

## Chapter 15

Since she had almost only ever seen him inside the castle, Cessilia couldn't help but be a bit excited about the two of them going on a date outside. Being so close to Ashen, in a foreign country, and spending time together incognito was like a dream come true. They were like any other couple going down the streets, holding each other close and acting lovingly. It was as if Ashen refused to part with her for even a second. Even as he kept his arm around her waist while walking, he made sure his coat was also partially covering her, and from time to time, would secretly surprise her with a peck on her hair or temple. Cessilia was only just now realizing how long the two of them had been due for some time alone, with no eyes on them, no bodyguards or servants around.

The streets of the Capital were already incredibly quiet for that time of night. It wasn't even that late yet, but they only crossed paths with a few people on the way. The shops were already closed and people were rushing to get to the safety and comfort of their homes. No one really paid attention to the tall couple walking away from the castle, quietly flirting with each other...

“Aren't you cold?” he asked.

“N-no, I'm fine.”

Cessilia was always a bit embarrassed at how little she could control her emotions around Ashen. Her heart was fluttering and her cheeks turned pink every single time. She could act strong and smart with anyone, but with the white-haired King, she was back to her innocent thirteen-year-old self again. It was a warm feeling, but she was always a bit afraid he would find her too childish. She tried to keep her breathing steady and stand tall next to him. If she hoped to really become his Queen, she needed

to graduate from her childhood crush to turn this into a proper relationship...

It was strange. She had always felt confident, but not so interested by men's curious gazes on her. Cessilia knew she was pretty, but she also knew her cousin Tessa was prettier than her, and she wasn't interested in making herself particularly stand out either. Things were only different with Ashen. Each time she saw him, there was this terrible desire that surged within her, like a bold, feisty creature whispering in her head. She wanted his attention, his love. Something had definitely changed from her younger days now that she could experience proper desire. She wanted to always be a little bit closer to him, and to attract his dark eyes. She hated any woman near him, and the mere thought of Ashen being with another woman would make her irrationally mad. That creature was a bit scary, but it was also empowering her. Cessilia felt much fiercer, like a female dragon ready to protect her territory. He was her man. The only one for her.

"We're here," he suddenly whispered.

To her surprise, they had stopped outside a house like any other, just slightly bigger, perhaps. Nothing was making this house particularly stand out from the others in the same street. It was a two-story house, with a deep blue roof in a quiet alley. The neighborhood did look as if it was nicer than most, and there was no one outside, just a few street lamps every four or five houses to light the way.

The house in front of them looked like it hadn't been vacant long, or it had been taken care of so nothing really looked out of place. However, there was a heavy lock on the door, and all the windows were boarded up. A little sign was even put up front to tell people to stay out.

"Th-this is your... house?"

"The one I was born in and grew up in, yeah... the only place I kept good memories in."

Ashen's expression was quite solemn as his dark eyes kept staring at the building in front of them. Cessilia couldn't quite decipher his gaze, but

there was something a bit... sad in it. The King himself seemed to be staring with mixed feelings, a hint of nostalgia in his dark irises. After a short while, he took out a little key and went to open the lock. It opened up easily, and the King took the heavy chain off the entrance door. Cessilia could see the almost painful expression on his face.

“D-did you c-come back here before?”

“Once or twice... when being in the castle gets too bothersome and I need to be alone. Sometimes I just stand here, though; for some reason, walking inside is the hardest part. No one else knows I bought this house back. I don’t... I don’t even really know why I bought it.”

He slowly pushed the door, which didn’t squeak, or even make a sound. Everything was so solemnly quiet. They stepped inside in an almost religious silence.

This ought to have been a pretty house a decade or two ago. The white ceiling was high, with pretty, wooden arches between the different rooms, and large, glass windows. A thin layer of dust was covering the wooden floors and the furniture, but everything else was kept in good condition. It would take but a week to put everything back into a usable state again. It was hard to imagine Ashen had grown up here, though. He was standing there awkwardly, staring around as if he had no idea what to do. Cessilia took his hand without looking, and he held hers back, as if to reassure each other with their presence. They both looked like strangers intruding in that quiet, forgotten space. There were stairs going up, but from what Cessilia had seen outside and the height of the ceiling, the second floor was probably an attic and wouldn’t be high enough for their tall figures to stand.

“Our bedroom was upstairs,” muttered Ashen, whose eyes had followed the same path. “Me and my brothers... It was big for three boys, back then. We could run around and play in every nook and cranny... Now, I doubt I would be able to stand in there.”

“...You never t-told me about your b-brothers b-before.”

“I know,” he sighed. “...There’s a lot I wasn’t ready to tell you back then.”

He took a deep breath, and turned to the small kitchen. The glass window was letting gentle streaks of moonlight gleam over the once white tiles. A pretty basin had been carved in the middle, and small hooks were still hanging from a rail. Although it was all empty now, it must have been stuffed with all sorts of dishes and food before. There were still a few stains on some of the wooden parts. Some of the cupboard doors were left open, and Cessilia wondered if someone had previously ransacked this house.... Spiders and dust hadn't been able to fully conquer the little cupboards yet. Cessilia slowly walked up to the kitchen, noticing a silver pitcher forgotten in the corner. It still had a bit of water in it. Little glass pots were lined up against the window too, one of them with small dried flowers still in it...

"My mother used to cook for us there," muttered Ashen. "That's the place I most easily remember her at. I'd always see her back, while she stood there and cooked. She used to hum songs while cooking, to put my youngest brother to sleep when she carried him. As soon as I got big enough, she made me cut the fish and meat because she hated to do it... She was the one who first taught me how to hold a blade."

"...What h-happened t-to her?"

"...She died from disease." Ashen's brows furrowed. "She and one of my younger brothers both passed the same winter. We didn't have money for medicine... and no doctor in town. Back then, this Capital was still as dangerous as the villages you've seen out there."

"B-but your father..."

Ashen scoffed.

"The General... he didn't live here."

He turned around, and walked up to one of the large wooden pillars, smiling at the old, decrepit wood. Thanks to the moonlight shining through the windows, Cessilia could see his glowing white hair, and his lonely figure as his fingers followed the wood print. At around half his height, there were clear cuts made, like those done to mark a child's growth, with names on it. The highest one didn't even reach his waist.

“I have... no memories of my father ever setting foot in this place. It was just the four of us. ...You heard that my mom was his mistress, right? God knows how many that bastard had... He lived a few streets away from here. They met like any other couple would have, from living in the same city, but their situations were different. My mom was from a family of merchants. Poor, but independent. On the other hand, my father was born into a family of servants. He was raised to serve someone, learned how to do many tasks, and follow orders. The nobles he served were corrupt, like most of them were back then. My father was smart enough to realize those things young, although he was told to stay silent and obey.”

