

Chapter 11

Cessilia trusted Tessandra's fighting skills enough to leave her and Sabael behind, but she was more worried about Nana. The young girl had realized what was going on and was helplessly hanging on to her, maybe even crying.

“What do they want? Why are they pursuing us?!”

Cessilia didn't have time to answer her. She was busy navigating their horse through a place she didn't know well at all, under the darkness of night and the downpour, riding as fast as possible to the next gate. She was worried more people were after them and targeting her. From the looks of it, this was all a set-up. It was obvious that whoever had made sure they wouldn't be able to get back through the nearest door had also hired people to attack. Did someone spot Krai when they left? They wanted to get rid of her while she was far from the castle. In this downpour and that place, it would even take a while before they got worried about her and Tessa's disappearance...

Her main thought was that she couldn't get Naptunie involved. Although she was a candidate too, chances were low that she was those men's target. The Royal Guard from earlier had barely glanced at her... Cessilia was glad they had chosen to rent horses. Otherwise, she couldn't imagine the nightmare of escaping those men on foot... She glanced up, but they wouldn't make it out by the sky, either. Even if she tried to call Krai now, the dragon wouldn't possibly hear her. They were on their own.

She heard the pounding of several hooves on the streets of cobblestone and glanced over her shoulder. It wasn't Tessa, but more pursuers! Why were there so many of them? What had become of her cousin? Had she and Sabael chosen another way back? All the streets were so similar, if it wasn't for Nana guiding her from time to time, she wouldn't have known

where to go... It was getting late and dark too. The streets were getting darker and more intimidating around them, flooded by the rain that wasn't stopping. Cessilia clenched her teeth and had the horse accelerate, more determined than ever.

“Cessi...”

She heard Nana cry a bit behind her, and she could feel the fear in her voice. It ought to be scary, both their situation and their speed, but they couldn't slow down. Cessilia had thought about it, but she couldn't part with Nana, who didn't know how to ride the horse alone. They had to keep riding until they saw the door, or when Tessandra and Sabael appeared. She didn't even have a weapon to defend herself with! Even her hands had turned back to normal already, her claws and scales gone...

Suddenly, she heard Nana shout, and something flew past her shoulder. An arrow!

“Nana! Are you okay?”

“My shoulder...”

Nana was hit? Cessilia panicked, but just as she was trying to look behind her, their horse whined loudly, and suddenly pitched up without warning. Cessilia tried to hang on to the bridle, but it was no use; the horse completely collapsed onto its side, and she felt Nana fall off before she did. She heard a scream, one second before her own body fell.

Cessilia's head hit the ground, brutally. She felt the pain resonate in her whole body, and right after, another wave of pain came, from her lower body this time. Something heavy fell on top of her, crushing her and making her gasp for air.

“Cessi!”

She looked around, trying to see Nana, but her voice had definitely come from above, and Cessilia's body was stuck in the opposite direction, toward the ground.

“Nana, r-run! I'm fine, g-go!”

“B-but...”

“Run!” Cessilia roared.

The young woman hesitated but took a step back, and turned around, running away while holding her injured shoulder. Cessilia thought she saw the shaft of an arrow sticking out, but she wasn't sure. For now, she was pressed against the ground by the horse on top of her, barely able to see anything. She could feel the steps and horses running her way. She tried to move, to get out of there. If her arm wasn't already trapped underneath, she could have lifted that horse off of her! The whole horse's dead weight was pinning her down, and a normal woman would have been completely unable to move, but Cessilia was stronger than the norm. Grunting and ignoring all the pain in her body, she was fighting to free herself. The downpour felt like it was trying to pin her down too. Each movement let her know of an injury in another part of her body, which made her worried that getting out of there would be for nothing. She could tell her ankle was broken, at the very least, and perhaps a rib or two. She couldn't believe how bad her situation had gotten in minutes. She couldn't die here!

She kept trying to push the huge weight off of her with one arm, grunting and panting in the flooded street, looking out for the enemies running her way. She was out of time, and Tessa was nowhere in sight.

“Cessi!”

That voice sent a cold shiver down her spine. Cessilia struggled to turn around, and spotted, from the corner of her eye, Nana's silhouette running back toward her.

“Nana, no!” she shouted.

“I can't leave you,” cried the young girl.

She was already by her side, and trying her best to pull the horse. Cessilia was shocked, she couldn't believe the young woman was back, in tears and probably terrified, but still there. She was in awe at Nana's bravery, but this was suicide! The men were almost there. She turned her head,

seeing their figures almost on them. They were both going to get killed any minute now!

Suddenly, a large shadow jumped over them. The largest black horse she'd ever seen jumped in the middle of the opponent, and silver lightning immediately sliced one of them in two. The action was so fast, their attackers were thrown into complete disarray. The horses panicked, the men shouted, yelled, trying to face the threat. Their weapons were swung around recklessly, unable to take a hold of him. It was like a god of death had appeared among them. An imposing figure, with a black cloak covering him. The large blade was moving swiftly, flying in the air and sending blood and limbs to the ground. Swish, swish, swish. It seemed like he was cutting through men, weapons, and the rain alike. Someone screamed, and orders were shouted to retreat, but that wouldn't happen. There was nowhere to flee and no way they could escape from that monster among them.

