

Chapter 12

Cessilia woke up very slowly to the feeling of someone caressing her arm. Gentle fingers brushed back and forth over her skin, so faintly it was like the wind's soft caress. She smiled and closed her eyes again for a few seconds. She felt good... Her body was still somewhat heavy from everything that happened the previous night, her throat a bit sore and the skin around her eyes a bit dry, but she felt fine. The warm blanket covering her lower body was a perfect balance with the soft, gentle breeze on her skin. She let out a faint breath, opening her eyes again, and turned around to face him. Ashen was seated against the bed's headboard, looking wide awake already, his white hair prettily covering his bare shoulders. From the lighting in the room, still a bit dim, it ought to be quite early.

"...Good morning," he muttered with a smile.

"G-good morning... How c-come you're already awake?" she asked, frowning.

The King sighed and looked away.

"...I think I'm being kept in check."

Cessilia frowned and turned her head to the window, where his eyes were staring. She realized it was later in the day than she had thought, but the window was obstructed by a dragon's head. The large, dark scales that blocked most of the lighting of the room had tricked her. The big red eye looking around, Krai let out a grunt. Next to her, Ashen frowned while glaring back.

"Seriously..."

Unable to hold it anymore, Cessilia giggled and rolled back on the bed to hide her laugh in the pillow. Krai acting like a chaperone and watching

the King in his own bed was so incredibly funny. Just imagining how long those two had been staring at each other while she slept peacefully, Cessilia just couldn't stop herself.

"...I love the sound of your laugh."

Those words calmed her down a little. After a second, Cessilia felt Ashen's shadow over her and his body. She stopped laughing, her heartbeat accelerating a little. He left a kiss on her shoulder, sending delicious, warm chills down her spine. His hand gently caressed her arm, and she felt his body against her, his torso against her back, and his lower half against her butt...

"Do you feel better?" he asked in a whisper.

"Yes..."

She could feel his hot breath against her neck, his fingers moving her chestnut curls out of the way, and soon after, he left more kisses against her skin. Cessilia blushed a bit, feeling her own body react with delight to this. Not only that, but she could feel Ashen's body reacting to her too...

An upset growl made them both jump.

"K-Krai!" Cessilia protested, sitting up. "G-go hunt now!"

The dragon growled back, upset, but the Princess kept staring at it.

"I am g-good. Now g-go!"

With a high-pitched growl and a loud ruckus against the stone wall, the dragon finally disappeared from their sight, probably flying away to hunt its breakfast. Next to her, Ashen sighed, lying back down on the bed and closing his eyes.

"I never thought I'd get cock-blocked by a dragon..."

Cessilia chuckled a bit, but used their positions to enjoy the view of his exposed body... Now that the sunlight was filling the room, and he was lying down on the bed, she could see more clearly the lines of his body, making her feel hot all over again. The White King really was a warrior, and underneath all his scars, there was a muscular, very attractive body

for her to look at. Those scars were covering a lot of the god-like body, though, and each time she saw them, her heart felt a little sad. Cessilia leaned over, and despite feeling a bit shy, she put one of her curls behind her ear and leaned to kiss one of his scars. Ashen shivered underneath her, very faintly, but the King kept his eyes resolutely closed. After a hesitation, Cessilia decided to do it again, picking a different one. This time again, the King's body very visibly reacted to it.

“Cessilia, stop.”

“Why? You d-don't like it?”

He groaned, covering his eyes with his arms.

“I watched you sleep for two hours trying to hold back my desire for you. If you do this now, I really won't be able to hold myself back anymore. So please... don't make it harder than it already is.”

Goosebumps appeared on her skin from hearing that. She blushed a bit, and, after trying to lick her dry lips, Cessilia caressed the scar she had just kissed with her fingers.

“M-maybe I... d-don't want you t-to hold yourself back.”

The King lowered his arms and opened his eyes wide to stare at her, making Cessilia feel so intimidated again. He sat up, facing her from very up close all of a sudden. His dark eyes looked so confused, she couldn't decipher his thoughts as he stared at her silently for a few seconds. Then, his hand gently caressed her cheek, and he took a deep breath in, staring at her with that very serious expression.

Then, very slowly, he put a gentle, demure kiss on her lips. While she enjoyed his tenderness, Cessilia was left confused. When their lips parted, she stared at him, a bit at a loss. He looked much calmer now, caressing her cheek and keeping that gentle gaze on her.

“Ashen?”

“Not today, my princess,” he muttered.

“B-But...”

“Trust me, it’s not that I don’t want to,” he said to reassure her, caressing her skin once more. “It’s just... I love you, Cessilia. I love you like I don’t think I’ll ever be able to love anyone in this life. I want to treat you like what you are, the most important and precious person in my life.”

“I’m n-not th-that fragile,” she retorted.

“I know, Cessi,” he chuckled, “but you’re probably still injured and not fully recovered from last night, and... and frankly speaking, I don’t think I would be able to be gentle with you if we had sex now. I just... want to wait until it’s perfect, alright?”

However, Cessilia wasn’t happy with that response. She pushed him away from her cheek with the back of her hand, a bit annoyed, glaring at him with her fierce green eyes.

“You d-don’t want to have s-sex with m-me b-but you t-told me about all th-those many other women you s-slept with already. I hate b-being the only one you c-can’t have sex with! I’m not a g-girl anymore, and I am f-fine! D-do I have t-to be the only one t-to wait?”