Ashen sighed, and turned around to an empty corner of the room. There was a little couch there, undoubtedly made by a skilled artisan. Cessilia could see it in the way the wood had been beautifully carved, and how the timber resisted despite the long years... Was this his mother’s family’s doing? The remaining pieces of furniture were those which had obviously been too heavy to steal and transport. Once she walked up to it, Cessi realized the only thing remaining was this one piece of wood; the other parts like the seat pillows and back cushions had been taken away. Her fingers followed the beautiful lines of the wood while Ashen resumed talking.

“The more my father witnessed the nobles’ corruption, the more he realized he could rise above his birth situation. He studied secretly, and learned from their corrupted ways... I heard he was good at kissing their feet. He was probably ready to do anything that could improve his situation. He was... disgusted with his master, but he still sought the protection and security nobles could provide. He even began stealing from the nobles, slowly putting money aside for himself. He probably realized marrying my mother wouldn’t be his best choice either. He never intended to marry her, even as she got pregnant. He only wanted to keep her as a mistress on the side... I still don’t really understand how they somehow stayed together.”

Ashen turned around again, walking back to the center of the room, and turned his hand into a fist, right before punching one of the arches, a bitter smile appearing on his face.

“This opportunistic bastard... When the war against the Dragon Empire began, he enrolled himself into the army, thinking he’d come back covered in money and glory. You know how the war went... my father barely survived. He made himself just small enough to flee and return with the soldiers who hadn’t been killed as soon as our Republic yielded. My mom gave birth to me around that time... and he got her pregnant with my brother when he got back. But my father still didn’t want to marry her, or even acknowledge her. Instead, he acted like a war hero, and somehow got recognized for his achievements...”

Ashen looked almost disgusted. Had his father really done things worth being recognized and awarded, or had he lied his way to his position, like he had done with his sons’ mother? It was hard to tell. Either way, Ashen was speaking like the boy who had been deceived and disappointed by his father, many times.

“He rose through the ranks somehow. Corruption worked well for a coward lost in a chaotic land... He became known as the Great General Ashtoran... and gladly got married to a noble’s daughter when he got the opportunity. By then, the Republic was already on the verge of collapse, and the nobles were ready to do anything to keep their lands and wealth, including marrying their daughters to popular soldiers... For my father, it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to get himself a noble title, money, land, and a wife fifteen years younger than him. I guess it was worth throwing aside the mother of three of his children.”

Cessilia felt terribly sorry for Ashen.

She didn’t know any of this before. When they had met seven years ago, he had never said a word about his family, or even where he came from, his past. Her family had taken care of a broken, young man, who had lost all will to live...

She slowly walked up to him, and grabbed his hand again. She felt Ashen's fingers gently hold hers back, and he slowly turned around, but his eyes went to the names on the wooden pillar.

"I had... to watch my father rise and become a beloved king with a family that wasn't us from afar. People recognized him in the streets, and his new, young wife had already given him more children. Why would he have cared about my dying mother and brother..."

His voice broke a little on those last words, the heartbreaking sound of anger and sadness combined. Cessilia could feel all of those painful memories through their skin's touch. How did the young Ashen feel, watching the castle from afar where his father was living with another family? What had his mother felt after being abandoned by her children's father? How did those boys grow up, sons of a King that didn't care for them...? The more she heard, the smaller this place felt. Perhaps their mother had been able to care for all three boys long enough that their childhood wasn't unhappy, but the truth was still there. Ashen, being the oldest, had probably known all of this better than his younger brothers... and had been angry in his mother's stead.

"...D-didn't he t-try to help you at all? When your m-mother fell sick..."

Ashen scoffed.

"You probably heard about how my... father's reign went. He was so obsessed with his new power, he increased the people's anger toward nobles, and became the worst tyrant to have ever led this nation. So many people were executed... At first, it was seen as necessary because the Kingdom was in such chaos, but as time went by, all those deaths felt less and less justified. My father even had his own wife's family executed, claiming they had committed treason, when he himself had stolen from them for years. He was in a hurry to get rid of everyone who could have hindered his newfound power, I suppose... Those who weren't supporting him were against him, simple as that. Even his wife didn't dare to speak up. I feel sad for that woman, but at least she was spared from the disease and hunger that took over the streets. The bodies accumulated outside the Capital became a nest for disease, and with the money already lost in the

war and so many people having been executed, things were going too fast. The officials didn't have time to properly confiscate and redistribute the dead's wealth; people began to steal what they could to survive, even if they risked execution for that."

This matched Naptunie's words about her childhood... A time of fear and death. The peace the new General-turned-King had brought had become the seed for an even worse era. It was hard to think Ashen was speaking about something that had happened just a decade ago when she had seen the beautiful, peaceful streets of the Capital now. It only emphasized how hard he had worked to undo all of his father's past mistakes...

"What ab-bout you?" Cessilia muttered.

Ashen scoffed.

"When my mother and brother fell sick, I was left alone to care for them. At first, Mom claimed they'd be fine with a bit of herbs, but I could see what was going on in our streets. The bodies and the sickness that was spreading... All the decent doctors had fled the Capital, or died trying to help others. I could steal and hunt well enough to provide food, but I had no knowledge in medicine, and my mother and brother were not getting any better. My little brothers cried day and night for so long... At some point, I got desperate enough that I tried to ask for my father's help... He was a stranger to me, but I knew enough to hope he wouldn't leave us this way. I knew how rich he had gotten. So I swallowed my pride, and I walked there, ready to beg for help. But the doors to the castle remained closed for a nobody like me. No one knew I was the Great King Ashtoran's son."

Cessilia felt her heart sinking, hearing this. She could feel the extreme anger and sadness in his voice. Ashen couldn't see her, even as she gently hugged him. His eyes were lost in dark, painful memories.

"I waited outside for days, asking again and again for my father. The guards refused to open up. The King didn't receive anyone... not even some kid who was claiming to be his bastard."

"...I'm so s-sorry."



Cessilia's voice was breaking a bit. As if she could feel all of his sadness, she felt like crying too, and she could only try to repress her tears. This was so horrible to even imagine. The young Ashen, desperate to save his family, and a father that never acknowledged him. The amount of time he ought to have spent alone outside the castle's closed doors, waiting, praying, hoping for some miracle, or someone to help his dying family...

After a short silence, she heard him sighing and to her surprise, Ashen hugged her back, his fingers gently combing through her curls as if she was the one in need of comforting. She heard him sigh faintly.