Still pressed against the cold cobblestone, Cessilia could only witness the scene. His large stature as he jumped down from his horse, and when the hood fell back, his white hair flew around him like a mane. He was moving at an impressive speed, yet each of his movements was graceful, perfect. A dance of death defeating all their enemies, leaving them no hope of survival. The teachings of a War God sharpened to perfection. Cessilia was so fascinated, she had completely forgotten about her pain and struggle, just to watch him. Ashen's fighting stance was fueled by his anger, making him both captivating and scary. She held her breath at each movement of his sword, each time she could see his dark, dangerous eyes shining. The White King was right in front of her, saving her and leaving her breathless, mesmerized. She had to watch his back, mostly, as he refused to move from where he stood, using his long sword to reach all enemies and standing like a wall to defend her. From panic, Cessilia's heartbeat had switched to a different tune, still so fast, but for a different reason now.

When the last enemies turned around, desperate to flee, he grabbed a blade abandoned on the ground and threw it like a spear across the street. A

scream echoed back, and a dull sound. Then, he turned around and ran to cover the short distance between them.

His expression changed from anger to fear as he reached her side.

“Cessilia! Are you alright?”

“I’m... fine,” she grunted, remembering that horse on top of her.

Ashen glared at the dead horse and moved to push it off her. Compared to what Nana had been trying to do earlier, he single-handedly pushed it out of the way as if it was nothing. The young woman stepped back, intimidated. She could only witness silently as the King put one knee down in front of Cessilia. They were both in a mess, soaked and bloodied, but right now, those two looked like they were part of a different world, something she couldn’t intrude on. His movements to get Cessilia out of there were incredibly gentle. He carefully brushed her wet curls away from her face and pulled her into his embrace. The King’s eyes which forever looked angry, now looked as if he was the one in pain. He was touching the Princess as if she was the most precious and fragile thing in the world, frowning at each wound his eyes uncovered.

“H-how come you’re...” Cessilia muttered.

“I saw your dragon from the castle. ...Who the fuck did this?”

Cessilia shook her head. For now, she was too exhausted, injured, and soaked to care. Ashen grunted, but very gently, he took off his cloak to put over her, wrapping her body in it as much as he could, trying to be careful. It was no use, though. Cessilia grimaced, her body aching all over. The King’s hands froze, and his expression fell. He looked as if he was torn apart, and lowered his head.

“I’m sorry... I’m so sorry...”

She froze, hearing those words so faintly she thought she had dreamed them. Yet, rather than standing back up right away, Ashen was hugging her, his face buried against her shoulder. She could feel his clenched fists on the coat, and his shoulders shaking. She could even feel and hear his erratic breathing. Was it anger, or frustration? Was he thinking what had

happened here was his fault? Cessilia's heart missed a beat. This was the first time she'd seen him so vulnerable... Despite the pain, she moved her hand over his neck. As soon as she touched his head, Ashen's entire body froze. She slowly caressed the hair over his nape, to comfort him. Even wet, it was smooth under her fingers. Cessilia had been wanting to touch his white hair since she had seen him again. She wanted to remember how close they used to be and discover the man he had become since. She wanted to feel the touch of his skin, the shape of his muscles underneath, and learn his smell. Right now, Ashen smelled of blood, sweat, and rain. For a while, he didn't dare move, and the two of them remained like that, in the rain, simply holding each other gently.

Then, he pulled his face away from her shoulder, his dark, mysterious eyes staring at her with a complex expression. Cessilia wished she could get a grasp of the thoughts behind those eyes... Ashen was looking at her with so much emotion in his eyes, yet all of it felt like a secret she couldn't seize. For a second, his lips parted, and he leaned forward, their faces so close she thought he was going to kiss her.

Ashen sighed and pulled back a bit. He finally lifted her, holding Cessilia in his arms, so she could lean against his shoulder. He wasn't putting any distance between them, but now, his eyes were looking beyond her, in front. Cessilia didn't care much at this instant. She simply didn't want to move. His warmth and tight embrace were the most comforting place right now, that was all she needed. Her Dragon Blood was working to ease the pain of her injuries, but it couldn't numb it or make her feel safe like Ashen's presence did; she felt all the anxiety, fear, and panic from earlier slowly lifting from her body. It was as if something previously lost had been rebuilt between them. She trusted him completely to keep her safe now.

“Cessi!”

Tessandra came running from the other street, only to find her cousin already tightly wrapped in the King's arms. She stopped, glancing at Cessilia's relaxed expression. The Princess seemed half-asleep, and carried like a precious package, while the King looked like he wouldn't

let go of her for anything in the world. Tessandra hesitated. Perhaps her cousin couldn't hear her. She glared at the white-haired King, but after a hesitation, she didn't say anything. Instead, she glanced around. Her eyes went around the dead horse, Naptunie standing alone a couple of steps farther, and all the scattered bodies. She had enough knowledge about battlefields to be able to quickly catch a grasp of what had happened here. She sighed, and with a sullen expression, put her sword back in its sheath. Behind her, Sabaël arrived a bit late, only to see the King already turning away.