Ashen sighed, shaking his head.

“I’m the only one who deserves to wait,” he said. “I wouldn’t think twice about sleeping with another woman because, as cold-hearted as that makes me, I don’t care about them. I don’t care about them as I do about you, and that’s exactly why I just... I can’t bring myself to do it with you. I don’t want to just have sex with you, Cessilia, I want to properly make love to you. It is not the same thing. You’re the only woman I want to make love to.”

“B-but...”

“Cessi.”

He smiled, and gently brought her hand to his lips. One by one, he softly kissed each of her fingers, making Cessilia’s stomach tickle and her cheeks blush again. How could he do this, when he wasn’t going to make love to her? She wasn’t sure how to feel about this. It was true her body hadn’t fully recuperated from the events of the previous night, but it didn’t

make much of a difference in her desire for Ashen. She was a virgin, but she knew how sex was supposed to happen, her mother and aunt had both educated her on that as soon as she had become a woman.

“...I love you,” he muttered.

Cessilia felt her heart melting. Not only at his words but at the way those dark onyx eyes seized her soul, making her feel so awfully confident in his feelings. She had experienced all sorts of things since she had come to his Kingdom, but her target, her main objective, had always been Ashen’s heart. Now that he was giving it to her, she felt so awfully shy! Cessilia felt like she was thrown back into the past, into that enamored thirteen-year-old girl who thought she knew it all about love and what she wanted. She felt torn apart.

“It’s not only that,” he added in a whisper. “Last night was... a lot, for the two of us.”

His eyes went down to her throat, and Cessilia covered it right away with her hand, remembering her exposed scar. However, Ashen gently took her hand away, to stare at it more.

“I... I don’t deserve you, right now,” he muttered.

“Ashen! Ashen, th-that’s not—”

“I know,” he said, “but it is still... I was unfair to you, Cessi. At least... Let me properly apologize to you first. Don’t let me be more of a dirtbag than I already am by forgiving me too fast. I know I was wrong, and... I want to earn back your trust, and my own.”

Just as he said those words, Cessilia felt something leave her heart. It felt as if it flew off, and... freed something inside. She let out a faint sigh, calming down from her previous anger all at once. Ashen wasn’t rejecting her. In fact, he wanted to make things right instead... to repair what had been so badly broken between them. She lowered her head. She was really a bit too impatient when it came to him, wasn’t she? She suddenly remembered how her father was, with her mom. Her grandmother had

talked about this too. How dragons were possessive creatures... Cessilia slowly nodded, more for herself than for Ashen.

“I... und-derstand,” she muttered.

“Thank you.”

He said that with a smile, and gently kissed her hand again. Sitting opposite each other like this on the bed, Cessilia found herself a bit shy, even more so when she remembered she was only wearing one of Ashen’s tunics... She pulled the blanket over her legs a little, feeling embarrassed all of a sudden.

“...Cessilia, I’m also worried about what will happen once... I make my interest, no, my feelings toward you clear.”

She looked up at him again, feeling his serious tone all of a sudden. Ashen was still holding her hand, but his eyes had gone a bit darker, and he seemed determined.

“Those people will stop at nothing to get me to do what they want. Last night’s murder attempt is only a sample of what they could do. I tried to avoid putting you in their sight, but...”

“Is th-that why you never t-ried to t-talk to me in p-public?”

“...That was one of the reasons, yes,” he nodded. “Those lords all want me to do what will serve their tribe better. I know some are rather inoffensive like the niece of Counselor Yamino you’re always with, but some won’t hesitate to murder their rivals to become my Queen.”

“You th-think I would let anyone else b-become your Q-Queen?” Cessilia angrily asked.

“No! I’m worried about your security, not you losing this stupid competition!”

Cessilia sighed, and sat at the edge of the bed, away from him. She brushed her long hair a bit with her fingers, shaking her head.

“I want t-to win th-this c-competition, Ashen.”

“Do you think I could choose any other woman than you?” he exclaimed, shocked.

Cessilia shook her head, and stood up, walking up to a little table where clean clothes had been left out for a woman. She found clean underwear, a dark pink dress, and a pair of comfortable shoes.

“No, b-but I was serious when I t-told those vixens I would p-play by the rules. Th-this is not j-just about me and you. Those p-people represent your citizens, Ashen. If I want t-to b-become their queen, I c-can’t just force them to t-trust me. I already know at least a few of th-them are willing to see what I c-can do, who I c-can p-prove t-to be. ...C-can you t-turn around, p-please?”

He sighed but turned around. Cessilia began changing quickly, a bit shy as he was right next to her, but she trusted he wouldn’t dare peek.

“I am t-tired of only b-being the War God’s d-daughter. Th-those women hate me b-because they think th-that’s all I am. A rich D-Dragon Master. B-but I d-don’t really have a d-dragon anymore... and I d-don’t want to b-be a fraud.”

“Cessilia, you’re not a fraud. Just because you lost Cece doesn’t mean you’re anything less than... those women.”

“I know, b-but I have to p-prove it.”

She sighed, finished changing, and turned around. She walked up to the bed, where Ashen, hearing her come, turned around to face her, sitting on the edge of the mattress with a confused expression. Cessilia gently smiled at him, wrapping her arms around his neck.

