

## Chapter 14

“...Your cheeks are still red.”

“I’m t-telling you, they’re n-not.”

Cessilia couldn’t take much more of her cousin’s suspicious eyes. She was aware of her uncontrollable blushing, and her heart that was still beating a bit too fast. When she had gotten down to the castle gates, after stealing a few more passionate kisses in the dark with the King, Cessilia was well-aware she wouldn’t be able to avoid Tessandra’s sharp senses. Still, she kept nervously combing through her curls and walking a bit faster to get ahead of her inquisitive cousin.

“H-how is Nana?”

“She’s fine.” Tessandra shrugged. “She was already on the second chapter when I left, and Yamino and her will just have dinner, I guess. I really like that little chick.”

“Me t-too.” Cessilia smiled. “She’s b-braver than she looks t-too.”

She still had in mind how Nana had bravely come back to try and help her, despite how dangerous and helpless the situation was at the time. That had definitely sealed their friendship. The young Dorosef girl was honest, shy but brilliant, and very trusting too. Cessilia really liked those qualities in Naptunie.

“How about th-things with Sabael?” Cessilia asked, hoping to divert the conversation.

Tessandra grimaced.

“You’ve seen it for yourself. Nothing new... At least, he hasn’t shown his pretty face since. I’ve decided I don’t really care, though. I’m fine.”

She didn't sound like she was, but Cessilia decided not to push the matter any further. She knew Tessa enough to know her cousin was the type to toughen up when things got hard for her. Even if she was upset, she didn't want pity or any consoling words from anyone. She was better off acting like a strong, independent woman and convincing herself she was over this. Hence, neither of them mentioned the handsome guard again, and they kept walking in silence for a while.

The streets of Aestara were getting quiet despite the sun still in the sky, slowly going down in bright orange hues. It would sometimes blind them in between two buildings, before they got to another street below, slowly heading downtown. Without exchanging a word about it, both women were a bit on edge, and watching their surroundings for any enemies, or a possible ambush. They'd had their share of traps already, so now, it was a given that they didn't trust any shadow in the streets. Nothing major seemed to be happening, though. This was an evening like any other in the Capital, with shop owners slowly closing their businesses, locals going home after a long day, and Royal Guards patrolling. Little candles in seashells were lit at the window sills to add some light inside, and because the weather was good, just a warm, little breeze, many still had their windows open. A few children ran ahead of them, playing with a small dog.

"...It r-reminds me of our ch-childhood," smiled Cessilia.

"The rowdy part," chuckled Tessandra. "Whenever you guys came to the Capital, we would all run in the streets and cause a commotion..."

Cessilia smiled. Having a large family had always been a blessing. She had older brothers to rely on, and her younger siblings to take care of. Because she and Tessandra were born the same year, just a few months apart; she felt like they were as close as sisters, with different personalities that suited each other.

While reminiscing about their childhood, they slowly made their way toward the quieter streets of the northern part of the Capital, where Ishira had clearly explained her clan's main house to be. In fact, once they got there, Cessilia realized the Hashat Family's house was just slightly bigger

than the norm, but it didn't matter much, as all of these streets probably belonged to their tribe. There were several herbal shops around, two doctor's offices, a different, smaller apothecary, and more plant-related businesses around, like a tea shop and a massage house. For each business, there was an upper floor where the family probably lived. The apothecary they had visited that same morning wasn't too far from there, either.

The main house of the tribe was marked with their insignia, larger than anywhere else, just as Naptunie had explained. Even without that, though, Cessilia would have guessed this was the Hashat Family's house. The walls were covered in a variety of ivy, and all the flowers decorating the entrance were ones that could be used to make medicine.

Just as the two women turned their heads to exchange a look, wondering if they were supposed to knock, they both noticed a movement somewhere behind them. Tessa put a hand on her sword, but the people had no intention to hide their presence. Instead, as soon as they realized they were seen, two of the triplets stepped out of the shadows.

"...I fucking knew we were being followed," hissed Tessandra.

"Only by order of the King, Princesses. For your security..."

Just as Cessilia was about to speak up, the doors in front of them opened, revealing Ishira, two of her family servants already bowing behind her. The timing was quite perfect. She smiled politely to her guests, barely glancing at the two Royal Servants behind them.

"Evening, Princess Cessilia, Lady Tessandra. Thank you for coming to our humble residence, please come in. Feel free to bring in His Majesty's servants... or not."

Cessilia was a bit surprised. It appeared they didn't mind them bringing in Royal Servants, although Ishira had been clear about Naptunie not being invited... So this was more about the rivalry between the clans than an attempt at isolating her. She hesitated for a second, glancing at the two young servants behind them.

"...Th-they are with us," she finally said.

At any rate, the triplets were still trained as bodyguards. If anything happened tonight, it wouldn't be bad to have them as reinforcements, especially after the trap they had already run into the previous evening...

Perfectly composed, Ishira bowed politely and turned around to show them the way inside. The entrance of their house was a small garden, which Cessilia immediately found beautiful. There was a small wooden bridge over a pond, so narrow and thin it only allowed one person on at a time, but that was the only way to the mansion, and they walked across it one by one, noticing the colorful fish quietly swimming underneath. From what Cessilia could see, the garden was only made of medicinal plants. For every single leaf and flower her eye caught, there was some use.

"My aunt created this garden," explained Ishira. "It was her favorite place in the Kingdom... My uncle, our Clan Leader, wishes for this place to be preserved as it is, and I have been taking care of it personally since. That's why despite being given a room in the castle as a candidate, I do still spend a lot of time here during the day."

This explained why Cessilia hadn't crossed paths with this candidate at the castle after the first banquet, but had run into her in one of the family's businesses instead. Unlike the other candidates, Ishira herself seemed to have little interest in becoming queen. Cessilia remembered vividly that she hadn't been shy to speak up against her rivals in Cessilia's favor either. Maybe she was more interested in alliances with a woman she believed to be the future Queen, like Lady Bastat. The fact that she had already mentioned her aunt, who was probably from the Rain Tribe, intrigued Cessilia, though.

"Although this is considered our main house in the Capital," she continued, "our family is more of an itinerant one, so my cousin, the heir to our family, isn't here at the moment. We like to travel from village to village to offer our services as doctors, as well as study plants and remedies we can find in farther regions."

"Your businesses in the Capital aren't enough as an inflow of money?" said Tessa.

Ishira smiled, understanding the real question underlying her comment.

“I promise we’re not robbing anyone. Actually, people pay us what they can, but our services as doctors are mainly given for free. People only have to pay for the medicine, if they can afford it... We are trying to be charitable while not running out of business. Many would love to see us fall, though.”

“We heard a b-bit of your s-story,” said Cessilia. “Your family b-benefited from learning medicine...”

“That’s true. ...I know what you came here for, but you’ll hear it from my uncle. After all, a lot of our wealth came from his marriage...”

