

Chapter 10

“It’s b-beautiful,” Cessilia muttered.

She turned the vase in her hands, admiring the beautiful nacre mosaic on it, and how it shined superbly at each fragment of light. She could feel all of the craftsman’s hard work and passion in that object, the long hours spent perfecting it. The vase wasn’t perfect by any means, but it was beautiful that way. The little stains of the paint that were immortalized made it look like it had just been made. Next to her, Bastat nodded.

“You have a good eye, Princess. This one was made by one of our best potters. We attach an importance to objects that go far beyond their monetary value. Sadly, it also means we need to undersell our work.”

“...My mother would love th-these,” said Cessilia. “D-do you have a few samples I c-could send home? I’m sure we c-could work t-together on establishing new tr-trades b-between the Eastern K-Kingdom and the D-Dragon Empire. My g-grandmother is a well-known p-patron of the arts. I’m s-sure she would love one of th-these.”

“It would be our honor to send our best creations for the Imperial Family to see.”

Cessilia and Bastat both smiled, and their eyes went back to the amazing display.

After the events of the banquet, the King had ended the reception, but the investigation was still ongoing. All the candidates had been proven innocent, since they were attending the banquet at the time of the murder, so now they were free to do as they liked while the Royal Guards tried to find the culprit, if they could. The rain had continued all the next day, so they had remained in the castle and spent most of the day mending the rest of their ripped dresses and chatting with Nana. In the late afternoon, an

invitation came from Bastat, who invited all three of them to visit the Arts Market, mostly composed of people from the Sehsan Tribe.

Getting out of the castle felt good, after what had happened. Cessilia hadn't seen Ashen since, and she wasn't sure she wanted to. Bastat's invitation had come at the right time. Moreover, Tessandra had decided to go and train with the Royal Soldiers again, inviting herself to their training grounds, probably for another duel with Nana's brother. Naptunie had decided to keep following Cessilia, as she was also curious about the Arts Market she was unfamiliar with. She had a thousand questions for Bastat, who was incredibly patient in answering all of them.

"Aren't those too fragile for everyday use?" she asked, looking at another one of the pots. "I know the cheapest ones are made of glass or clay, and they are definitely not as pretty, but I would be worried about breaking it..."

"They are mostly meant for decorative purposes," nodded Bastat, "although our craftsmen have been working on making new ones for more pragmatic uses."

"Th-there are materials here I have never seen b-before," declared Cessilia, "and I am s-sure th-there are some we have in th-the Empire th-that are not c-common here. Our craftsmen c-could work t-together to bring even b-better and p-prettier results."

"It is my belief, as well," Bastat said with her toneless voice. "I am glad Princess Cessilia thinks like us. Despite your presence, I was worried you would be reluctant to trade with our Kingdom. ...I am sorry you weren't properly welcomed here. Last night's banquet was truly unsightly."

Naptunie pouted her lips, putting down the pot she had in her hands.

"That's for sure! I can't believe those girls' attitudes! Isn't the Yekara Clan overdoing it? Those girls just kept attacking Lady Cessilia any chance they got!"

"They are afraid," said Bastat.

"Afraid?" repeated Cessilia, surprised.

The young woman nodded. Today, again, she was wearing a very unusual dress, made of several layers and a motley mix of patterns and colors. Her hairstyle was also just as unique as it was during the banquet, meaning it was probably her personal preference rather than a once-in-a-while kind of appearance. In fact, she was somewhat even more eye-catching today, with layers of colored necklaces around her neck and large rings on her fingers.

“Although their candidates are trying to act otherwise, the Yekara Clan isn’t fond of the White King,” Bastat slowly nodded. “Actually, they were probably happier in times of war, when they could be paid to work as mercenaries or raid cities to take what they wanted. They would pretend to get rid of the criminals, but they also robbed the thieves and demanded compensation for it.”

“That’s why they are not very popular,” added Nana. “All that was just a few years ago, so many of them still behave as if they can do what they want and go unpunished. They got very rich from the years of civil war, but now they are afraid they will go back to just being one of many tribes.”

“Their candidates are probably set on becoming Queen no matter what. This way, they will be free to do as they want again, under the pretense of working for the White King. However, no other clan will support that. Since the White King got rid of the Kunu Tribe they were allied with, they have to be careful.”

The women moved on to the next shop, one that displayed a lot of jewelry this time. Naptunie immediately jumped on the stall, excited. She had no issues chatting and finding questions to ask the older lady that sold them, happy to chatter and fawn over the little wooden pieces that came in many colors. Cessilia and Bastat stayed a bit behind, neither of them really interested in that stall, only eyeing Nana’s movement from a few steps away. The seriousness of their conversation wasn’t one they could pursue inside such a little space, so they stood side by side in the little alley.

“...D-do you th-think th-they are b-behind Vena’s murder?” asked Cessilia.

“I can’t say for sure. However, the Pangoja Clan is most likely their biggest threat and main rival. Or so they would both want to believe. In fact, those two probably never consider the other tribes as a real threat. Our Kingdom was so fractured that each tribe kept to its own specialty and focused on its own survival for a long time. We all had to become the best in what we did and become essential to the other tribes to survive.”

“The K-Kunu were k-killed for opposing the K-King?”