“I r-realized it when I went t-to the Muram Village,” she muttered. “You d-did so much b-by yourself, b-but you really d-do need a queen. Not someone like Jisel, b-but someone who c-can d-do the right things.”

“Cessilia, Jisel is not...”

Her sudden, angry expression convinced him to shut up right there. He swallowed his words right back into his throat, while the Princess was glaring at him.

“I d-don’t want to know,” she hissed. “D-don’t t-talk about th-that woman now.”

He didn’t dare add anything to that. He could have mentioned she had brought up his mistress first, but after seeing Cessilia’s furious, green eyes, so much like her father’s when she was upset, he didn’t. The young Princess had the eyes of someone who knew how to threaten and uphold it. She had the eyes of a real dragon tamer...

After a few seconds of heavy, guilt-filled silence had passed, Ashen cleared his throat a bit.

“So... You want us to remain a secret for now?” he muttered. “You really want to... do this competition?”

“Yes,” she nodded, “b-but I am not l-letting any other wo-woman have you.”

“I know,” he chuckled. “I swear it’s not going to happen... ever again, as long as you’re with me. I just... want to look forward to when we can truly be together.”

Cessilia nodded and took the initiative to kiss him this time. The King answered her kiss right away, his hands going around her body, caressing her gently. Although they had both agreed on that, she could feel it would be hard to wait... She was feeling hot just from the gentle caresses on her body, and she regretted not staying in that bed a bit longer.

“Your Majesty?” Someone knocked at the door. “My apologies, Your Majesty, but the Counselors and Lords are waiting for you for the meeting...”

Ashen glared at the door, back to his usual White King cold demeanor. Cessilia chuckled and kissed his cheek gently.

“I’ll g-get going first,” she whispered. “...D-do you th-think we c-can... see each other again soon?”

He sighed and caressed her hair, staring at her as if he wanted to capture each of her traits in his mind. His fingers gently followed her curls to their end before he slowly nodded.

“...I’ll come to you,” he muttered. “Believe me, Cessi... I won’t disappoint you again. I promise.”

He gently caressed her cheek, making Cessilia feel even better. She nodded, and they kissed once more, a more candid kiss this time, just enough to say goodbye, although neither of them wanted to part. The King sighed, his fingers still in her hair. When the servant knocked at the door again, he glared.

“I’m coming!” he shouted, upset. “...You should go out after me. Servants will definitely speculate after I asked for women’s clothes to be brought earlier, but they might not see you if I have them all follow me, so...”

“I d-don’t need to g-go out by the d-door,” chuckled Cessilia.

She left another quick kiss on his cheek, and this time, slowly stepped back, grabbing the fur coat that had been left on the chair to wrap it around her. In front of Ashen’s shocked eyes, Cessilia climbed up the window until she was on the edge of it, and gave him a little wink.

“See you t-tonight,” she whispered.

The next second, she jumped out. Ashen’s heart dropped, but right after, he heard the familiar flap of the wings of a dragon. So her father’s dragon hadn’t left after all... He didn’t know how to feel about that. Eventually, a smile appeared on his lips, and he had to hide it with his hand when the servants walked in.

The bold Princess hadn’t changed much, after all...

Cessilia landed effortlessly on Krai, but it did remind her that her body was indeed still healing from the previous night. Maybe Ashen wasn’t

wrong about waiting a little... She grimaced a bit, and adjusted her position on the dragon's back, patting its neck.

“Krai, you're g-going to have t-to learn t-to give me some p-personal space now... I need t-to have a life without-t you watching me all the t-time.”

The dragon growled a bit, unhappy with the idea. Krai flew off quietly around the castle, taking Cessilia farther away, over the sea. Since the downpour from the previous night had passed, the waves seemed a bit calmer, letting her enjoy the gentle morning breeze. There were a few boats still at sea, fishermen coming back late from their morning outing. Some let their jaws fall or pointed at the dragon in awe, and to Cessilia's surprise, a few even waved at them, perhaps some of Naptunie's relatives. She smiled back, but they were quickly beyond the fishermen's line of sight, with nothing but sea ahead. On the dragon's back, she made Krai fly lower so that she could see the sea animals jumping out of the waves, probably unaware of the dangers of a gigantic dragon above them... A couple of unlucky fish found themselves jumping out of the water, never to return after being eaten in one bite.

Cessilia let the dragon eat as it wanted and enjoyed the warmth of the sun and the freshness of the wind on her skin. She loved flying. Her father had taken her to the skies since she was a child to get her used to it, for when her own dragon would be big enough to let her fly on its back... Her heart broke a little each time she remembered Cece. Her dragon would have loved the Eastern Kingdom and its sea...

“K-Krai, let's find T-Tessa and Nana now,” she said.

The dragon growled happily, making a little joyful jump in the air, and slowly began to turn around, heading back to the Eastern Kingdom. It looked like the Black Dragon definitely associated Nana's name with the perspective of a yummy little treat... In just a few minutes, they were back above the Eastern Kingdom's Capital. Far ahead, on the horizon, Cessilia could see the very large chain of mountains that made up the border, sometimes replaced by man-made walls. A little nostalgic smile appeared when she thought of her family, and she wondered if her younger siblings

missed her. As the eldest sister, she was often the one who helped her mother look after them, and as a result, all the younger ones had grown close to her, especially Sadara, her littlest sister. She missed each of her siblings, as well as her parents, but it was also her first adventure away from them, and she felt a little proud, for someone who had rarely left her family's domain... She was starting to understand her sister Kiera's feelings, as she was constantly running away from familial surveillance.