They finally reached the actual mansion, which, aside from the beautiful garden in front, didn’t seem much bigger or ostensive as the other larger houses they had seen in the Capital. With the servants opening doors for them, Ishira preceded them inside, quickly leading them into a small room where a man was already seated and drinking. The space was smaller than they had imagined, but the table was large enough for six people, and already filled with food. The man looked to be in his late fifties, with a well-kept silver beard and short hair, a thin nose and thin lips on a square-shaped face, and enigmatic brown eyes. His long sleeveless tunic showed thin but toned muscles, and like his niece, several tattoos. He was one of those men who might have been average when he was young, but was more attractive as an older man, with an aura of calm and dignity, and fine wrinkles. He didn’t get up upon the young women’s arrival, only bowing over the table. Cessilia remembered him right away. He was one of the men sitting during the council she had witnessed on her first day there, one of the nine lords. He indeed was the head of the Hashat Family.

“Evening, Princesses. Please, take a seat.”

Cessilia and Tessandra exchanged a glance and took the two seats opposite the man, while Ishira went to sit next to her uncle, pouring what smelled like hot tea for the guests herself.

“My name is Hedrun, the head of this family, and Ishira’s uncle. My niece as well as my cousin, Counselor Oroun, mentioned the Princesses were interested in meeting me.”

Tessandra and Cessilia exchanged a surprised glance. Didn’t Ishira mention their Family Leader was the one who wanted to meet them, not the other way around? Upon glancing once more, they noticed the Queen Candidate was staying silent, as well as keeping her eyes down. They felt a bit wary of this odd situation.

That man’s attitude and tone were a bit different from what they had expected. He was barely looking them in the eye and was already busy eating, as if this meeting had little to do with him. Next to him, Ishira hadn’t touched the food, either, and was simply sitting with her hands on her lap, seemingly a bit tense, as if she was cautious of her uncle herself. They didn’t look like close relatives, more like master and servant.

“Our m-mothers were p-part of a t-tribe called the Rain Tribe,” said Cessilia. “We b-believe the Hashat Family is familiar with these p-people.”

“That is true,” said the leader. “My wife was one of their people. She died a few years ago, though.”

His bluntness shocked Cessilia even more, and she frowned.

“We had no idea th-there had b-been other survivors in the Eastern K-Kingdom. Our m-mothers d-devoted a lot of themselves t-trying to find more of their relatives.”

“Not many. Most were sold as slaves, and our tribe bought some of those slaves. Some fled, the others were killed.”

Despite the leader’s aloof and cold tone, Cessilia felt her heart accelerate a bit. So there really were some of her mother’s long-lost relatives in this Kingdom. According to her mother, the Rain Tribe wasn’t composed of a lot of people, even before they were attacked. To hear there were any survivors at all had been a huge relief when they expected them all to be dead. Although she had never met those people, Cessilia was well-aware

this was half of her heritage, half of her family's story, the half that wasn't from Imperial Dragon blood, but from the sad history of a dying civilization.

"We're sorry about your wife," said Tessandra, "but are there other members of that tribe still surviving?"

"What for?"

The man finally looked at them, a hint of annoyance in his eyes.

"So your people can plunder that village again? Rape those women?"

Cessilia was so shocked, she lost her words for a second. Tessandra was the first one to react, clenching her fist on the table.

"Are you mad, old man? Didn't you listen? Our mothers are from the Rain Tribe! They went through that shit too!"

"And who do you think put them there? How do you think they became slaves? How do you think they fell into the hands of those men? Did your daddies ever apologize for it?!"

This time, even Tessandra was rendered mute.

"...Our fathers had n-nothing to d-do with what happened t-to the Rain T-Tribe," muttered Cessilia.

"Really? How did you think they got to meet your mothers in the first place?"

"Uncle, please," muttered Ishira, uncomfortable too.

"Silence, Ishira," the man hissed. "My wife spent her whole life traumatized by the men who had beat her, raped her, and sold her. They did the same to her whole family if they didn't kill them. Do you think I'll tell anything to two girls who have the blood of those rapists?"

"Hey!" roared Tessandra. "Don't you fucking insult our fathers! Who the fuck do you think you're talking about? The Eastern Kingdom was the one who raided the Rain Tribe!"

The man brutally slammed his glass against the table, making even his niece go white.

“...Say that again?” hissed the leader.

“You’re not scaring me, old man,” retorted Tessandra. “The Rain Tribe was raided by the Eastern Kingdom, not the Dragon Empire. Get your damn facts straight before you start insulting our dads!”

“You damn little—”

“Uncle!” Ishira shouted, panicked. “You can’t insult the Princesses!”

“Princesses?” scoffed the man. “How dare they call themselves princesses, when they are the daughters of wretched murderers...!”

“...That’s enough, Father.”

They turned around to see a young man who had just opened the doors wide, out of breath, with a thin layer of sweat on his forehead. He was strikingly handsome, with his long, black hair over his shoulder, his muscular silhouette, and his simple but beautifully embroidered blue outfit. Even more striking was the contrast between his olive skin, and his clear blue eyes.

“Holy shit...” muttered Tessandra.

“Hephael,” sighed Ishira, relieved to see her cousin.

The young man’s eyes quickly circled the room, changing into a brief glare when he met his father’s, and softening when he met Cessilia’s green irises. To her surprise, he bowed even more politely than his cousin had.

“Princess, it’s an honor to meet you. ...I apologize for my father’s rudeness.”

“Hephael,” hissed his Father, “you shouldn’t get involved in this.”

“And you shouldn’t be rude toward these ladies, Father. As far as I’m concerned, they are my relatives.”



His words surprised Cessilia and Tessandra once again, but in a good way, this time. The young man seemed about their age, but he had no issue overpowering his father's anger with his composed but firm tone.

"...The Princesses are my guests," he said. "I'm sorry there seemed to have been some miscommunication."

"Ha! Is that what Oroun set up? Does that bastard think I am not the leader of this family anymore?"

"...I did not ride all the way here to hear your nonsense, Father."

"These women are—!"

"My mother's relatives," said Hephrael. "...She'd be upset at how you're treating the few people left of her family."

The anger on his father's face literally melted away. Instead, it was as if the man had been slapped with humongous guilt. He slowly stood up, glaring at his son, and without another word, left the room. They heard his steps going away, and an awkward silence was left behind until Ishira let out a sigh of relief. Tessandra scoffed.

"Well, I officially like you better than your dad," she said to Hephrael. "Now, what the heck just happened?"

"I apologize," muttered Ishira.

"I'm the one who should apologize," sighed Hephrael, who walked around the table to take his father's seat next to his cousin. "It seems like my father intercepted my message... I am the one who wanted to meet you and sent Ishira. I forgot my father has a bad habit of butting in."

Next to him, his cousin looked mortified. They barely exchanged a silent greeting before she helped him take off his coat and poured him tea. Hephrael looked at least much nicer to his cousin, briefly patting her shoulder as he took the drink.

"We did not come here to hear our dads be insulted."

"I offer my most sincere apologies about that too. The truth is, my mother spent most of her life coldly rejecting his love, even after he freed her,

married her, and gave her a son... and it is much easier blaming the other party involved than his own nation for what was done.”

He drank the tea in one shot, while Tessandra and Cessilia exchanged a confused look.

“...So you d-don’t b-believe the D-Dragon Empire was the one t-to attack the Rain T-Tribe?”

Hephael sighed.