“Indeed. Just like the Yekara, they weren’t fond of times of peace. They were amongst those who waged war against the Dragon Empire too. Their leader publicly defamed the King several times for backing off from the war; they somehow believed it could have been won if we attacked the Empire again. Foolish.”

“R-really?” muttered Cessilia, shocked.

“We might be separated by a border, but we knew of the previous Emperor’s death. The Kunu Tribe believed an empress with no dragon would have been easier to defeat.”

Cessilia chuckled. The Kunu Tribe couldn’t have been more wrong. She could easily imagine her aunt jumping headfirst into the battle despite her advisor’s pleas. She would have loved proving the Eastern Kingdom completely wrong about their defenses. Although it wasn’t technically her dragon but her late father’s, Empress Shareen was the new master of the Golden Dragon, which was still very much alive. The Eastern Kingdom obviously didn’t know dragons could outlive their owners.

“What of the other c-clan that d-defied the K-King? I b-believe it was the Cheshi C-Clan?”

Bastat let out a long sigh, slowly crossing her arms.

“It is hard to tell where their loyalty lies. Unlike the Kunu, the Cheshi were entirely against the war. However, they were also against the former King, and now, they are against the White King too. Many believe our Eastern Kingdom won’t be able to really recover or avoid more civil wars until we get a monarch the Cheshi Clan approves of.”

“Th-that’s... surprising.”

“They might be against the King, but they are still waiting to see who he will pick as his Queen.”

Just as she had said that, Bastat’s eyes went to Cessilia, with a very serious expression on. She seemed more mature than her age, even though Cessilia now knew Bastat was the oldest of the candidates, and a year older than the King himself. In fact, she realized Bastat could have made a fine queen herself if she had come from the right background. She was very insightful, knowledgeable, and tactful. However, she wasn’t the right match, and they both knew it.

The way she looked at Cessilia meant she was well aware that the Princess was a better candidate than she was.

“My father allowed me to be the judge of the Princess’ character, so I will say this now. I believe our Kingdom needs someone powerful, someone who will genuinely care for each tribe, and someone who will try to heal our nation from the inside without ignoring any wound. Counselor Yassim isn’t called the Wise for nothing. The fact that he brought you, the daughter of a legendary healer and a godly warrior, means a lot to many people, Princess Cessilia.”

“...I und-derstand.” Cessilia simply nodded, her throat a bit tight.

Although she hadn’t expected so much hostility when coming here, she also hadn’t expected to see people sincerely rooting for her to become Queen.

“I have only gotten a small glimpse of you, so it might be too soon to entirely put my support behind you,” said Bastat, “but please know you will have nothing to fear from my clan. We will simply be watching.”

Cessilia understood Bastat’s words easily. She was still a foreigner and had merely been here for a few days. Even if she was aware of all the eyes on her, it was too soon for the tribes to really support her. Perhaps she had made an impression at the first banquet, but she would have to prove herself even more in the upcoming days. However, it was understandable

that the smaller tribes with lower chances of seeing their candidate become Queen would naturally turn to someone who had the power but no tribe supporting her, rather than the candidates from hostile opponents. Cessilia had thought she would have nine rivals, but perhaps it didn't need to be so. Aside from the girls of the Yekara and Pangoja Clans, no other candidates had been openly hostile to her. Perhaps the remaining candidates were also considering this competition very differently as well. Perhaps there were even more eyes watching her than she had realized...

“You m-mentioned the K-King wasn't letting the Yekara C-Clan free the occupied c-cities anymore,” she said, frowning. “Th-then, is he d-doing it alone?”

“He is,” nodded Bastat. “That is also why many respect him, or fear him like one would a real god. The King didn't only establish himself because he took the throne by force, but because he managed to remain there without any clan's help, and restored peace at an unprecedented pace all on his own.”

“What ab-bout the Royal G-Guards?”

“He had defeated the ones his father had previously, so when the White King rose, there was almost none to support him. The Yekara Clan helped him defeat the previous Royal Guards, but there wasn't many left to switch to his side. It took a couple of years before we even got enough new recruits to protect at least the Inner Capital.”

Cessilia was rendered speechless.

She meant Ashen had reconquered his Kingdom almost... on his own? It seemed unthinkable, and yet, it would have explained why all his people worshiped him like a god. He was their War God, the one who had single-handedly saved the decaying Eastern Kingdom. If she put together everything the Counselors, Nana, and Bastat had told her, their country was an absolute wreck for the past two decades. The one King who had first tried to restore some peace had turned out to be a tyrant himself, and the most barbaric tribes had fueled the years of civil wars in between.

What she had seen so far reflected very little of that. Although she had witnessed the dangers in the Outer Capital and the ravaged landscape, the Capital still seemed to be thriving. The Inner Capital was completely secure, and the economy was given a new breath, enough for the locals to try and grow more activities, trades, and businesses. All this in the span of just five years... Cessilia had always felt something was off about the way people treated Ashen, but now, she knew why. His legend wasn't just a tale he had simply fabricated. It had been forged by his actions, and the miracles he had conceived.

Miracles she didn't believe in.

"...Lady B-Bastat," she suddenly asked, turning to Bastat with a resolute look, "d-do you kn-know which cities were freed r-recently?"

"I do not," Bastat shook her head.

"I know!" Nana suddenly raised her hand, popping up before them. "Sab and some of his friends were chatting about it last week. But why?"

"I want t-to g-go."

"Are you sure?" Nana frowned. "It's a bit far, and probably not very nice to visit..."