Krai let out a little growl, and Cessilia looked down. The dragon had already found her cousin and their friend, both waving at her, Sabael with them. They had apparently decided to have breakfast downtown, near the port. The dragon swiftly landed on one of the ports' docks, under all the fishermen's shocked eyes. Krai was larger than any of the boats there, and, although the dragon's front paws got on one of the docks, the lower part of its body was quietly floating, or maybe paddling underwater. While the large dragon curiously sniffed the closest stalls, Cessilia jumped off its back, Nana and Tessa running to her.

"Lady Cessilia!" exclaimed Nana, all smiles. "How are you? Are you feeling better? I am so glad His Majesty came to our rescue yesterday... Oh, good morning, Sir Dragon!"

"G-good morning, Nana. I'm alright, th-thank you. How about you g-guys? D-did you get back safely?"

Now that she saw them, Cessilia realized she had no idea about what had happened to her friends after the attack last night, and felt awfully guilty about it. Luckily, they seemed fine, although she spotted some green scales on Tessa's arms and a bandage on Nana's shoulder. Her cousin sighed.

"We're fine," she said. "Looks like those people were targeting you more than us, Sab and I had no trouble getting rid of them, it just took a while... We tried to capture some of them, but they committed suicide."

"We think they were hired," grumbled Sabael, his eyes on the dragon. "They had common mercenary tattoos on their bodies. I put in a request

at the Guild, but I doubt those who hired them had a proper contract. We found some money on several of them.”

“Which we confiscated, of course,” added Tessa with a cunning smile, “which is why we’re having a victory feast this morning... Have you eaten, Cessi?”

Cessilia could tell her cousin’s question was not as light-hearted as it seemed, as Tessa was tilting her head with an accusatory look. She blushed, realizing her cousin was definitely going to roast her for spending the night with a man, and the King himself, no less... To avoid Tessandra’s stare, she turned to Nana, who was already convincing one of her uncles or cousins to feed the dragon before Krai helped itself.

“I’m s-sorry for leaving you, N-Nana, especially when you c-came b-back for me...”

“Oh no, don’t worry! It’s not like I was of much use anyway... I am sorry I couldn’t help much, and glad we all made it back safely...”

Cessilia sighed but walked up to her to hug the young lady, who happily hugged her back. When they parted, she could see that Naptunie’s expression was a bit serious, the young lady frowning.

“You know, Lady Cessilia, I’ve decided. I always wanted to become a scholar, but I really wasn’t sure what kind. From now on, I will work hard to become a Royal Counselor, like my uncle. I hope you will become Queen, so I can keep helping you and advising you this way! I may not be a fighter, but I have confidence in my knowledge!”

“Th-thank you, Nana,” said Cessilia, smiling. “You will b-be an amazing c-counselor.”

The young lady blushed, smiling widely and visibly proud of Cessilia’s comment.

“Oh, what do you want to eat?” she asked. “We’re having some of my cousin’s herbal soup and of course some buns, but I can ask for more for you!”

Cessilia let Nana take her to the market, while Krai stayed behind, its tail making little waves in the water, very happy to be fed by the curious fishermen. For a while, Cessilia was only too happy to eat what she was given and chat about the soup's rumored healing properties and ingredients; however, it was hard to ignore her cousin's intense, suspicious stare on her all the while. Tessandra was following closely, her arms crossed and her lips pinched in a pout that reminded her of their grandmother on bad days...

After a while, they finally found a little spot to sit in the open market. Cessilia had noticed the girls had chosen more practical clothes than their usual dresses today. Tessandra was wearing a long, red, double-slitted skirt and a fitted top, while Nana was wearing a flowy and colored romper, with a cute, matching ribbon around her neck and flat shoes. Even Sabael was wearing his full armor today, all in dark leather and metal, which made him stand out in the middle of the market. Had they decided to be a bit more cautious, in case something else happened? Cessilia noticed how Nana seemed to glance to the side from time to time, as if she was wary of someone watching them, and Tessandra kept her hand on her sword.

"...I'm s-sorry ab-bout what happened," she finally said after finishing her meal. "It was my d-decision to g-go outside of the C-Capital again and I p-put you all in d-danger."

"Cessi, I also came here to protect you," sighed Tessandra. "Plus, you were the target, it's not your fault. We need to find whoever hired those mercenaries and make them pay for trying to kill you."

"Any of the strong families could have ordered this," said Nana with an upset expression. "Mercenaries are expensive, and there were so many of them too... It has to be one of the other candidates."

"They also had enough power to bribe the guards," groaned her brother. "Not many families are that powerful. I reported those men to our headquarters, so there will be an investigation. Hiring mercenaries is one thing, but bribing guards is another. I have never seen those guys before either, so they might have been new hires..."

“I say the next time the Royal Guards don’t let us in, we fight our way through,” declared Tessa with a bitter look.

Sabael frowned at her.

“You can’t do that...”

“Why not? We played by the rules and had our papers in order, and we couldn’t get in! I hate corrupt officials. If this was the Dragon Empire, they would—”

“This is not the Dragon Empire,” Sabael retorted. “Can you resolve anything without using your sword?”