“It’s not a question of belief, Princess. There was a war, and a small tribe’s village was caught between two rival nations. You and I are proof the survivors ended up as slaves in both countries, didn’t they? ...Although it might be hard to admit, it’s easy to know what happened. Both the Kingdom and the Empire were responsible for the disappearance of our mothers’ homeland.”

“...That’s not exactly what we heard,” hissed Tessandra, visibly upset.

Next to her, Cessilia didn’t say a word. In a way, Hephael’s words made complete sense. If the Eastern Kingdom alone had raided the Rain Tribe, how would their mothers have ended up in the Dragon Empire...? That was a part of their past that their mothers had never talked about much, either. There was too much trauma behind those memories, and it was too soon to talk about some things. Cessilia was old enough to know her parents’ history, and so was Tessandra. In fact, both girls had experienced hardships because of it. Despite the accomplishments of the Water Goddess, it didn’t change the fact that her skin color was foreign to most people, making it nearly impossible for the girls to have a childhood like others. Not only that, but once their mothers had found some survivors from their tribe, only a handful, they had met people who had gone through real hardships and heard tragic stories.

Hephael sighed and put his glass to the side for his cousin to fill it again. Despite Ishira’s submissive attitude, there was clearly a silent understanding between them, and they definitely acted like siblings to each other, completely unlike the tension with his father earlier.

“I don’t blame you,” he sighed. “To be honest, it took me a while to stop sharing my father’s point of view as well. My mother never really recovered from what had happened to her, and her story was never really clear either. She was literally terrified of any man resembling a soldier, causing her to spend a lot of time in this house, hiding from the outside world. I loved her, but she was a very... troubled woman, and I hope she’s found rest now.”

He and Ishira exchanged a glance and a little smile toward each other. Hephael gently caressed his cousin’s hair. The young woman seemed to be a lot more reassured with her cousin in the room.

“My aunt was the one who acted most like a mother figure to me, and also took care of my mother,” explained Hephael. “Because of her being unable to stand being around men, she had a quiet, secluded life. Meanwhile, my father kept leading the family outside the Capital, as we were originally travelers. I think she is the main reason we ended up here in the first place. My mother’s knowledge in medicine took our family in a new direction... leading us to where we are today.”

“So your mother was the only... woman from the Rain Tribe?” asked Tessandra. “We were told there were, uh... other people with your tribe.”

“Oh, there are. My mother was actually the first adult from the Rain Tribe to join the family. My father fell for her after seeing her at a slave auction, although he’d never owned a slave before. He then tried to find and buy back more of her people, trying to help my mother overcome her traumatic past. He even renamed our family after it became clear her knowledge of medicine would be the new focus of our people... The other people from the Rain Tribe he found were three young women and six children. One of the young women sadly committed suicide shortly after, and another one died in childbirth. The last one is still doing fine as of today, and she’s traveling with our people as we speak. She’s happily married with five children, and I’d love to introduce her to you if we get the chance.”

“W-what about th-the children?” asked Cessilia.

Hephael turned to her and nodded.

“Two died of disease, but the four others grew up fine, and are actually our best doctors. They are not... fond of the Capital, though, they live with the itinerant part of our family with their own families. ...Can I ask about your mothers? To be honest, we have only heard from afar about the stories from the few people who could travel between here and the Empire...”

Cessilia and Tessandra exchanged a smile.

“Our m-mothers are named C-Cassandra and M-Missandra. Th-their maternal g-grandfather was the t-tribe’s chief... Th-they were c-captured and sold s-separately after the attack. My m-mother b-became a slave for nobles b-before she met my d-dad and they fell in love...”

“My mother was sold to the prostitution district and worked until a patron helped her buy her freedom,” said Tessandra. “She was already a free woman when she and my aunt reunited. After a while, she actually married one of the Empress’ other half-brothers, my dad and Cessi’s paternal uncle. Cessi and I are actually cousins from both sides. Since then, they have both been looking for other people from the original Rain Tribe, and they’ve only found a handful of their descendants so far...”

“That’s heart-warming to know,” smiled Hephrael. “...I wish my mother had been alive to hear that some of her relatives survived.”

“C-can we ask her name?”

“Hendira... My mom’s name was Hendira. She did mention a village chief a couple of times... but that’s all I know, I’m sorry.”

“It’s already p-plenty,” Cessilia said with a smile. “We will t-tell our mothers more of their p-people survived.”

“Did you ever go to the village?”

Cessilia and Tessandra exchanged a shocked look.

“...It’s still there?” muttered Tessandra.

“Well, there isn’t much left,” sighed Hephrael, “but... the location is to the south of this continent. I was shocked at how it is exactly on the border

between the two countries, to be honest. I went there a couple of times to pay my respects... There isn't much to see, though, so do not expect anything if you go. Grave robbers stole whatever the soldiers hadn't already taken..."

"We will g-go," said Cessilia, not even thinking twice.

They hadn't even thought about the possibility of ever seeing the remains of the Rain Tribe's village. That place had always been an enigma to them, the remnant of a memory their mothers shared with them. To think they'd be able to go was a bit unreal.

"I believe Ishira shared with you a... present."

"Th-thank you for th-that." Cessilia nodded.

"I'm afraid we don't have much more to offer, honestly. The knowledge we have is mostly what the Rain Tribe gave my mother, and what she gave us. Although we have done our best to increase that knowledge, you will have probably seen as much from your mothers."

"It d-doesn't matter. Th-this is p-proof that their p-people survived even on th-this side of the b-border..."

"It's not like we were expecting much, truthfully," added Tessa. "Our mothers were pretty... realistic even when they began searching for their people. It's good to know at least a few more survived. ...But, do you know more about who was really the first to attack?"

Hephael sighed.

"...My father's words got to you, didn't they? To be honest, I never got a straight answer either. They all said everything happened so fast, and some soldiers were fighting on top of everything... Their descriptions of their armor weren't described the same way twice, and given that they were taken into foreign lands when they'd never taken a step outside of their village..."

Cessilia and Tessandra nodded, but both girls were left to their own thoughts. Hephrael was right; it did bother them a bit. When Ishira kindly invited them to start dining, the young Family Leader helped himself too.

“To tell you the truth, I think your mothers were luckier being in the Dragon Empire. No offense, but... the Eastern Kingdom wasn’t exactly a great place for my mother and her peers to start a new life. They went from near genocide to a country struck by several civil wars.”

“Yeah,” scoffed Tessa, “we had the pleasure of meeting His Majesty...”

He briefly glanced his cousin’s way, exchanging an enigmatic look with her. Cessilia caught sight of that.

“D-do you have... a d-different opinion on the K-King?”

“...I’m not fond of that man, to say the least.”

“B-but...”

“I know his return put an end to the war, and he has been doing lots to improve life in the Capital. Truth be told, the White King is barely holding the clans in a relative state of peace. This isn’t going to last long, sadly. We have known many civil wars to tell this much. The clans just don’t get along, and one is going to overthrow the others sooner or later unless we get a more capable ruler.”

“The K-King seems to b-be doing what he c-can,” said Cessilia, a bit upset.

“...And although I am also not fond of the guy,” added Tessandra, “it looks to me like the clans aren’t making much of an effort to get along either.”