"...As you can guess, they didn't make it. My brother and I buried them in one of the communal graves, like anyone else... and we did our best to survive on our own. We stole and held on to this house for as long as we could. There was no work in the Capital, and nothing anywhere else. The King's reign had brought so much more anger and fear, civil war was already threatening to explode in the third year of his reign. His wife's only son was killed by his enemies, and their two daughters had died young... he was probably desperate for an heir. That's when my father suddenly remembered he had fathered a few bastard sons. I swear, the day he showed up at our house, expecting to find our mother with us, I was ready to fucking murder him... but I didn't, for my younger brother's sake."

"Your f-father t-took you in b-because he wanted... sons?" muttered Cessilia, shocked.

"Yeah. He believed that establishing a proper dynasty would make him more legitimate... Perhaps he was even inspired by the Dragon Empire, since the Princes' popularity was supporting their father's. Because his sons were street children who had faced difficulties like others, he thought it would be even better suited for his plan. I did not take his return well. He apologized to us, and made up some sob story about how we were his long-lost sons... I didn't believe him one bit, but it was still better to accept his newfound love for us than to risk losing my brother and dying in the streets. So I swallowed my pride, and let him take us in. I admit, he gave us all the wealth we had never even dared to imagine. At first, I was

relieved, but I slowly realized he had become just as corrupt as the nobles he had once hated for it... When I began to call him out on it, he got mad, and sent me to train with his soldiers as an apprentice. I turned out to be decently good, so he sent me even more, to calm down his angry vassals and repress the rebels. He only needed one of us, so he probably thought my brother would be enough, and me expendable. I was just fourteen at the time, but I was so bent on not letting anyone break me or kill me... I became good enough for those men to respect me despite my age. Ironically, I did much better than he had expected. I somehow became the new pride of this father I had loathed for so long. He used the fact that I was away to pretend to love me from afar, saying I was doing everything in his name, thinking no one knew how bad our relationship really was. But I never hid that our relationship was bad. When people realized I did come from the street and didn't share my father's rotten values, they were even more ready to listen and follow me. Unlike what he had hoped, the more he sent me out to the battlefield, the more my reputation grew, and his diminished. For a while, he wouldn't dare to touch me, but he also knew I was turning into the biggest threat he had ever faced."

Cessilia felt a chill run down her spine. This father-son rivalry couldn't have ended well, but she had a feeling things were even worse than she thought. From what Yassim had told her, she remembered Ashen had been seemingly murdered by his father's enemies... However, this didn't match what she was hearing now. Why would they have killed their best hope at a change? Between a selfish king and a people-devoted, upcoming, strong, young prince who wasn't afraid to oppose the tyrant, the choice should have been easy.

"...What happened?"

"Realizing that me being on the field wasn't serving his interests, he got me to come back to the Capital more and more often, despite me doing my best to stay away. The only reason I had to come back was my younger brother. Until, one night... I woke up to the screams of my stepmother. I already knew my father's wife wasn't happy in this marriage, but I had always thought it would be better for me not to involve myself with that

woman. My brother had a different opinion. Unlike me, he lived in the castle and interacted with her more often than me. He had... walked in on our father forcing himself on her. Not just once, but repeatedly. She hadn't chosen to marry him, and she probably had enough of being his thing. In fact, she was closer in age to us than she was to our father, and... my brother couldn't leave her alone. He hadn't told me anything, but he had probably resolved to protect her if my father sought for her again. He was still a boy, though... My father didn't take it well. His wife was his property, you see. A good bought from his former master that he was not ready to let go of. A trophy... That night, when my brother begged him to stop assaulting her, and got between them, he refused and instead, he attacked my brother."

"Oh, G-God, no..."

She felt Ashen's grip tighten around her shoulders. She could feel his apparent calm was like a storm under the surface. He was merely repressing his anger from that memory.

"...I arrived too late. I barely got a grasp of the situation... I couldn't save him. He had tried to act stronger than he was, and didn't want to involve me... My stepmother was injured too. Her screams and sobs still ring in my ears sometimes... It was the most horrible sound I've ever heard. My father was already half-dragging her out, but she wanted to go to my brother's body. Perhaps there really was something between them... Once she saw me, she probably realized I was in danger too. She begged me to run. But I couldn't simply turn my back on my brother's murder. Bare-handed, I tried to attack my father. He had his sword in hand, and it would have only taken him one blow. Just one. What happened next, I am not sure. The next thing I knew, that woman was stabbed in my stead, and I was pushed, falling out of the window. The last thing I saw was my father's hand, grabbing her hair and pulling her back inside. ...I lost consciousness when my body hit the sea."

Cessilia shivered. She had seen the sea so many times from the castle's windows, she couldn't imagine anyone falling from that height and

surviving. It explained the many, many scars on Ashen's body, though, and the terrible state they had found him in...

He gently caressed her hair.

"I have no idea how I survived that fall, nor how long I spent adrift at sea. There was a storm that night, but I didn't drown. I still believe the gods favored me somehow, for how I was lucky that I fell on a side without rocks that my body could have crashed onto, or how the waves pushed me away from the Capital. When I woke up, my body was floating along the Pseha at dawn... and the river took me all the way up to the north."

He suddenly cupped Cessilia's cheeks between his hands, and had her look up to him, smiling at her. All the sadness from earlier seemed to have somehow disappeared, replaced by his gentle, relieved expression.

"That's when a curious little princess and her dragon found me, half-dead."

Cessilia blushed, but smiled back at him. She knew what had happened next, this time.

"...We f-found you in the n-north," she muttered with a smile. "I r-remember. You were d-drifting, and c-covered in remnants of b-blood... I th-thought you were already d-dead when I c-called my brothers to d-drag you out..."

"Without your mother, I probably would have died," muttered Ashen, "and without you, I would have chosen to."

He let out a long sigh and kissed her forehead, very gently.

"I thought... I had lost absolutely everything. My home, my family... I thought it was time I gave up on life. There was nowhere to go home to, absolutely nothing I wanted anymore."

"You d-didn't talk for so long," Cessilia remembered. "We th-thought you were m-mute for real."

"I was... depressed. I had no will to live left. I thought... your family's kindness was unnecessary. I didn't get what I could possibly want from

life, after everything that had happened. But, unlike my expectations, I didn't die. Not only did I not die, but you were almost... dragging me back to a normal life. I was shocked that your family didn't expect anything from me. You healed me, fed me, and clothed me without expecting anything in return. You were just... happy to have me around."

"You h-helped with the ch-chores. It was m-more than enough..."