“You’re the one with full-on armor right now!”

“I am a Royal Guard.”

“You’re off-duty, love.”

Cessilia and Nana exchanged knowing glances. They were now both used to those two arguing back and forth about Tessandra’s quick temper, and it was obvious Sabael was getting much better at handling it too. For a while, they watched as the two of them bickered about the laws and punishments for corruption while drinking their soup in silence. Cessilia loved this a lot. The four of them, like any group of friends in the bay, having breakfast in the open air and tasting new things. Leaving her brother and Tessa to their argument, Nana sat a bit closer to Cessi.

“I am just so glad that His Majesty arrived, Lady Cessilia. I don’t know what I would have done if anything really bad happened to you... I was a bit curious, ahem... You didn’t come back to the suite last night... Where, uh, did you...?”

Cessilia blushed a bit. It couldn’t be helped that she would get questioned, but unfortunately, Nana’s whispering didn’t escape Tessandra’s ears. She lifted a finger to interrupt Sab and turned to her with a frown.

“Cessi?”

“I was with the K-King all night...”

“Oh my!” squealed Nana, covering her mouth with her hands, excited.

Opposite her, both Tessa and Sabael’s jaws dropped, staring at her with blank expressions.

“Seriously, Cessi?!” her cousin exclaimed. “Are you mad? You spent the night with the King? After everything that happened, you really think that was a good time to—”

“We d-didn’t d-do anything!” Cessilia protested, blushing. “We really d-didn’t... We j-just slept t-together, nothing else hap-happened...”

She was even more embarrassed as her stuttering was made worse by stress, which felt like a confession in itself. Tessa clicked her tongue, a noise that made the siblings jump, but her eyes were on Cessilia, with a suspicious stare.

“...He really did nothing?” she insisted.

“N-nothing... I was hurt t-too... I j-just left th-this morning b-before anyone saw me. We th-thought it would b-be best t-to k-keep it a secret...”

“Oh my gosh,” squealed Nana, all excited. “This is like one of those romance stories! The Princess runs off through the window so no one knows she’s the King’s secret lover... So romantic!”

“No, no, Nana,” said Tessa. “That is not romantic, this is very dangerous and very bad behavior, Cessi!”

“I’m t-telling you we d-didn’t d-do anything!” protested Cessilia.

“You better not! I don’t want to have to explain that to those crazy, overprotective brothers of yours... Let alone your father!”

“I’m an adult n-now! P-plus it’s n-not like you c-can lecture me! Even if I d-did something, th-there’s nothing wrong with th-that!”

Tessandra rolled her eyes and leaned back in her chair.

“I agree that the King gets brownie points for not touching you when you were injured. And I get that there is something between you, I’m not that blind. ...But he is still the King, with a major anger management issue and

about a dozen harpies, all lurking around trying to get their claws into him! What if they find out that you're his new mistress? We already almost died last night, Cessi!"

"T-Tessa, I c-can't just b-back off and p-push him away b-because of those women. I d-don't want t-to. Ashen and I t-talked a lot last n-night, and we c-cleared some th-things up."

"Oh yeah, like the fact that he kept a woman, who just happens to resemble you, by his side?"

Cessilia glared back, annoyed to be reminded of Jisel. That was one topic both she and Ashen had avoided, and for good reason. From what they had heard and seen the previous night, she had understood those two had something more complex going on than a simple sexual relationship. Someone as cunning as Jisel probably didn't really stay around with no prospect of becoming queen without expecting anything else in return...

"See?" said Tessandra. "You haven't solved everything yet, so don't trust that guy too soon, Cessilia. I know you're an adult, and I can't keep you from sleeping with guys either, but I want to warn you about sleeping with guys who will turn out to be douches."

"I kn-know Ashen..."

"Are you sure about that? Because all I've seen so far is a self-centered King who can only make one facial expression, and it's not an inviting one!"

Cessilia sighed and crossed her arms without responding. She didn't like when Tessandra acted like this, lecturing her like an older sister. Next to them, Nana looked uneasy, nervously peeling off her bun's layers while glancing back and forth between the two of them, before settling her gaze on Tessandra.

"Lady Tessa... D-do you mean you have experience with boys...?"

"I do," said Tessa with a smile. "Not just with boys, actually. I mean, I was probably an early bloomer, mostly to piss off my mom... Not that I wouldn't have done it either way though. Women in our family educate

us pretty early on, but I just had to be the rebellious one of the bunch, I guess!”

“Oh my...”

“...You’ve n-never had a b-boyfriend, Nana?” asked Cessilia.

“No! I mean... I have had a couple of crushes, but I’m known as a boring dork... Besides, all my sisters and cousins are prettier than me, so I feel like I’m better off reading books and dreaming about romance than getting my hopes up in real life...”

“Th-that’s not t-true, you’re really p-pretty!” protested Cessilia.

“It’s nice of you, Lady Cessi,” blushed Nana, “but I’ve decided I should be patient and wait for someone who will really like me rather than be too hopeful... I’m fine marrying a nice man, really!”

“I’m s-sure you will find the b-best partner.”

“Me too! I mean, I will completely support your secret romance story!”

The two of them smiled at each other, feeling like they were allies in love, and could understand each other’s feelings well in this moment. Tessandra chuckled.

“You two are so cute,” she said. “So innocent too. Not that I wish you to have any bad experiences!”