It was a lonely scene in the street. Naptunie scampered to join Tessa's side, making a detour to not get in the King's way. No one said a word. The three of them, left behind, simply watched the King's lonely figure carrying Cessilia away.

The King's horse, completely fine, was left behind with them. Ashen had no intention to ride back and risk making the Princess' injuries more painful. Carrying Cessilia, he walked alone, all the way back to the castle, not showing an ounce of fatigue. Even with his white hair, some people rushing in the streets glanced twice, but most didn't even notice their monarch walking amongst them. The downpour was making everyone run home and not care for anything else. He was the only one making his way up to the castle.

"You shouldn't have gone out," he muttered.

Cessilia's eyes opened faintly. Through the thin window of vision she had under the cloak, she recognized the streets of the Inner Capital already. Her injuries weren't as painful anymore, but the healing process had gotten her tired. She sighed.

"Ashen, I c-can walk..."

"No."

She had expected this much, and she didn't feel like fighting him. She didn't mind him carrying her. Instead, she was more worried at how drenched the King was, and how cold his body had gotten.

“...You shouldn’t have gone out of the castle without telling me,” he muttered again. “I was worried.”

“You d-didn’t leave me much room to t-talk.”

“You could have sent a servant to me.”

“I don’t t-trust them.”

To her surprise, he sighed. In front of them, the guards opened the gates, not hiding their surprise at their King’s appearance.

“...I know.”

Without adding a word, he climbed the stairs of the castle, taking her through the maze of corridors. She didn’t know where they were going, but she quickly realized it wasn’t the Cerulean Suite. After a while, some servants stepped aside to open a door.

“No one is allowed to enter,” he hissed.

The doors were closed behind them, and Cessilia tried to look around.

It was a small room, with a large chimney, a simple canopy bed with heavy curtains, a large fur rug, and a couple of seats. The only decorations were the few draperies on the walls, and the large blade hung next to them, similar to the one Ashen carried. Someone had already lit a fire in the room, and despite the rain blowing against the window, it was quite warm in there.

Ashen gently carried her to one of the large leather seats, putting Cessilia down as carefully as he could. To her surprise, he simply stayed there, down on one knee, in front of her. As soon as he had put her down, it was as if he didn’t dare touch her anymore. She took off the cloak herself, feeling a bit stuffy now with the fire next to them. Ashen frowned as her injuries were uncovered again.

“...Don’t get yourself hurt again,” he muttered.

“I d-didn’t choose t-to be in this situation,” she sighed.

He remained mute for a few minutes, his fists clenched.

“I will find who did this.”

“I’ll find th-them myself,” said Cessilia. “This is m-my p-problem.”

“It is mine too. I wanted you to stay... I didn’t think you’d get hurt.”

“Ashen.”

Cessilia grabbed his face between her hands, forcing him to look at her. His dark eyes looked full of pain each time he looked at her, and only when he looked at her. She could almost hear him suffering inside. He put his hand over hers, without pushing it away, simply caressing her skin.

“I’m th-the one who chose t-to stay,” she said, “b-but you d-didn’t give me a reason t-to, yet.”

He took a deep breath, and very slowly, turned his head, kissing her palm. The contact of his lips sent shivers down her back. The pain and cold from earlier were almost forgotten already, replaced by this delicious warmth between them. Her heart that had calmed down accelerated a little.

“...Stay with me tonight,” he muttered. “Please.”

Cessi’s throat tightened a little. She wasn’t prepared to see Ashen like this, almost begging at her feet... The King who looked so fierce while killing two dozen murderers now looked completely helpless and at her mercy. Why was it that he showed this part of him only when the two of them were alone? Cessilia tried to take a deep breath in. She nodded and, very slowly, leaned forward to kiss his lips. There was something empowering about making the next move, and knowing she was the one giving him the right to kiss her or not. Ashen almost seemed to hesitate, but very quickly, he recovered and kissed her back.

It was a long, tender kiss. A kiss that tasted like rain and firewood. Ashen’s lips were almost hesitant as if he was prepared for Cessilia to pull back at any moment. She didn’t. The Princess just wanted to feel him, to feel his warmth against her lips, against her skin. Without even thinking about it, their hands found each other on her knee, and they intertwined their fingers. Ashen sat completely at her feet, while Cessi was leaning forward to reach him. He was tall enough that she didn’t have to lean too much,

and their bodies met halfway. She even caressed his white hair which she adored, and his hand softly held her lower back too.

After a short while, they parted, both much calmer now. A few inches between them, they didn't sit back completely, still leaning toward each other, as if they couldn't bear to part anymore. Ashen sighed.

"...Are you alright?"

"I'm f-fine."

She was telling the truth. Her Dragon Blood was numbing and healing all the injured parts of her body. The most painful was her broken ribs, being mended together at a much faster pace than the norm. Ashen frowned, looking like he was the one in pain once more. He shook his head and put his forehead against her knee, his white hair falling down his shoulders.

"I shouldn't have let you go through this," he groaned. "I knew all those wretched women were going to come after you if I showed you even just a bit of interest, but..."

"Ashen," Cessilia called him angrily, "d-don't ignore me b-because of some o-other women. D-don't pretend th-that is the only reason, either."