"No, you don't get it. If it had been just me, I would have probably found a place to let myself die, or jumped off a cliff or something... but I couldn't do that after your mother had spent so much time healing me. Plus, you just weren't leaving me alone. You had no idea what was going on inside my head, but you still wouldn't let go of my hand, and you took me everywhere with you, and you were so... innocent and pure and kind. You didn't care that I didn't talk, you'd show me your world, anyway. The smallest things made you happy, and you shared them with me. You were like... the sun to me. More than any of your siblings, I was always attracted to your smile, your gentleness. How you cared for all your younger siblings made me feel like... there was someone else like me, devoted to their family. That the choices I had made so far made sense, that it wasn't all... worthless. That there was always someone, somewhere, who could need me. Even if they weren't my family. I realized you had taken me from having no will, nothing I wanted, to me needing you."

Kissing her forehead once more, he then slowly moved to join their foreheads together. The two of them breathed so slowly, it felt like everything around them had suddenly gone incredibly quiet and calm. As if it was just the two of them left in this city, the other's skin the only source of warmth. Their faces were so close, but they kept their eyes closed, neither of them moving, both lost in those blessed memories they created years ago.

"Your home became my paradise. Despite my grief, I felt happiness like I had never before... I was healing, slowly. Both my body and my mind. You were the best medicine, and I was... addicted to you. Every day, I was looking forward to your expressions, your movements, your smiles. I wanted to see what you'd do, what would make you happy or excited. The

way you smiled at your mom, and how small you were next to your father. How strong the bond was with your siblings... It was like watching a dream from afar. I didn't expect to be part of it, but of course, your family wouldn't hear of it. You don't know how everything your family did was precious to me. Kassian and Darsan treated me like a brother... Your mother was there to listen when I needed to talk. Your father... took me under his wing, and taught me how to be a real fighter. Your parents knew where I came from, and perhaps, they figured I'd go back someday, so they prepared me, the best they could."

Cessilia knew. She could remember the blessed days where she had spent the whole day watching Ashen and her brothers train together. How he had become a part of her family, someone she genuinely loved. Until her feelings had gradually moved to a different kind of love, along with the months. She was young, but this was when her first feelings as a woman blossomed. Ashen was handsome, hard-working, honest, and kind. Perhaps she had felt a bit of his feelings for her too, but Cessilia had a hunch that, even if he hadn't loved her, she would have fallen in love with the boy from back then. She liked how calm and composed he always was, his gentle movements that spoke more than his few words.

She smiled, and gently caressed his cheek, looking into his dark eyes. His face was framed by his silver-white hair, gleaming under the moonlight. His hair wasn't completely white when they had found him, but it already had a handful of white or gray strands... as if Ashen had been three or four times his real age. According to her mother, it was something that could be caused by stress, or poison, but this was an extremely rare condition, with no known cure. As if his body had needed to express all his trauma, in some way... The discarded Prince was well-fed, and had a strong body, but his scars and white hair were proof of all the hardships he had gone through.

"You're s-strong," she muttered. "I d-didn't know how much you endured b-back then. You d-didn't show any of it... and when you c-came back, you d-did what you c-could, didn't you?"

Ashen sighed, his expression darkening.

“...You know I didn’t choose to come back,” he groaned. “When... your father told me to leave, he said I should go back and finish what I had started; I never thought he had been training me all this time with the idea to send me back and let me conquer my father’s throne. At least, not so soon. The way he... banned me from the Empire was so sudden. I felt like I was falling down from that window again, losing everything and everyone I cherished. It was like being thrown back into hell after tasting paradise for more than two years. My hair turned completely white then, I think. ...I didn’t want to go back, but once I was back in my Kingdom, I realized there were truly people who needed me.”

He took a deep breath, his eyes going down on the sword at his side.

“...In the end, I obeyed your father. I started from scratch, letting people believe what they wanted about my supposed death... My father had used my murder to gain sympathy, so when I got back, everything crumbled under his feet. People had already endured two years of civil war, they were more than glad to see me appear to put an end to it.”

He scoffed bitterly, a disgusted smirk on his lips.

“...Killing him was almost too easy,” he chuckled bitterly. “He hadn’t trained in years, he was no match for me, who had been trained for two years by the War God himself. Plus, those who were still debating on who to follow against him were only too happy to rally behind me... like the nine clans. I knew some of them didn’t do it only for my sake, but I figured it was better to let them follow my lead and deal with their expectations later. It only led to where we are now...”

He let out a long sigh. Despite how young Ashen was, he already had faint wrinkles, too many scars, and something incredibly sad and wise in his dark eyes. He had already lived one too many lives, it seemed. Cessilia smiled, and gently pulled his face closer to kiss him.

“...My King,” she muttered. “You’ve really gone through a lot, haven’t you?”

He smiled. He liked the way the Dragon Princess said this, with a hint of possessiveness in it. Ever since she had appeared again, he was

rediscovering the girl he had once known bit by bit, unveiling how she had grown into a strong, beautiful, and determined woman. Still, the more he learned about her, the more unworthy he felt. He didn't want to be that weak, anger-filled boy anymore. The same way he had turned from a prince to a king who had fully taken his throne with his own power, he wanted to be a strong and reliable man to Cessilia, not the self-centered bastard he had shown her all this time. He took a deep breath, and answered her kiss back.

"...Let's leave," he said.

She nodded, and he gently pulled her hand, the two of them leaving the house. Cessilia glanced back once more before they stepped out. Even if this place was filled with melancholy, she could feel it had been the home of some happy days too. Hopefully, it would be able to host more in the future...

"...Now you know," Ashen sighed once they were outside. "...I'm sorry it took me so long. You're the first person to know all of this... about my past."

"Thank you for t-telling me," she said calmly, "...but it d-doesn't change anything, Ashen."

His hands froze on the lock he was busy putting back. He finished locking it, and turned to her, taking her hand with a worried expression.

"...What doesn't change? What are you talking about?"

Cessilia sighed calmly, and caressed his cheek once more.

"You're still a p-prince, in their eyes... a p-prince they want t-to manipulate to d-do their b-bidding. You haven't finished the t-task my father sent you to do. Finish what you s-started here. End the wars and b-bring peace to your home c-country."

"Cessilia..."

"I'll help you," she added with a gentle smile. "D-don't worry. I'm stronger than you th-think, and so are you. We c-can do this... together."



Ashen hesitated for a few seconds, caressing her cheek with a solemn look.

“...I know. But... I am afraid I’m going to involve you in something you shouldn’t have to go through if it wasn’t for me. Given a couple more years... maybe you could have come when I had finally pacified this Kingdom.”

“And m-maybe you wouldn’t b-be able to d-do it without me,” Cessilia calmly retorted. “Ashen, I chose to c-come here. It was n-not on a whim, b-but by my own choice. It’s n-not just about you. I have some things to p-prove to myself t-too. I j-just chose to d-do it b-by your side.”

