

The White King's Favorite

Chapter 16-20

Chapter 16

"...Cessi, if you keep making that face, I'm really going to have Krai stick to you like the stench behind an old dragon's butt."

She bit her lips, glancing at her reflection in the mirror and noticed she had begun smiling again without even thinking about it. In the mirror, Nana, who was helping her brush her hair, exchanged a smile with her.

"...Well, Lady Tessa, I think you're just a bit upset over last night."

"How could I be?!" protested Tessa, blushing. "I... I barely remember anything!" No one in the room believed that. She had been grumbling and beating a poor pillow for a while now, retreating to the end of Cessilia's large bed and blushing constantly. When Cessilia had come back late the previous night, her cousin was nowhere in sight, and this morning, she had barged into the room after Naptunie, complaining about her headache and what a drunk idiot she had been.

"At least Lady Cessi looks happy about her evening!"

Cessilia nodded a bit shyly, but still smiling, and grabbed another little piece of fruit, their breakfast laid on the pretty vanity table. Then, remembering something, she took out the pretty shell, which she had placed in a box the previous night.

"Nana, c-can I ask you something? D-do you think this c-could be made into a... a necklace, or a b-bracelet?"

She showed her the seashell, and Nana immediately nodded.

"Of course! But you should ask Lady Bastat, I'm sure her people will make something gorgeous out of this! They can varnish it and polish it, and make it into any jewelry you want! ...Is it a special seashell?" Nana looked a bit curious, her eyes going to the seashell that had nothing special about it, and Cessilia's fond gaze on it. She could definitely tell this seashell had a significant story behind it, and was curious to hear it, but the Princess simply nodded once again. The meaning behind this seashell was something she wanted to keep to herself. Despite not getting back too late, she had a hard time sleeping the previous night, her heart beating fast the entire time and her head full of steamy memories from the cave with Ashen. She regretted they hadn't been able to at least sleep together, but they were both very aware of all the eyes on them. They had even gone back separately to the castle, and went directly to their bedrooms, as if nothing had happened, their thoughts full of each other...

"If only this rain would stop soon," sighed Nana.

The downpour outside was even more impressive than the other night's storm. It had been raining an alarming volume of water, constantly for the past few hours. It was already like this when Cessilia had woken up, and the usually beautiful views from the suite's balcony were completely blocked by the heavy curtains of rain. She noticed how Nana looked a bit worried.

"D-do downpours like this n-not occur often?"

"Not this much," she shook her head. "We're used to the wind and rain, even the storms, but I haven't seen such a bad downpour in a while."

Indeed, it was the heaviest rain Cessilia and Tessandra had ever witnessed. They weren't used to much rain at all in the Dragon Empire. The Capital and most of the Empire were too far south to get more than what they usually did in the rainy season. Cessilia's family's castle in the north had mostly snow, except for the warmest months. Only their grandmother's castle, located half-way between both, had some rain, but it was hot and humid, and certainly never this cold nor heavy.

"Is it really b-bad?"

"...It should be fine," muttered Naptunie. "The Capital is on a mountain anyway, so even if the streets are flooded a bit, the water will only fall far below, by the river. ...I'm more worried about people at the entrances of the bridges, on the shores of the Soura... but there are evacuation systems, so it should be alright. I think."

For a second, Cessilia was confused about why people on the other sides of the bridges would have an issue, since they were on the same level as Aestara, and the Soura far below, until she remembered the wall. If the walls meant to protect the city were keeping the water from draining properly, then the areas near the Capital could get flooded.

"...How long d-do you think it c-could hold?"

Nana's hands stopped moving, and she frowned, obviously doing the calculations in her head.

"If it keeps going like this, then... it could start accumulating in a few hours. ...By midday, if it hasn't stopped or slowed down, the water will start being retained..."

Cessilia frowned. A few hours was a really short time, and acting too late could become really problematic. Although

her experience there the previous time hadn't been the best, she could still remember the many, many people outside of those walls, waiting for a chance to get in. She couldn't even imagine anyone outside in this weather. It was cold, humid, and only a proper roof could shelter them, but many were homeless, even within the Capital. And they hadn't seen many examples of

people helping each other out...

She suddenly stood up, and walked to the wardrobe, opening it wide.

"...Cessi?"

"D-do I have something that c-could protect me from the rain?" she asked Nupia, who had been standing by the door this whole time.

"Yes, two of your coats are made of water-proof material, but... Princess, I'm not sure you should go out in this weather."

"C-call your siblings, we're g-going out," Cessilia retorted. "It's t-time you three p-prove your worth. Nana, c-can you ask your family t-to help us out?"

"We're going to the bridges?" exclaimed Nana, running up to her. "To help out?"

"Yes. I c-can't stand here knowing those p-people are in danger."

"But... maybe the rain will stop soon!"

"No, Cessi is right," said Tessa, staring outside. "This is going to last for a while." Naptunie glanced out the window, baffled, but she was incapable of seeing whatever Tessandra was staring at. She hesitated for a few seconds, fidgeting, but as Tessandra sighed and got up, she stood up too.

"...How do you know?" she finally asked, while Tessandra put on the other coat.

"Our eyes," said Tessa, pointing at her dark irises. "We can see much better and farther than normal people, to be able to ride our dragons. And with how far I can see this rain, I can tell you, it's not going to stop before tonight at the very best..."

Naptunie went a bit white. She didn't doubt the two young women a single second, and if Tessandra said it was going to rain until the evening, she fully believed it.

"Oh no," she muttered. "What are we going to do? All those poor people...!"

"Nana, d-do you have a raincoat?" asked Cessilia, putting on another pair of shoes while preparing to leave.

"Yes, it's upstairs in Uncle's apartment..."

"G-go get it. Then, I will need to b-buy some buns from your family, d-do you think they can p-prepare large quantities of b-buns like the ones you s-sold us?"

Nana's chest inflated, as if her family's pride was on the line.

"Of course! We can have them made at the storehouse near the bridges, in the west part of the Capital! We may not have much fresh fish left, but we have a lot of stored food, and vegetables too! We can even fill them with sweet potatoes!"

"G-great." Cessilia smiled. "C-can you ask your family to p-prepare them to d-distribute? If you c-can do as much as p-possible, I promise I will cover the c-costs."

"I'm sure my family will refuse to let you pay, Lady Cessilia, it's our people after all! But I will be going now!"

"Thank you, Nana. We will c-catch up with you later."

While Nana ran out ahead, very determined and happy to help, Cessilia and Tessandra left right after her.

“What about us?” asked Tessandra.

“Let’s b-buy tea from the Hashat Family,” explained Cessilia. “We c-can ask for their help, and Lady B-Bastat too. We will need a p-place like a shelter, and a lot of p-people to distribute warm t-tea and food.”

“Alright.”

“We c-could use some soldiers’ help, T-Tessa...”

Her cousin stopped right in the middle of the corridor and frowned, turning to her. She progressively went redder.

“Cessi, you’re not—”

“Nana is already g-gone,” said Cessi with a faint smile, “and I’m sure her b-brother will be working t-today too. B-but if you g-go and ask...”

“You did this on purpose, didn’t you!” exclaimed Tessa, literally stomping her foot down.

“Cessi! You knew you

wanted to ask Sab, and you sent Nana ahead on purpose to set me up!”

Cessilia bit her lower lip, slightly amused. She hadn’t really thought that far ahead, but judging from her cousin’s

flustered reaction, Tessa wouldn’t have believed her anyway. Plus, she knew the proud Tessandra all too well. Without a very good reason, she probably would have denied everything and avoided poor Sabael for a while.

“I c-can’t...”

“T-Tessa, please. We d-don’t have much time.”

She saw Tessandra clench her fists, her face red as if she was about to explode or breathe fire at any moment now.

Luckily, before she could protest more, the two other triplets arrived next to them, Nupia explaining the situation briefly to them.

“One of you g-goes to help Nana,” ordered Cessilia immediately. “One g-goes with Tessa, and the last with me, s-so if we need to c-communicate, we c-can send one of you.”

This time, they didn’t discuss at all, and the boy departed immediately to catch up to Naptunie, while Nupia stepped to

Cessilia’s side, her younger sister behind Tessa. Before anyone could add anything, though, two Royal Guards suddenly

appeared at the end of the corridor. Tessandra went white for a second, before realizing neither of them were Sabael. The two

men walked up to Cessilia, and to their surprise, respectfully bowed.

“Princess Cessilia of the Dragon Empire. Your presence is requested by His Majesty and the Royal Council.”

“N-now?” She frowned.

“Yes, Your Highness.”

Cessilia sighed. If Ashen had sent those men, she couldn't refuse, but she was still thinking what was going on outside was much more important. Still, she took a breath in and turned to her cousin, determined.

"T-Tessa, go ahead, please. I'll t-try to talk t-to Ishira or Hephrael if I c-can see them there. I'll c-catch up to you g-guys, but Nana is g-going to need you."

Tessandra sighed, unhappy about the situation, but she glared at the guards, and then toward Nupia, raising her index finger at the female servant.

"If anything happens to my cousin, this time I swear you'll pay for it."

"I understand, Lady Tessa," said Nupia, not flinching at all.

Her cousin grunted in frustration, but quickly turned around and left, probably to catch up to Naptunie before she left the castle. Left alone with Nupia and the guards, Cessilia turned to them, a bit annoyed, but still composed.

"Let's g-go."

Before the guards had even turned around, Cessilia knew they would be escorting her to the Council Room. The matter couldn't have been too serious, though, judging by the way the guards walked ahead without even checking to see if she was

still following. Still, she wondered why they would suddenly call her to the meeting...

When she arrived in the room, the tension was palpable. Once again, seven out of the nine chairs were filled, with all

their eyes going to her as soon as she stepped in. Cessilia's green eyes immediately looked for Ashen's.

The King was seated on his throne, sullen. He went from a slouching position to sitting up as soon as she arrived, his

upper body leaning forward in her direction, but the frown between his eyebrows didn't disappear. Since he wasn't glaring at

her, Cessilia imagined his anger was fueled by someone and something else. She looked around at all the eyes on her. To her

surprise and relief, Hephrael was now seated there instead of his father, with his cousin Ishira right next to him, her hands

joined in front of her, and she smiled at Cessilia when their eyes met. The other eyes around the room weren't as welcoming,

though. The two candidates of the Yekara Clan were also there and smiling, although their smiles had something sinister about

them. Seated between them was their Clan Leader, a man as tall as he was thin, with long hair going down his shoulders, a

square chin, and piercing eyes. He was the one glaring at her the most, but Cessilia ignored him, not intimidated in the slightest.

Except for the remaining Pangoja candidate, Istis, all the other faces were unfamiliar, or people Cessilia hadn't been able to chat with before.

It was clear which people were favorable to her, those who were neutral, and those who hated her. The latter were the most numerous, and did not bother to hide their feelings, either. Things were considerably tenser than when she had come here the first time.

Cessilia quickly bowed in Ashen's direction.

"G-good morning, Your Highness, honorable L-Lords. May I ask what is th-the reason for my p-presence here?"

"Princess Cessilia," sighed a man who ought to be the representative of the Dorosef Tribe. "Some people here are... expressing concerns over your status as a candidate."

Cessilia frowned, and crossed her arms.

"I'm c-curious to hear your c-concerns," she said calmly.

"A hoe can't marry a king, that's what," scoffed Safia.

She had said it just loud enough for all to hear, despite the downpour outside. Ashen stood up furiously, glaring at her.

"Yekara," he hissed, "I suggest you watch your words carefully."

"Why?" retorted the Yekara Leader, not afraid. "Your Majesty, my niece raises a true concern for your sake. It is part of the rules of the competition that all candidates should be virgins."

Cessilia's blood left her face. She wasn't embarrassed about losing her virginity. She was shocked they already knew.

It hadn't been a day since she had been with Ashen. She glanced around, many people looking embarrassed to hear this, doubtful or sorry for her. More were delighted by the accusation, though.

"...Is th-that why you had me c-come here?" Cessilia said, not hiding the anger in her voice.

"Princess or not, you have to follow the rules of the competition," said the Yekara Leader. "We have several witnesses claiming they saw the Princess going out alone last night, and you came back to the castle late in the night."

"Princess Cessilia and her cousin were invited to the Hashat Family house," retorted Hephrael. "I already told the Council that, and many witnesses will confirm this as well."

"Oh, we know. But the Princess was seen parting ways with her cousin, and a man came to her after that. She definitely spent a part of the night with him."

Cessilia was frustrated and mad. She exchanged a glance with Ashen, but it was now clear why he had requested her presence. He wanted her to decide whether to reveal their relationship or not. At the very least, Jisel wasn't here this time. It should have made her glad, but somehow, she had an ominous feeling about her absence.

"Well?" said the Yekara Lord. "We knew you aren't quite eloquent, Princess, but we still ought to hear at least an explanation. Or proof we're wrong. After all, we do have means to check your words..."

An old woman stepped forward, probably a nurse or something of the sort, but she ignored her. Instead, Cessilia glared at the man who was now trying to annoy her. He had the look of a predator toying with his prey. He knew he was right, and perhaps, he even knew who she had actually spent the night with. What he wanted was to humiliate her, expose her in front of the Council. He may have thought a young woman who had just lost her virginity would have been terribly embarrassed of the situation and ashamed. However, Cessilia crossed her arms, not shy in the slightest. "It's t-true," she said. "However, it d-doesn't disqualify me as a c-candidate if the man I spent the n-night with was His Majesty." Many eyes shifted from her to the King. The White King was smiling. For many, that unique sight was absolutely terrifying. Rather than a happy man, it looked like a predator showing its fangs, and when he relaxed his shoulders and sat back down, many got chills. He remained silent, though, so the Yekara Leader was confused for a second, his eyes going from the King to the Princess. "B-but you already knew th-that, d-didn't you?" said Cessilia with a smile. "You... you broke the rules! We will not accept a sullied candidate as our Queen!" "You're not making any sense, Lord Yekara. ...Surely you were not expecting the future Queen to remain immaculate?" retorted Ishira, raising an eyebrow. "How is His Majesty supposed to have his heirs then?" "We shall not accept it," the man insisted. "The purity of the candidates is one of the rules for—" The Princess suddenly stepped in his direction, suddenly seeming taller, making the older man sit back in his chair and almost swallow his tongue. "His Majesty can confirm I had b-been with no other man b-before him," retorted Cessilia, her angry voice suddenly echoing in the room, "and I will not b-be humiliated b-by the mere loss of my virginity b-by any man. If you want t-to reduce your c-candidates to mere child-making t-tools, th-then all I did was g-get a headstart on them!" She looked around, glaring back at those who had been prepared for her humiliation. "You c-can't even honor the rule of not k-killing or harming other candidates," hissed Cessilia, "and you're t-trying to corner me with your rules that d-don't make sense? A K-Kingdom where a man c-can take mistresses, b-but his wife has to bbe a virgin? How c-can you ask that of your d-daughters and nieces?!" No one in the room dared to utter a word anymore. In fact, most of the Lords were stunned and stuck to their chairs, some of them sending guilty glances toward their candidates. But Cessilia's angry eyes suddenly went to Ashen. The King had completely stopped smiling.

"Next t-time, at least ask your King to stay pure too."

A heavy silence befell the room after her words. She hadn't meant to target Ashen with this, but she couldn't spare him, and the guilt was legitimate too. After all, he had agreed to those rules as well as the others, and even if she knew it was her own pride talking, Cessilia was still bitter about Jisel. Even worse, she couldn't swallow the hypocrisy of these men toward their own female relatives, and she refused to let him be used against her. If anything, Cessilia had grown up in a house where women were not looked down upon, and she wouldn't let herself be here. After a short while, someone in the room chuckled, awkwardly breaking the silence. "...This is why I admire the Empress so much."

The woman who had spoken was the only one seated as one of the Family Lords. In fact, she could have almost been mistaken for a man, with her short hair, strong jaw, and the fact that she wore the least jewelry out of all seven. She was wearing a modest, dark brown outfit too, with her legs open and large boots, some muddy water staining the beautiful floor under her. She turned to the other Lords with a smile.

"The Princess made a reasonable point. If it was indeed His Majesty with her, I don't believe there's any valid reason for her to be taken out of the competition."

"The Hashat Family supports this," immediately nodded Hephrael.

"We're not holding a vote!" exclaimed the Yekara Leader.

"We are," retorted Ashen.

Because he had been so silent until then, the King's ice-cold voice took them all by surprise. The Yekara Leader glared his way, and for a while, it seemed everyone was suddenly reminded the real monster was still there, just unusually passive.

There was a very faint general movement in the room, a lot of people stepping an inch or two farther away from the throne.

Some of the Lords even nervously shifted their positions on their chairs, sitting straight or leaning away. Even when he was slouching on his throne, Ashen was effortlessly dominating them all.

The leader of the Yekara Clan did try to hold his stare for a while, but Ashen wasn't even glaring; he was like an ice

fortress, a wall of contempt with the eyes of a monster. Soon enough, the man was forced to look down and admit his defeat

toward the King. Still, he raised his head high again, gripping his seat and looking sullen. Since he couldn't convince the King,

the leader of the Yekara glared at his peers as if to dissuade them. Much to his annoyance, though, the leader of the Sehsan

Tribe then raised his hand.

"The Sehsan Tribe also supports the Princess' statement. We won't require any more proof, either."

"The Dorosef Tribe too!" exclaimed the man in the next seat.

With already four out of the seven Lords having spoken up, the outcome didn't even need to be said. This was Cessilia's win, and her green eyes went to the Yekara Leader as if to dare him to speak up and raise this issue again.

"...Are we d-done?" she asked in a loud and clear voice.

Despite her stutter, the imperious tone in her voice was leaving no doubt as to her superiority there. Those who had tried to humiliate her had completely lost. This Princess who had seemed to almost hide behind her cousin all along was now

clearly standing her ground alone, and making a laughing stock out of the Clan Leader.

"...The competition isn't over," the leader of the Pangoja Clan declared suddenly. "At least now it is clear a few of us actually have the intent to keep things clean."

He was actually glaring at the leader of the Yekara Clan, not Cessilia. It surprised her a little, but after all, he had lost one of his candidates, probably one of his younger relatives, to this competition already. From the murderous glare he was

sending across the room, he had probably identified the culprit as well. However, his rival smirked. He may have lost to the

King and the Princess, but the Yekara Clan Leader wasn't going to be afraid of one of his peers.

"It's not over indeed," he said. "Perhaps we need to reconsider this... competition, after all."

While the two of them kept exchanging glares, Cessilia sighed and turned to Ishira, mimicking with her lips for the young woman to meet her outside. Ishira nodded, and after whispering in her cousin's ear, quietly stepped out first. Cessilia turned back to Ashen, giving him a little nod.

"Your M-Majesty," she said, bowing faintly, "Lords, I will see you all at t-tonight's banquet."

She didn't want to greet or thank them all excessively. She had already given them enough of her time, and the people

whom she wanted to respect her already did and understood her actions. Cessilia turned around and left with her head held

high, a silence behind her.

She waited until the doors were closed behind her to let out a long sigh.

"That cunning bastard," said Ishira, appearing in the corridor. "I'm sorry you had to go through that, Princess."

"It's f-fine, I expected a few th-things like this to happen. And p-please, call me Cessilia."

"Understood. So? Did you need something from me?"

Cessilia briefly went on to explain the situation, and what she was requiring of the Hashat Family. Ishira listened carefully, a faint smile appearing on her lips.

"...I understand; it's a great idea! I will go right away to prepare everything, and meet you outside. We also have honey,

sugar, and many edible plants we don't need and can give to people. But don't you talk about money; we will donate it all for free and I'm sure my cousin will agree to this. But... why didn't you mention this in front of the Council? I'm sure you could have gotten them all to help."

Cessilia shook her head.

"I d-don't believe so. They would have d-done it by obligation, p-probably unwilling t-to really help me out, and I d-didn't want to cause more c-conflicts between the clans. It is already hard t-to have them all in one room. P-plus, if they are watching me enough t-to know about what happened b-between me and His Majesty last n-night, they will find out about th-this soon enough too. It's up t-to them to come t-to help or not, b-but it would be less likely if I had asked th-them."

Ishira was a bit impressed.

Cessilia hadn't decided to ask for help; not because she feared the clans or wanted to pick which ones would help her.

She had considered the current psychological situation between the Lords, and chosen to let them think they would help out of their own volition. She had raised the chances for them to actually help willingly, as opposed to if she had asked, they would have done it unwillingly because they didn't like her, perhaps with fewer means or people, out of spite. Now, the Lords were going to see this foreign Princess winning over the people and were most likely going to intervene to even the score. Ishira smiled, relieved.

"...I think you're right," she nodded. "Good. Then I'll leave a note for my cousin and get going right away. I'm sure he'll relay the word too, in a subtle manner."

"Th-thank you."

"I should be the one to thank you," Ishira shook her head. "It is disgraceful that the most powerful people of our

Kingdom are bickering in a room while some of our people are outside in this horrible weather. Thanks for reminding us of that... Alright, I'll get going now. See you there."

Cessilia nodded and watched the young woman quickly leave to get a servant to send her note to her cousin.

Meanwhile, Cessilia turned around, reuniting with Nupia who had been quietly waiting for her outside of the Council Room.

"My siblings, Lady Tessandra, and Lady Naptunie have left the castle already, Princess," she said as they were rushing down the stairs. "I also asked for horses, they should be ready for us right outside."

"G-got it. Let's hurry and—"

Before she could finish that sentence, Cessilia felt a presence behind them on the stairs, and looked back. It was Ashen,

who had rushed out of the throne room to catch up to her. Nupia bowed and respectfully went down to the floor below to leave them some privacy. Meanwhile, Cessilia and Ashen reunited, grabbing each other's hands in this narrow spiral staircase. He was still breathing quickly and loudly, probably having just left the Council. His chest going up and down in front of her got Cessilia thinking about the previous night, and she stepped back, trying to control her emotions. She was still a bit high on adrenaline from her angry outburst earlier. Her heart just couldn't settle down. "Ashen, if it's about earlier, I'm not g-going to apologize," she said coldly. "I d-didn't mean to implicate you, b-but—" "No, no. I know," he said, lowering his head a bit, although he was still significantly taller. "...I had it coming for a while, anyway. It was just... Well, I think I would have rather had you punch me." "You're lucky I p-prefer words then," chuckled Cessilia. "B-but... I'll think about it n-next time."

Ashen grimaced.

"Fine..."

He released one of her hands gently, caressing her cheek instead. He did have an apologetic look in his eyes, although he also looked a bit hurt and sulky from earlier. Perhaps the Lords had irritated him more than her remark had. He had remained mostly silent, but that didn't mean he wasn't mad about the Yekara Leader's twisted accusations. Cessilia nodded, hiding a faint smile. She was glad this wasn't going to damage their relationship. At least, he was finally owning up to his wrongs...

"...I had a talk with her last night," he muttered.

"You d-did?" Cessilia exclaimed, shocked.

"Yes... When I got back after seeing you, I ran into her, and... I knew I had to do something about my relationship with her. For you. I can't pretend... even if it has only been in name for a while, I didn't want to have her still known as my mistress.

So, I told Jisel that... she and I needed to put an end to this."

"How d-did she react...?"

Ashen slowly shook his head.

"Not... well. Perhaps she saw it coming, but she was not crazy about the idea. We argued for a while... In the end, she just left, saying she wanted time to think about it. I don't think she had realized what... how much you mean to me."

So that explained why she wasn't there this time... Cessilia felt a huge weight lifted off her heart. She hadn't even realized how dark and ugly the veil of jealousy was on her feelings for Ashen, but just then, it felt like something had finally come off. She took a deep breath, a bit heavier than she had thought, and looked at him, as if under a new light.

“...I understand,” she muttered. “Th-thank you for t-talking to her.”

“Don’t thank me.” He shook his head. “I knew this should have been dealt with... a while ago. Perhaps I was also feeling sorry toward Jisel for... using her.”

She could understand Ashen wasn’t feeling good about suddenly ditching the woman who had been by his side for a while, but Cessilia couldn’t feel sorry for his mistress. She had a hunch that Jisel had used him at least as much as he had used her... and things wouldn’t be settled so easily, either. From what she had seen, Jisel was not one to let go easily.

Still, Cessilia shook her head. She didn’t have time to worry and get mad about her rival once again. She took Ashen’s hand off her cheek and stepped down.

“Sorry, b-but I have t-to go,” she said. “I’ll see you later t-tonight.”

After one last look at him, she quickly turned around, about to go down the stairs again. However, before she could take more than two steps down, Ashen’s hand grabbed her arm, holding her back with a worried expression.

“Wait, where are you going? Why are you headed downstairs?”

“Outside. T-to help the people b-behind the walls. The rain won’t s-stop until t-tonight, and Nana said they risk b-being flooded over there. P-people might get sick without p-proper shelter.”

“No, Cessilia, you...”

Ashen was about to say something, most likely to stop her from going out in this horrid weather, but just then, his eyes met Cessi’s. The determination in her striking green irises made him swallow whatever he was going to say. He frowned slightly, having some inner conflict, and then he sighed, his shoulders going down a bit. “Fine. ...I’ll come with you.”

“B-but the castle...”

“It’s not like it’s going to fall just because I’m not sitting on my throne for a few hours. I’m coming with you.”

Cessilia hesitated, but something warm appeared in her heart, slightly glad and relieved. She nodded, happily.

“Alright. Let’s g-go.”

They went down the stairs side by side, and just as Nupia had promised, horses were waiting downstairs. Ashen called his own, a very large, black steed, and they left the castle grounds a couple of minutes later.

It didn’t take more than a few minutes for them and their mounts to be drenched. The rain was so heavy they could barely see ahead, and they couldn’t have the horses go faster than a trot, in case they’d slip or hit someone. There was no one out, though; everyone was probably cautiously staying indoors. The water was dripping down the dark cobblestone, and just

like Nana had described, was going down the streets to fall into the riverbed. There was still a lot, however, and some narrower streets seemed to have turned into little rivers, when it wasn't deep puddles filling an intersection.

Finally, they arrived at the wall, and with just one glance at Ashen's white hair, the soldiers stepped aside, opening the door for them. They crossed the empty bridge without an issue, but Cessilia could finally take a good look at the situation.

Naptunie was right again. The few holes in the walls' lower half were like heavy waterfalls, releasing a continuous large stream of water into the river. The waterflow was so dense that the holes were clearly not enough. Cessilia glanced further, and there were smaller waterfalls coming from further along the coast, on both sides of the bridge's end, naturally dug beneath the wall as the soil became saturated with water. Luckily, the rocks in the layers beneath wouldn't collapse, but this meant the ground on the other side already had too much water...

They reached the next door, but as they yelled for the soldiers to open, it took longer for anyone to respond. After a

while, Ashen got down from his horse, and went to bang at the door. To their surprise, it opened, but a heavy flow of water

came out of it, like a valve had just opened. Cessilia anxiously watched it cover up to the horses' ankles and Ashen's. They

exchanged a glance, both shocked, but it was even worse on the other side. The soldiers tried to let them through, but the crowd

of people trying to get to the bridge was making things difficult. They had to open the doors very briefly, and once they got to

the other side, Cessilia really took hold of the utter and complete chaos. The brief opening of the door and the water that had

been flushed on the bridge wasn't enough. Hundreds of people were gathered, shouting at the soldiers to let them through,

water up to their knees for some. The Royal Guards, five times more than usual, were barely keeping the protesters away from

the doors thanks to their weapons and the archers on top of the wall, threatening to shoot any trespassers down. Moreover, the

crowd was angry, but most of them were families. There were a lot of children crying, even those carried by their parents, and

some that couldn't be had water up to their waist. Cessilia's heart dropped. This was worse than they had thought.

"Cessi!"

Tessandra ran to her from across the crowd, effortlessly pushing people out of the way to get to her. Sabael was right

behind her, not in his soldier uniform but with his large sword on his back, soaked to the bone despite his raincoat. Cessilia

threw her shoes to Nupia, and ran to get to her cousin, grabbing Tessa's cold hand.

"It's complete hell," she said in one breath, wiping the water off her face. "The guards didn't want to listen to us, but Naptunie is amazing. She negotiated with some inns to let the older people stay inside!" "Our siblings and cousins are spreading the word to our tribe," nodded Sabael. "We also have two of our uncles and one aunt here, they are trying to make people stay calm, and talking to more shop owners and residents to get help." His eyes quickly went to the King, surprised to see him there, but a bit relieved as well. Ashen and Cessilia exchanged a look.

"Ishira will c-come soon," said Cessilia. "We need t-to set a tent outside to d-distribute warm tea and food, so people will stay c-calm a bit longer."

Tessandra nodded, and turned to Sabael.

"Let's find the largest, biggest pot we can," she said. "I'll go ask around if anyone has a tent that we could use, or perhaps we can set it up in front of someone's shop."

"Got it."

Tessandra quickly turned to Cessilia again.

"Nana is in the first inn on the second street!" she shouted, covering the downpour and loud crowd.

"I'll g-go see her!"

Tessandra nodded, and she and Sabael turned around, running back to the habitations to find what they needed. Cessilia turned to Ashen.

"I'll stay here," he said. "Things will get much worse if all those people get inside the Capital or even take the doors down. People won't dare to break the door as long as I'm here."

Just as he said that, a rock suddenly hit his temple.

He grimaced, and glared back at the crowd, but whoever had done that was staying quiet and hidden under the King's annoyed glare. However, it was clear he wasn't too popular. Many people were glaring back, if not looking at him with terrified eyes.

"Let us through!" a woman screamed. "Our children are terrified and drenched! We're going to be flooded!"

"There won't be a better place to shelter yourself in the Capital," shouted Ashen, calmly but loud enough for the crowd

to hear despite the downpour. "There are too many of you, and we don't have time to allocate everyone somewhere!"

"You liar! You're keeping us out while you nobles stay comfortably inside in your palaces!"

Many more people shouted at him, similar things and furious accusations, but Ashen didn't flinch. Cessilia's heart hurt

for him, but the King was incredibly calm and composed. After a while, the crowd calmed down by itself. People weren't less

angry, but they were slowly realizing who was standing in front of them, just as drenched and cold as they were, and not turning away from their insults. The King was still there, looking more human than ever, his wet, white hair stuck to his face and his hot breath releasing little clouds of mist.

"I'm sorry," he suddenly said.

His words were followed by a shocked silence. Some people exchanged glances, as if to check they weren't the only ones to have heard this. The King was apologizing to them? It was baffling enough to make everyone calm down, although many whispers went rampant through the crowd.

Ashen sighed and pushed his wet hair out of his face.

"...I'll do my best to save my people," he said, water dripping down his chin, "but I need you all to listen to me. To us, for the time being. I promise I'll do what I can to help you all."

Cessilia was staring at him, an indescribable feeling of pride in her heart. It was the first time she was seeing Ashen interact with his people, with the common folk, and he was nothing like he was with the Clan Leaders and nobles. He was drenched, his shoulders low and cold, but he had never looked more magnificent in her eyes. This was the real Ashen, the Ashen who had grown up in the streets of Aestara and fought to free them from his father's tyranny.

In front of them, the crowd seemed at a loss of what to do, exchanging whispers between them and sending doubtful glances to their monarch. Cessilia stepped forward.

"We are bringing tea and food," she said in a loud voice, "but no one will get anything if we can't distribute them. Please be patient a little bit longer!"

She glanced around to see if anyone was going to protest, but the mention of warm food and drinks sparked a light of hope in many eyes. The King himself had come, and the situation was looking much brighter now, so the crowd had ceased to protest for a short while.

The rain itself wasn't going to kill these people. They were scared of drowning or getting sick. The solution to the

second problem was on the way, but the first one was the priority for now. There was way too much water starting to flood the streets of the Outer Capital. Soon, not even the buildings would be safe, the water was going to start getting in. Cessilia looked around, trying to find a solution. The ground was slightly inclined toward the river and the edge where the walls had been erected. That was the main problem. Because the water couldn't be evacuated naturally, the whole area was turning into a reservoir. Cessilia frowned and turned to Ashen.

"We have to tear down the wall."

The King frowned, immediately conflicted. He didn't like the idea. Those walls had been built to prevent people from finding ways to cross over the bridge or cheat their way inside the Capital. If they broke some of it, they might be opening a large breach into a lot more troubles later.

He looked around. Sadly, right now, there was no other solution on the table. The water was rising fast, and all the people in front of them were in danger. Perhaps a couple more hours and the water would start swallowing people, and getting inside the buildings. They had to do something while they could, or there would be no way to calm the furious crowd, and that would be a much more pressing issue. His eyes met with those of the terrified children, clinging to their parents and crying loudly. He had once been as helpless as them. He had been scared of dying, of hunger, of the cold. He had been scared for his mother, and his younger brothers, and watched helplessly as they were taken away by disease.

Ashen took a deep breath, and turned around, staring at the large closed doors. Taking down the wall, even a portion of it, would take too long, but they could win time before that. He glanced back at the crowd, and his dark eyes darkened.

"I'm going to open the doors," he said, "...but no one shall come in."

Immediately, a concert of protests started loudly. People had been waiting for days, weeks, and even months for those doors to open for them and their families. Now, the King was going to open them, but they couldn't cross, even in such a situation? This was too much. The shouts at the King got louder, but Ashen wouldn't budge. He stared at the crowd, with his dark eyes, not afraid. Cessilia wasn't as confident. His popularity was already not what it once was, and now, it was almost a provocation to open those doors and trust these people not to force their way through. The only thing scarier than a natural disaster was an angry mob. Ashen was facing hundreds of people, and this time, no one could help him. This was not a situation that a dragon, brute force, or money could solve. Cessilia couldn't step in, either, which made her feel even more sorry for him. But those people were Ashen's people. She was still only a foreign princess.

"You can't keep us here! We're all going to die!" the angry crowd roared. "Let us through!"

"No," Ashen retorted, calm but loudly, "or do you people want another civil war?" Those last two words calmed them almost instantly. There wasn't a single person here who had forgotten the nightmare before the White King rose to his seat. Some were hesitant, or doubtful, the cold and anger making them lose part of their

rationality, but many knew their current situation would come to pass if they waited, perhaps in a matter of hours. They all knew a civil war could last much, much longer than that.

"...There's really nothing ready to welcome you in the Inner Capital," Ashen continued, "but we are bringing the basic necessities to you. If you force your way in, not only will you not get anything, but people might die in meaningless fights.

"Who says you'll help us?!" someone shouted. "You've been keeping us out of the Capital for so long!"

"I've been doing what I can!" Ashen roared back. "...And I know it's not enough. But right now, this is what it is. I

swear we'll do what we can and save everyone we can. I'll do anything I need to."

The crowd hesitated, but before anyone could protest again, a large man made his way to the front. His large frame was

intimidating, and he was standing half a head above everyone else, with a large beard and small eyes, which were riveted on

the King. He was carrying a large ax too, although his apron seemed to indicate he was some sort of blacksmith, not a fighter.

He stepped forward, detaching himself from the crowd to face Ashen, his bushy eyebrows knitted together.

"I remember a boy who once stood with us," he said, his loud voice reaching everyone.

"Back then, there was a bad

king in this castle and war everywhere. My family was scared, like everyone. I lost two brothers, my sisters-in-law, and four

of my nephews and nieces to that bad King. Not many people were brave enough to fight the King's soldiers, but there was a

boy who did. That boy was brave, as brave as any man I've met."

He was standing, tall as a mountain, and staring very seriously at Ashen. From the odd accent in his voice and the

strange hairdo with feathers braided in his hair, Cessilia suspected he belonged to one of the smaller families. He had a few

people standing behind him and glancing at him as if he was their leader of some sort, and a young girl was standing behind his

leg. In fact, as her eyes kept going around, Cessilia noticed several more groups of people who seemed to have similar

distinctive traits from the others. Some of them had tattoos of little black dots and lines on their bodies, including their faces, or

scarifying marks. Others had unique hairstyles or unique kinds of jewelry. So many people belonged to families she hadn't

heard of before...

"Is there... anything left of that boy we trusted?" asked the man. "I won't follow a greedy and cruel king. But I will

listen to that boy once more."

Cessilia turned her eyes to Ashen. He looked a bit surprised to be reminded of his past in such a way, but after all, it

hadn't been so long for those people since the seemingly dead Prince had come back to take his tyrant father down from the Eastern Kingdom's throne. For those people, the memories of his battles and honesty were still fresh enough to give him the benefit of the doubt, and thanks to that bearded man, even those who had forgotten were now reminded of this.

Ashen took a deep breath and stepped back, not away from the man, but closer to the doors.

"...I am that boy. And I am your King. Now, whether you agree with me or not..."

He turned around and began pushing the doors. Those doors were large and heavy.

They normally took a whole

mechanism to be opened, and at least one man for each door. Yet, the King only had one hand pushing against each door. They

saw him use all of his core, arm, and back muscles, struggle for half a second, and slowly, he opened the large doors. As

predicted, the water went flowing out through the bridge's arches, decreasing on the side they were standing on. Cessilia turned

to the people, all stunned by the King's strength, and bearing. She felt a little bit proud.

Despite the situation, those people

admired Ashen. Indeed, they knew what he had once done for this Kingdom, and weren't ready quite yet to mob against him.

Once the doors were opened, Ashen turned around, his chest going up and down with his heavy breathing. He stared at

the crowd as if daring them to defy him.

However, nobody moved. Many people had their eyes riveted on the bridge, but the anger from earlier had definitely

been subdued. Instead, after a couple of seconds, some of those eyes lit up.

"Look!" exclaimed a young man.

From the other end of the bridge, people were advancing, heading toward this side.

Cessilia ran to Ashen's side, and

quickly found relief. The Dorosef Tribe! She recognized a few of Nana's cousins, who were braving the downpour to pull a

large cart. Soon enough, they arrived, drenched, but looking around. The young woman she recognized from the Fish Market

ran to them first.

"Lady Cessilia! Y-Your Majesty... We brought a lot of food! As much as we could prepare for now, but there is more

coming! And we have ingredients to prepare more here too!"

"Th-thank you so much," said Cessilia, relieved. "Let's g-get you set up as soon as p-possible."

"...Food?"

The little voice behind could have come from anyone, but the dozens of hungry eyes riveted on the cart meant the same

thing: those people were starving. Cessilia was suddenly worried. Were they going to try and force their way to the cart now?

She took a deep breath and stood in front of the cart.

“Yes. The D-Dorosef Tribe brought food, b-but please, be p-patient! We will find a way t-to distribute it t-to everyone!”

A few people ignored her and suddenly rushed toward the cart. Cessilia stepped back, panicking about what to do to stop all those people, but before she could even react, an ax suddenly swung through the air, brutally slamming into the ground.

“Stop it!” roared the man from earlier. “Didn’t you hear the lady? They will distribute the food! And there’s more

coming! If you rush now, how many kids will starve because of you greedy bastards?!

By the Galatian Tribe, if anyone else touches that cart, I’ll slice your greedy hands myself!”

Even the young girl by his side glared around as if to dare anyone to approach. His people were clearly siding with him, and now, the crowd didn’t dare come closer, instead looking like they actually felt a bit guilty for rushing.

“...We will b-be ready soon,” Cessilia promised.

She exchanged a quick glance with Ashen, who was still standing a few steps back in front of the doors. He nodded and crossed his arms. He wouldn’t move from there, to prevent the mob from trying to force their way into the Capital. The tall man

sighed and turned to Cessilia. She was tall, but that man looked like a giant compared to most people. He brushed his hair.

“Come on, young lady, you should get all this to where we can distribute it soon. Words can’t hold hungry stomachs for

long, and to be honest, everyone’s been starving for a while...”

“I will. Th-thank you.”

Not hesitating anymore, Cessilia quickly moved, guiding the people from the Dorosef Tribe to meet Nana at the first

inn, just like Tessandra had said. Plus, her cousin was there, and they had found a tent large and strong enough to erect outside.

Quickly, they had the Dorosef people borrow the inn’s kitchen and start making more buns, while Tessandra, Sabael, and

Cessilia put the tent up outside, as close to the doors as they could while staying close to the inn. The crowd was now

completely disinterested in the doors, glancing with hungry eyes at the large beignets that quickly appeared in their little stall.

“Everyone, get in line!” roared Ashen. “Families with children or pregnant women first!”

The people began moving, and despite a bit of uproar, no fight was instigated, everyone too tired to really attack each

other. Soon enough, a clear line of people appeared, and those who tried to get in front were loudly told to go to the back.

Under Cessilia’s orders, the triplets made sure the line was kept with the priority they had determined, and they began

distributing the first beignets. They could smell in the air that more were already being prepared at the inn, and soon enough,

two more carts arrived, the Dorosef cousins relaying each other to bring them back and forth with ingredients. Ishira arrived shortly after, bringing with her large bags of tea leaves and more people from her family to help. They couldn't set up the tea outside, as there was no way to keep a fire going in this flood and downpour, but a pot was prepared inside someone's shop, and they started donating warm tea with the beignets. Cessilia was impressed with how willing everyone was to help since they had arrived. Many people ought to have been too scared by the mob, but they were now opening their doors, offering some families with babies or infants to stay in, and lending their cups, glasses, and bowls for the tea distribution. Things were calming down slightly, but while handing beignets to people, Cessilia glanced around. People who had just filled their stomachs with a bit of warmth had no choice but to go back under the downpour after a quick stop under the tent. The people whose turn it was thanked her with trembling lips, wet to their bones, and their hands shaking. They needed another solution for that too...

"Lady Cessilia!"

She turned her head and spotted Lady Bastat arriving on a slim horse, followed by a few people. She jumped down and rushed to Cessilia's side, noticing the line of people.

"How can I help?" she immediately asked.

"Lady B-Bastat, do you think you c-could help us prepare more t-tents?" Cessilia asked right away. "The rain will last a f-few more hours, and we c-can't keep these p-people in this d-downpour like this for s-so long, everyone will g-get sick!"

Bastat looked around and nodded. "I'll see what I can do! I'll get my people to sew fabrics together and bring them here! Do you need anything else?"

"C-cups and b-bowls, and t-tea or food, if you c-can."

Bastat looked around at the massive crowd and nodded again, but right as she turned around, a silhouette appeared behind her.

"We can help with that."

Cessilia recognized the woman from the Council who had supported her. She hadn't realized it was her before because of the large coat she was wearing, but she was now standing right in front of her, with a little smile.

"Let the Yonchaa Tribe help, Princess. The Dorosef might be fishing for the people, but farming is our speciality!"

She left with a big smile without waiting for an answer, leaving Cessilia and Bastat completely stunned. The latter turned to Cessilia and nodded quickly.

"I'll be going then."

She left quickly on her horse, and meanwhile, next to her, Tessandra chuckled, leaning toward her cousin.

“...Is it me or... is this a fourth family supporting you already?”

“...M-maybe?”

“Maybe? You barely said a thing and the Yonchaa Tribe is now lending a hand! And she talked to you, of all people!

You’re making your mark around here!”

“I wouldn’t say that t-too fast,” sighed Cessilia. “You d-didn’t see all the g-glares I got at the c-council earlier. I was not p-popular with everyone...”

“Four out of seven is already pretty good!”

Cessilia nodded, but she didn’t want to think too much about that for now. In her head, the Yonchaa Tribe Leader had

agreed to help her own people and her King. This may not have much to do with Cessilia at all. She kept serving the food to a

few more people, but after a while, she felt someone staring at her. It wouldn’t have been too surprising given the situation, but

her instincts were telling her to be cautious... She raised her head, and after a glance around, she found her. A woman with the

dots and line tattoos she had noticed earlier was leaning against a wall. She wasn’t in line, and Cessilia was pretty sure she

hadn’t received food or tea yet. Who was she? She was wearing a raincoat and half of her face was hidden under her hood,

making Cessilia a bit curious to see her fully.

Someone coughing loudly in the line brought her back to the current situation. People were definitely falling sick.

Cessilia glared at the water, still up to their ankles. That downpour was too much...

“T-Tessa, Sabael, I will be back.”

She ran through the rain until she found Ashen, still in front of the doors. He was actually helping one of the Dorosef

Tribe’s carts that seemed stuck in the mud. Cessilia rushed to help them out, and after a few minutes, the cart was free to go.

She turned to Ashen.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Yes, b-but we need to d-do more. Ashen, p-people are getting sick. We n-need more water t-to go away. We need t-to tear the wall down.”

“...No. We can’t.”

“Ashen, we d-don’t have a choice! If we don’t d-do something—”

“I can’t!” He shook his head. “Cessilia, I can’t take down this wall! Do you realize how long it took to make the

Capital secure? If we tear it down, people will be in danger! Raiders, thieves, criminals, they will all rush in! You don’t

understand what it’s like, I just can’t! I don’t have a dragon to establish peace like your family does!”

Cessilia suddenly pushed him away from her furiously.

“You don’t need a dragon!” she shouted back. “What do you want a dragon for, look around you! Your people are already in danger! They don’t need a dragon, Ashen! Your people need their King!” It was as if she had slapped him. He remained stunned for a few seconds, staring at her with a speechless expression.

Cessilia was really mad, glaring at him with her pouty lips and rosy cheeks. She hadn’t stuttered to shout at him, as if her anger had kept the stutter away, but it seemed like she had been too mad to notice it herself. She was drenched, her lips a bit blue and her wet hair stuck against her face, but that clear, bright light in her eyes seemed to wake the King up.

After a long while, Ashen sighed. He combed his white, wet hair back again, looking around as if he was seeing this crowd for the first time. It was more accurate to say he was seeing it with new eyes. There were many people still waiting in line, trying to catch a glimpse of the small tent and the warm food and tea waiting for them. Some children were crying continuously, having not been fed yet, and people were starting to cough and sneeze more and more. Most barely had anything decent to cover them and keep them warm at all. After gazing around for a short while, his eyes fell back on Cessilia.

The young Princess looked just the same as before. Soaked to the bone and mad at him. Despite her serious and furious expression, he found her adorable. He broke into a nervous chuckle, suddenly feeling much better.

“Ashen, it’s n-no laughing matter!”

“...I know,” he muttered. “I’m sorry.”

Before she could protest, he grabbed her cheek gently and put a quick kiss on her wet lips.

“You’re right,” he said. “I don’t need a dragon... I only need you.”

Despite still being a bit angry, those words melted her anger quite effectively. She glanced to the side, a bit embarrassed, notably because there was still a large crowd behind them.

“W-what are you d-doing... Th-there’s still a lot of p-people...”

“We basically announced our relationship already.”

“N-not to these p-people! And it’s n-not the moment, either...”

“Sorry, you were too cute, I couldn’t help it. You were right, Cessilia. Thank you for reminding me.”

He put another quick kiss on her forehead this time, and took off his coat, putting it on her shoulders.

“Ashen? What will you d-do?”

“Exactly what my princess said,” he sighed, caressing her cheek. “I will tear down that wall. You were right. Walls or not, gates or not, I have the power to stop them now... and you’ve shown me the families are more than willing to cooperate as

well. Maybe not entirely, but at least, you got them to change their positions. I knew most were only partaking in the competition for the sake of it, but... now, they really want to be serious about this. I've never seen them get involved with people that aren't their own like they are now."

He turned around, looking at the wall with a frown. His eyes were going down on the water level.

"Moreover," he said, "we don't need to destroy all of it, right? Just enough to drain the area..."

"Ashen, what are you g-going to do?"

"Don't worry," he said. "You're right. I may not be a dragon, but I'm still rather strong..."

He took out his large sword and began walking toward the wall, under the crowd's shocked eyes. Cessilia stood there,

unsure of what to do, watching him put his hand on several parts of the wall as if he was looking for something. The ground had

to be steeper where Ashen stood, because the water was now reaching up to his mid-thighs. He had to use his strength just to

fight his way through the water and kept walking next to the wall, touching it with his hand or the tip of his sword. After a

while, she saw him freeze for a second, and he began stabbing his blade against the wall, using the tip to try and pierce his way

through. The scrape of the blade against the rocks made an awful sound, and for a second, she feared his sword would break.

But it withstood the impact, even after the second, third, and fourth blows. Ashen kept going, trying to dig with the only

instrument at his disposal. It looked like a titan's work, but against all expectations, he was really starting to carve in. The size

of his sword made a considerable impact against the wall, and she could see the stones trembling at each stroke.

"...Is His Majesty... trying to break that wall?"

Cessilia looked to the side, surprised to see the large man from before standing there, his ax in his hands and a

dumbfounded look stuck on his face. She nodded.

"To d-drain the water."

"By the Gods! If I ever thought he'd take it down himself! ...Hey! You guys! Come and give me a hand!"

To Cessilia's surprise, the large man walked past her, followed by several others, all with heavy tools in hand. All the

men went to Ashen's side, and after briefly talking with their King, they began striking against the wall as well. Cessilia's heart

skipped a beat. Seeing him side-by-side with all those men, trying to tear down that wall despite the flood, made her so

incredibly proud of him. There was nothing left of the stubborn, wrongheaded man she'd argued with before. He was so

focused on his task, with all the men around, if it wasn't for his white hair and impressive musculature, he could have seemed

like any common man out there.

Finally, the first breach appeared. All the men had to step back because the water was suddenly sucked into the thin gap with a strong force. The water level went down a bit, but it would take more. As soon as it appeared and the water flowing out had slowed down, they all resumed banging their tools against the wall, some with things such as hammers, trying to gradually enlarge the hole. Cessilia looked back. The crowd seemed mesmerized by the scene. There were even some gaps in the queue, some people were too shocked by the King's behavior to think about the food for a few minutes. She smiled, feeling proud. Those people were finally getting to see their King, and what he was truly capable of. Cessilia turned around, leaving Ashen to his task. Far from the castle, the stares and schemes of the Lords, he could finally be what he had always been: a man of the people.

"...You don't need to look that proud, you know," chuckled her cousin.

Cessilia couldn't hide her smile, though. She kept Ashen's coat on her shoulders, joining her cousin still distributing the food under the small tent. She and Tessandra glanced at the crowd still waiting.

"H-how are we?"

"As you can see, people are still waiting, but many have received some food already," nodded Tessa. "Most could use some more, though. The Dorosef have just brought another cart of food, and more of the Hashat people just brought in more tea, as well. We got new hands to help us out too, but... I'm afraid it might not be enough, though, Cessi."

Her eyes were on the people in line, some of which were starting to sneeze and cough more. Despite the several hands working behind the large table set up to distribute beignets and tea, once the people were done eating, they were sent back into the cold. Cessilia's heart dropped. It was a certainty now that people were going to get sick.

"We might need to set up an infirmary," sighed Tessandra.

"No, we're g-going to need a hospital."

Her cousin dropped her jaw, shocked.

"A... A hospital? Cessi, we already barely found any space to set this up..."

"I know, b-but look. Many p-people have b-been walking around in th-the water, some b-barefoot. There has to b-be dozens of d-diseases in this water. There might even be some p-people carrying diseases in the g-group. If we d-don't do our best to p-prevent it from spreading now..."

"We'll have a pandemic on our hands," sighed Tessandra. "Damn it. ...But still, we have nowhere to set this up, and hundreds of people on our hands. Not much time either. What do you suggest we do? I know your mom had a full mountain

available to set up a hospital, but we don't have that!"

Cessilia smiled.

"Maybe we d-don't need to g-go anywhere. The p-patients are all already h-here."

"...I'm not sure I'm following."

"Lady Cessilia!"

Bastat and Ishira arrived in front of her at the same time.

"We brought more fabrics, as you requested," said Bastat. "I've also asked some of our best and fastest seamstresses to make more tents for the people to use. They will be ready shortly."

"G-good."

Cessilia turned to her cousin.

"C-can you and Sabael g-gather men and ask them t-to help erect p-pillars? As soon as the water g-goes down, we ccan set up more tents for p-people to be under."

"Got it."

Tessandra quickly left, grabbing Sabael's shirt and pulling him along with her. The poor man had clearly learned to

follow without too many questions... Cessilia chuckled but turned back to Bastat.

"Th-thank you, Lady Bastat."

"You're more than welcome, my lady. We are also working with the Yonchaa Tribe.

They donated furs so we can make

more coats and hand them out to the people to help them stay warm. Where do you want us to set up the tents?"

"Make sure to elongate the one we have over the q-queue, first. K-keep it far from the wall and out-t of the way, we ccan't

block the streets. I'm also g-going to need to set a larger one, near the d-doors. Enough t-to hold about t-twenty seats, bbut

I need it to c-cover the sides t-too. With t-two entries opposite t-to each other, if p-possible."

"Understood. I'll relay that to my people."

Lady Bastat quickly left without discussing Cessilia's orders. She was wearing a strange colored wooden hat that kept

the rain away from her, but also got her many surprised stares.

"You seem to have a plan in mind, Lady Cessilia?" asked Ishira, stepping forward.

"We need to c-create a temporary hospital," she explained.

"A hospital? But there's none here, and we can't possibly accommodate all the patients in a tent! We do have a few

White Houses in the Capital, but..."

"We d-don't need to t-take anyone sick to the Capital," Cessilia shook her head. "C-can you have healers come here tto help us?"

"There's ten of them already, but I can ask my cousin to send more. He said we'll provide you with anything you need

to the best of our ability. He sent word to the family outside too, so more might be coming here to help out."

“That would be g-great. We need the d-doctors to look at the p-people here and find out who needs urgent c-care. If they c-can treat them where th-they are, they d-don’t need to send them to our t-tent. In the t-tent, we can assess who c-can be taken care of here, or send them t-to the Capital for further c-care.”

Ishira stayed stunned for a few seconds, taking the time to process everything Cessilia had said.

“...You want the doctors to go and find the patients?”

“Everyone is already g-gathered here. We c-can spot p-people with the first signs of d-disease... P-people are more

worried about g-getting food than looking after th-their injuries or symptoms right now, b-but if we send the d-doctors to them,

we c-can find and heal injuries, or g-give them medication early.”

“We can separate them from the crowd, give them first care before they get any sicker and contaminate more people,”

gasped Ishira. “Lady Cessilia, it’s brilliant! We can even use our medical students to catch something as simple as symptoms or make bandages!”

Cessilia nodded, blushing a bit.

“D-do you think we’ll have enough p-people?”

Ishira glanced at the crowd, and nodded.

“We’ll have to! The Hashat Family always takes pride in being the best healers in the Kingdom! Even if there’s not

enough of us, I can assure you, everyone is going to work twice as hard to make sure the tiniest wound gets treated!”

“G-Good. C-can you ask Lord Hephrael if we d-!”

A terrible uproar cut her off.

Everyone who wasn’t already looking turned their heads toward the wall, where a large crack had appeared after the

men’s repeated hits. The wall began to crumble, fast... too fast. Ashen and the others had to run as fast as they could against the

water to get out of there. The King and the man with the ax even had to each grab someone else to help them get out of there as

the rocks fell. The water being sucked through so suddenly caused the flood to rage toward them. Despite the water going down

rapidly, two men were too late to evacuate the area. A large rock fell, seemingly toward them.

Just as everyone thought they were about to get crushed, a gigantic maw appeared, grabbing the rock like a toy between its fangs.

“K-Krai!” Cessilia exclaimed in joy.

The dragon had just flown in from the side, coming out of nowhere. It spat the stones into the river, glancing at the large

water stream that was going under its body as if trying to grasp what was going on. Its eyes finally fell on Ashen, the only

human in the area it probably recognized. It growled.

“Ugh,” Ashen groaned back. “Of course you only come now to help, huh?”
Krai swung its large tail left and right and lowered its head to sniff the King. Ashen took a step back. He had very limited trust in the War God’s dragon.

“Sir Dragon!” exclaimed Naptunie, who had just run to Cessilia’s side. “When did he arrive?”

“I d-don’t know.” Cessilia shook her head. “He p-probably can’t fly in this weather, he must have b-been hunting in the c-countryside...”

As long as the dragon hadn’t been hunting unreasonably again, she didn’t mind much. Dragons weren’t too fond of downpours like this, as it stuck them to the ground. Especially for Krai, who, unlike her siblings’ dragons, didn’t have a body made for water...

“I hope he’s not hungry,” muttered Nana in Cessilia’s ear. “We are already very busy making food for the people...”

“He’ll b-be fine,” said Cessilia. “...K-Krai!”

The dragon immediately popped its head up, the red eyes finally finding the Princess amongst the crowd. With the rain covering the smells and pretty much everyone wearing cloaks and hoods, Krai was probably having trouble finding anyone. As soon as the dragon saw Cessilia, its large tail swung again, hitting and demolishing a small portion of the wall in one blow.

Ashen rolled his eyes, exasperated.

Still, the dragon ran to Cessilia, its large snout releasing large puffs of hot steam. She patted it, happy to see the familiar large figure.

“K-Krai, I need you t-to stay still for now,” she said. “S-stay with Ashen, p-please?”

The Black Dragon growled softly against her, and its head then suddenly turned to Nana, the red irises growing larger.

Poor Naptunie jumped.

“Later!” she promised. “L-later, I’ll give Sir Dragon tons of fresh beignets!”

She received a loud growl in response, and Krai turned around, crawling back to Ashen. Everyone else was completely

shocked at the scene. Most were seeing a dragon for the first time, and the gigantic creature was just effortlessly tamed by a few pats and the promise of fish beignets...

“...I’ll go and share your plan with the rest of my family,” said Ishira. “The sooner we start seeing people, the better.

We can send the worst cases to the Capital if there are any. I’ll tell them to sort out some space for us.”

She left and Cessilia turned to Nana.

“Is everything g-going alright?”

“We’re still distributing food, and the Yonchaa Tribe just came with more meat and people to help!” exclaimed

Naptunie, excited. "But Lady Bastat is setting the tents to shield the people, and they could use more arms to help set it up! I was supposed to go ask His Majesty..."

Nana glanced toward the men now walking away from the wall. She was probably too intimidated by her King to go and ask for help, but she was now waving at one of the larger men, not the one with the ax, but a middle-aged man with a large hammer, and the round face shape characteristic of many of her family members. "Uncle Yamam!" she said. "Are you alright? Can you come help? We need strong men to erect wooden pillars, they are heavy!"

"Coming right up!"

The man sighed, catching his breath, while Naptunie ran to talk to another of the men, a younger one this time. He shook his head.

"Ah, she's a real beauty! I hope she doesn't lose too much of her curves when she grows up!"

"Her c-curves?" said Cessilia, a bit surprised.

The man nodded.

"Ha... All the women in our family tend to be like that! They are all cute and well-rounded as children, and they lose it all when they grow up! I wish our cute little Nana would stay this adorable forever! Ha... Yes, coming, coming!"

Cessilia watched him go, a bit surprised. Thinking back, all the Dorosef adult women they had seen were quite slim and fit, while the younger girls were all round... Wasn't it the exact opposite of their male family members, then? Cessilia chuckled. That was one interesting tribe...

"Cessi! Come help too!" exclaimed Tessa from the other side, grunting.

The whole group was indeed busy raising the large wooden pillars. They had been brought with carts, but they were a pain to put up, the wet wood adding to its weight. It took three strong people to raise each, and they had to act fast. Cessilia ran to help next to Tessandra and three other people, who were trying to get one of the largest ones up. After a bit of effort, they finally managed to raise it.

"...Ah!"

The sharp pain inside of her hand felt like something small had stabbed her, probably a splinter of wood. Cessilia looked at her palm, trying to find the cut. Something shined briefly.

"Cessilia!"

She raised her head, seeing Ashen run to her, alerted by her sharp cry of pain. She hadn't realized she had been so loud, or he was near enough to hear. Looking worried, he took the log off her hands and grabbed her wrist to check for an injury.

"Are you hurt?"

“N-no...”

There wasn't even a cut or a drop of blood, and she felt a bit embarrassed. She had been surprised by the sudden sharp pain, but she hadn't meant to cry out like that... She looked around, hoping no one else had noticed, but they were too busy. She glanced at the injury again.

“...Are you sure you're fine?” Ashen insisted, taking her hand to glance at it.

“Yeah, I... I th-thought I saw something. I must have b-been wrong. I'm fine, I p-promise. Let's k-keep helping.”

“Alright.”

Ashen briefly kissed her, ignoring all the stares aimed toward them, and rushed to help raise the next pillar. Meanwhile,

Cessilia glanced at her hand again. For a second, she would have sworn she had seen something there...

“Cessi!”

“C-coming!”

Chapter 17

Forgetting about her hand, Cessilia went to help again. With so many volunteers to help erect the new tents, it only took

a matter of minutes before a good fifth of the queue was now shielded from the rain.

Moreover, the large tent made to treat

medical emergencies was ready too, and they had brought out tables and chairs. The ground wasn't dry yet, but the water was

now down to ground level or almost, and they could walk around normally again without water to their ankles. Cessilia's and

Tessandra's shoes had even been given to some people who didn't have any, since their scales covered their soles at the

smallest scratch. They had grown up pretty much barefoot, anyway; this was nothing.

Plus, they were both too busy to bother.

Soon enough, the first patients arrived under the medical tent, and Cessilia, along with some of the Hashat Family doctors that

had arrived, began tending to the worst cases, while Tessa went back outside to help organize everything and keep order.

Cessilia was a bit glad to be helpful with something she was extremely knowledgeable about; having been one of her

mother's best students, she was fully confident in her medical skills. Not only that, but she soon realized the other doctors

present were regularly seeking her advice as well, and even taking notes on some of the medicines she explained, or how she

manipulated the patients with twisted muscles. It wasn't until Tessandra came back to update her on the situation outside and

Nana insisted they both eat something that she and Ishira agreed to take a short break.

“We still need more medicine,” said Ishira, who had come by and grabbed a beignet while they were under the tent,

“but I think we will be fine.”

“D-do you have news from your c-cousin?”

“They should arrive any minute now with more supplies, and perhaps take the more urgent patients we can’t handle here away.”

“And give you a break! The rain is calming down a bit,” noted Tessandra, her mouth full.

“At this rate, it won’t stop until later tomorrow morning. ...I don’t want to be pessimistic, but the wind has changed.”

“It will be fine,” said Sabael, gently wiping a piece of food from her cheek.

A little silence followed his cute gesture, Cessilia, Nana, and Ishira were all stunned and embarrassed by the couple.

Sabael’s boldness was so unexpected. As she noticed this, Tessandra glanced at them and suddenly turned red, hurriedly pushing his hand away.

“D-d-d-don’t do that!”

She stepped away from him, as if he was some dangerous, unpredictable beast, almost hiding behind Cessilia, who

exchanged an amused glance with Sabael. She wasn’t sure what had happened between them, but it seemed like the young soldier was getting closer to taming the beast...

“Sabael, c-could you ask more Royal Soldiers t-to help us d-deal with the crowd, and request more b-buildings to host those who need p-places to sleep? It might just be t-temporary, but...”

“We’re already on it, my lady,” said Sabael, his eyes still going to Tessa. “The soldiers have volunteered their barracks

here to offer beds and temporary housing for the families who haven’t found one. We also have more shop owners who donated, and even some of the restaurants. If the rain doesn’t get worse, I think everyone will be fine until tomorrow morning.”

“G-good, then. T-Tessa?”

Her cousin sent her a warning glare, clearly knowing what Cessilia was about to do. The Princess ignored her, a smile on her lips.

“C-can you g-go with Sabael and make sure the families g-get priority?”

“Cessi...” she growled.

“Come on.”

Without warning, Sabael took her hand, and pulled her out of the tent. As soon as they were gone, Cessilia chuckled and Ishira sighed.

“Can those two be any more obvious? It’s almost painful to watch!”

“...I don’t get it,” muttered Nana. “Is my brother chasing Tessandra now, or...?”

“It’s what you c-call push and p-pull,” chuckled Cessilia.

“Ah... Oh, well. I’m glad they don’t seem to be fighting anymore! I will get back now! Let me know if you need more beignets, we are preparing a new batch. I think the Yonchaa Tribe is bringing us more ingredients too!”

Naptunie left. She looked as tired as them, but rather happy to be helpful in organizing the distribution around. She had put up an efficient system to have the recipes and dosages all ready to be measured up, so more people could help both in the temporary kitchen and for the ingredients preparation. Plus, she had an incredible memory, being able to tell who had how many buns and cups of tea since they had begun distributing.

“...I never thought I’d say this one day,” muttered Ishira, “but that Dorosef girl is more capable than I thought. I thought she was just always busy studying, but to think she can use all she learned on the field...”

“N-Nana is much m-more than she seems,” said Cessilia proudly. “She’s very b-brave too.”

“Indeed... Our Kingdom has some really capable young women around. You’re even more impressive, Lady Cessilia.

You know, I’m thinking of expanding that system you created.”

“The system I c-created?” she repeated, surprised.

“The visiting doctors! I never thought about the doctors visiting the patients rather than the other way around! We have

so many patients visiting our doctors offices and hospitals every day, I never realized there might be so many people in need of

a doctor who wouldn’t go to see one themselves. I’ve been talking with some of those people we saw, and I was a bit

surprised. Some people don’t dare come into a doctor’s office, or can’t, for some reason. Many overestimate the cost of

medicine, or don’t even know my family offers free consultations for the poor twice a month...”

Ishira smiled, putting one of her braids behind her ear.

“I may have... never thought of sending one of our doctors out here,” she said. “The Outer Capital has always been

absolutely insecure since I was a child. Our family used to live far from the rest of the population, to protect my aunt and the

knowledge we inherited from her and the people of the Rain Tribe. When we... got on the King’s side, and we were given

mansions inside the Capital or bought locations, we thought of our security first, as usual, but...”

She took a deep breath and turned to Cessilia, with a smile.

“You, a foreigner, came here and you just spent hours organizing a rescue for people you knew absolutely nothing about.

You didn’t care a single second about hiding your knowledge of medicine and you didn’t once use your power as an Imperial

Princess, or even that dragon. You spent hours under this downpour treating each citizen as if they were your equal, with no

care for their background... Princess Cessilia, I think you have a lot more to teach our Kingdom than medicine. ...Do you have

any idea how impossible it is to have members of different families cooperate like this without any sort of payback between them? Now, look. The Yonchaa and Dorosef donated food alongside one another. I am... treating people one after another without knowing who they are or asking for any money. People were so... helpless, for so long, we forgot what it was to simply help someone else.”

Ishira turned her eyes inside the tent. There were a dozen people inside, calmly chatting and treating wounds. All of the doctors were volunteers from the Hashat Family. They were tired, only there to serve complete strangers' needs, but they were all smiling, reassuring, and treating them with the greatest of care too. “...I never thought I'd be as proud of my family as when they are sharing what we tried so hard to protect and keep to ourselves for free.”

“The Rain T-Tribe would be proud,” nodded Cessilia.

“I think so too.”

The two women smiled at each other. They felt a bond between them, not only from their similar age and interests but because of their familial roots. Perhaps they were more closely related than they thought.

“You know... I always had doubts about our King,” muttered Ishira, “but... of all the people I have seen today, I think he surprised me the most. I never saw His Majesty act so vulnerable. Genuinely I always saw him as a demi-god, but a lot of people remember him fighting for this Kingdom. Perhaps he might not be so bad to follow after all....”

“C-come on,” Cessilia smiled, “let's g-get back to it.”

The two women went back to treating patients. There were no big emergencies, luckily, and even as the other Hashat arrived to help out, only a handful of people were taken to the Inner Capital for further care. Most people they saw had light injuries or diseases that could be handled with known treatments, but as time went on, it was obvious some people were coming for conditions that resulted more from the journey there or long-term issues than any emergencies. Still, both girls and everyone else kept treating patients, losing themselves in work and feeling happy about it.

Without their knowledge, Ashen and Tessandra had arrived and been spying on Cessilia for a few minutes at the entrance of the tent, watching her working hard while each drinking a cup of tea.

“Her mom's best student,” chuckled Tessandra.

“She already knew every herb and plant when she was young,” smiled Ashen.

Tessandra gave him a glare, staring at his form up and down, and taking a step aside.

“I still don't like you, for the record,” she blurted out.

“...Noted.”

“And if you ever hurt my cousin again, I’ll make you pay. I may not have a dragon but I can still barbecue your ass anytime.”

“...Duly noted.”

Tessandra clicked her tongue, a habit of their family he had forgotten, and stepped inside. Ashen sighed. With Cessilia being so sweet and gentle, he had forgotten the women in her family all had dragon blood in their veins...

“Cessi?” Tessandra called out.

“T-Tessa! ...Is everything g-going well outside?”

“Very well. But it’s getting late now, we’ve been here almost all day. I think they can do without us now. The members of the Dorosef Tribe are running out of supplies, but everyone has been decently fed at least once already, and the Yonchaa promised to bring some more vegetables for the local kitchens to boil and share. Plus, I don’t think you’ve noticed, but the rain has calmed down more.”

“Oh...”

Cessilia looked up, and indeed, she could hear the sounds above the tent were calmer than before. She nodded.

“G-good, then...”

“...And, I’m sorry to remind you, but I think you’ve got a banquet to attend?”

Cessilia’s heart dropped. The banquet! She had completely forgotten all about it. She had spent hours in the tent, caring for the sick and getting completely absorbed in treating one patient after the next, she hadn’t realized how late it had gotten outside. She nodded, a bit stunned as if she had been sucked back into reality.

“I’ll go grab Nana and Sab,” said Tessandra. “See you in a minute.”

Cessilia agreed, and as her cousin left, her eyes fell on Ashen, who had been waiting behind. She sighed and walked up to him.

“Is it v-very late?” she asked, worried.

“Not as late as she made it sound. But we should go back now. We’ve done plenty here, the rain is calming down, and I think you deserve some rest before the next battle...”

Cessilia chuckled nervously. Indeed... She had been standing up for hours with only a couple of beignets in her stomach. Now that she had stopped focusing so much, she could almost feel the fatigue weighing on her. After a quick word to say she was leaving to the doctors in the tent, which no one opposed, she stepped out, holding Ashen’s hand.

The scene outside had changed quite considerably. The queue for the beignets was now reduced to a few dozen people, and no one was looking as famished or desperate as before. In fact, the streets were much emptier, and instead, people had

gone toward the dozens of tents that had appeared outside, scattered between the streets. Naptunie and Sabael came out from one of those streets, looking a bit tired as well, but calm. The rain was no more than a gentle drizzle now, nothing that they couldn't handle on a daily basis.

"I still can't believe so many people came," muttered Tessandra, glancing at the queue. "I never thought I'd ever get sick of handing out fish beignets..."

"I was surprised too," said Nana with a sad expression, "but I chatted with a few people, and they said a lot of them came from nearby villages a bit farther away, not all of them are from the Outer Capital. The flood was worse in the lowlands and midlands, and this is the highest part of the Outer Capital, so they gathered here, hoping the Ki-I mean, someone would help them out... There really aren't normally this many people in the Outer Capital, but they didn't have a choice. The word spread quickly after we began distributing food too! Many people arrived later, I think by word-of-mouth..."

Cessilia had that feeling too. A lot of the patients they had treated today looked exhausted, not from the downpour but from the journey to the Outer Capital. She had treated many foot wounds, twisted ankles, and other injuries that indicated the people had come from perhaps even farther away. Had the rain taken over all of the Kingdom, driving people all the way here?

As the little group was getting ready to head back to the castle, she couldn't help but glance around, surprised by the difference from the previous situation of the Outer Capital. Now that the flood was completely avoided and left as a scary memory, people looked a lot more relaxed, not so bothered anymore by the rain, even for those hanging around against the buildings' walls, shielding themselves under the edges of the rooftops.

"What about the t-tents?" she asked. "And c-clothes. Where d-did those come from...?" "Many tribes had to come here because of the rain too," explained Sabael. "When they heard what we were doing, they

simply installed their tents here and offered people to come in. I heard the Yonchaa Tribe and Hashat Family brought some of their people back here from the outer lands just to help out, and the word spread..."

Cessilia was shocked. This many people were all tribes from outside? She knew there were more tribes than the ones with a head seated at the Council, but looking around, she could see so many different kinds of people, attires, and body decorations, giving many clues about all the vibrant tribes that existed outside the Capital's walls. Many were comfortably chatting with people from different tribes too, and food, money, or clothes changed hands like that. What had happened here? It

looked like the former Outer Capital that was so insecure and its people reserved had now become a cultural crossroad!

"I'm so glad many people showed up to help," sighed Nana. "I don't mean to complain, but I think we almost emptied my tribe's food stocks... We usually have a lot, but I think my uncles will have to fish twice as much from now on! You know, we even worked with the Yonchaa Tribe to make new types of buns! They were so nice, and they helped us make a ton more. We had meat-filled ones!"

"God, don't ever let Krai hear about that," chuckled Tessandra, "or any dragon, for that matter. I swear your tribe's cupboards will be raided by something bigger and hungrier than a mob..."

Nana chuckled and glanced toward the large mountain of dark scales lying against the wall. Krai had apparently decided to simply wait there, a bit bored and taking a nap at the periphery of the streets. There was a continuous crowd of shocked and fascinated people glancing at the dragon, pretending to walk around in the rain or staring from the windows. Some children were even playing to see who would dare to get the closest to the dragon, screaming and running back when it suddenly breathed out or moved its eyes to them. Now that they were fed and the water had gone down, the children weren't scared to play around anymore and actually seemed to have a lot of fun distracting themselves with that giant, scary toy.

"...You can tell that big boy is used to kids," chuckled Tessandra.

Cessilia, however, had her eyes a bit away from the group of bashful kids. A young girl was crouched down, staring at the others with her head in her arms, scared and crying. There was no adult near her, but she had proper clothes on, and Cessilia was sure she had seen that child with locals earlier.

"...J-just a minute," Cessilia muttered to their little group.

She walked away from them, going to the scared little girl. The child raised her head as she heard her approach, surprised. Cessilia crouched down to her level, smiling at her.

"...You're n-not having fun?" Cessilia asked. "Are you p-perhaps hungry?"

The girl shook her head, her eyes going to Krai with absolute fear in them. As soon as she thought the dragon's red eyes had crossed with hers, she jumped and hid her face.

"K-Krai is not scary," said Cessilia. "D-dragons are nice."

The little girl shook her head vehemently.

"No. Dragons are so scary..."

Cessilia frowned, a bit confused. Has that child seen a dragon before? She extended her hand, offering to help the girl stand up. The child took it after some hesitation. She was visibly scared of Krai, but also intrigued by the Princess, staring at her green eyes with curiosity.

"D-do you want me t-to show you? K-Krai really is nice."

The girl stood there, her eyes riveted on the dragon. Cessilia smiled and very softly, began humming. Her voice was

low, soft, but a continuous flow of sounds. It was a song, but she wasn't singing any lyrics. Still, something strange happened.

Her voice began echoing. There weren't any walls, but Cessilia's voice seemed to be gently bouncing off around them as if the

rain was her instrument as much as her voice. Hundreds of very faint, small, and high-pitched echoes of her voice resonated around them.

Everyone close enough to hear stopped whatever they were doing, mesmerized by this unique music. On the other side,

Krai rose its head and got up, walking to her. The little girl noticed and curled her body up even more, retreating against the

wall. She watched as the dragon's snout appeared under Cessilia's arm, rubbing itself against her. Krai was growling very softly, to the same rhythm as the song.

"...He will eat you," muttered the little girl, still scared.

Cessilia stopped humming and petted Krai's nose, her song still echoing a bit around them.

"He won't. ...See? He's my f-friend..."

The little girl shook her head.

"No... Dragons eat people. Dragons are so scary..."

"N-no," Cessilia said, "he won't..."

"But I've seen it," muttered the little girl. "Dragons eat people."

She suddenly stood up and ran away, leaving Cessilia confused.

"...What the heck was that about?" muttered Tessandra.

Just as perplexed, Cessilia kept staring in the direction the little girl had left. How could that child have witnessed

dragons eating humans? She wasn't even ten years old, and living in the Eastern Kingdom too... She pensively kept patting

Krai's warm snout, thinking.

"I d-don't understand..."

"Maybe she was scared by something else," said Ashen, taking her hand.

"B-but she clearly said she had seen d-dragons eat people. I d-don't think she c-could have mistaken d-dragons for anything else..."

"Could there be other dragons...?" muttered Nana, a bit worried.

"No," immediately said Tessandra. "Our aunt and fathers made sure to hunt all the other dragons when she became

Empress, to avoid issues or a future rebellion. Only the Imperial Family has dragons, and there isn't a dragon that we don't

know of. Our aunt let a few of her other brothers' sons' dragons live, but on the condition that they stay under surveillance at the

Imperial Palace. We know them too. They wouldn't have dared to do something like that. They wouldn't even be able to cross

the border without her knowing.”

Cessilia sighed. She couldn't shake off that odd feeling she had.

“B-but that girl was really scared of K-Krai...”

“It doesn't mean she's actually ever seen other dragons. Perhaps she heard some folk tale about dragons eating humans.

It wouldn't be so surprising, either, given the past between our countries...”

Tessandra was so strongly rejecting the idea of dragons they wouldn't know of, Cessilia didn't dare add anything to

that, but she still felt very insecure. Ashen gently wrapped his arm around her shoulders, and she was reminded of where she

was, the rain gently falling and the banquet she still had to prepare herself for. She sighed and turned away, following him.

Tessandra followed closely, keeping her arms wrapped around herself, and pretending not to see Sabael who was walking very

close to her and stealing glances in her direction...

Naptunie, closing their little group, was frowning, thinking.

“So... you mentioned your uncles' sons, but the daughters really don't have dragons?”

“Aside from Cessi and her sisters, no,” said Tessandra.

“We d-don't know why,” said Cessilia, “b-but the d-dragon blood is more potent with the male heirs. The g-girls

aren't normally b-born with d-dragons, my generation is the first. T-Tessa and her sister are a b-bit special too, though.”

“Really?” exclaimed Nana, already excited to hear more.

“It's nothing,” blushed Tessandra, who kept pretending not to see Sabael. “We are just stronger than the other women

born with dragon blood...”

“How so?”

Naptunie wasn't going to let go so easily. Tessandra sighed, and they bid goodbye to Krai, leaving the large dragon in

the Outer Capital, to step through the doors again. While they got on the bridge,

Cessilia couldn't help but glance at the portion

of the wall that had been destroyed and was still letting a faint but continuous stream of water down into the river. The damage

made to the wall was much more impressive on this side of the wall... She couldn't even tell if it would ever be able to be

repaired someday. She glanced up at Ashen, but the King didn't even spare a glance toward the damaged wall, his eyes riveted

on the other end of the bridge. Cessilia smiled. He really had no intention to repair this, at least for now. Perhaps this would be

only the start of more of that wall being taken down...

“It's not as impressive as having a real dragon,” said Tessandra, sounding a bit embarrassed. “My sister and I are just...

a bit different than what the dragon blood women used to be, like our aunt.”

“T-Tessa and her sister t-take a lot after our water d-dragons,” explained Cessilia.

“There are water dragons?” exclaimed Naptunie, her eyes shining twice brighter.

"My m-mother calls th-them that," smiled Cessilia. "Many of my b-brothers and sisters' d-dragons are d-different from Krai. They d-don't fly as well and c-can't fly such long d-distances, but they are f-formidable swimmers. We used t-to watch them race all the t-time in summer."

"Swimming dragons... How come?"

"Cessi's mom was blessed by an ancient Dragon God," sighed Tessandra. "A Water Dragon. Or so the legend says..."

We really never knew the truth of what actually happened, our parents don't like to talk about it. But ever since, the dragons were born differently. Their bodies are made more for water than air. Our grandmother says dragons are more ancient than the human race, so there's a lot we don't really know about them, or even about why the Imperial Family is born with dragon blood, and no one else is."

"That is so fascinating... Are there any books on the subject? I would love to study this!" Cessilia and Tessandra chuckled alike. Naptunie and her endless passion for books knew no bounds when it came to the subject of study...

"There aren't any that we know of," said Tessandra. "They were reportedly ruined and burned by one of our ancestors who didn't want his enemies to find a weakness in our relationship with the dragons."

"I'm sure Nana c-could study dragons and b-bring more things t-to light," added Cessilia.

"I would love that! Ah, but I would probably have to travel to the Dragon Empire..."

Cessilia and Ashen exchanged a glance. Indeed, the border had been tightly closed for years now... Only a few people could travel between their two countries, but at a great expense, like Counselor Yassim. The White King let out a faint sigh and kissed Cessilia's wet forehead.

"We might have to rethink that border," he muttered.

Cessilia was happy with that promise. She was already dreaming of everything she could import and export between the countries, not only merchandise and money but also years of knowledge, advanced crafts, and perhaps the promise of even more magnificent discoveries if both sides of the continent could unite in this... Now that she thought about it, if she married

Ashen and her brother became the Emperor, their countries would be closer than ever before. It would probably be the safest and surest way to definitely put an end to the wars between them.

"...Cessilia."

She raised her head, realizing they had stopped walking. They were almost at the castle already, but she had been so absorbed in her thoughts she had almost run into a cart. She blushed, realizing she had been dreaming about a wedding and a

future where she was Queen of this Kingdom for almost all of the walk back... Behind them, Tessandra, Naptunie, and Sabael were casually chatting about the new recipes for the beignets and didn't seem to have noticed her daydreaming. Ashen chuckled.

"What was that about?"

"N-nothing... I'm just th-thinking about t-trading opportunities."

"I heard Lady Bastat praise you endlessly, earlier."

"Lady B-Bastat did?"

Ashen nodded, a faint smile on his lips.

"She said a lot of the fabric they used was unsellable, but many people were glad to take it. Because the citizens in the Capital have the means to buy the best quality, only the very best fabrics usually get sold... Now, she was talking with families from the Outer Capital to have them purchase some of their fabrics and improve them for traveling. I think this gave them a few nice opportunities to extend their businesses to families that don't come to the Inner Capital."

"Lady B-Bastat is a very smart woman," nodded Cessilia. "I'm sure she will make a g-great leader for her t-tribe in the future..."

"Don't you ever take a compliment for yourself?" sighed Ashen. "They were praising you, Cessilia. The families haven't tried to collaborate or trade in any way other than through money for years. Most of the people who came to the Outer Capital today would have never come there to help if it wasn't for you..."

"They were all talking about you," added Tessandra, catching up on their conversation. "I think I heard them say the Dragon Princess about a thousand times today."

"Oh, we made sure to say it was your idea!" exclaimed Nana. "The Dorosef Tribe was happy to help, but none of this would have been done if Lady Cessilia hadn't given us the confidence for it! My tribe has been making a lot of exchanges with the outside, but it was never really safe until today! I am so glad so many people got to eat my family's beignets! Oh, and that we made friends with the Yonchaa too!"

"You forgot the Hashat. They were all looking at Cessi as if she's the great priestess of medicine..."

"You g-guys are exaggerating," muttered Cessilia. "I d-didn't do that much. Without everyone's help, I wouldn't have bbeen able to do anything... a-and we still have t-to pay them b-back too."

"Pay us back? Surely not!" protested Nana. "These are our people! I don't regret handing out a single beignet for free!"

"The soldiers were happy too," chuckled Sabael. "To be honest, guarding the Outer Capital and making sure no one

gets robbed or attacked can be exhausting. Most soldiers don't want to be assigned there, but today, we had many guys volunteer to help out. Because food and tea were given for free, no one reported a single robbery. We even spotted the local thugs helping out the soldiers!"

Those words seemed to have Ashen thinking. While the trio behind passed the doors to the castle, Cessilia stared at the King, seemingly lost in his thoughts.

"...Ashen? W-what is it?"

"I was just thinking... I never thought things would go so well today. I haven't... visited the Outer Capital in a while.

Perhaps it's time to re-evaluate the situation outside."

"You should," bluntly said Tessa, who had once again heard that. "People don't choose to become bandits or thieves. If

you give them jobs and a paycheck, you'll be putting them to work. A stable job is a safer way to get their stomachs full compared to daylight robbery."

Cessilia was pensive. It was true. Even when they had slaves in the Dragon Empire, they still earned money. That was why their aunt had fewer issues abolishing slavery. People had simply stopped buying someone's freedom, but there weren't fewer jobs or workers, on the other hand.

"You should discuss with the families to have jobs created outside," Cessilia muttered.

"I can't possibly relocate everyone in the Outer Capital," said Ashen. "I've thought about it. It isn't safe enough, and

there just isn't enough time to build and get more businesses running."

"I didn't mean in the Outer Capital," said Cessilia, "but in the Kingdom. Some villages can still be rebuilt and

consolidated, and the security improved. If you pay men to protect those places and let the tribes own lands, they will expand and create more cities for people to gather."

"You want me to give lands to the tribes?"

"You can have them pay you back slowly. The tribes have the businesses, and there are people willing to work

hard, it can work. The families can also defend themselves, otherwise, they wouldn't be able to live outside the Capital,

right? But if you give them places they can own to settle, they can create even more places for their businesses

and let the other people feel safe too. People can work together, you saw it..."

"It can work!" exclaimed Nana. "There are some villages where all the conditions are ideal to make great cities!

Natural resources, perfect locations, and fertile soil! In fact, long ago, our history books show we had large villages that were

quite flourishing. That was all before natural disasters and wars destroyed a lot of things there, of course..."

"Nana, do you actually eat the history and geography books you read?" chuckled Tessandra.

"I have a good memory!" she protested. "Plus, history is one of my favorite subjects of all. It's fascinating! Did you know, my ancestors weren't always fishermen? They used to be explorers, travelers, and architects! They were sent by the first kings to help shape cities and improve trade too!"

"That was until the wars had most of our cities destroyed and the tribes left, traveling non-stop to survive," sighed

Sabael. "What you're talking about happened centuries ago, Nana. Nowadays, those places are mostly ruins."

"They might be ruins, but they would still be a great place to start! The soil should still be fertile, and the rivers are still going the very same way too! They are mostly occupied by all sorts of bandits, of course, but with the proper conditions, I'm sure it would be a piece of beignet to make them all amazing again! There are some impeccable drawings of what the cities in the west used to be like. I'm sure back then the trades with the Empire were going well too!"

"Nana, you should really become a counselor," said Tessandra. "I'm not joking. You're a walking library."

"M-me? Well, I would like to try... I mean, I do dream of becoming a scholar, of course, but becoming a counselor is still a very difficult thing, it takes years of studies and some great achievements to achieve this. Plus, I'm a woman. I would want to have a family first, and it might be complicated..."

"How could having a family be an issue?!" protested Tessa. "Do you have any idea how much work my mother does in one day? And she raised both me and my sister alongside my father! My other aunt is also an amazing businesswoman while raising her three children!"

"Tessa, how many aunts do you have?"

"By the Great Dragon, way too many. The ones that matter are only... well, three or four, I'd say. Most of the others I have never met, and I don't want to. The Empress kicked them out of the Imperial Palace the second she could. They all have nasty tempers anyway... It's rampant in the family."

"I can see that," chuckled Sabael.

Tessandra blushed helplessly. Was he mocking her now? She cleared her throat, trying to ignore the glances he was sending her. His heterochromia eyes were both equally enticing, and she hated that effect he had on her.

"What do you want to become, then?" Nana asked, totally oblivious to her brother's eyes on Tessa.

"What do you mean?"

"If Lady Cessilia becomes Queen! What will you do? Do you want a family too?"

Naptunie's questions could be innocent yet deadly. Tessandra blushed even more and tried hard not to glance in Sabel's direction. She had been so bashful recently, now she had lost all of her defenses against him! How was the hunter now the prey? It didn't make sense. She tried to channel her inner dragon and calm her red cheeks, answering Naptunie without looking at her brother behind her.

"I don't know yet. I do want children, but I also want a career. All the women in my family are impressive in their own fields... I know my mother wants me to inherit the family business, but I don't want to. My sister can have it. Plus, Cessi is my best friend. If she stays here, so will I."

"...Would you really be fine living here forever?"

Sabael's question was less innocent than it seemed. She finally glanced at him, and immediately looked away. Of course, he was staring. Serious, but intense, as always. Tessandra silently thanked the gods she didn't have a dragon. She could imagine the damn creature helplessly and shamelessly purring at each of the handsome soldier's words and glances... Right now, the dragon was in her stomach, twisting it and rendering her mute. How was she supposed to answer him?!

"Maybe. I can travel, anyway."

She had said that while stubbornly staring at the stones on the castle's walls. There really was nothing to see on those walls, so she pretended to be absorbed in one of the tinted glass windows, but they quickly walked past it. They had accelerated their steps, even walking ahead of Cessilia and Ashen, and she was now wondering how far Sabael was going to accompany them. She was fine sharing her room or Cessilia's with Naptunie, but being in the same room as Nana's brother was a promise of disaster for her pride. She mentally harangued herself about that drunken night, for the twelfth time of the day. She had ruined all her efforts to appear like a calm, proud, and strong-headed woman to Sabael and made an embarrassment out of herself! She was so mad at herself, and she couldn't even understand why Sabael had seemingly changed his attitude toward her. ...What had really happened that night? She couldn't remember most of it after meeting the handsome soldier, only the most embarrassing part! For the daughter of a family with an alcohol business, it was a shame! Tessandra could endure anything, any insult made at her, and any attempt to ridicule her, except making a fool of herself. There was no way to win a fight with her most embarrassing self and no walking away either. She was stuck with her own betrayal. The absolute worst...

"Ah... I'm so tired," groaned Nana. "I just want to lay down and sleep. Oh, and a hot bath too."

“Great idea!” said Tessandra, feeling saved. “Let’s bathe together. Between girls. Cessi, do you think we could—
...Cessi?”

The three of them turned around, only to find no trace of the King and Cessilia.

Tessandra grimaced.

“They... They ditched us!” exclaimed Nana.

Chapter 18

“Ashen...”

His large hands were going all over her body, warming her gently. She had no idea how his skin could be warmer than

a dragon’s, but she didn’t want him to stop touching her ever. His hands were always rough, calloused, and a bit dry, but he still touched her so gently every single time. As if she was the most fragile, precious thing in this world.

With only one arm below her butt, holding her effortlessly against a wall, and Cessilia being a bit higher than him, the

two of them hid to be intimate. She kept caressing his thick neck and combing his white hair with her fingers. She liked the

length of it, which took her fingertips down to his large back. She had always been the tallest among most girls she knew, but

Ashen made her feel like a small doll. Each time he raised his eyes to look at her, his dark irises glowed with a secret message

only for her, right before they began kissing again.

When he had pulled her into a small, almost secret side passageway of the castle, taking her away from the rest of their

little group, she hadn’t resisted. They had snuck away like a pair of young lovers who couldn’t hold it anymore. The feeling of

guilt toward her cousin and friends was quickly erased by the taste of Ashen’s kisses, and the pleasure of this stolen moment

between them. She could always face Tessa’s wrath later...

“You were so pretty,” he muttered in between two kisses.

“Huh?”

“In the rain. Helping people... You’re so beautiful when you’re focused.”

Cessilia blushed. Ashen was terribly blunt and straightforward when it came to praising her, and she was not used to

such compliments. He smiled at her soft blushing and kissed her rosy cheeks one after the other, then her lips. They resumed

their kissing, neither of them tired of it. Ashen seemed to be holding her as if she weighed absolutely nothing, and they were so

serene, just the two of them in this small hideout, they probably would have stayed there for a while longer if Cessilia hadn’t

shivered.

“...You should change,” muttered Ashen, frowning.

“I’m a-alright.”

“No. Come on.”

Ashen gently let her down, and took her hand, guiding her through the castle. Cessilia had never seen most of the corridors and stairs they took, but she could tell they were headed to his room. He was indeed very familiar with this place, moving with ease and finding the most secretive ways to go without running into anyone. This castle was more complex than it seemed on the outside, Cessilia had already noticed almost nothing was symmetrical nor predictable, some stairs leading to half-floors or getting narrower and leading to only one room.

There were some places they couldn't avoid, however. Soon enough, they reached a larger, central room they had to cross to get upstairs. Cessilia had briefly crossed this place before; it was one floor above the Cerulean Suite. Just as Ashen was leading her, he suddenly stopped and pulled her to get behind him. Cessilia frowned but caught a quick glimpse of what was going on. They had just run into some unpleasant acquaintances...

"Your Majesty," said the leader of the Yekara Clan.

"...Lord Yebekh," muttered Ashen, "what are you doing here?"

"I was simply taking a stroll with my daughter and niece, Your Majesty. After all, they should get quite used to this place as well, for the future."

Behind him, Safia and Ashra smiled at the King, like two vipers at their prey. Cessilia glared right back at those two.

Out of all the candidates, the Yekara women were the worst. She couldn't stand their haughty attitude and even worse, their lascivious looks in the King's direction. Ashen's hand held hers a bit tighter as if to reassure her.

"You should be careful with your expectations, Yebekh. Your people are getting greedy."

What was that about? Cessilia frowned. What did the Yekara Clan do now? She almost regretted not staying for their council this morning. She had thrown facts in their faces angrily, but she had left Ashen alone against those vultures... Lord

Yebekh wasn't losing his composure at all. This man was thin and tall, with a long beard caught in a single silver bead, and his long hair in a myriad of thin dreadlocks, large eyes, and oily skin, like an eel. He didn't seem like a warrior like his people, only thin and almost sickly under his large, thick clothes. He definitely had the eyes and attitude of a schemer, instead.

"Are they?" he chuckled, raising a thread-thin eyebrow. "I am only hoping for the very best for this Kingdom. But fear not, Your Majesty. My daughter and niece will be benevolent. Even if you decide to take a concubine... or a few."

Cessilia wasn't phased by this man's insult. She had heard much worse, and she believed in Ashen too. She would

never be just a concubine. This was the low attempt of the Yekara Leader to bring her down again when he had already failed miserably this morning.

“You are overestimating your candidates,” retorted Ashen. “I don’t see any woman with the potential of a queen standing behind you.”

“It’s too bad Your Majesty can’t see it. The daughters of the Yekara Clan have every single quality needed to become a queen, they have it all. Beauty, intelligence, and most importantly, the skill to lead or support a leader. They will make perfect brides... even if they don’t rely on a dragon.”

Cessilia scoffed, stepping forward and out of Ashen’s shadow.

“D-do you really think a d-dragon is all I have t-to offer? His M-Majesty and I just c-came back from the Outer CCapital.

We were helping the p-people against the flood. I d-don’t believe we saw anyone from your c-clan.”

“Why should we bother with the low-borns and criminals of the Outer Capital?” retorted Yebekh, losing his smile.

“Does the Princess believe those people will make you Queen, perhaps? They are irrelevant! Saving those people is useless, they will die of any disease they brought with them or in our streets like the rats they are!”

“How dare you call our people rats?” roared Ashen, stepping forward angrily. “They are our people!”

The Yekara Leader shook his head slowly.

“They are our pests, Your Majesty. The annoying symptoms of the disease that’s taken over our once glorious Kingdom.

The weak shall die for the survival of the strongest, so we can keep the very best and make this Kingdom strong again. It might be cruel, but this is the only way our Kingdom will get back to its former glory. The survival of the fittest will bring a new dawn. We shouldn’t let everybody starve for the sake of some weak-hearted believers in a miracle that won’t happen. Get rid of the useless, only keep those who can be beneficial to our Kingdom. The poor keep reproducing like rats, which will only suck our nation’s wealth from the inside.”

“...You’re d-disgusting,” retorted Cessilia.

“Sorry to hurt your dream, Princess, but the Eastern Kingdom is different from your Empire,” hissed Safia.

“That’s right,” said her father. “We have limited resources, and way too many people, beggars, trying to get to it. We cannot afford to let this nation bleed out more from useless blood-suckers. The strongest shall survive.”

Ashen chuckled, although there was nothing joyous in his voice.

“You sound like my father,” he said, “and that’s not a compliment.”

“Your father may have had some wrongs, Your Highness,” retorted Yebekh, “but at least he had the guts to lead this country with a strong hand. One king cannot reign by only listening to his personal whims... or have eyes for one woman.”

“Watch your mouth, Yebekh. I don’t tolerate traitors.”

“Your Majesty, I’m only telling some truths, as any wise man would advise his King... or warn him.”

His eyes were clearly staring at Cessilia, just like his niece and daughter that were already glaring at her. Cessilia was disgusted by this man. She had already thought he was a horrible creature that morning while trying to use her relationship with

Ashen against her, but now, his political standpoint was perhaps even worse to hear.

“Let’s go,” groaned Ashen, pulling her behind him.

They cut across the room, briefly crossing paths with the Yekara, although they purposely left quite some space between them. Ashen didn’t spare them a second glance, but Cessilia didn’t shy away from their glares. She was clearly an annoying

obstacle between their candidates and the King, and they didn’t even bother to hide their hatred. The smirk on the Clan

Leader’s lips as she was pulled away annoyed Cessilia all the more.

“N-no, wait.”

Just as they were about to reach the doors and part with the irritating trio, Cessilia turned around, fiercely facing them.

“You knew th-the flood would p-put people at risk outside the C-Capital,” she said. “You d-didn’t send help at all.

Almost all the families did, but you d-decided to ignore those p-people.”

“Those families are so poor and weak precisely because they can’t help but lose their wealth stupidly. It is their choice

to waste money and goods on those useless people. The Yekara Clan shall stand strong, alone. We do not need to concern

ourselves with those peasants. They should have left those beggars to die in the natural order of things and saved their wealth.

No wonder they are still below us.”

Cessilia chuckled.

It was a brief, crystalline chuckle, but it was so sudden and sincere, the Yekara Leader lost his prideful attitude and

knitted his brows, completely overthrown. Cessilia’s confident laugh made him lose his stance. Facing him, the Princess

looked strangely relieved. Her smile was anything but what he had expected.

“You are th-the one making foolish choices, Lord Yebekh,” she calmly said.

“How dare you?!”

“You’re c-completely wrong,” she said, “and you will r-regret it too. The other t-tribes are the ones m-making smart cchoices, while you stay b-back and hide.”

“The Yekara Clan doesn’t hide!” he roared. “We don’t fear anything!”

“You d-do. You f-fear losing what you have. B-but you’re losing opportunities b-because you’re so afraid. The other tribes are already far ahead. You just d-don’t see it.”

“You’re ridiculous! They are stupidly losing money! Wasting it on beggars! They will soon come and beg us for their own food!”

“They will n-not. They are already p-preparing for the future, g-getting richer.”

Cessilia grabbed Ashen’s arm, with a confident smile that infuriated Lord Yebekh even more.

“They are n-not wasting their m-money. They are investing in p-people,” she declared, before pulling the King away with her.

Just before they left the room, Ashen noticed Yebekh’s furious expression and smirked. Cessilia had defeated this man

once again, just with words, no swords or dragons needed.

As the two of them walked away, he smiled to himself, proud of his Princess. She was surprisingly eloquent, fierce,

and sharp as a blade at times. They climbed the stairs together in silence, both enjoying this little victory over the Yekara Clan

after a long day. They finally reached his room, and Cessilia let out a long sigh, taking Ashen’s fur cape and the raincoat off her

shoulders. Meanwhile, he went to prepare the fire in the little fireplace, half-naked already. Cessilia easily found towels in the

only wardrobe and began drying her long curls with one.

“How c-come you really d-don’t have many c-clothes?” she asked, staring at the half-empty wardrobe.

“I don’t really need them,” he shrugged, grabbing another towel. “It’s easier to move around without...”

“I d-don’t like it,” she frowned.

Every time they ran into some women, candidates, or servants, they couldn’t help but glance at the King’s impressive

body, regardless of if they were scared or not. Cessilia didn’t like that at all. She rubbed her hair a bit more vigorously with

the towel, reminiscing about the Yekara women that still had their hungry eyes on her man.

“...Cessi.”

His gentle voice wasn’t enough to make her stop pouting. Instead, