

THE WHITE KING'S FAVORITE

BY JENNIFER FOX

Introduction

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 kn-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...