The King remained silent for a little while. A part of him was still desperate to protect her at any cost. Since he had learned what she had gone through after he left, and what had happened to her dragon, Ashen felt an even bigger sense of responsibility toward Cessilia. In his mind, he had already been granted a miracle just to be able to meet her once more and to have her by his side. But if anything happened to her because of this Kingdom’s political intrigues, it would be entirely his fault...

While he was lost in some dark thoughts, the Princess unexpectedly slipped her hand into his. He glanced down, a bit surprised, but Cessilia looked very calm, simply leading their little stroll away from his childhood house. He held her hand a bit tighter and they kept walking in silence, just enjoying each other’s presence, and the quiet streets around them. With no one willing to stay out late, it looked as if time had stopped in the streets of the Capital. The night sky was beautiful too. The moon was bright and full, only obscured once in a while by a lonely cloud.

“I really like th-this city,” she whispered.

“It wasn’t always this calm and quiet. Ten years ago, you couldn’t walk three streets without risking being robbed or getting into a fight... The wealthier people hid in their houses and could pay for their security, but for everyone else, it was quite the challenge just to survive...”

“Nana t-told us about her childhood here too...”

“Yeah, she probably experienced it from a... more privileged point of view. At the very least, the clans, even if they were still more tribes back then, could protect each other. For people with only their families to rely on, it was... hard.”

Cessilia nodded, and they kept walking. Knowing the history of this place made her even prouder about what Ashen had managed to do with it... Bringing back peace and security had probably been the very first step to healing this country from its deep wounds. Even if it was just beginning with the Capital, it could at least show that with time and the proper measures and leaders, the other cities would improve too. It was just a matter of time, and if they could find the right people...

“What about C-Counselor Yassim?” Cessilia asked. “I heard a b-bit from him about his r-relationship with you, b-but...”

Ashen grimaced a bit.

“He told you he used to be my teacher?”

“Yes...”

“He was also my father’s way of watching me. For as long as I stayed in the castle, Yassim would be stuck to me. On the surface, he did teach me a lot of things, and gave me an education but... he also reported every single one of my movements to my father. I never really knew which side he stood on, and while I grew under his watch, I felt like this cunning old man was watching me as much as my father was. He was grooming me to become the perfect prince. I had one of the sharpest educations thanks to him, and I caught up on everything in a matter of months under his teachings. My mother had taught me the basics of how to read, calculate, and write, but Yassim took me to the level of this Kingdom’s scholars... For this, at least, I am grateful to him.”

“Was he ever s-strict?”

“Yes. But he wasn’t... inflexible, or too rude. At times, he was even the one to suggest I go back to the field, to take a break from my studies. It was as if he knew exactly which point he could push me to before I’d

really give up, or get mad. At that time, I was working like crazy. If I wasn't fighting, I was studying. I knew my brother's survival and mine relied a lot on how useful we were to our father. I only had in mind to grow strong enough to protect my brother and try not to upset my father... too much. You remember my father was... looking for heirs, at some point?"

"Yes? B-but... It was just your b-brother and you, wasn't it?"

"Not exactly. In terms of blood-related sons, yes. However, my father had other... sons. Orphans that he had chosen himself, and who were trained every day to become stronger. I think he always had a hunch that my brother and I might not be enough, or... devoted enough to him. I barely met them, but unlike me, those men were desperate to please my father and to become his real heir. Me coming into the picture didn't really please them, and they were constantly looking to annoy me or my younger brother. Yassim taught three other boys, as well as me."

"What happened to them? Yassim said he helped you escape the C-Capital, but..."

Ashen scoffed.

"...That's what he claims. I don't know what the truth is, but I do think a cunning old man like him could easily try and lie his way out of it. As I said, I lost consciousness when my body hit the sea... but my father sent men to find me, and kill me. His other sons, to be exact... Yassim said he saw me fall from another window of the castle. He went to find my father, but found him in a rage, yelling orders to either confirm my death... or finish the job. When he understood that his students were sent out to kill me, he rushed out of the castle to try and save me. According to him, they could see my body drifting... He claims he tried to stop them, and stood between me and their weapons. As their former teacher, it did make sense they were reluctant to shoot him. He stood there until my body disappeared across the waves, but more of my father's men arrived before he could search for me, and he was taken and jailed."

"I see... So you really d-don't know if he d-did try to save you?"

Ashen shrugged. They were now slowly heading southeast, following some of the larger streets, but Cessilia thought she recognized the way to the Fish Market or at least its general direction. The smell of the sea was getting stronger around them too, and she could hear the waves, their sound growing from afar.

“No. Everyone else who was involved was either killed or fled god-knows-where away from here. He could very well be saying this to keep his head. I was reluctant to kill my former teacher, but... he keeps doing things that go against my will, and putting the little trust I have in him in jeopardy.”

“Like when you sent him to find you a... princess?”

Cessilia’s eyes were full of kindness, which made Ashen hesitate. He could see she already believed in the old Counselor’s upright character, but he didn’t think the same. In fact, when Yassim had come back with her, Ashen was even more furious. Although it was easy to make the link between his fake death and disappearance of two years in the Dragon Empire, how could Yassim have known about his tie with the Imperial Family? He hated that the Counselor had brought Cessilia, of all people. Not because he didn’t want to see her again, but because it made him worry about the old man’s intentions toward her. Despite his gentle smile and clear eyes, Yassim was harder to decipher than anybody else. He had begged Ashen to spare two of his former adopted brothers upon his return and even hid them, the same ones that had tried to kill him... And when he had tried to banish the old Counselor once and for all, he came back with the most unforeseen candidate of all. Thinking back now, it felt more and more like the Counselor had his own plans, and intended to use Cessilia against him.

“Just... don’t trust him,” he finally said. “Most of the time, I feel like that old man is just ready to do anything to save his neck... He is the only counselor that used to serve my father that I kept alive. Even the Clan Leaders are wary of him. Most of them don’t understand why I kept that cunning old man alive when I cleared out most of my father’s followers. Sometimes, I wonder the same. But I just... He did protect me from my

father's wrath a few times. He was also my brother's teacher, and I know I owe him for being half of the King I am today."

Cessilia smiled, and gently caressed the back of his hand with her thumb.

"It's g-good that you are giving him the b-benefit of the doubt," she said. "Maybe the C-Counselor just wants to stay alive, b-but... if he was really a b-bad person, I don't think he would have t-traveled all the way to the Empire to ask me to c-come."

"Don't you think he did it to use you against me?"

Cessilia sighed. After years of being involved in political conflicts and war, it couldn't be helped that the King was so doubtful of everyone's intentions. Even more so for a man who had once been his father's advisor too... However, Cessilia thought of herself as a pretty good judge of character, and she never felt any ill intent from the old Counselor. In fact, Yassim seemed to genuinely care for the King, enough to risk his own life to bring him a new potential wife... He could have been killed so many times on his way to and from the Empire.

"He d-didn't know about our relationship, Ashen," she muttered, gently grabbing his arm with her other hand to get closer. "...I think Yassim is just hoping t-to show you there are... other p-paths than the one you've t-taken."

The King remained silent for a while. For some reason, he didn't like Cessilia defending another man. After a while, he shook his head.

"...Let's stop talking about the old man. We're almost where I wanted to take you."

"To t-take me?" she repeated, a bit surprised.

She hadn't realized he had been purposely guiding their steps until now. Earlier, she had realized they were clearly headed toward the sea, but to her surprise, Ashen took her away from the port and the Fish Market, even farther east, to the end of the island that constituted the Inner Capital. For a while, it seemed like they were going to reach the coast, but, as they reached the last lines of houses, Ashen took her through smaller, narrower

streets. She had never been to this neighborhood before, and the fact that they were headed to a destination he had picked made her heart flutter. The paths between the houses became so narrow that she had to let go of his arm, and while still holding hands, they went one behind the other through the little paths.

“Where are we g-going...?” she whispered, a bit excited.

“You’ll see.”

The smile on his face when he glanced over his shoulder made her heart skip a beat. Ashen didn’t smile often, but he was irresistible when he did. He was usually so serious, closed, and stern, his smile was even hard to imagine. Yet when he did, he suddenly seemed a lot younger, and so handsome that he made Cessilia blush instantly. He was like a young god in all his glory. She held his hand a bit tighter, and followed him with the excitement building up in her stomach.

Finally, they reached the very end of the coast, past the last deserted streets, gardens and trees, where there was nothing else other than the sea, for as far as their eyes could see. Because the waves were so quiet tonight, it felt beautiful, almost eerie, with the moon lighting up the shimmering surface of the water. Cessilia thought they’d admire the view, but to her surprise, Ashen kept pulling her along.

“Here,” he said.

To her surprise, she saw him go down some invisible trail past the coast, and realized there were stairs built into the rocks. They would have been impossible to see, if someone didn’t purposely stand almost at the edge and looked down to their right. The stairs had been very roughly cut too, so there weren’t two the same, and they had to go down slowly to avoid slipping. It would have been impossible to use it if the weather hadn’t been perfectly calm... Only on a night like this, with no wind and no rain, was it safe to go down. Cessilia had to hold up the hem of her dress, and Ashen went down very slowly too, holding her hand securely at each step she took.

They passed in front of little holes in the rock, some bigger than others, and before they got there, Cessilia had already guessed what kind of place they were headed to.

The cave wasn't very large, but it was certainly beautiful. The stairs were taking an abrupt turn to the right, and there was a very small pathway inside, where they had to stay close to the wall on their right, while on their left, the sea waves gently came and went, filling a little river that went deeper inside. Despite the small entryway, there were other holes higher in the cave that the moonlight was shining through, illuminating the cave and its river in a gorgeous, blue-white light. For a while, she thought the river water was shimmery white, with dozens of little colored pieces at its bottom, until she looked closer. A bed of white seashells. The beautiful seashells were paving the entire river bed, along with pieces of blue or green frosted, smooth sea glass. Because the water depth was so shallow and the waves gentle, it looked like a shimmering mirror reflecting the moonlight in even more beautiful colors. Cessilia's breath was taken away.

"It's beautiful..." she muttered.

Surprised, Ashen suddenly stopped walking and turned to her. He was staring so intensely, Cessilia blushed helplessly.

"W-what...?"

"Just now, you... you didn't stutter."

She blushed even more, and lowered her head, nodding weakly.

"It happens... s-sometimes."

Ashen smiled and closed the distance between them in a couple of steps.

"So you like it?"

"It's a b-beautiful place." Cessilia nodded. "How d-did you find it...?"

"My mother showed it to me and my brothers years ago. According to her, only a few young people knew of its existence when she was young... I guess most people living in the Capital now have no idea. It's impossible

to get here most of the time. It takes the perfect weather conditions that we rarely have here, and a low tide. We can only stay here for... perhaps two or three hours before this whole place gets filled by the sea again.”

Cessilia was amazed. This was such an ephemeral and beautiful place. To think this place possibly wouldn't be available to anyone for a few days, before becoming such an enchanting place again...

Ashed smiled and turned around again, pulling her deeper into the cave. There were little holes going deeper, but they couldn't be accessed by a human. The floor was humid, with a thin layer of half-dry sand, and some seashells forgotten by the tide scattered around them. Cessilia couldn't help but try to avoid stepping on them on the rocky floor. Ashen took her to a little area that was about one step above the little river, dryer, and large enough, around the size of a small room. He took off his large, thick fur coat, and put it down on the floor for them to sit on it. He sat first, inviting Cessilia to join him. She sat shyly next to him, admiring the view they had on the little river and farther away past the cave entrance, on the large Eastern Sea.

He gently pressed his lips against her shoulder, before taking the back of her hands to his lips as well.

“I know it's not as great as the wonders of the Dragon Empire, but... I wanted to show you the best of my world.”

“It's t-truly amazing, Ashen. I love this p-place.”

To his surprise, Cessilia leaned in and initiated a kiss between them. The King answered her kiss, his breathing a bit unsteady. His lips against hers were trying to keep up, yet holding back a bit, as if he was afraid to lose control. He was frowning faintly, looking almost... in pain. Cessilia liked this restraint about him, though. She smiled, and while their lips parted, she caressed his cheek gently.

“Aren't you... c-cold?” he muttered.

“You're the one with a s-stutter now?” she chuckled.



The King blushed a little. He couldn't hide his troubles, but the Princess found him even more charming when he was embarrassed and visibly torn inside. She smiled and put another quick peck on his lips. Then, she stared right into his eyes and putting her hands around his neck, she moved to sit across his lap, straddling him. Her heart was beating wildly in her chest, but she had never felt so confident and bold. She smiled at him.

“...I'm never c-cold,” she said, a dash of pink on her cheeks.

His breath taken away, Ashen grabbed the Princess' nape, and pulled her in for a wilder kiss.

The heat rapidly increased around them. Their damp and hot breathing and their wild kiss made any thought about the cold irrelevant. It was just the two of them, in their little world, kissing and caressing each other. The memory from that morning was rekindled in a matter of seconds, making them both lose their hesitation to indulge in some tender exchanges. Cessilia loved that he never wore a shirt, and left his torso bare for her to caress and touch. It was like a vast, warm, and soft land under her fingers.