"I didn't mean it like that," he sighed, raising his dark eyes to her. "I just... I really wasn't prepared to see you again, Cessi. I left the Dragon Empire angry, bitter, but most of all, I missed you like crazy. I missed you each day, hour, minute since I had to leave. I dreamt of you every night, and even during the day. I never thought I would get to see you again... not unless I came to get you myself. And now, here you are, a full-grown woman, appearing at a time in my life when I thought I would have to settle with another woman."

"Like J-Jisel?" she asked angrily.

"No!" he protested. "It's true Jisel has... She has been by my side for a while now, and she's... Cessi, she's nothing like you, I swear. I don't love her."

"You slept with her."

Her words were like a dagger in his heart, but he couldn't deny or avoid the Princess' anger. He lowered his head.

"I... I don't want to lie to you," he muttered.

Cessilia made a sour expression, and turned her face to the fire, disappointed. She knew it since she had seen Jisel by his side, but it was still bitter to hear the confirmation. She took back her hand and clenched her fists on her skirt, tightly, refusing to look at him. She knew she had to calm the anger in her heart first.

"...Have you s-slept with her since I arrived?"

"No!"

Ashen had shouted so loud she jumped. She finally looked at him, but the King looked almost horrified by her words.

"Cessilia, do you think I'd have an ounce of desire left for any other woman now that you're here? Do you have any idea what you do to me?!"

He grabbed her hands, not forcefully, but holding them in his grasp, looking her right in the eye.

"Cessilia, there's only you. It's only been you, all this time. You've been the only one on my mind, even when I held other women to satisfy my desires. Yes, I slept with others, and I did it without an ounce of love for them. Not even a thousandth of what I feel for you. I've been so cruel to those women who tried to get something out of me, and I can't even feel sorry. I did it because I was desperate that it couldn't be you in my arms."

Cessilia's heartbeat accelerated a bit at the thought of this. She hated that he had slept with other women, but she loved that he thought about her each time he did. It was a horrible feeling, a bittersweet mix of anger, pain, and envy. Even if she hated each one of them, she couldn't help but be jealous of those women. She had come here knowing what it would imply, to be the White King's woman. Worse, she desired it too.

"Even when I tried to forget," he continued, "the memories of you came back to hit me even harder. The more I tried, the harder it was to forget

you. A thousand times, I tried to imagine what it would be like if one day I could finally go back to the Empire. Each time I imagined you possibly falling for another man, or getting married while I was stuck here because of the war... Sometimes it hurt so much I thought I'd go insane."

"What ab-bout the c-competition?" she asked, her voice a bit more hoarse than she'd have wanted.

Ashen scoffed bitterly.

"Not my choice... My position is more fragile than it looks. All the main families want me to have an heir... to have one of their descendants as my heir. That's the only way they'd leave me alone and stop fighting me, I guess. The problem is, they all want me to marry one of their daughters. So I let them decide to have that stupid competition. I couldn't have cared less for who won... until you came."

His expression softened, and he raised his hand. After a hesitation, and seeing Cessilia wasn't backing away, he gently caressed her cheek. His large, warm hand against her cheek sent delicious shivers down her spine, and she put her hand over his.

"...I'm sorry," he muttered.

She was a bit surprised at his sudden apologetic tone but waited to let him speak. Ashen's expression looked so tired, something that had nothing to do with the earlier fight. The White King looked exhausted overall... but right in this moment, all of him was leaning toward her, and he was leaning against her legs, the two of them sharing each other's warmth in front of the burning fire.

"I'm sorry," he repeated. "I just... I couldn't believe it when I saw you here. Even now, I'm scared your father or your brothers will appear, and take you away from me... a second time. I never thought Yassim would bring you all the way here, and I never thought I would have a chance to... to have you."

“B-but I wanted you t-too,” she muttered. “I d-don’t c-care about the c-competition either, Ashen. I c-came here b-because I still love you t-too. I... I really th-thought you had sent Yassim t-to ask me to marry you.”

“If I had thought it was possible, I would have married you the second you came.”

“...Why d-do you say it like that?”

“Look at yourself, Cessilia. You haven’t been here for a week, and you almost got killed already! I want you. I want you more than anything in this world. But... but I was foolish enough to agree to this competition, and you too. Now, every single one of those bastards will have put a target on your back and try to kill you. If something happens to you, I won’t forgive myself. ...I won’t come back from it, Cessilia. At least, in the Dragon Empire, you were safe. But here—”

“Ashen, look at-t me,” she ordered.

He raised his head again and met the Princess’ eyes, her emerald irises glowing with the fire’s light in them. She held his hand against her cheek, but her stare on him was fierce. She was like a queen looking at her servant, confident and strong.

“I won’t lose t-to them,” she said. “Th-those women can’t d-defeat me. I won’t be k-killed, either. And I kn-know you’re t-trying hard t-to save your K-Kingdom too. I d-don’t want t-to take that away f-from you, Ashen.”

“Cessilia, you don’t understand. I may be the King, but most of them don’t want me. I had to establish myself through—”

“Th-through fear? I went t-to the Muram Village t-today.”

Ashen’s expression fell.

“Why did you go there...?”

“I wanted t-to know how you won all th-those fights so fast. I saw you b-being t-trained by my dad. I saw how you fought t-tonight too. You’re

strong, Ashen, b-but you're not a god. T-tell me the t-truth. Why d-did you let th-that women d-drug those men?"