Her accusing eyes were on Ishira, still holding to heart the fact that Naptunie wasn’t invited. Cessilia pulled her cousin’s sleeve a bit, but Tessandra ignored her.

“Since we’ve come here,” she continued, “all we’ve seen are catty women fighting to become Queen, people trying to murder us inside the Capital, and someone was even killed inside the castle! None of that was the King’s doing, from what we know.”

“That wasn’t our doing either,” retorted Ishira. “That was all the other clans’ doing. The Pangoja, the Yekara, even the Kunu.”

“B-but... I thought the K-Kunu Tribe was dead?” muttered Cessilia.

“Those people are mercenaries, assassins,” sighed Hephrael. “I wish the King did get rid of those murderers for good, but the rumors are already saying they aren’t gone. They might be gathering their strength and planning their revenge as we speak.”

Ishira nodded in agreement before adding to what Hephrael said.

“The Kunu consider themselves abandoned warriors, but they turned into nothing better than ruthless mercenaries over the years. No one had the money to employ their expensive services anymore, so they took whatever they wanted instead... The worst.”

“They are what happened to soldiers once the kings that used them couldn’t pay them...”

Hephrael sighed and ate a couple of bites with a pensive expression.

“They are only one of the worst symptoms of a sick nation. People out of employment. Resentment, anger. People are ready to do anything to survive... even at the expense of their fellow citizens. The people who do not belong to a clan have it hard too. Many families have disappeared without anyone batting an eye for them. Roaming around the Kingdom’s lands has shown me a lot of the bleeding injuries of this Kingdom.”

“...We saw it too. But you think changing your ruler is going to bring peace?”

Hephrael shook his head.

“Maybe not. But... we might not be the only ones thinking so.”

“The stronger clans didn’t appreciate the King putting small families like us on an equal footing with them,” explained Ishira. “They treat us with contempt, thinking they should still be respected like they were in times of war. They want martial law back, so they can exercise their power even more than now. Many supported the King because they thought they

would get extensive rewards like with the previous King, but the treasury was long empty when the war ended, and the King isn't giving them the little bit of money the state has. He won't favor them, and that's what's making them unhappy. They believe they were wronged; however, now people need healers, food, and for all the businesses to resume."

"Thankfully for us, the Pangoja and Yekara don't get along. Otherwise, those two clans allied might be enough to take us all down. However, none of the other families are willing to follow them either. Except perhaps for the Nahaf, the other families like their independence, and would rather follow an illegitimate king."

"So aside from the two stronger clans," said Tessandra, "you're saying most of the other clans are fine supporting the King, right?"

"It's more complicated than that. Most haven't fully made up their minds yet, to be fair. They are all careful; after what happened with the previous King, they are scared to make the wrong choice again. At the moment, most think the choice of the future Queen will be what seals the deal, or adds fuel to the fire."

"...They hope the Queen will be of their clan," nodded Tessandra, "or someone they can approve of..."

"Exactly," nodded Hephrael. "People have a hard time believing the tyrant's son, so we are all waiting to see what his decision for his Queen will reveal about him. Hence, all the Lords voted for this competition. It's basically a political tug-of-war. I have to say, the arrival of a Princess from the Dragon Empire did shed new light on the game, though."

"We noticed," scoffed Tessandra. "Some are ready to support Cessi, others want to kill her. It's tense for us too, to say the least."

"I want t-to help," said Cessi, "b-but I understand the s-stability b-between the families might b-be more important right now."

"It might be too late for that."

Hephrael put down his glass, crossing his fingers together with a serious expression.



“To be honest, most clans are already very wary of each other, and the competition exacerbated that. If something happens, I’m afraid it will be near impossible to have us work together to riposte. We simply don’t have the power to oppose the Yekara or the Pangoja. We are doctors, the Sehsan are artists, and the Dorosef are fishermen. I’m making it rather simple, but when push comes to shove, it will be a follow-or-flee situation for everyone. There are only two situations out of this.”

He lifted his index.

“One, we find a way to all unite, but like I said, this is nearly impossible in the current climate; it would take a miracle... or for the Cheshi to step up. They are the only other clan that all the small tribes would be willing to listen to. They also probably still have the political strength to do something. Sadly, they’ve been rather quiet for a while now, so we don’t know what their opinions are.”

He lifted his thumb.

“Two, if there were someone strong enough to support the King and help him subjugate the rebellious clans. Someone really strong, but also fair enough that the clans would be comfortable following them and uniting behind them. A strong queen would be the perfect example of that...”

“You mean someone like Cessi,” said Tessandra.

“Exactly. That’s why many tribes have approached you already, haven’t they? To be fair, some candidates were appointed more to watch the King than to really compete. They don’t care about becoming Queen, but they want to see if the King will react to them, if he even... considers someone other than the Yekara or Pangoja women.”

“Turns out he does,” muttered Ishira, glancing Cessilia’s way.

“B-but your interest in me is b-because I’m a D-Dragon Empire d-daughter.”

“Yes, and no. Putting that aside, you’re also someone who’s not allied with any of the clans but is still a strong contender. If I may say so, you’re

a big hope for many of us. It may sound strange, but many of the tribes would rather have a foreigner on the throne than a corrupt queen.”

A lot of things were beginning to make more sense to Cessilia now. The other candidates tolerated her because she was an alright option for the King, and because she was essentially one of the only possible alternatives to the worst, the Pangoja and Yekara candidates...

“...Have you t-tried reaching out t-to the Cheshi C-Clan?” Cessilia asked.

“We tried, but I have no idea what they are thinking at the moment. They have closed the doors to their residences and won’t appear at all. From what I know, they refused to meet the other tribes as well... They might be watching the competition as well, and waiting for the outcome.”

“They are cowards then,” scoffed Tessa.

A silence followed her statement. Hephrael and his cousin exchanged a glance, but obviously, they had nothing to answer to that. They didn’t know what was going on with that tribe, and it did feel like they were somewhat hiding from the current events... The question was, when would they finally get involved?

“C-can I ask...” muttered Cessilia. “What ab-bout th-that woman... The K-King’s mistress.”

“That woman...” Hephrael frowned. “I guess you’ve met her.”

“She said t-to ask you about her p-past.”

Ishira grimaced.

“She’s not one of us,” she immediately said, “if that’s what you want to know.”

“B-but she is p-part of the Rain T-Tribe too, isn’t she?”

Hephrael let out a long sigh as if it cost him to talk about this.

“...We had no idea about her existence until a while ago, honestly. She wasn’t among the children my father bought back, she had... her own life, far from our family. But yes, she’s... part of the Rain Tribe, like us.”

“Then what is it you’re not telling us?” frowned Tessandra. “You don’t like her either, it seems.”

“Not really. She was never a Hashat, and she sided with the King ever since she appeared... When we tried to reach out to her, that’s when we learned of her background, and we immediately cut ties.”

Cessilia and Tessandra exchanged a glance, surprised.

“...What is it?”