He kept caressing her, but as he was hesitant to undress her, Cessilia took the first step, slowly undoing her leather belt and tossing it aside, taking her arms out of her sleeves, the dress naturally falling down to reveal her skin. Ashen's breathing stopped for a second, and she saw him gasp very faintly, as if breath-taken.

“You're... beautiful,” he muttered.

He wished he had words closer to the truth of what he was experiencing right then, but none seemed enough to describe the vision of the young goddess facing him. It was enough to make his heart wrench in pain. She was down on her knees, a bit higher than him, and he was admiring her from below, completely blown away by her mythical beauty. Her skin was glowing like cold gold under the moonlight, circled down by a myriad of her dark, walnut-brown curls. Cessilia's striking green eyes had a more teal shade from the water reflected in them, and her lips were a bit purplish from the makeup that had been wiped off earlier. With only the nacre and seashell jewelry left, and the blue fabric streaming down her body, she

was like a sea goddess, or a mermaid, who emerged from the sea to ravish his heart.

Like a mere mortal man, he had no power to resist her call, his own barely restrained desire building up within. His hesitation blown away, his hand came to her body again, running over her skin, caressing each curve. For a while, he couldn't even think of kissing her. He was too busy looking at the gorgeous woman she had become. It was like a fantasy in front of him, a dream so real he could barely believe it. It felt almost... forbidden. A sin a man couldn't resist. The appeal was strong, and his resolve weak. They both wanted it, and her eyes said so too.

"You're b-being shy again," she muttered, as if amused, putting a soft kiss on his lips, like a cold caress.

It was just enough to entice the two lovers some more. He claimed the next kiss, and soon enough, they were exchanging kisses slowly but passionately, as if tasting each other. They could feel each other smiling in between, happiness overflowing. Their hands were picking up the rhythm too. Cessilia's hands were following the strong lines of his muscles, and crossing paths on his back. Ashen's fingers were more sensual. He was already caressing her hips, leaving his fingertips on her inner thighs, making her shiver from a mix of excitement and nervousness. She was a bit embarrassed to be left in her underwear already, but there was no denying the heat beneath the fabric. He began caressing her over the fabric, making the Princess blush helplessly again. She had been so bold seconds ago, but now, her inexperience was starting to catch her up. Meanwhile, Ashen slowly moved his kisses from her lips, to her cheek, her jawline, and then her neck. Much to her surprise, he paid special attention to that part of her body which usually made her shy. Cessilia felt his butterfly kisses, all over her scars, so faint and soft she almost felt like crying. He was melting all of her insecurities away with his gentleness. Silently telling her it was alright, that he loved that part of her too. It felt like he kissed every single inch of her throat, and for once, she felt as if there was nothing there. No scar to constantly pull on her skin, get itchy or dry. The place she had lost all sensations in seemed to

be revived under the King's tender kisses. She almost felt like crying in relief, as if that part of her had been healed somehow.

Then, just as she was getting a bit soothed, Ashen's lips progressed further down, exciting her again. This time, one of his hands grabbed her breast, sending a new dash of red on her cheeks. Cessilia had never really considered her feminine allure, but now, she was receiving unexpected sensations from her chest. It was like her extremities were connected right down to her lower abdomen, and sending delicious signals of pleasure from the King fondling them. Leaving her inner thigh to hold her hip and the other hand on her breast, Ashen licked the other, suddenly focusing on them, making Cessilia gasp in unexpected pleasure. Her two ends were so sensitive, each lick and caress was like sweet torture, electrifying her whole body without warning. She had no idea a woman could experience such things from her small bosom!

"A-... Ashen," she cried faintly.

"...I like when you call my name."

He smiled, and moved to kiss her lips again, letting her breathe a little. Cessilia moved her hands, one still combing his hair as they kissed, the other exploring the lines of his abs and lower abdomen. She didn't want to stay too passive. After all, she had been the one to initiate this! She shyly moved her hand toward his pants, a bit unsure what to do next. She found an opening, and gently began touching him too. She didn't have the courage to be too bold, but caressing the hot flesh was already bold enough, in her mind. Indeed, the King's dark eyes suddenly lit up with a new fire, making her hot too. She watched with a bit of excitement as his breathing became louder, and he moved his hips a bit, allowing her better access to his lower body. It was still a bit scary to imagine what was going to come next...

After a short while, Ashen grunted and, as if to even her movements, placed his hand between her legs again. He was much more direct this time, and Cessilia moaned as his fingers drifted under the thin piece of underwear. The sounds her wet flesh immediately made from the rubbing were so embarrassing, she closed her eyes, unable to look at him, and tried

to focus on her hand's movement. She listened to Ashen's breathing, so close and so hot. The sounds echoing in the cave were completely erotic right now, the faraway sound of waves wasn't enough to hide it anymore. Her own voice took her by surprise when she realized those coquettish cries of pleasure came from her. She realized her hand was slowing down on Ashen's hard rod, but it couldn't be helped; the heat between her legs was overwhelming.

"...Come here."

Ashen's unexpected mature and dominating voice sent a new shrill to her lower regions, and Cessilia felt herself tip backward before she could realize it. To her surprise, she found her back against the fur, her legs spread, and Ashen's smiling face over her.

"What are you d-doing?" she muttered, embarrassed by her new position.

"Trying to please my Queen," he smiled, before going down.

His mouth against her opening made her yelp without thinking. Her panties came off, and the cold wind she felt was quickly taken over by his hot and moist breath. She gasped, her lower abdomen torn with excitement. She slightly arched her body without thinking, but the movements of Ashen's tongue made her legs weak. It was hot, humid, and totally obscene, but her cries of pleasure came before she could stop them. The thoughts of his experience with this were quickly blown away by how good it felt. A bit strange, but there was no mistaking it: her shameless lower half enjoyed this. Cessilia had never imagined sex was this crude and unfiltered, despite her mind in a hot daze. She hadn't thought much about it, but this didn't feel like something that could be dreamt, more like a sheer, raw piece of reality. She closed her eyes again, focusing on her sensations, and Ashen's shoulder and hands under her fingers. She wanted to enjoy this, and feel herself as a woman under his caresses. It was all about letting her inhibitions go, and trusting the other. Soon enough, she felt her insides become embarrassingly wet, and her lower abdomen begging for more...

"Ashen," she called to him. "Ashen, p-please..."

He stopped and gently placed a trail of kisses from her abdomen to her chest and neck, all the way back up to her lips. Her lover had a strange taste now, but she didn't hate it. He kept kissing her lovingly, while his lower body moved between her legs, a bit impatient despite his clothes... Cessilia smiled and playfully grabbed his butt.