Ashen looked in complete shock. He tried to take his hand away from her face, but this time, Cessilia held his wrist. She used just the right amount of strength, so he would have to use force to free himself. He didn't. Instead, he stared at the Princess, a bit shocked. Her bright green eyes left him no room to escape, and no room for lies, either. She already knew the truth.

"It was the fastest way, and the safest one for the villagers too," he muttered.

"Ashen!"

"I didn't want to use that method! I swear, Cessilia, I didn't... but half my Kingdom is occupied by bastards like them, and the rest is dying of hunger! What was I supposed to do? It took me five years just to regain control of the Capital and its surroundings, and you have no idea how hard it was!"

"You c-can't drug your opponents t-to win a fair fight!"

"Those men don't deserve a fair fight, Cessi! Didn't you hear what they did?"

"C-can you b-be sure that's what they d-did, each one of them? If th-those men are half of your p-people, Ashen, what d-do you think made th-them like this in the first p-place? Where d-do you th-think they c-came from?"

His expression fell. He knew all too well. Those men he had slaughtered were like any other citizen, just a few years ago. Citizens who had grown tired of hunger, citizens who couldn't live like they used to anymore. Those men had lived through wars, civil wars, and his own father's tyranny. Some had become soldiers while hoping for a better future, but their futures had been ruined by war itself. They had been ruined by his predecessors' greed and mistakes, and he was the last one left to try and suture a bleeding wound. He was alone to mend what had been shattered by twenty years of wrong rulers, and he was seen as a bastard King

himself. His father's blood had been a curse he couldn't get rid of, while Cessilia's parents' teachings had been his only blessing.

"...I tried, Cessi. I swear, I tried, I tried so hard, I almost got killed a hundred times. I used... every single thing your father taught me. I did everything right. For so long, I tried to lead each battle while giving what you call a fair fight. Each time, I put my life on the line, with the fear my homeland would die with me. Look!"

He stood up into the light showing her all of his scars. Cessilia had already seen them before, but it still hurt each time she had to see them. Some were so large, or so long, she couldn't believe he had survived that. There wasn't a part of his body that wasn't covered in those white lines, some over the previous ones. His body was that of a warrior ten years older that had gone to war for most of his life. Ashen wasn't old enough to have this many scars...

"This is what I got, from trying to heal this Kingdom the right way. For a while, I got drunk on battles, you know. Fighting was easier than doing nothing, and being left alone with the memories of you... but after a while, it became my nightmare. One fight after another, every day, as if my life had been nothing but a succession of fights. I fought mercenaries by day, assassins by night. For each time I was grateful for your father's teachings, I couldn't help but remember he had a dragon too. I didn't have a dragon or even a real friend to help me. When... When Jisel came up with this idea, I realized this would make it all easier, faster. I said yes, because I was tired, and I thought if I was, my people were also probably begging for me to deliver them faster."

"...N-no, Ashen," she said, standing up. "You sh-shouldn't have a-agreed. Th-there are so many ways t-to win fights. Without d-dragons, without d-drugs and p-poisons."

Ashen took a step back, shaking his head helplessly.

"Cessilia, please... please, you have to understand. This isn't the Empire you know. What you saw at the Muram Village... It's the same everywhere. I tried everything I could before it came to this! Each time I

offered to take prisoners, I left them a chance to put down their weapons. Half of the time, they didn't listen, and when they did, it was to try and trick me."

He brushed his white hair back with a tired look.

"I know it's... it's not ideal, Cessilia. I know it's nothing like what I would have wanted to show you. But this is the best I could do. It was the painful and hard way, but slowly, I've done it. I became King, and I made all the Lords of the strongest clans listen to me. ...I've brought peace to this country."

"No."

He looked up, but the Princess looked almost angry.

"You b-brought nothing b-but fear. And fear b-brings more anger."

"No," he shook his head. "Cessilia, you don't know what it's like. You've never faced men like these, your country hasn't known war since you were born. Your family has dragons for every fight they face! You don't know what it's like to put your life on the line, every day..."

"I kn-know."

He frowned, confused. Cessilia sighed and left the coat on the seat. Slowly, she pulled her hair back. Her fingers were trembling a bit, but her expression was determined. She took a deep breath and began to undo the clasp of her choker, behind her neck.

"I d-don't th-think you understand," she muttered. "Th-the g-girl you knew was only th-thirteen years old. It's t-true I d-didn't know much, b-back then. B-but I wasn't afraid of anything. I d-didn't fear g-going to your K-Kingdom, either. I th-thought it would b-be fine as long as I was with you... Th-that night, I left the Onyx C-Castle, in secret, with my d-dragon."

Ashen's expression fell.

“N-no,” he muttered. “No. ...I waited. I waited several nights at the spot we had promised to meet, Cessilia, but you never came. I thought you had decided not to follow me.”

“I wanted t-to follow you,” she said in a cry. “I was ready t-to leave my family, my p-parents, and my c-country to follow you.”

She took off her choker, and he took another step back, horrified. His heart sank in his chest. Where the grand, golden choker had been just before was nothing but a large, horrible scar all the way around her throat. After looking for a few seconds, he realized it wasn't a large scar, but dozens of long scars, left in the same spot. As if her throat had been cut open, repeatedly. Cessilia's hand came to touch her throat, briefly, as if to remember it herself.

“I t-ried to c-come,” she muttered, “b-but C-...”

She stuttered that letter several times, as if it was too painful to pronounce. After a while, she took a deep breath, and a single tear rolled down her cheek.

“C-... Cece and I d-didn't make it.”

Ashen's dark eyes couldn't leave the sight of those scars. He was horrified, mortified. His years on the battlefield were more than enough to know this was not the result of any ferocious beast or accident. Those were the clear, clean cuts only a proper blade could make. He slowly shook his head, unable to understand.

“No,” he muttered. “It can't be. You... your brother took you home, to the castle. You didn't... come...”

“I really wanted t-to,” Cessilia cried, brushing her long curls back. “I wanted t-to, Ashen. I d-didn't even th-think much b-before I left. I knew my p-parents would be mad, b-but I d-didn't want to b-be separated from you. When I understood my d-dad and my b-brothers made you leave the c-country, and we d-didn't even g-get to say g-goodbye, I c-couldn't bear it. I c-ried, and I p-panicked. I knew you'd b-be waiting for me, I wasn't ready t-to let you g-go at all.”

Ashen couldn't even believe what he was hearing. The younger Cessilia hadn't left him. Worse, she had tried to join him, when all those years he had thought she had made the opposite choice. He had seen her being taken home, without a word, by her brother, but he had never expected the thirteen-year-old girl had really left the safety of her home to come and find him... Now, he was scared to hear what had befallen her because of that decision.

“What happened...?”

Cessilia took a deep breath and swallowed with difficulty. She had a hard time breathing, let alone speaking. She was struggling and kept crying silently, brushing her hair back nervously, with her trembling fingers. As much as he wanted to run and comfort her, Ashen felt like he had no right to. Not until he heard it all. There was this invisible barrier between them, something he couldn't cross, and his legs wouldn't take him there. The Princess glanced at the fire. She had been avoiding his gaze since that heavy piece of gold had fallen to the floor.

“I was c-captured midway,” she muttered, “c-close to the b-border. Th-three men appeared, g-grabbed me, and p-pinned me d-down... My d-dragon t-ried to attack them t-to defend me, but th-they used me as a shield. One of th-them... c-cut me, just once. B-but when they realized d-dragon scales appeared on my b-body, and my d-dragon was affected t-too, they used it as a way t-to control her.”

She shivered. Her face had gone white, as if she was going to be sick just from remembering this. Ashen finally took a step forward, raising his hand and wanting to at least touch her, but Cessilia wrapped her arms around herself and took a step back. She shook her head slowly.

“I... I c-can't remember how many t-times they d-did this. Every t-time I healed, th-they would cut my th-throat again, t-to scare her... t-to scare my Cece. Th-they wanted t-to c-capture her, b-but d-dragons only ob-bey their owner, so th-they forced her t-to obey th-through me. I b-... I b-bled so much... I p-passed out several t-times.”

Ashen's nails were digging deep cuts into his palm from the anger. The Cessilia in front of him looked completely helpless, and he couldn't bear to imagine what she had gone through. He couldn't believe she had been tortured, and so young. Not only her but her dragon as well. Dragons were like their human's counterpart. If Cessilia was hurt, Cece must have been going through the same pain her owner did...

"D-dragons... share th-their energy and strength with th-their owner when th-they are injured. I d-don't really know how it c-can be, b-but... th-that's why our s-scales are... the same c-color as theirs."

Cessilia closed her eyes, frowning and looking like she was reliving that pain all over again.

"I... I b-begged th-them t-to stop," she cried. "I... I felt my d-dra-... I felt my Cece was in t-too much p-pain to save me... she c-couldn't t-take it. Her th-throat had b-begun to b-bleed too, without even a c-cut there."

Ashen was just as shocked. Dragon scales were amongst the thickest materials, most blades couldn't cut through them. Yet, Cessilia's dragon's throat had begun to bleed as a response to what its master was going through... and how much it tried to save her. How long had those two been tortured? He couldn't even imagine the scene. Ashen had known Cece, and he had always seen them together. The dragon was a reflection of its owner. Beautiful, graceful, kind, and strong. Cece was completely devoted to Cessilia, those two were like one soul in two different bodies. He couldn't even bear to imagine the scene... the horror they had suffered, to try and save the other.

Cessilia covered her eyes with her palms, trying to calm down her tears, but it was all in vain. She couldn't stop crying, big tears flowing out now, her shoulders shaking.

"She... D-Dad c-came t-too late," she cried. "My d-dad and b-brothers found us b-both and k-killed those men, b-but... Cece was already... she d-didn't move at all. I c-cried. I p-passed out, I had lost t-too much b-blood and my th-throat wasn't healing anymore b-because..."

Because she didn't have Cece's power anymore. Cessilia's Dragon Blood couldn't keep up with the injury, meaning she had been left to bleed out like a normal human being. Ashen's eyes fell on the scars again, a horrible sight he couldn't look away from. There were so many scars on top of one another. Perhaps twenty, or thirty... he couldn't even tell. They were all spread out around her throat on the front half, showing how repeatedly Cessilia had been sliced there. If those were the results of when Cece couldn't share her pain to heal her, this meant this was only a portion of what she had really endured...