“She... she was born out of a rape,” said Hephrael. “Not here, but on the Dragon Empire’s side. Because of that, she... that girl was loathed by her mother, and raised by her father. Her father... eventually killed her mother from too much abuse, and was left alone with his daughter, abusing her next. She... freed herself by killing him, and fled here, to the Eastern Kingdom. That’s when we met her, among a group of refugees. But that woman, she’s still... very much damaged.”

“No wonder... But she killed her abuser of a father and avenged her mother. I get the twisted part, but if you couldn’t rescue her, couldn’t you have... I don’t know, at least helped her? I’m by no means fond of that woman, but her father was the monster, not Jisel!”

Ishira and Hephrael exchanged a very awkward look. Cessilia understood there was something more to this story.

“We would have,” muttered Hephrael, “but...”

“...Her father was the one from the Rain Tribe.”

A long, heavy silence followed his words. Cessilia and Tessandra exchanged a look, both completely stunned. They had never imagined they would hear such a thing today.

“...Her father?” muttered Tessandra, shocked. “Holy fuck...”

“Yeah, that was a lot for us too. But after that, we understood she would not be... very fond of our family, no matter what we did. For her, the Rain Tribe is her cursed heritage, so... she went on her own.”

Tessandra combed her hair back, still in shock. She and Cessilia exchanged a glance, appalled at what they had heard. They knew war was the cradle for a lot of horrible and tragic stories, but this one was truly unexpected. They were even a bit glad their mothers weren't present to hear this.

"...Is that it?" finally muttered Tessandra.

"Pretty much. It's not like she welcomed us with open arms, we barely... exchanged a few words before she made it clear she did not want our help. She was still young the first time we met her."

"I don't think she... hates the Rain Tribe, per se," muttered Ishira. "From what we understood, it's more like she has a strange fascination for it. She did learn the same knowledge as we did about medicine and plants."

"Well, I guess Daddy taught her a thing or two between beatings," grumbled Tessandra. "Great. Father of the year."

Cessilia frowned. She was still preoccupied with a lot of things Jisel had said, especially her mentioning she was a dragon's daughter... Did she mean her heritage from her father's side or her mother's? Something was still making her uneasy about all of this.

"You said she had always b-been by His Majesty's s-side..."

"Well, that is after she reappeared," said Ishira. "We met her once, years ago, probably right after she had run from the Empire amongst refugees, but before we could find out more, she fled from us, and the next time we saw her, she had somehow become the King's right hand... and his mistress."

"In any case, she refused our help," declared Hephrael. "She is not... someone we'd trust. We suspect she has interests with the stronger clans more than the likes of us."

Tessandra scoffed. They had noticed the same, and they probably wouldn't trust that woman either. Despite her underhanded attempts at befriending this duo of cousins, Cessilia just could not shake off that negative feeling she had toward that woman... even if they somehow

looked alike. Tessandra was the same; something in their instincts was constantly warning them about Jisel, something they couldn't quite put their fingers on just yet.

"All you know about her might be a lie as well," muttered Tessandra. "It's hard to know if that snake ever spits out anything real..."

"In any case, we don't consider ourselves involved with her," nodded Hephrael.

That was about all Cessilia wanted to know. Anything else she wanted to know, she would have to sort out with Jisel herself, since it was clear that the woman's origins were still a mystery. Had she suggested they ask the Hashat just so they would hear about her father and be less wary of her? A part of Cessilia did believe that story to be true, but she also thought some things just didn't match. She let out a long sigh and shook her head.

"Th-thank you for t-telling us what you kn-know," she finally said.

"I'm sorry it's not much. ...At the very least, if you wish to visit the remains of the Rain Village, let me know. I'll accompany you there. I owe you that much..."

"You don't owe us anything," said Tessa. "Your father took care of the few survivors on this side of the border, it's already more than we hoped for. ...Do you think you found them all?"

"Sadly, yes. Our family has been roaming this Kingdom for long enough, I don't believe there is a village or city we haven't visited twice..."

"Even th-the ones occupied by b-bandits?" Cessilia said, surprised.

Hephrael sighed and grabbed a piece of meat to chew a bit before answering.

"Yes. Our family has managed to arrange some... understanding with those bandits. A lot of them are soldiers who have resentment against the King or the clans, but they don't have any interest in attacking healers, so we make sure they recognize us from afar, and let us in. We heal the sick among them for free if they don't attack us and let us through. It may

sound surprising, but we are careful not to carry anything of value, only medicinal herbs, and our knowledge. We make sure to hunt or fish and eat far from them, we don't take any risks."

"Some do try to attack," said Ishira, "but we have the means to fight back too."

"...Like poisons?"

"No. Some of our men have learned how to fight, and we also tamed falcons so they could hunt down an enemy. In short, we made sure there is more to risk attacking us than to win for those bandits. ...It's not like a lot of them are simply lying in wait to attack us, either. The truth is, many of them are struggling to survive. Ransacking a village provides short-term relief, but without anyone to take care of the fields and produce the food... money runs out eventually."

"B-but it has b-been five years since your K-King... came b-back. How c-come those b-bandits haven't g-given up?"

Ishira and Hephrael exchanged a look, almost looking surprised.

"Well... It's not like all those men took those villages five years ago. They gradually left the Capital once it became clear their master hadn't won and there would be no one to pay them. Some have only arrived in those villages up to a few months ago."

"It's not something that can last, though," said Tessandra. "We saw one of those villages the King freed, and it was already a wreck before."

Hephrael nodded, putting his hands on his knees with a very serious expression.

"I know. I happened to stop by the Muram Village on my way here, and we heard about a little group who had come with a dragon... What you did there also helped convince me Lady Cessilia might be exactly who we need to fix what can be fixed in this Kingdom. I will be speaking as the Hashat Family's leader now. We will align ourselves behind Lady Cessilia, from now on. It was important for me to meet you and confirm your intentions."

“You say that, but isn’t your father still the leader?” frowned Tessandra. “He did not give us the same impression.”

“My father is the leader in title only,” the young man retorted. “This helped me stay away from the Capital and the King’s eye. People of our tribe will listen to me, I promise. Ishira is like my younger sister as well as my representative in the Capital. You may ask her anything in my stead, and she will provide you with anything you request if it is within our power.”

Tessandra glanced at her cousin, waiting for her. Although she had been the one speaking the most, no one was mistaken as to who was the Princess. Cessilia was quietly listening, but she was the one making the decisions.

“What if the K-King is under th-threat?”

Hephael and Ishira were both surprised by her question. They were ready to be loyal to her, but they hadn’t been clear about their position toward the King, and she had picked up on that. Cessilia wanted to be sure they wouldn’t run the minute Ashen was under attack himself. She might be a decent candidate for Queen, but it would all be meaningless if anything happened to the King. She was a foreigner, and couldn’t become Queen if there was no one to marry... Right now, she was glad for their support, but it was all very fleeting, and conditional to Ashen making her his Queen.

Their hesitation in answering spoke volumes in their stead.

“Didn’t he make you guys rich, though?” said Tessandra, frowning. “You said it yourself, the Hashat Family was like any other before the King rose your status and gave you mansions inside the Capital.”

Hephael lowered his head, nodding faintly.

“That is true, but... for the longest time, we had suspicions about the King’s intentions. See, it is not the first time a king has risen a family’s status, only to use them and abandon them afterward.”