"You temptress," he groaned against her chin.

"T-take it off," she ordered with a smile.

He grunted, struggling to take his pants off without moving from his position too much; Cessi's arms around him wouldn't let go. Finally, he was naked above her, and with a smile, the Princess grabbed his shoulders, making him roll to the side so she'd be the one on top.

"Let me d-do it," she said from above him.

He nodded, his hands grabbing her hips, and pulled his head up for another kiss.

"Go slow," he muttered.

Cessilia nodded, but slow or not, she felt ready. Never had she felt more like a woman than right now. She took a deep breath, trying to remember the few pieces of advice she'd heard before, and slowly rubbed their intimate parts together. The slow teasing made him groan and breathe louder, but she enjoyed feeling her body more and more ready... Finally, she gradually went down. Despite her breathing, she could feel his thickness push against her walls, a bit painful. Ashen's hand on her waist was guiding her, though she could tell he was holding himself back from just pushing in. A sharp pain made her grimace, but she didn't shy away from it, only going down further, focusing on the good sensations to occult the rest. Despite the pain, she could tell there was also something... fulfilling. His heat inside her felt... good. She breathed loudly and slowly moved, holding on to his torso while going back up and down.

"...Are you alright?" he asked in a whisper.

His husky voice excited her a little. She could tell he was enjoying her insides pressing around him, and it made Cessilia smile and forget the

pain a bit more. She bravely moved again, stubbornly looking for genuine pleasure. The pain wasn't as bad as she had imagined, but it wasn't going away. Cessilia ignored it, and kept going, her graceful body gliding up and down. It was like a dance on his body, a search for that perfect harmony. The sound of their flesh slapping began to resonate in the cave, along with their heated breathing; Ashen grabbed the curls around her neck and pulled her in for a kiss, trying to tame his instincts. Her narrow walls were driving him insane. He wanted to ram in savagely, yet the still rational part of him was terrified at the idea of hurting her. His manhood was sucked in and out, making him grunt in helpless pleasure already. The slow back-and-forth was akin to torture, pulling his sanity and desire further and further from one another. Without thinking he began moving under her, his hands grabbing her hips and taking her with him. Cessilia cried out, in pleasure this time, and barely held herself from falling, holding on to his shoulders, her mouth constantly open to let out successive moans. They had found a rhythm, a little rough but not savage. She could feel his pounding resonating throughout her entire body, the waves of pleasure slowly obliterating the pain. Her breasts were bouncing above his face, her hair covering them like a curtain. Sometimes, they'd find a way to kiss, but there was no slowing down, only the awkward, jerky, irregular breathing and their lips trying not to miss each other.

“Are... you... alright?” he asked in between his pounding.

Cessilia nodded helplessly at first, trying to catch her breath.

“I like it,” she muttered. “I like it... Ah! Ah... I... Ah... I like it...”

He smiled, and kept going, perhaps a bit more restless. His manhood wanted more, and he could feel she had grown more used to him. Their exchange was wetter, hotter... He moved to sit up, letting her wrap her arms around his shoulders, and moved his hips and her butt a bit faster. His excitement was taking over, but he could tell he was close to release, and her cries had turned into excited screams. Trying to keep his last restraint, he thrust again and again, listening to Cessi's voice and focusing on her to finish. He looked for her eyes, staring at her dazzling beauty, the thin tears shining in her eyes, and her cute flustered expressions. His eyes

narrowed briefly, and he found his release, pulling out almost one second too late. He grunted, gushing against her hip, and let out a long sigh of relief. Cessilia's breathing was still hot and loud against his ear, and he moved his hand again, caressing her while his arm was holding her close. She cried again, her nails scratching his back when he teased her little button, but he now knew the sound of pleasure in her voice. He kept going, making circles on her entrance with her own fluids, making her hot and breathing hard again.

"A-Ashen..." she cried.

"I love your voice, Cessi," he gently whispered to her, caressing her hair.

His hot, deep voice was the trigger she needed. Something brutally sparked in her lower abdomen, cutting her breath and making her gasp. It wasn't what she expected, but it was a new sensation, and definitely pleasurable. She took several long seconds to take it in, feeling her breathing slowly calm down. Ashen's hands were gently caressing her legs, letting her come back to her senses by herself. When Cessi opened her eyes again, she met with Ashen's, and they smiled at each other, in a strange daze. Without a word, they slowly pulled closer for another tender kiss. Their bodies against each other, caressing each other's hair, they kissed slowly, only focused on the other, forgetting everything else. There was nothing special about this kiss. It was a kiss like many others between two lovers, but it had an unbearable, almost painful taste of happiness caught in a fleeting, fragile moment.

When they quietly parted again, Ashen left a gentle kiss on her shoulder.

"How do you feel?"

"I'm fine," Cessilia muttered, a bit embarrassed. "You d-don't have to ask so much..."

"Sorry, I'll stop now. ...Then shall we bathe a bit?"

"C-can we?"

"This water should be fine, it's not deep at all and surprisingly clean. As long as we don't fall asleep."

Cessilia glanced back and, indeed, the water was rather clear, for seawater. Plus, she had been intrigued by it for a while now. With Ashen's help, she got up, surprised by the lingering sensations in her body. She didn't think her insides would feel so strange after sex, but she didn't mind it much. It was like proof she wasn't a virgin anymore...

Ashen went in the water first, carefully stepping on the bed of seashells and shivered. Then, he forced himself to dip his whole body in, although it wasn't that deep. He looked surprisingly good with his white hair wet. Cessilia joined him quickly, trying to ignore how naked she was in front of him. After all, it was too late to hide, and she didn't want to act shy. She bravely stepped in after him, finding the water at a good temperature thanks to her natural body heat.

"I love this p-place," she said with a smile.

"I knew you would... I'm happy I brought you here."

For a while, they swam around and teased each other, playing with the water. However, just as Ashen had said, it was rising rather quickly. Cessilia noticed the water that was previously at their waist was soon almost to their shoulders, and the path was already under a couple inches of water when they went to retrieve their clothes.

"Let's go," said Ashen, taking her hand after they both got dressed. "I don't want to have to call your ride to get back..."

Cessilia chuckled, amused. She could only imagine what Ashen would risk if Krai found them there... She glanced one last time around the cave and carefully put one of the seashells she had collected in her pocket. It wasn't the largest or probably even the prettiest she could have found, but it was intact, in good condition, and she liked the size of it. She had taken just one, for memory. If this cave was their secret she could only visit once in a while with him, at least she'd have a memento until the next time...