Ashen's legs gave out under him. The White King fell down to his knees, shocked and crushed. He had no idea. All these years, he had only felt sorry for himself and regretted a thousand times Cessilia not being by his side. But she had tried to be. The reckless, enamored, thirteen-year-old girl she was, had been ready to give up everything to follow him, and what had she gotten in return? Torture and pain, a tremendous, unmeasurable amount of pain. Ashen couldn't even breathe, choked up by his guilt. Nothing was as he thought. Cessilia had said it before: he only felt sorry for himself. He only realized that now. He had held on to that dream where Cessilia was growing happily, surrounded by her family's love and free of any hardships, when in truth, she had lost so much already. Her dragon, and her voice.

Cessilia's hand moved down to touch her scars with trembling fingers.

"My mom t-tried to save me... She spent many d-days healing me, c-comforting me. We t-temporarily left the north and the Onyx C-Castle t-to stay at the Imperial P-Palace. I c-couldn't talk... My th-throat hurt so much, I c-couldn't utter a sound for nearly t-two years. I g-got d-depressed from seeing my siblings' d-dragons, so I spent more t-time with T-Tessa... or with my g-grandmother. I got b-better with t-time... After th-that, and my th-throat had healed, it b-became clear I was healed here, b-but..."

Cessilia sighed, and let her hands fall to her sides, shaking her head slowly.

“I c-can’t... forgive myself b-because I lost Cece. I was t-too selfish and d-dumb. My d-dragon d-died b-because of me... and for a while, I c-couldn’t get any scars.”

Cessilia suddenly opened her hands, showing her palms. For a second, Ashen was confused, until he saw the cuts that followed the natural lines.

“B-because we c-couldn’t understand what happened to my d-dragon or save her with our own ways, D-Dad let K-Krai t-take her to the D-Dragon’s Lake, in the Imperial P-Palace... Th-there’s a legend th-that a D-Dragon God used to live th-there, with immense p-power that c-could even resuscitate p-people. My p-parents b-believe in th-that legend... At first, I really hoped it c-could work. When K-Krai p-put my Cece in the lake, she d-drowned, but a few d-days later, I b-began g-growing scales again when I was injured. I k-kept... injuring myself, t-to see if my scales would t-turn another c-color than b-black, but...”

Ashen understood. If Cece was to come back alive, the scales would have taken Cessilia’s dragon’s real color... however, it had been five years now. He had seen her scales, still as dark as coal... Cessilia sighed, shaking her head. She looked a bit calmer now, but her fingers were still trembling, and she didn’t even try to wipe the tears off her face.

“I c-can’t... heal like th-the others d-do,” she confessed. “T-Tessa is very p-protective of me b-because she knows th-that. I have those b-black scales, b-but... it’s nothing like b-before.”

She sighed, shaking her head.

“My voice... I c-can’t speak like b-before either. Mother says it’s a c-condition that’s in my heart, not my th-throat. I just c-can’t... I c-can’t speak like b-before.”

“It’s alright.”

Ashen jumped back to his feet. He couldn’t feel sorry for himself, not anymore. He didn’t want to show Cessilia any more of that, any more of that self-pity, when she was the one truly in pain, the one who had endured all those hardships alone. He approached her and, very carefully, after

seeing that she wouldn't reject his touch, he gently put his hands around her neck, on the sides of her scars. He glared at them, wishing he could wipe it off, and all the terrible memories behind it. He took a deep breath and looked up at Cessilia, his thumb rubbing the tears off her jawline gently.

"It's alright, Cessilia, I... I am so, so sorry for what you went through. I'm really... sorry."

She raised her big green eyes at him, and Ashen felt his heart falling.

"If... If I had known," he muttered, "I wouldn't have asked you to follow me. Not... I didn't realize. I was young, arrogant, and... blinded by my feelings for you. I had this stupid idea that you and I, we could do it together. I didn't even consider you were too young and too fragile to endure this. When I got back, and I got thrown into war once more... Several times, I regretted not having you with me, and at the same, I felt thankful you were far from this hell. I... I really had no idea..."

Cessilia put her hands on his and shook her head.

"Th-that was my mistake, Ashen... I d-didn't listen to my p-parents. I was b-blind too. I just th-thought about how b-brutally we were separated, and... I just wanted t-to see you, even if it-t was only one last t-time."

For a few seconds, the two of them remained silent, just staring at each other with complex feelings. Now that everything between them was out in the open, it felt like a fresh wind had been blown, bringing something a bit new to their relationship. Something a bit exciting, and different. The warmth of the fire and Ashen's hands on her skin were starting to get to Cessilia. She could feel the gentleness in his fingers, and in his dark eyes, read the tormented King's thoughts. He looked torn apart, staring at her with regret, guilt, and adoration. He wasn't good at hiding his emotions from her, and right now, she could easily read his bittersweet feeling, the sour expression he was making while caressing her wet cheeks.