“Ashen is n-not his father,” declared Cessilia, a hint of anger in her voice.

“You... sound like you’re familiar with His Majesty,” noted Ishira, surprised.

“The K-King has a history w-with my family. I d-didn’t come here only b-because Counselor Yassim invited me. I c-came to b-become his Queen.”

Hephael and Ishira stayed mute in surprise, both staring at her dumbfounded, but it was only to be expected. This was the first time she was revealing her personal interest in Ashen, and speaking so vehemently too. Cessilia blushed a little once she realized that and grabbed some food to try and act normal. Next to her, though, Tessandra had a faint smile on. Only at times like this did her cousin leave her shy demeanor aside to shine, when she was determined and ready to fight for who or what she believed in.

“...See?” she chuckled. “My cousin is pretty stubborn when it comes to these things. You guys may be fine making promises to someone who has yet to become Queen, but you can’t keep stalling and hesitating any longer. The Yekara and Pangoja Clans you fear so much have made their choices already. It’s only a matter of time before they try to overtake the throne.”

Ishira’s face went pale, and she dropped her cutlery.

“What are you saying...”

“It’s easy to lie in wait when you’re hiding behind a king you don’t even trust,” Tessandra continued. “You can’t simply shift your hideout to my cousin’s shadow and pretend you’ll be all good once this is over and sorted.”

“That’s not what we said!”

“Th-then m-make a real d-decision.”

Their eyes shifted to Cessilia, whose green eyes looked more emerald than ever, shining and almost... reptilian. Right now, she had changed from her shy demeanor from earlier to a completely different woman. They could see the Empire’s eldest Princess in her. It was as if she’d matured and



grown a few inches in the blink of an eye, her presence was suddenly overpowering them. Even Tessandra seemed to have taken a back seat behind her.

“I will side with K-King Ashen,” she declared. “If your family simply waits for me to b-become Queen t-to openly support me, I won’t c-consider your intentions as g-genuine. I will not accept a c-coward, even if they are related t-to my mother.”

“How can you call us cowards?!” exclaimed Ishira. “We have been doing all—!”

Before she could finish that sentence, her cousin grabbed her shoulder and had her quietly sit back down, his eyes on Cessilia. Hephael was clearly more lucid about the Princess’ clear warning, and more realistic too. He had underestimated her because she seemed to be of a kind nature like her mother, but right now, she had the aura of a War God’s daughter...

“You hide far from the C-Capital and b-behind your father,” Cessilia continued. “You want t-to support me, b-but you are not ready t-to take action. The other c-clans have already t-tried to k-kill me, and they will k-keep on doing so. I c-can’t trust p-people who are all t-talk and no action.”

“...What about the other tribes you met?” asked Hephael, frowning. “I thought the Princess would be more willing to trust our Hashat Family, but it looks to me like you’re asking us to be on the frontlines while letting the Dorosef and Sehsan remain hidden.”

“N-Naptunie and her uncle are with us every d-day,” retorted Cessilia, a hint more anger in her voice. “No one ignores the fact that the D-Dorosef Tribe is now my ally.”

“And don’t you think you, of all people, should be more supportive of us than the Sehsan Tribe?” added Tessandra. “You knew who we were, our common ties to the Rain Tribe’s legacy, but they reached out to us first, and even offered an opportunity to trade with the Empire, knowing full well how risky that was.”

“I b-believe the Hashat should b-be more p-proactive than them. Your family might only b-be healers, but you’re p-powerful enough to openly d-display which c-candidate you will support. D-did you even consider that the smaller families might be looking up t-to you?”

The two of them exchanged a glance as if really surprised by her words. They clearly hadn’t even considered the influence they had over other tribes.

“We... Well, we don’t mix with the other families...”

“You should s-start,” Cessilia coldly retorted. “You’re one K-Kingdom, one p-people. You c-can’t act like you d-don’t care what happens t-to each other anymore and p-push the liability onto others. Otherwise, th-there is no use in waiting for a q-queen. You are all already letting the other c-clans win by not d-doing anything. If the t-tribes d-don’t unite together against those c-clans, neither the K-King nor I will be able t-to do anything. Your passiveness will b-be the downfall of this K-Kingdom.”

A heavy silence followed her words. Ishira looked as if she had just been slapped awake, while her cousin’s face held a stern, indecipherable expression. Neither of them could say a thing, and Cessilia was done talking too. Next to her, Tessandra was simply re-filling her own plate with more meat, a satisfied smile on her lips.

“...I see we underestimated the Princess,” finally muttered Hephrael.

His cousin glanced his way, looking a bit worried and unsure about what was going on now, keeping her lips sealed. Meanwhile, Hephrael grabbed the teapot and refilled Cessilia’s cup himself, an obvious gesture of submission from someone who had his cousin serve him all along.

“I’ll admit, I was raised to put the needs of my family first and foremost. Never did I envision the day would come so soon when I would consider partnering up with other tribes. Our knowledge in medicine was always sufficient to maintain our way of life.”

Cessilia looked a lot calmer now, but she accepted the cup of tea with a faint nod, bringing it to her lips gracefully. She took a sip and put the cup down before talking again.

“The b-best doctors learn not from other d-doctors, but from other c-cultures. The Sehsan T-Tribe can sew th-things in better ways than I have seen b-before, and I want to t-try their techniques on fresh wounds. The D-Dorosef know the p-properties and nutritious values of fish and have s-studied algae so much they c-can use it for health b-benefits as well. No one is only g-good at one thing, b-but if you c-combine many p-people’s talents, you learn and improve even faster.”

“If you keep yourselves to yourselves,” added Tessandra, “you are bound to hit a slump sooner or later. No offense, but I’ll bet your medicine hasn’t improved much from what your mother taught you already.”

Hephael and Ishira’s expressions betrayed them before they could even come up with a response to that. Eventually, the young leader sighed, defeated. He didn’t look like he had lost to Cessilia in any way, though. In fact, he smiled confidently, slowly nodding.

“Lady Cessilia, you exceeded my expectations, by far. I did not expect to be lectured today, but I’ll bow down without shame to your words. You’ve proven not to be a princess in name only, but a woman of character and great insight, and I respect that. In fact, I am more confident than ever in supporting our future Queen. I will set my doubts about King Ashen aside for your sake, and trust the King the lady has chosen. ...If you prove yourself as our future ruler, I will also step up, as you requested. The Hashat Family will no longer hide. How can we prove our loyalty to you?”

“Hephael,” muttered his cousin, a bit worried about what she could ask.

Cessilia’s answer came right away.

“Reach out t-to the other t-tribes,” she said in an imperious tone. “The Sehsan, the D-Dorosef, and even those who have yet t-to take a side. D-do not wait for me; c-create an alliance with them.”

“...Aren’t you worried we’ll create an alliance in favor of another candidate?” Hephrael raised an eyebrow.

“I d-don’t believe you will b-be able to b-betray me if you c-can’t agree on another c-candidate. We know most of the smaller t-tribes have chosen a c-candidate without real b-belief they will be p-picked by the King, b-but now, you have an opportunity t-to take a real stance, b-by supporting me.”

