. A voice called from outside the bedroom, something unintelligible Cessilia couldn’t understand, but that made him close the door again.

Her heart was going fast, way too fast. She could almost feel the blood rushing to her extremities, making her numb in some parts. She was holding on to that vision of Ashen’s back, and the fact that he wasn’t gone yet. Instead, he was stuck in that heavy silence between them. Cessilia stepped forward, almost worried she would miss his answer. She couldn’t see his face, blocked by his white hair in between. He then turned his head, but now, she couldn’t see his eyes, just the edge of his lips and nose. He opened his mouth, slowly.

“I...”

Whatever he wanted to say next, it didn’t come out, his sentence remained suspended between them, that troubled tone

in his voice serving only as a clue. That was all Cessilia wanted. Some hope.

She moved forward, not thinking about anything anymore. In just a few seconds, she closed the distance between them,

feeling the bravery of a dragon inside her. She reached Ashen, and without any warning, she put her lips on his. This was a

gesture she wouldn’t have dared to dream of just seconds ago, but now, something was changing inside her. Her voice was

broken, but not her body. Her hand on his cheek, the other on his arm, she just kissed him, putting all of her feelings into that shy, fragile kiss.

Ashen’s lips opened slightly. She couldn’t tell if it was to breathe or to taste more of her. Cessilia slowly pulled back,

watching his expression, that feeling lingering on her lips.

The look in Ashen’s eyes was all she wanted to know. That breach in his armor, that almost frightened look meant she

had reached something deep inside. He was letting down his cold and ruthless demeanor to show the young man she had known

once before, the one she had missed so much it hurt.

“...Never do that again.”

He fled the room as fast as he could, leaving Cessilia there.

When reality hit her again, she exhaled all at once, staggering and stumbling back, her body going numb again. It was

such that she dropped down to her knees, trying to catch her breath, massaging her chest, hoping her heart would calm down

too. Cessilia had to lean against the door for a few minutes, just trying to recuperate.

Despite her physical distress, something

in her heart was a bit brighter, and she felt a little bit more confident, a faint smile even appearing on her lips.

Then, she heard a faint growl coming from the other side. She brushed her curls back and turned her head, seeing Krai's big head shyly appearing behind the rail. Cessilia smiled and slowly stood up, helping herself by using the wall on the side, and walked over. Its head was trying to go higher than the balcony, so it could get in, but there was no way the dragon's body would ever fit in the suite. When Cessilia reached the balcony, she glanced outside and noticed it was indeed trying to climb up the cliff, its lower body in the water. Krai probably struggled to fly to that place and had to dig its claws into the cliff to have a stable position to peek. She smiled, and sat on the rail, leaning forward to caress the big dark snout.

"Were you worried...?" she muttered. "I'm f-fine..."

The dragon's warm scales under her hand were very comforting. Cessilia gave in, leaning even further, until her upper body rested on the dragon's head, her hand between its eyes. Feeling her father's dragon was both heart-warming and a bit saddening. When she heard Krai growl softly again, Cessilia felt her lower lip twitch a bit.

"I miss her t-too..."

Cessilia's tears fell down silently. She didn't want to think about Cece, but now, it was inevitable. She closed her eyes, crying silently and feeling the dragon's warmth under her, imagining it was her own...

"Lady Cessilia...?"

The shy knocks on the door woke her up from her half-drowsy state. Cessilia slowly rose up, gently pushed by Krai too, and saw Nana fidgeting at the entrance of the suite. The young woman looked worried and was holding a large drink in her hands.

"Oh, Sir Dragon is here too! Hi, again!"

Krai tilted its large head, visibly curious about the little Dorosef woman. Nana walked over to Cessilia.

"I'm sorry, I tried knocking twice already but I thought you didn't hear, these doors are so huge! So, my uncle said the dinner is almost ready, but he wanted to know if you prefer to eat in your room or in the tower with us since the weather is nice tonight! Oh, you should drink this later! It's warm milk with honey, it will help you sleep! I'll put it on your bedside table! Oh, you didn't unpack yet? Do you need help with that? Oh, I can... Lady Cessilia, are you okay? You look like you cried!"

Cessilia quickly tried to wipe the tears from her cheeks. Her face felt all dry and salty from being exposed to the sea spray all this time, and her hair was a mess too...

"Nana, c-can I wash my face b-before dinner?"

“Of course! The bathroom should be ready, right? Oh, you should ask them to get you coconut butter! It does wonders for dry skin, all my sisters and I use it!”

“Th-thank you, I’ll b-be quick.”

Cessilia ran to the suite’s bathroom, trying to hide her face from Nana, a bit shy. Upon glancing at the mirror, she realized it wasn’t so bad. She took a deep breath and washed her face in the little basin first, hoping the cold water would wash it all away, and wake her up a bit better.

The memory of what had happened just minutes ago was still burning on her lips.

Cessilia stared at her reflection in the mirror, trying to see what he had seen in her... A liar? A traitor? She shook her head, chasing all those thoughts away. It didn’t matter much now. She knew there was still something between them... She could hold on to that, and it was enough for her. He hadn’t kicked her out of his Kingdom, and he hadn’t rejected her kiss either. The look in his eyes... Cessilia touched her lips, trying to grasp that feeling again. It was still so vivid in her mind, yet disappearing already.

“Oh, can I help you brush your hair?”

Nana’s voice coming from the doorstep made her jump.

“Sorry...” mumbled Nana, realizing she had scared her. “I just thought you might need uh... some help. The coconut butter is great for dry lips too!”

Cessilia smiled, thankful for Nana’s bright personality right now. If it had been Tessa there instead, her cousin would have surely insisted to know what had happened for the longest time. Naptunie didn’t seem to mind, and she was nice enough to pretend she hadn’t seen Cessilia’s crying. Although she obviously knew, she was being kind and was just trying to cheer her up.

After Cessilia nodded, she merrily walked over to grab a comb and help her with her hair, which was too long for Cessilia to handle alone.

“Your hair is so pretty...” smiled Nana. “Do you have servants at home to brush it?”

“My little sister d-does it.”

“Oh right! You mentioned you have siblings! Do you have many sisters?”

“Just t-two, but we have five b-brothers.”

“Oh... Five boys, that must be tough! In my family, we always have more girls than boys! ...Do you miss your family?

Or your home country? Is that why you were crying...?”

Cessilia chuckled. It seemed Nana was curious after all.

“It’s t-too soon,” she shook her head. “I j-just arrived t-today, b-but I am alright. Th-thank you, Nana.”

“Oh, you’re welcome! You know, when my uncle said you were a princess, I was very nervous to accompany you! I

mean, I have never been friends with a real princess before, and the rich girls I know are all so haughty and mean... like that Yekara girl. I don't get why they always make fun of my tribe the most. Without us, who would fish for all our citizens?! I don't care, you know, we learn to ignore them. I hope she won't become the Queen though. We really don't need a bad person like that!"

"Why d-did you enter the c-competition, Nana?"

"Oh... I'm not really sure. I mean, my uncle suggested it, but I wasn't really motivated. I don't know much about the King, and the little I do know is scary! I think he hoped the King would be a bit nicer if he had a nice queen... You would make a very nice queen, Cessilia! Will you seriously take part in the competition?"

"...Yes," muttered Cessilia, her heart picking up a fast rhythm again.

"That's good!"

"Nana, what is the c-competition like?"

"Oh, not much! They call it a competition, but it's just having all the candidates over in the castle, and there are three ceremonies where they can showcase their talents. It can be anything! Then, the King just decides on his Queen, and that's pretty much it. I know the Council can give their opinion, but they don't decide. Although, I'm worried it might get a bit nasty..."

"N-nasty? How?"

"Well, candidates can't give up, but they might be forced to; if they are heavily injured, if they commit a crime, or if they are proven to not be virgins. I think those are the rules, and there are already rumors that some candidates won't play very fairly... Ah, not me! I just heard it from the people in the kitchens. I don't think it will get too bad, though. If they attack other candidates, they'd be committing a crime too, which would disqualify them. Maybe it's just me being too cautious!"

Cessilia didn't feel like Nana was exaggerating, though. From what she had seen earlier, at least a couple of her competitors would be very fierce in the race to the throne... It would be better if everyone was like Naptunie, but she highly doubted it.

"The first ceremonial banquet will be in two days, so don't worry, we will have plenty of time to prepare! We can still order you a dress by then, and we can go do more shopping tomorrow and the day after too! Oh, can I look at your dresses later? I mean, I don't want to be too, uh, curious, you know, but I'm really, really curious about what you brought from the Dragon Empire! Is it true that everyone wears gold there? And only the Empress can wear purple? I have tons of questions already!"

Cessilia smiled. Of course, she did... For now, though, she had to get ready to go have dinner with the Counselor, and Tessa should be coming home soon too...

Just as she thought so, the doors to the suite were opened with a bang, and Tessa walked in, visibly furious.

"T-Tessa?" asked Cessilia, worried.

"I don't want to talk about it," grumbled her cousin, diving onto the large bed without even taking off her clothes.

She buried her face in the pillows and stopped moving. On the other side, Krai stared at the young woman on the bed,

then directed its red eyes at Cessilia, letting out a short growl. Cessilia sighed. Their love lives were not going to go as smoothly as they had hoped...