Cessilia smiled at her and turned to Bastat.

"Th-thank you very m-much for the visit t-today. I will c-come to the market a-again, another t-time."

"You will be welcome anytime, Princess Cessilia," Bastat nodded politely. "I will have some art pieces delivered to you later if that is alright with you."

"Th-thank you. Nana, let's g-go."

"Alright... Bye, Lady Bastat, thank you for the invite!"

They quietly left the market, Bastat waving as they exited the little alleys of the market. However, Naptunie frowned and got closer to Cessilia.

“It’s not that I don’t want to go, but... why are we going there? It’s really not a good place to go, even if the King freed that city. The cities usually take a while to get back on their feet and for people to go back there to open trades. If they liberated it last week, it’s probably still very, uh... unsightly.”

“I kn-know. Th-that’s why I want t-to go now.”

Naptunie was a bit confused, but she still decided to follow Cessilia quietly, without further discussion. Whatever the Princess did, she was always curious to hear and see. It was more interesting than any of her books.

“So... do you want us to rent horses? If we take really fast horses, maybe we can get there tomorrow morning, but it’s still going to be a dangerous journey... I can ask Sabael to come, but it might not be enough! I know Lady Tessa can fight really, really well, but...”

“D-don’t worry, Nana,” chuckled Cessilia. “I have th-the ride and s-security already c-covered.”

Nana frowned for a second, and then she slowly understood, her eyes opening wide and her heart beating a bit faster. She opened and closed her mouth several times, unable to formulate her thoughts. She walked a bit quicker next to Cessilia, only to realize they were going to the Royal Guards’ training grounds, probably to get Tessandra. Perhaps they were picking her and Sabael up before going to rent horses? However, Cessilia had definitely said the ride was covered... Nana tried hard to contain her excitement, but she was practically jumping when they arrived at the training grounds, not even daring to ask the question that was burning on her lips, which was quite a first.

“T-Tessa!” Cessilia called once they got there.

In the middle of a training field, her cousin was shining. With two short, wooden sticks in her hands, she was defeating her four opponents with incredible ease. When her cousin’s voice got to her, she turned her head at the same moment she blocked an attack coming from the opposite side, as if her arm was operating by itself. Then, she turned around, and as if

she had been resting until then, she quickly ended the fight about one minute later. She was sweating a bit, but compared to the young men with their bodies and egos on the ground, she was fine. She quickly walked up to Cessilia and Nana, Sabael appearing behind her with a faint frown, and a bruise forming next to his chin.

“Cessi, Nana! Are you guys back already? How was it?” Tessa asked, a large smile on. “How come you’re back already?”

“We need t-to go somewhere,” Cessi said. “N-now.”

“Got it. Are you coming, handsome?”

“I told you to stop calling me that...” Sabael blushed. “Where are you girls going?”

“To the Muram Village,” said Nana.

“What? Why would you go there!”

“We won’t b-be long,” promised Cessilia. “We will be back before dusk.”

Next to her, Nana’s eyes sparkled with joy, but her brother had a different opinion.

“Wha–No way, you’re going to take my sister on the... the...”

“Dragon,” chuckled Tessa. “Come on, babe, you can say it.”

“Don’t call me that either! I’m sorry, but I can’t agree to that. Nana is only sixteen, she’s not going to–”

“I am not waiting for your permission!” his sister exclaimed. “Don’t come if you don’t want to, but I’m going to ride on Sir Dragon, and you’re an idiot if you don’t come with us too!”

“Nana!”

“There’s enough room for four,” added Tessa with a little wink, putting an arm around Nana’s shoulders. “Alright, let’s go, ladies! Come on, Nana, let’s go buy some beignets for the big boy before we go, he’ll be happy to have a snack for the road... and I’m hungry too.”

Cessilia chuckled but turned around to follow Tessandra and Nana, leaving poor Sabael behind. After they had taken a few steps away, they heard an exasperated sigh behind them and steps catching up to them.

“By all the gods, you dragon girls are impossible!”

Again, they borrowed the Dorosef Tribe’s passes to get out of the Capital and find a deserted area to call out to Krai. This time, Nana was much more enthusiastic than before about leaving the safe area, probably more convinced about both Tessa’s skills and having Krai as a bodyguard. The reluctant one was her brother. Although it was obvious he would come with them regardless, he kept protesting as they moved away from the crowded streets and past the two walls, leaving plenty of time for him to banter with Tessandra along the way. Cessilia suspected her cousin was loving those arguments with Sabael, so she and Nana didn’t really take part in them.

Soon enough, they found themselves in a deserted enough area, and Cessilia called out to the large Black Dragon.

“Couldn’t Sir Dragon have come to get us near the castle?” Nana asked, her eyes on the sky.

“I d-don’t want t-too many p-people to b-be aware of his p-presence,” Cessilia shook her head. “It’s b-better if he is left alone, I am a b-bit worried that others will t-try to hunt him d-down.”

“I’m sure Sir Dragon would be fine!” Nana exclaimed.

“Oh, he would,” scoffed Tessa. “We would be more worried about the hunters...”

Nana grimaced, understanding their point. Despite this, she was a bit excited and nervous to be able to climb on the big dark dragon. She was almost on her toes and trying to glance all around when the dark spot finally appeared in the sky, coming from farther north. Krai let out a loud growl before landing right in front of them, its large wings throwing gusts of wind on all sides. The Black Dragon looked a bit excited and leaned its head toward Cessilia, who patted the large snout.