Tessandra loudly put down her own cup, giving them a cunning smile.

“On a side note, I’ll add what Cessi here is too nice to tell you, that you guys really better not dare betray us. Our family has a history of cutting off toxic relatives. ...Quite literally.”

“We will remember that,” nodded Hephrael, the corner of his lips lifted. “However, we are not liars or traitors and as my lady mentioned, we won’t keep acting like cowards either. ...I’m sure you’ll see the result of this very soon.”

He was most likely referring to the upcoming banquet, but Cessilia didn’t need to inquire any further. She smiled back at him and they resumed eating as if this conversation had been very natural. For the rest of the meal, they didn’t mention anything else about tribes, conspiracies, or rival clans. In fact, they quite happily chatted about their medicinal knowledge and the differences between the Empire and the Kingdom. Each side of the surviving Rain Tribe had perfected their knowledge according to the new ingredients and herbs they had found, and Cessilia was quite happy to chat about their respective discoveries with Hephrael and Ishira. They had asserted they were probably something like distant cousins, and now that the hardest and most serious part of the conversation was over, they were acting quite familiarly. Tessandra and Hephrael happily drank together, each boasting about their talent for handling alcohol, while Ishira and Cessilia much rather enjoyed staying sober to discuss more complex medicine. Each duo had begun more naturally leaning toward each other, and Cessilia noticed how Ishira smiled while staring at her cousin.

“You t-two seem close,” she whispered.

“Oh, in my heart, Hephrael is as close as an older brother. We were raised together by my mother, and since we don’t have other siblings, it was always just the two of us. He’s always been very protective of me since I lacked a father figure. ...You have many siblings, right, Lady Cessilia? Are you close to them as well?”

“I am.” Cessilia smiled. “I have two older b-brothers, and they d-do tend t-to be very p-protective, b-but they are nice... I have f-five younger siblings t-too.”

“It must be nice growing up in a large family! It was always just me and my mother. My father died when I was young, and my uncle never cared much for us. He was always too concerned about his wife, and almost jealous about how close my mom had gotten to her... unlike Hephrael. My cousin always made time for me and my mom who helped raise him, despite taking on a lot of responsibilities since he was young. I knew he was growing up to become the Family Leader, so I did my best to become one of our best healers as well. Just so I would be useful to him. He never pressured me to get married, either; I’m the one who offered to volunteer as a candidate.”

“Really? B-but his father...”

“My uncle is... a sad man,” Ishira muttered. “Although we don’t approve of his ways, neither of us really blame him. After tonight, I guess Hephrael will take his position as the official leader, to make your request doable... My uncle won’t agree to it, but he’ll step down. He already knows who our family will follow.”

Cessilia didn’t answer that, only glancing Hephrael’s way. The young man seemed to be having fun with Tessandra, far from the serious Family Leader he had acted as just before. It was one fun night for the four young people, now that they had become closer, and it did feel like they belonged to the same family.

“...Do you believe you can do it?” she asked. “Become our Queen?”

“I b-believe it.”

Cessilia's answer wasn't arrogant or hesitant. Despite her stutter, she had said it the most calm and honest way possible, not even blinking.

"Good," smiled Ishira. "I'll hold you to that. And then, I hope our nations will be able to create ties again. It's my dream to visit the Dragon Empire."

"Really?" Cessilia asked, a bit surprised.

Ishira blushed and nodded. She suddenly looked a bit younger, finally acting like a young woman her age rather than a family representative. It was obvious she had finally let her guard down with Cessilia. She leaned a bit closer, like a friend about to share a secret.

"I am rather admiring of your mother..." she whispered. "Since I was a child and heard of her achievements, I always wondered what kind of woman she was, to free herself from slavery and become such an important healer for an empire. We don't have many examples of women becoming such important figures, except for the Empress, of course, but... the Empress is almost akin to a scary deity, while your mother's love story with your father has... crossed the border as a tale that would make more than one girl dream."

Cessilia felt a bit strange, hearing about her parents in such a way. She knew their story was quite unique, but she had grown up observing them, and she was somewhat used to it. A close, loving family was the norm for her. She knew by heart the way her father's dark eyes always looked for her mother, like a dragon fiercely guarding its treasure. Meanwhile, her mother was the pillar of their family, the one they all gravitated toward. In a way, perhaps she had always been influenced by those two and their love story. Cessilia had never been interested in boys before she met Ashen, and once she had met him, there had never been anyone else for her...

"...My g-grandmother has a theory that d-dragons only have one real p-partner in their life," said Cessilia. "My father's d-dragon knew my mother was th-the one f-for him since the moment he saw her."

"That's even better than what I had heard," smiled Ishira. "...Do you see the King like that too?"

“M-me?”

“I saw how your eyes changed each time we mentioned His Majesty... and I have seen you two in the same room. He might not be a dragon, but the candidates are all jealous because it’s clear the King is different with you, Lady Cessilia. Honestly, you make it easy for us to give up on this competition... No one wants to pursue a man who only has eyes for one woman.”

Cessilia wished this was true. Sadly, there was more than one woman still aiming for Ashen, and they wouldn’t give up easily.

Thinking about the rivalry for the King’s heart, or at the very least the position of his Queen, made her long for him more. She glanced out the window, noticing how the sun had gone down already. On the other side of the table, Tessandra looked a bit too drunk, but it made her smile. At least her cousin had fun and forgot about her love troubles for a short while. It did feel like they had made new friends, if not, new relatives.

She decided it was time they left the Hashat cousins and politely bid them farewell, after thanking them for the meal. Hephrael promised he’d keep to their agreement, and Ishira added they’d always be welcome in their properties. The young woman wasn’t going back to the castle that night, instead, staying there to discuss some of their family affairs with her cousin, so Cessilia was left to take a staggering Tessandra back by herself.

“T-Tessa, you’ve really overdone it t-tonight,” she sighed, helping her down the street.

“Sorry, their wine was damn good... Oh, I should have asked Mr. Handsome what it’s called or something...”

“M-Mr. Handsome?” Cessilia repeated, raising an eyebrow.

“Oh come on Cessi, he’s easy on the eye, isn’t he?”

“Yes, b-but... he’s almost a r-relative. And what about S-Sabael?”

“I don’t want to talk about that idiot! He can keep brooding and ignoring me if he wants, I do not care for him anymore! I don’t care! I’d rather go and lick a dragon’s butt than see him again!”

“Oh. That’s a bit harsh...”

The two girls stopped and turned around, only to see a blushing Sabael standing awkwardly behind them. This time, he wasn’t wearing his armor, only a plain white shirt that was still open enough to show his muscular torso... Cessilia was a bit surprised to see him there, but judging how close they still were to the Hashat residence and the direction he had come from, it looked like he had been waiting for them to come out. She realized he might have gotten a little tip from his sister on where to find them. Cessilia smiled, a bit relieved to see his sorry expression, and his two different-colored eyes on her cousin. Tessandra, however, wasn’t of the same opinion. She glared.

“There he goes, that coward. He’s done for the day, and he has the guts to show up, with that sexy get-up too! Who do you think you are, to appear all hot like that in the middle of the night?! I’m not tempted at all! It. Does. Not. Work!”