Cessilia leaned forward, hoping for a kiss, but Ashen suddenly pulled back. He was still holding her neck, cupped in his hands, but he had stepped back right away, with an almost frightened expression.

“Ashen...”

“I... I c-can't, Cessilia,” he muttered. “I can't ask you to stay with me.”

“No,” she declared strongly before he could add a word to that. “N-No. D-don't p-push me away b-because you p-pity me.”

“I don't pity you!” he protested. “I am responsible for what happened to you, Cessilia! I... I have just thrown my anger at you since you came, when I had no reason to! I had no idea what you went through, and I just acted like... like the self-centered bastard I am! How can I even dare to keep you with me now? I—”

“Ashen!”

She grabbed his face, angrily staring at him and forcing him to look at her.

“I c-came here,” she said. “I chose t-to see you again, and I d-don't regret it. D-despite what happened t-to me, I still regretted that I c-couldn't see you. I... I missed the b-boy I fell in love with b-back then. I... I missed you t-too. D-don't d-decide what is b-better for me now, or what you c-can do or not. Things are d-different now. I am an adult, and I c-came here b-because I really wanted t-to. When Yassim c-came and said you needed a q-queen, I knew I had t-to come.”

She let out a long sigh and lowered her hands to his exposed torso, her fingers lingering on the long lines of his scars. The King calmed down a little, and gently moved his hands down to her shoulders, holding her gently.

“I understand... you have b-been through many hardships t-too,” she whispered. “My d-dad made you leave when you were only sevent-teen, still a b-boy... I d-don't want t-to say I am the only one who g-got through hardships, I know t-things were d-different here. I t-talked a lot with Nana too, and she t-told me about it... P-plus, I know you c-could have k-killed th-those men without even a fight. I'm sure th-that woman knows p-poisons th-that c-could have spared you a fight, b-but you d-didn't choose that.”

She smiled, a bit weakly given the circumstances, but she didn't want to hang on to those heavy feelings in her heart. She wished it could be blown away, like the rain and wind battering against the windows. She touched the tips of Ashen's silver-white hair.

"So it t-turned c-completely white after all," she muttered. "It's p-pretty. I like it."

He covered her hand with his.

"...So you really still have feelings for me?"

Cessilia nodded.

"You th-thought I d-didn't?"

"I don't know... I was scared," he muttered. "Each time I had found peace, it ended up slipping through my fingers again. I don't think I'll be able to handle it if I lose you a second time."

"...You won't," she whispered.

Cessilia sighed, and took a step forward, nestling against Ashen's torso. After a hesitation, he wrapped his arms around her, and tightly embraced her. She closed her eyes, feeling Ashen's moist, hot sigh against her temple. He cradled her head while she leaned on his shoulder, his fingers softly grasping her brown curls. The two of them stood like this, by the fire, hugging each other in silence. They didn't even need to kiss. Right now, all Cessilia wanted was Ashen's smell surrounding her, his strong but gentle arms, and the quietness of being just the two of them in this room.

After a while, she felt him move, and he lifted her up, carrying her to the bed. Cessilia didn't resist at all, even as he sat her on the edge of the mattress, and with one knee down, helped her get rid of her shoes, very gently. She couldn't help but grimace when her ankle moved.

"Are you alright?" he asked, concerned.

"I th-think I b-broke my left ankle, b-but it d-doesn't hurt anymore. It will b-be healed by tomorrow morning."

Ashen nodded, visibly satisfied. Then, he stood up and grabbed a clean piece of clothing to give her. Cessilia frowned while receiving it. It was clearly a man's tunic, much too long for her.

"For you to change into," he said. "You'll get sick if you sleep in these clothes, and... I don't really trust my self-control if you end up naked."

Just as he said that, he took off his own shoes, deliberately looking away. Cessilia tilted her head, a bit intrigued. He really wasn't going to peek at all? She felt a bit dejected and a bit happy at the same time. Although they were going to spend the night together, it seemed like the King was resolute on really only sleeping together... She chuckled but changed into that piece of clothing anyway. The truth was, she had never been naked in front of a man, and felt nervous, even if Ashen really was turning away from her. Not only that, but a part of her was somewhat jealous of all those women who had done things with him in this bed before...

When he finally turned back and came to join her, Cessilia was still frowning at his side of the bed.

"What is it...? Do you want me to change the bedding?" he frowned.

"I d-don't like it," she muttered. "You've s-slept with other women here..."

"I haven't."

Cessilia frowned as he lay next to her, facing her in the bed. They were just a few inches away from each other, but Ashen didn't try to get any closer, sticking to his side of the bed as if he was worried about crossing some invisible border. He chuckled, facing her. In the darkness behind the bed's curtains, he looked even more mysterious, while his white hair had golden reflections from the fire.

"I've... had sex with many women, but not in this bed. I can't stand sleeping with someone else in the same room... unless it's that thirteen-year-old girl who'd sneak into my bed under the cover of night."

It took Cessilia a short while to realize, and a faint smile appeared on her face. She moved her body, confidently laying against him, and Ashen laid

out his arm for her with a sigh. He wrapped her in his embrace, rubbing his cheek against her hair.

“You haven’t changed much,” he muttered to himself.

Meanwhile, Cessilia had a faint smile on, and closed her eyes, feeling a bit better now.