While she spoke, all three girls became aware of Sabael, who had been staring at Tessandra for a while now with a puzzled, complex expression. Tessandra blushed a bit, brushing her hair back playfully.

“What is it? Dazzled by me?” she chuckled.

“You... have experience with boys?” he asked.

His tone and frown sent a cold chill across the table. Cessilia and Nana exchanged a look, a bit worried all of a sudden.

“Sab,” muttered Nana. “You...”

“Is there a problem with that?” retorted Tessandra, suddenly defensive. “Did you expect me to be a virgin? Are you disappointed?”

“...And with girls too?”

Cessilia felt a bit worried for her cousin. She could see Tessandra’s expression slowly sinking, and she very visibly tightened her fist on the table. From Sabael’s shocked expression and the silent anger rising, this was not going to end well... Next to her, Nana looked just as worried, and desperate to de-escalate the situation between them.

“S-Sabael, don’t be like this... Lady Tessa and Cessilia are from a different culture, of course they have different experiences...”

“If you have a problem with me not being a virgin and also being attracted to girls, you can say it right here and now, Sab,” snapped Tessa. “I’m not going to apologize or feel sorry for my past. That’s what it is and I am not changing it!”

The Royal Guard remained mute, staring at her with a stunned expression. It would probably have been less awkward if they actually began to fight, but because he wasn’t saying anything, both Cessilia and Naptunie had no idea what to do. They could tell Tessandra was furious, and that closed fist was not a good sign, either, but she was also waiting for him to speak his mind. Despite her temper, Cessilia knew her cousin wouldn’t be the one to get physical unless the situation really called for it...

“Sorry,” suddenly said Sabael, standing up from his chair. “I... I think I need to be alone for a while.”

Without adding a word, he quickly left their group and walked away, not even glancing back once. Tessandra, who had obviously been prepared for a proper dispute, turned to the other two.

“...What the heck was that?!”

Both Cessilia and Nana were equally at a loss as well. Nana looked the most surprised and worried, shaking her head.

“I really don’t know,” she muttered. “I’ve never seen Sab react like that or look so upset...”

“...Is it really because I’m not a virgin?” Tessandra frowned. “It can’t be, right? He must have had a few girlfriends, no? At least one or two...?”

She turned to Naptunie, who was slowly shaking her head, looking almost sorry.

“I don’t think so,” she mumbled. “Not that I know of...”

“Are you kidding?” exclaimed Tessa. “With those looks of his?”

“I d-definitely thought he was p-popular as well,” muttered Cessilia.

“Oh, he is! But I’ve never seen him interested in other girls before. I know of at least four or five of my sisters’ and cousins’ friends that he rejected completely... Lady Tessandra is the first one I have ever seen him close with!”

“I did have to force my way in a bit...” scoffed Tessandra.

“Sab focused a lot on becoming a soldier and Royal Guard,” said Nana. “He really spent all his time training for the past few years, even now...”

“You tend to be a bit... very single-hobby-focused in your family, don’t you?” sighed Tessa. “...Do you think that’s what this is about, then? Because I’m not inexperienced? Or because I’ve been with girls? ...Or both?”

“I really don’t know... I mean, we do have a... uh... traditional view of relationships in our family, but it’s not that shocking either if people have relationships before marriage...”

Tessandra sighed, clearly upset by this.

“Well, I can’t change what has been done,” she pouted, “and if he’s not fine with it, that’s it. I hate guys who think women have to be virgins for them, and that they are sluts if not! I grew up with strong, independent women who did not wait for marriage, and it didn’t make them any worse or better than others. They are even stronger! If he wants a cute, shy

girlfriend, well, it won't be me! He's just an idiot for pushing his standards on me!"

"T-Tessa, it might not b-be what you th-think it is..."

"What is it, then?! You saw his reaction!"

Naptunie and Cessilia exchanged another look, but they had no response to that. It was hard to understand Sabael's thought process when he hadn't said a thing... He didn't look disgusted or anything, just shocked, and he had walked away without saying anything on the matter.

"Should we just go?" suggested Naptunie. "All those... words we used got us some attention..."

Indeed, Tessandra hadn't been very discreet during her heated speech, and several people around were glancing at the three girls with suspicious looks.

"Fine," said Tessa, jumping to her feet. "I'm done eating, anyway, and I need to do something or I'll keep thinking about it and it will annoy me even more."

She quickly walked away and threw the leftovers of their breakfast to Krai. Cessilia felt a bit sorry for her cousin as she watched her scold the dragon and send it away. Things really weren't simple when it came to love... Next to her, Nana leaned in to whisper something.

"So... we should probably avoid going near the Royal Guards' quarters today? Sab tends to go there and train when he's upset..."

"I th-think so t-too," nodded Cessilia.

When Tessa came back, Krai flying off in the distance, they quickly did their best to change the subject. In fact, Nana began by telling Cessilia all about how they had quickly gone back to the castle the previous night and had eaten with the Counselors while getting warmed up in the room prepared for Tessandra. From Naptunie's recount, Cessilia understood her brother hadn't accompanied them to the castle, but had immediately gone back to the quarters instead. Nana was smart to carefully avoid mentioning

her brother, though, and made her explanation quick and fluid. Then, it was Cessilia's turn. She summarized in her own words her evening and night with the King, although she left out all the details she felt shy about. Following this, and once they were out of reach of any opportunistic ears, she quickly explained to Naptunie and Tessandra about their past relationship, including her scar, and how her dragon had been lost. Tessandra knew about most of it except for Ashen's relationship with Cessi, but by the end of it, Naptunie was weeping.