Confused, Sabael looked down at his outfit, completely unaware of his own charms. Cessilia couldn’t really blame her cousin, the young man was indeed quite attractive, even more so while wearing fitted clothes rather than heavy armor. His leather pants and boots were dark and highlighted his silhouette, and a blue, colorful scarf was tied around his waist.

“S-sorry,” muttered Cessilia. “She’s a b-bit drunk...”

“I’m not drunk! And I am not tempted to jump on that sexy pirate! ...Where did you get such a girly scarf? Why would you wear what another bitch gave you?! I haven’t had a chance to buy you anything yet! Take it off!”

“T-Tessa!”

“I-it was a present from my sister!”



Cessilia was almost more shocked to hear Sabael genuinely trying to explain himself apologetically than her cousin's shameful behavior. Ignoring him and Cessilia's attempts to hold her back, Tessandra staggered up to the young soldier and angrily tried to take off his scarf. Her fingers were unable to untie anything in her state, but having her fidgeting around his waist area made Sabael blush uncontrollably, and he didn't even dare try to stop her.

"Uh... I'm... sorry..." he muttered, his eyes down on Tessandra's uncontrollable hands.

"Shut up," she retorted. "Shut up, you and your mouth. I don't care! You're an idiot, and you're... you're..."

"I'm sorry," he muttered again. "I didn't mean to act cold this morning, but I was just surprised, and I needed to collect my thoughts..."

"Shut up!"

Tessandra's shouting was assorted with a violent slap on his torso that cut his breath. He coughed a couple of times, his eyes opened wide in surprise. Behind him, Cessilia grimaced.

"I'm sorry, S-Sabael," she said. "T-Tessa gets a b-bit hard to handle when she's d-drunk..."

"N-no," muttered the young man, trying to regain his composure. "I'm the one who made her upset, I should be able to handle this much... It's my fau-!"

Tessa suddenly grabbed his collar and kissed him. Sabael was so stunned, he kept his eyes wide open on Tessandra and froze completely. Behind them, Cessilia facepalmed.

"G-goodness, Tessa..." she muttered.

Right after, Tessandra ended their kiss, her hands still on Sabael's collar with a proud smile.

"There!" she exclaimed, visibly satisfied. "Now, you're mine!"

"Uh... th-thanks," dropped Sabael, at a complete loss of what else to say.

“Shut up,” retorted Tessandra, frowning. “You shut up. Don’t add anything.”

“...Sorry.”

“I’m sleepy,” groaned the willful young woman. “Take me to bed.”

Behind them, Cessilia was completely at a loss. She had seen Tessandra become a handful when drunk, sometimes too violent as she didn’t control her strength, and willful too, usually toward her dad, but never with a man her age. She silently apologized to Sabael but, much to her surprise, the young Royal Guard didn’t seem offended at all. He sighed, and as if it was natural, lifted Tessa up, letting her wrap her arms around his neck and rest her head on his shoulder. Curled up in the soldier’s arms, the young warrior didn’t seem so feisty anymore. She was probably going to fall asleep long before they reached the castle. A smile appeared on Cessilia’s lips, although it was likely her cousin would flip over all her bold actions the next morning...

“S-sorry about this,” she muttered to Sabael. “T-Tessa was b-bit uneasy about what happened th-this morning.”

“...You probably mean my attitude,” sighed Sabael. “My apologies, I just needed... a bit of time. I’ve never been with a lady like Tessandra before. I’m not used to... bold women. It made me... a bit insecure as a man.”

“...What a-about now?” she asked carefully, glancing at her cousin’s peaceful figure.

“I am still working on it. ...But I think running from Lady Tessa isn’t going to give me the answers or the resolution I need.”

Cessilia smiled, relieved for the two of them. Sabael wasn’t as stubborn as he seemed, and he was a good man. Becoming the interest of a girl like Tessandra was likely forcing him to reconsider the values he had grown up with, as well as challenging his own pride. It probably wasn’t easy, but he had come back anyway. Perhaps those two would be able to find the key to their understanding after all.

For a little while, neither of them added anything, both lost in their thoughts while on the way back to the castle. Cessilia hadn't drunk as much as her cousin, but this little walk helped her shake off that bit of tipsiness, and instead, her heart was gradually filled with expectation. It was a bit late, but she hoped Ashen hadn't changed his mind on their date.

"...Princess, watch out."

Sabael's nervous voice took her out of her reflection. He had stepped in front of her by reflex, but she could still spot the large, hooded figure standing ahead of them, right outside the castle's gates. It was a bit unnerving to cross paths with an imposing silhouette like this in the middle of the night, but Cessilia immediately recognized that familiar frame. Her heartbeat accelerated a little in anticipation, and she put a hand on Sabael's shoulder.

"I-it's alright," she said. "C-can you g-go and p-put Tessa to b-bed for me?"

"...Are you sure?"

Cessilia nodded, catching a glimpse of shiny, white hair under the hood.

"Yes, d-don't worry. N-Nana should still b-be up, t-tell her not t-to wait for me either."

"...I understand."

Although he hadn't recognized his King under that hood, he politely nodded at the large man standing in the way, and made a little detour around him, still carrying Tessandra, a cautious expression on. He was confused as to what was going on, but he knew not to ask. Cessilia watched him walk away and disappear inside the castle with Tessandra.

As soon as he was out of sight, she almost ran to Ashen. He opened his arms just in time to hug her tight, burying his face into her large curls.

"I missed you..." he whispered against her ear.

"I m-missed you t-too... D-did you wait a long t-time?"

“I saw you coming back from afar, I wanted to greet you as soon as I could. ...Who was that?”

“S-Sabael? He’s Naptunie’s b-big brother...”

“...Is he interested in your cousin?”

“Yes... T-Tessa has been the one ch-chasing him, b-but I think he has feelings for her t-too.”

“...Hm. Good, then.”

Cessilia frowned, a bit confused why Ashen would care about Sabael and Tessandra’s relationship... until she quickly remembered that she had touched Sabael’s shoulder. She blushed.

“Ashen... Are you j-jealous?” she muttered.

She had expected him to deny or laugh it off, but instead, he very gently caressed her cheek with his palm, pulling his face closer to her.

“...If they see what I see, I can’t blame them for falling too.”

His words made her blush even more as soon as she understood them. Yet, the King gently put a kiss on her lips, a naughty smile on. His lips were a bit colder, and had a faint taste of beer that evening. Had he been drinking too? Despite the misty wind blowing from the ocean, Cessilia’s body warmed up instantly to the King’s touch. The way he was tall enough to cover everything else had something a bit intimidating yet exciting about it.

However, even hidden under a cloak, his tall silhouette was hard to conceal. The guards making rounds around the castle kept glancing their way, probably wondering who that couple was shamelessly reuniting in front of the doors...

“L-let’s go,” Cessilia suggested, pulling him inside.

Ashen didn’t follow her lead, though, and instead, wrapped his arm around her waist to take her to one of the side streets away from the castle.

“We’re having our date outside,” he whispered. “I promised I’d make you see my home, didn’t I?”

Cessilia’s excitement increased immediately, and she let him lead her.