“Hi,” she said with a smile. “I’ll c-climb up first. Nana, you come after me.”

“Really?” Nana gasped, smiling from ear to ear.

“Your little sister is less scared than you,” said Tessandra, teasing Sabael with a little elbow push.

“I’m not scared! It’s just... concern.”

“Sure...”

Tessandra helped Nana climb up before doing so herself and offered her hand for Sabael to get on. The young man sighed and rolled his eyes once before eventually sitting behind her.

“You’d better hang on,” Tessandra warned him with a mischievous smile.

“Uh... to what...?”

“To me!” she exclaimed, frustrated. “Oh, come on, if you can handle a sword, you can grab my waist...”

Sabael turned red, his eyes going down to Tessandra’s waist. Of course, she happened to be wearing a mere piece of fabric around her chest, meaning a lot of skin was exposed below that... He sighed but finally wrapped his arms around her, trying to look elsewhere.

“Finally,” Tessandra smiled.

“N-Nana, you hang on t-too. C-come on, K-Krai, let’s g-go.”

The dragon jumped up in the sky effortlessly, despite the four humans it carried. Nana gasped, letting out something between a squeak and a cry, but in a matter of seconds, and despite the fear, she found herself mesmerized by the view below. The Capital was growing tinier each second, while the large, flapping wings were taking them high, fast. The dragon was climbing up, and even Sabael had to hang on tighter to Tessandra, much to her satisfaction.

Thankfully for Sabael, Krai quickly found a nice pace at which to fly. The dragon could float a bit with its wings spread wide open, and at this height,

it was incredibly easy for them to get away from the Capital. Quickly, Nana had to point at the place they were headed to, almost like she would have pointed it out on a map. Still, she enjoyed each second of the flight. She had never seen her country like this, nor imagined the sensations flying could give them. It was scary but thrilling. However, because it was her home country she could observe from up there, it was also saddening to see all the ruined, burnt, deserted lands.

“Two of my uncles and our grandfather died in the civil wars,” she whispered to Cessi with a sad voice. “It was really hard, for a while. I was scared every day that people would ransack our house next... My dad said we survived because we were able to stay together and protect our boats, but we knew what was happening everywhere else. It was worse when the army came back defeated from the border. People don’t like to say it, but many of the people who became mercenaries were soldiers before that. After they lost the war, there was no money to pay them, and they didn’t want to return to their families empty-handed. It became really horrible... Even those who returned to their villages ended up having to fight to defend them...”

Cessilia felt her pain as well. She had accompanied her father on battlefields, and her mother in hospitals. She knew how to recognize traces of war and devastation...

When Krai finally landed them in front of the Muram Village, a terrible smell of burnt flesh greeted them. Nana grimaced and covered her nose, hiding behind Cessilia, a bit afraid once again. They all got down from the Black Dragon, which growled, also unhappy about this place. Krai wasn’t the only one. This village didn’t look like it had been freed, it looked like a cemetery. There were only a few people who ran to hide upon the dragon’s arrival. Cessilia gestured for Krai to stay behind, the dragon lying down, and she stepped forward first, the others following right behind her.

“This place is... hell,” grimaced Tessandra, visibly just as disgusted.

The smell was coming from the large pile of bodies on the side. Most of it had been turned to charcoal black, but there was just so much that it

wouldn't go away for a few more days. Cessilia couldn't bear to look at the calcined human remains. They had been gathered a bit away from what was left of the Muram Village. It was really just a village like any other. A handful of roads came to a group of modest houses, and there were only two shops, both closed. In fact, all buildings bore traces of damage of some sort. Some had holes in the walls, others their door ripped off, and one even seemed to have completely collapsed from the inside. Those weren't new, however. A lot of the damage had clearly been done over a few years. Only the large red stains on the walls and ground seemed to be fairly new...

Cessilia kept looking around the streets, ignoring all the stares she could feel on her from behind the closed doors and drawn curtains.

"Some of the Royal Guards came here just a few days ago with the King," said Sabael, "to help gather the bodies, and try to help with the damages, but... many villagers don't trust soldiers anymore, since what happened with the previous King. They were asked to leave by the remaining locals."

Tessandra crouched down, her eyes on the ground. She was scrutinizing all the footprints left on the soil, and behind her, Cessilia was standing but staring at them too.

"How many soldiers came to fight?" Tessandra asked.

"I'm not sure... Maybe about twenty or thirty?" Sabael shrugged.
"...Why?"

"It d-doesn't look like th-there was much of a f-fight," Cessilia said.

Even if the battle had ended a week ago, there weren't many people there, and the houses were rather far from one another since this place was meant for farming. From her experience, there should have been much more traces of the fight than this.

"His Majesty arrived first and did most of the work," explained Sabael.
"His abilities are... godly. When the Royal Soldiers arrive, there usually

isn't much more to do about the pillagers. We come to pacify the people, help with the damage, and make sure the place will remain peaceful..."

"Peaceful, it is," scoffed Tessandra.

Indeed, there was a terrible silence reigning. A silence of death.

Cessilia's eyes turned to the houses. Most of them had found people to come back and live in them. These lands were obviously meant to be farmed, but it would take months before people could do anything with them again... The soil hadn't been cultivated for far too long, and all the animals had fled. The only well was probably dry too. She sighed, a bit depressed. The aftermath of a battle never had a taste of victory...

"What now, Cessi? What did we come here for?"

"I want to know how the K-King did it," she said.

She turned around and began walking to the pile of bodies. Her eyes were going to the damaged walls, analyzing everything she saw. She knew the survivors would probably not talk to a foreign woman who had just landed on a dragon's back, and she couldn't blame them for being terrified. They were probably terrorized already...

Behind her, Nana was following like a shadow. From a dream-like flight, her mood had sunk with the heavy atmosphere in this place, and she didn't really dare leave the Princess' side. She was also curious to understand why Cessilia had wanted to come here. Meanwhile, Tessandra stayed behind, observing the traces of the fight. Between the two, Sabael, visibly lost, crossed his arms.

"I told you, the King came first!"

Seeing that Cessilia didn't seem to listen, he ran to catch up to her.

"I've seen him in action," he continued. "The King has unbelievable fighting skills, the best in our entire Kingdom, and he's as fast as lightning! Behind him, all soldiers become braver just from seeing him in action. We all dream to achieve a tenth of his talent one day. His white

hair is proof he is out of this world, and his combat skills too. It's inhuman. I really believe his sword is blessed by the gods of war!"

"Your K-King only had one God of War t-training him," retorted Cessilia, sounding pissed, "and he did not t-teach him this."

She stopped in front of the pile of bodies, a dejected expression on her face. Somewhere behind her, Nana hadn't followed her all the way and was covering her nose with her sleeve, looking like she was going to be sick. Sabael only dared to go a couple of steps farther than his sister, but before he added anything, Cessilia's hand suddenly grabbed a limb from one of the bodies and pulled it to take it out of the pile.

He gasped in shock, not only because of the visual of the burnt bodies falling down one after another but because she had fearlessly grabbed a still-smoking corpse. So much of the flesh was already burnt that it looked like Cessilia had dragged a skeleton away from the pile in front of the siblings' shocked eyes. Her dark reptilian hand was protecting her from the heat, but there was nothing to prevent the smell. Naptunie coughed a bit but didn't dare try to get closer. Tessandra was the one to join her cousin, glaring at the body beneath them.

"This guy was killed in one blow," she said, tilting her head. "The way his neck bones are still bent means the sword was stopped halfway, probably by some armor. A grown adult, I'd say..."

Cessilia seemed to be scrutinizing the body from even closer. She didn't shy away from getting down on her knees next to it or manipulating it, although she was visibly being as respectful as possible. She used her scaled hand to check the body's mouth and its head, although there wasn't much left but a few holes and the vague shape of a skull.

"He was drugged," she whispered.

"What?"

"His t-tongue and gums b-burned faster than th-they should have, c-compared to the rest of his b-body. There was something that accelerated the p-process in his mouth."

“...Alcohol?”

“He d-doesn't smell like alcohol.”

Tessa leaned over, and despite grimacing, took a whiff of the body, before nodding.

“You're right... Alcohol would still leave a smell, I can even smell some of his sweat.”

“What kind of nose have you got?!” exclaimed Sabael, stunned.

“A dragon's,” the girls answered simultaneously.

Somewhere behind them, Krai let out a short growl, as if to concur. Sabael was speechless. The Princess could tell the person was drugged simply after observing their burnt body? Before he could even ask anything, she and Tessandra began pulling two more bodies out and observing them the same way. The two cousins were quickly drawing conclusions between themselves, agreeing those people had been killed way too swiftly.

“Someone drugged these people before they fought,” mumbled Tessandra. “That guy looked like he had plenty of muscle, but he was killed with one blow... They probably all were! There are, what, fifty bodies here?”

“Sixty-six, my lady.”

They turned around.

A very old woman, who only stood with the help of a cane, had come out of one of the houses to talk to them. She was wearing a bandage with blood on it over her small head and looked like she had been through hell. As if her body moved automatically, Cessilia walked up to her, gently pulling the bandage to see the wound beneath.

“I c-can treat this,” she offered.

“I am fine, young lady,” the old woman shook her head, “but thank you. I'm at the age where I don't care about these little things anymore. I heard you ladies from my house, the one over there. You were right. All these men were drugged before His Majesty arrived. We did it.”

“What the heck?” Tessandra frowned. “Why?”

“To help His Majesty!” exclaimed the old lady. “This village was my ancestors’ home long before those bandits came here. I had to watch again and again as they robbed, killed, and raped every single person I have known. They killed my sons who tried to save me, and they raped my daughter-in-law and grandchild before murdering them! Each time more men came here, it wasn’t to save us, it was more bandits coming to take whatever was left!”

The old lady looked exhausted just from saying all that. In fact, she seemed to be out of energy overall. She was old, injured, and clearly very upset too. Her wrinkled hand was shaking on her cane, and tears were appearing in her small eyes. Cessilia felt her own throat tighten listening to all this. She could imagine that pain was the pain of each person hiding inside the houses. No wonder they had been terrified of them and their dragon now...

“Granny, I’m so sorry...” Nana cried, upset as well.

“I can’t take any more pity, young lady,” said the old woman. “Those men got what they deserved! They weren’t humans! I don’t know what you came here for, but the King served justice for my family!”

“Did you see the fight, old lady?” asked Tessandra, her hands on her hips.

“...From behind my window,” she nodded. “I would have helped, even!”

“There were sixty-six bandits here?”

“That’s what I said!”

“And you drugged them all to help the King?”

The old lady suddenly seemed to calm down a bit, and averted her eyes, nodding.

“We did. The few of us they kept alive to serve them, cook them meals... We simply drugged them, to help His Majesty.”

“How did you know the King was coming?”

The old lady hesitated for a second, before shrugging.

“We had heard he was on his way.”

“From whom? If the bandits had known, they should have been prepared better than stupidly eating and drinking homemade drugs by a bunch of villagers?”

“Watch your tongue, foreigner!” exclaimed the elder.

“You’re the one not telling us the truth.”

“I’m not lying! We drugged them!”

“Who p-provided you the d-drugs?” asked Cessilia, frowning too. “Who t-told you the King was c-coming?”

“I told you, no one! We made it!”

“You d-don’t have the ingredients here t-to make such a p-potent and c-complicated drug,” she retorted. “Someone had t-to c-come beforehand and t-tell you this p-plan. The K-King had an easy fight against th-those bandits b-because you helped him. I just want t-to know who helped you.”

The old woman seemed to hesitate, her eyes going to Nana behind them. Seeing she still wasn’t talking, Naptunie took a deep breath and came forward.

“Granny, please? We are on His Majesty’s side too, we came from the Capital to understand what happened here. We will help you, I promise. ...I... I will ask my uncle to bring you some food, as soon as we can. Look! See? It’s a pass from my family, the Dorosef Tribe. We can help you, I promise.”

The old woman’s eyes lingered for a while on Naptunie’s papers, her lips pinched in a line. Then, she sighed.

“That woman... She asked us not to tell anyone about the drug, but since you already know... I don’t know more, anyway. She just snuck into the village the night before the King arrived, and gave us a huge bag that smelled like herbal medicine, asking us to put it in their food.”

“A woman?” Tessa frowned.

“Yes. She had strangely pale skin just like yours, and red hair too.”

Cessilia and Tessandra exchanged a look. The latter sighed.

“Oh well, that explains a couple of things... although it makes me mad too.”

“Why all the questions, what are you here for?!” the older woman exclaimed, frowning. “With that dragon, I thought you had come to attack us!”

“Why would we attack here, there’s literally nothing left we’d possibly want to steal...”

“Tessa!”

“My thoughts too!” scoffed the granny, not offended.

“We only c-came b-because we heard what ha-happened here,” sighed Cessilia. “...I a-am a healer. Are you sure you d-don’t want me t-to look at your wounds?”

“Oh, if that’s the case... There are a few more who need it more than me. The soldiers did their best, but those brave boys aren’t cut out to heal anything... If that’s alright with you, I’ll go back to the others now and explain to them. We’ll see if they want to be healed by a foreigner or not...”

“Th-thank you.” Cessilia nodded.

The old lady slowly went back, and Cessilia let out a long sigh, crossing her arms. Tessandra walked up to her, a sullen look also.

“What are you thinking? Are you mad that... the King had help?”

“...I don’t know.”

Cessilia was conflicted. Her eyes kept going back to the pile of bodies. Even though she now knew who they were and what they had done, she still felt something was terribly wrong about all of this. She didn’t like the idea that Jisel had cheated the battle in Ashen’s favor, either, but she knew

this had probably spared him, and a lot of the soldiers, some wounds and effort. Perhaps it had even saved lives.

“This is too horrible,” muttered Naptunie, still upset. “To think those people were still under those bandits’ tyranny all this time! It makes me sick just thinking about what that granny had to go through...”

“Don’t think too much,” sighed Tessandra. “You getting sick won’t help them. Can your tribe really provide food here?”

“We can,” nodded Sabael. “I’ll make sure of it.”

“Great. But I doubt the Dorosef can feed all the other villages in the same situation...”

Cessilia felt the same. Even if the Dorosef provided some help, it would be temporary, not a long-term solution. She looked around. They had to help those people so they would get back on their feet by themselves.

First, as she had promised, Cessilia spent time looking at the wounds of the people the old woman brought forward to meet her. They were clearly lacking the proper medicine and supplies, so they had to make do with what they had, as well as explain to them how to tend to the most basic wounds, sterilize things, and create their own supplies. Not only her, but Tessandra, who had also learned some rudimentary medicine, helped too. There weren’t many people left to tend to, but they did their best. Even Naptunie was happy to run errands, distribute some snacks she had gotten earlier that day from her aunt, and learn what she could from Cessilia. It was clear her thirst for knowledge knew no bounds, and she even quickly got over her disgust of blood and exposed flesh to help out. Meanwhile, Sabael was recruited to help repair the damages, unplug the well, and gather what materials could still be useful. It was cute to see him run around, eager to help and eager to get out of a certain lady’s line of sight...

For a while, their little group stayed in the Muram Village, helping in every way they could. When she was done healing those who could use her help inside the houses, Cessilia took a walk around the village, showing the women which wild plants could be propagated and used for herbal medicine, or to make tea to warm everyone up. Some women were

already knowledgeable, so it was a quick tour, and soon, it became clear she had done all she could. She sighed, the women going back to prepare a larger pot of tea for everyone.

Next to her, Nana stepped forward to hand her a little cup of water.

“You’re so talented,” she muttered. “I understand better what they said about your mother being a legendary healer...”

“My m-mom remembered the t-teaching of her ancestors and t-taught me and my siblings t-too. B-but it won’t be enough t-to help this village. We can heal th-their wounds, b-but th-they will need more food soon.”

“They should make a trip to the Capital!” exclaimed Nana. “Nowadays, they are trying to encourage the growth of more crops, like before... I can even ask one of my uncles who trades outside to come all the way here. If their lands can be farmed again, I’m sure they just need to buy new crops to start anew.”

“That would be nice, young lady,” said the old woman, appearing at their side. “However, our lands have been ravaged. We wouldn’t even know where to begin, between all the blood that has been spilled, and the soil that has to be dug... It will take us weeks until we can be ready to farm anything again!”

“Th-that, we c-can help with.” Cessilia smiled.

To their surprise, she walked out, and Tessandra, who was smiling as well, obviously knew exactly what her cousin was going for because she followed right after her. Cessilia walked away for a bit, leaving the line of houses to get to the lands. As the old lady had said, there was no ground to cultivate from... yet.

“K-Krai!” she called out. “Nana, d-do you still have s-some f-food with you?”

“I have a few more snacks, yes... Why?”

“C-can I have it?”

“Oh, is it for Sir Dragon? Of course!”

Cessilia took the little snacks, which were small and sweet versions of the beignets. Then, she walked up to the ravaged field, and dug as deep as she possibly could, with her hands, and buried one, before covering it back with the soil. She walked away, and did that again, until all six of the little snacks were hidden underground, around the same time Krai arrived, tilting its head.

“...I don’t understand,” Nana whispered to Tessa. “She isn’t expecting them to grow, right?”

“You should step back, Nana,” Tessa chuckled. “It’s going to get a bit messy around here.”

Naptunie frowned, but carefully took a few steps back along with Tessandra, noticing Cessilia was doing the same now, walking up to them with a little smile.

For a few seconds, nothing happened. In front of them, Krai had begun walking around the area, and sniffing the ground, deeply interested. She was shocked. The dragon could sniff the treats when Cessilia had buried them so deep? Yet, to her surprise, it suddenly began digging into the ground. It was so violent, Nana jumped back a little. With its tail wagging in the air, Krai’s sharp claws violently ripped full wagon loads of soil out of the way. Such a large dragon was digging to get such a tiny snack! Naptunie was in awe. It was a bit funny, and also a bit scary. Quickly, Krai found the first of the snacks, and ate it right away, before sniffing the ground again to find the next one.

That wasn’t all. As the dragon dug out the second and third treats, Naptunie realized Cessilia hadn’t placed them in random spots. In fact, she had calculated how deep she should bury them, how much soil Krai would be able to dig out, and even from which direction the dragon would dig it, making sure they crossed paths. What she had thought to be some random digging game was now turning into a large-scale plan to completely labor the land, and it was unfolding in front of her eyes, in a matter of minutes!

“This is amazing!” exclaimed Naptunie.

“I c-created this t-technique with my b-brothers w-when I was young,” chuckled Cessilia. “Mother wanted to c-create new fields in the n-north, b-but we had to d-dig deep and it was really t-tiring for my older b-brothers and the workers. I noticed th-the d-dragons love to d-dig for treats, so I made several at-attempts to have them d-dig as a game. B-but we c-could only b-bring one d-dragon at a t-time or they ended up f-fighting and making a b-big mess... In th-the end, we hid a b-bunch in the lands, and it worked so well, we p-prepared large fields for farming...”

“So that’s how you came up with that technique?” laughed Tessandra. “No wonder the north became so prolific in just a few years, with dragons to do the work!”

“Th-they had fun d-doing it!” protested Cessilia.

Even without her saying it, it was obvious. Krai was happily digging, making little mountains and deep trenches of soil all around, which meant a large area was already plowed. All the villagers who had been brave enough to come and observe were speechless. Cessilia turned to the older lady when the dragon was looking for its last treat.

“K-Krai d-did a lot, b-but you will still have t-to work to b-bring this place b-back to what it was. It r-rains a lot in the area, so you c-can p-prepare to farm again and organize th-this land as you want. Many villages are p-probably in the same situation as yours, so you c-could try growing many d-different kinds of crops, and later b-become a reference for th-them. P-prepare a lot more food for th-the nearby v-villages who will t-take longer t-to get b-back on t-their feet. You c-can establish this village as a future p-point of trade.”

For a few seconds, the old woman seemed a bit lost, and Cessi wondered if she should explain again. Yet, to her surprise, the older woman took a deep breath and bowed. Behind her, several villagers did the same, or even got on their knees, all showing deep respect and gratitude toward the Princess. The whole area was silent, and Cessilia, shocked, took a step back.

“N-no! P-please, it’s not necessary...”

“Please let us thank you, my lady,” said the old woman. “Without you, we would still be hiding in our houses in fright, instead of thinking of the future. And thank you for using such a noble creature to help us prepare to farm again. I promise we will work hard, and do our best from now on. Thanks to His Majesty and you, it feels like this Kingdom might still face a new dawn after all we have endured! I hope I’ll live long enough to see it!”

Cessilia felt horribly embarrassed, but when she glanced to the side, both Tessandra and Nana were smiling at her, clearly happy with this resolution too.

“Y-you’re welcome...” she muttered.

“Alright,” said Tessa. “Cessi, it’s starting to get late, and I see more of those dark clouds from earlier. We should go back now if we don’t want to get caught in another storm...”

Quickly, they bid goodbye to the old lady and all the villagers they had met. Naptunie once again promised to send them food from the Dorosef Tribe, and the Muram Village thanked her too, as well as Tessa and Sabael, for their help.

Cessilia had an odd feeling when Krai took off from the ground. She was glad they had been able to help this village, but their situation was probably the same as many others... Who would be able to help them all? This was an issue of a Kingdom-wide scale. Some weren’t even freed of the bandits yet. She couldn’t imagine what those people had gone through, but she could see a glimpse of it in their eyes. Hell, surely...

Just like Tessa had predicted, the rain began to fall on their way back. Krai tried to fly quickly, not fond of that weather, either, but the Black Dragon couldn’t spare them from the downpour. They were all a bit relieved when they finally landed on the outskirts of the Outer Capital, as the wind at least wasn’t as terrible down there.

“Bye-bye, Sir Dragon!” Nana tried to wave her hand.

Krai left them quickly, and Sabael suggested they rent horses to get back faster, which they agreed to. With Naptunie riding behind Cessilia, they all departed quickly, hoping to reach the bridge soon. However, to their surprise, they were stopped by the Royal Guards, who refused to let them in.

“Are you kidding?” roared Sabael. “These passes are perfectly fine! Which division do you belong to?!”

“They are not,” retorted the guard calmly, his eyes going to Cessilia.

Cessilia and Tessandra exchanged a look. There was no problem with their papers. Those guards were only set on not letting them through. While Sabael was bent on arguing with them, Tessa sighed and pulled his horse’s bridle.

“Stop it, Sab. Let’s just try one of the other entries.”

“We shouldn’t have to! Our papers are fine!”

“I know they are, love, but that guy barely looked at them. He looked at us. Either he has something against foreigners, or he was paid off. In any case, we aren’t going back this way without causing a commotion. There are three other doors, right? Let’s just try the closest one...”

The Royal Guard grunted, but the girls had already decided to let this go. In fact, they were all drenched already, and that only added to Sabael’s frustration. They should have been getting back as soon as they could, but now they had to spend extra time under this downpour, in this unsecured area, and make an unnecessary detour. He was ashamed they had run into corrupt Royal Guards and internally swore he’d remember their faces for later...

Luckily, the girls were calmer, and once they were on the way to the next bridge, no one mentioned what had happened. Or perhaps the rain and wind blew their frustrations away too. However, it was still a long way there. They kept riding next to the first wall that protected the city, the rain pouring down on them.

Except for Nana, they all quickly realized they were being followed. At first, it was an uneasy feeling. Sabael had been nervous since they were refused entrance into the Capital, but now, it was clear someone was chasing after them. They could hear horses, and see their pursuers coming from adjacent streets. It made no sense that more horses would be riding under this downpour to gather behind them unless they also couldn't get in at the previous door, which was unlikely. People who could afford horses shouldn't have to ride from one gate to another.

“Cessi, keep going with Nana!” Tessandra shouted, taking out her sword.

Cessilia's horse accelerated, Nana holding on tightly behind her. Meanwhile, Tessandra slowed her horse until she and Sabael were riding next to each other.

“There are a dozen of them... at least,” she shouted to be heard. “Will you be alright?”

“I should ask you that!”

“You're cute!”

Sabael rolled his eyes and took out his own weapon. Of course, she would be fine... He was more worried for his little sister. Naptunie had no fighting abilities, and he was pretty sure he had never seen the Princess use a weapon, either, which explained why they weren't staying behind to fight as well. Tessandra was the fighter of the two.

The first attack came from the corner of a street, taking them by surprise. A man stepped out at the last second, with a long sword. His target was Tessandra's horse, and the young woman moved quickly to save her leg from being cut too, knowing it was too late to save her mount. The horse was brutally stopped in its run by a large blade slicing its flank, and Tessa jumped. Her body made a perfect arc in the air, and she fell down brutally on top of the man, her blade going right for his heart.

“Cessi, don't stop!” she shouted.

Cessilia nodded and had her horse speed up. While her cousin's horse rode farther away, she already had two more men going right for her. Bandits,

by their looks. However, their weapons were new, and she was clearly their target. Those men had been paid off. Tessandra frowned and raised her sword, attacking first. She was strong, and those men were not a problem for her. What was more annoying was the slippery ground, the fact they were still outside of the Capital, and she had no idea how many more enemies were targeting them. She couldn't stay here.

“Tessa!”

She raised her head, and to her surprise, Sabael, whom she thought to have been gone already, was coming back to her, riding his horse and holding his hand out to get her. Tessandra smiled and got ready to grab his hand. He rode past her, and in a perfect movement, she used his strength to swing and land behind him. As soon as she was seated behind him, she put a quick kiss on his cheek.

“You came back for me?” she asked with a smile.

“Not now, Tessa!”

“You so came back for me,” she smiled, hugging him from behind with a satisfied expression.

Sabael rolled his eyes, but as he was seated in front, Tessa couldn't see that he was smiling as well... He pulled the reins and had his horse turn around to try and catch up to the others. Who knew how many more attackers were waiting for them between there and the next gate? They had to find a way back into the Capital, and quickly.