"I can't believe this..." she kept crying. "This is so beautiful and sad at the same time... That you two were separated because you were from different countries... And what happened to your dragon... And your scar... Oh, god, it's better than any romance book I've read but it's too many emotions for me."

Cessilia touched her scar. She still felt a bit embarrassed about it, but she had decided it was time she stopped hiding it. She had retrieved her choker before leaving Ashen's room, and worn it all morning, but now that she had taken it off to show Nana, she didn't want to put it back on. That piece of gold felt heavy in her hands, and she felt like it had been keeping her from breathing right for too long now. Strangely, she felt a lot more free now that she wasn't hiding her scar anymore. It was quite ugly and still got her stares from passersby, but her skin color would get her stares anyway, and she didn't care about what others thought of it either.

"I'm sorry I d-didn't t-tell you everything sooner," she muttered, looking at Tessa. "I th-think t-talking with Ashen helped me a b-bit to p-put things b-back where they b-belonged..."

"I get it," sighed Tessandra. "I'm just glad if it makes you feel better now... I remember the state you were in after everything happened, and I know the only thing that mattered was to get you better, not just physically. You didn't talk for so long... I was just glad when I got to hear my best friend's voice and see you laugh again. Your mom and mine had told me a hundred times not to pry too much, and I already had a rough idea of what had happened anyway. When we got here, I kind of figured the King might have been... somehow linked."

“So... His Majesty didn’t actually die, but lived in the Dragon Empire?” whispered Nana.

Cessilia nodded. They were wandering in one of the streets right next to the sea, not too crowded at this hour. Naptunie was taking them to the Apothecary in the northeastern part of the Capital, as she had promised Cessilia before, taking a nice long way around.

“He was f-found near the m-mountains,” Cessilia explained. “He was in th-the snow n-near the b-border, half-d-dead... Mother said his hair had p-probably s-started to t-turn white d-due to a c-combined effect from p-poisons and stress.”

“Poison?” exclaimed Nana. “I knew there were many assassination attempts, but...”

“It was,” Cessilia nodded. “I th-think if anyone b-but my mother had t-tried to save him, he would have d-died. On t-top of the p-poison, he was severely injured. It t-took several weeks t-to nurse him b-back to health. I was already s-studying with my mother at th-that t-time, so I helped a lot...”

Naptunie blushed. Just from her expression, they could tell she was visualizing the scene like in one of her romance books. Tessa knew the reality probably hadn’t been so pretty. The Goddess of Water had spent a lot of time in the north with her husband, working on improving medicine for injured or sick soldiers while her husband and sons fought the barbarians from the north or trained. Tessandra had also been trained in the camp, a few years later, so her imagination probably took her closer to the truth.

“Th-that’s how I met Ashen. We d-didn’t know who he was until he t-told us... When he got b-better, Father b-began p-personally t-training him too. Ashen wanted t-to get stronger, t-to one d-day b-be able to fight off his f-father and reconquer his K-Kingdom. He d-didn’t t-talk much about it, th-though. I only heard him t-talking with my older b-brother once...”

“Well, gratitude hasn’t been choking him,” scoffed Tessandra. “For someone who was trained by the War God himself, he should have been

a bit happier to see you, no? He didn't even invite you himself, it turned out to be a scheme of Yassim's..."

"I t-told you, my father ch-chased him—"

"I would have kicked his butt out of the Empire too if I had found a guy flirting with a girl four years younger, Cessi. I don't blame your dad on this one, and you and I both know how he and your brothers are protective of you. Seeing what happened next, it looks like they didn't make such a bad choice, either..."

"Maybe it's because I am one of his citizens," said Nana, "but I really do feel a bit sorry for His Majesty now that I have heard all of this... He really seemed in love with Lady Cessi, and to have to brutally leave like that... I am glad he came back and got rid of the tyrant, but still... I am glad you can be together again now!"

"Easy there," exclaimed Tessandra. "For now, they are not together!"

"I d-do want to win the c-competition fairly," said Cessilia.

"Yeah, I have a feeling your rivals don't know what fair means. Did you girls already forget? There was a murder. And that was only the first banquet too. Who knows what those crazy wenches will do next... We can't lower our guard now. We have to stay together and be cautious in case something else happens. Even if that stupid Sabael has decided to leave us..."

She walked ahead and kept grumbling, leaving Cessilia and Nana behind to feel a bit sorry for her. It was clear she was still thinking about their earlier argument and needed some time to work through this. Meanwhile, Naptunie walked a bit closer to Cessilia.

"Lady Cessi... I get how our King got his white hair and skills now, but I was wondering, you know, about that dragon armor of his..."

"Th-that... I am not s-sure," confessed Cessilia. "I had n-never seen it b-before. Men in my family d-don't need to wear something like th-that, so..."

Naptunie's question had Cessilia intrigued as well. Where did Ashen get his dragon-scale armor from? She was sure she had never seen such a thing before; all the armor her family wore was made of metal or leather, and they really didn't need it, thanks to the dragon skin that naturally appeared to protect them. Unless in times of war, it wouldn't have made much sense for them to need extra protection... However, where would Ashen have gotten such a thing, if it wasn't from her family?

"Here we are!" exclaimed Nana suddenly.

The neighborhood they had arrived at was quieter than Cessilia expected, with fewer people too. All the shops were rather small and all lined up, literally next door to one another. They were all so similar, with the same architecture, one window and one door on the street, their products lined up in front with little stalls and signs, so they had to watch out for the right door or they might enter the next one without realizing. They were all made of stone bricks, covered with something that looked like a foreign variety of ivy, and only the roofs were of different colors from one shop to another. Cessilia noticed several shops had similar little insignias in front, symbols that felt somewhat familiar.

"Those are the clans' insignias," explained Nana. "You may have seen them engraved in the seats of the Lords at the Royal Councils, or on the candidates' jewelry and clothes. Because the rivalry between most families is rather strong, we tend to show which building or business belongs to which clan to avoid issues. This way, no one can pretend they began a fight not knowing whom the shop belonged to..."

"What of those who don't have one?" frowned Tessandra.

"Oh, well, they are the independent owners... Those who don't belong to a clan, or came from the outside. The people of each tribe do tend to buy from their own, so it might be a bit harder for those who don't have the support of a clan. ...It's not completely bad, though! Some people are prejudiced against some clans, so they'd prefer to buy from an independent person rather than a tribe's bigger shop. It requires a lot of money to have an established business in the Capital too, so those people are usually already wealthy enough to maintain their business, or are

experts at what they sell. Plus, they get allowances from the Kingdom sometimes, and they also have less taxes from the Commerce Chamber. As long as they don't get on the wrong side of a strong clan like the Pangoja, they are usually fine!"

"That's our Nana," said Tessandra, giving her a little elbow bump. "Knowledgeable as always!"

Nana blushed but smiled proudly, and guided them to one of the shops with an insignia. This shop was obviously an apothecary, even without reading the sign. Their stall outside was flooded with plants, dried or in pots, and tons of little glass containers and parchments. Even before going in, Cessilia recognized the familiar scent of medicine and herbs she would always smell in her mother's office at the Onyx Castle.

"...So, this sign is...?" asked Tessandra, pointing at it right before they walked in.

"It's the Hashat Family," said a female voice as they walked in.

Surprised, Cessilia recognized Lady Ishira, the candidate of the Hashat Family. She was looking very different from when they had met during the first banquet. She was wearing a layered, dark green dress with leaf patterns, and her black hair was only held back by a simple matching headband. She was rather skinny but almost as tall as Cessilia, and her voluminous mane seemed to be three times the size of her face. She also had several tattoos which her dress covered during the event, and wore two prettily crafted wooden earrings.

"Good morning, Princess," she said calmly. "The eight-shaped snake with the orchid branch is the symbol of my family, the Hashat Family."

"Lady Ishira," said Naptunie, a bit surprised.

Ishira greeted her too, and Tessandra when she walked in last. She was helping out rather than shopping as a customer, carrying a little basket with an ensemble of dried herbs Cessilia's eyes fell on.

"...You are m-making m-medicine for head-headaches?" she guessed.

Ishira smiled.

“You’re really skilled in medicine,” she said. “That’s right. My father has been rather unwell lately, I was hoping to prepare something to heal him... To what do we owe the pleasure of the Princess’ visit in our humble shop?”

“I wanted t-to see what k-kind of herbs are f-found around here,” explained Cessilia. “I’m c-curious if th-there are some I have never seen b-before...”

“Oh, surely,” Ishira smiled. “If the Princess is alright with it, I will happily show you myself.”

She turned to the man behind the counter, most likely the shop owner and a relative of hers, and nodded to him, exchanging a simple signal. The man nodded back and stepped behind a little curtain at the back, going to get something. Ishira turned back to the Princess, smiling to her politely.

“I’m sorry we didn’t get to talk much during the banquet,” she said. “I am more than honored to finally be able to meet the Princess privately, though. I believe we have a lot in common.”

“I b-believe so t-too.”

Unlike Bastat, Cessilia could feel that Ishira was a bit more reserved, and probably waiting to fully make up her mind about her, despite her words. The young woman was still extremely polite, though, and didn’t show any animosity. When the shop owner came back with a book, she took it and presented it to Cessilia herself.

“Princess, this is a copy of the Hashat Family’s almanac of herbs, plants, and medicines known in the Eastern Kingdom until today.”

“Th-this... Isn’t this something t-too p-precious t-to share with a foreigner?” Cessilia muttered.

The book looked heavy, and very well taken care of. The binding looked perfect, and the cover didn’t have any dust on it, despite the pages looking a bit worn. Ishira slowly shook her head.

“It is precious, indeed, but it is our core belief that knowledge is meant to be shared. The Hashat Family is dedicated to the study and research of plants and medicine, and even on this side of the continent we have heard about the Princess’ mother’s achievements in terms of medical knowledge and development. Please take this as a token of goodwill from the Hashat Family, and our hope that we will be able to exchange much more in the future.”

Cessilia smiled and took the heavy book, her heart excited to discover its secrets and learn something new.

“Is th-there anything th-the Hashat Family wants f-from me in exchange for th-this?” she asked bluntly.

Ishira smiled.

“Indeed, Princess. Our Family Leader is looking forward to meeting you.”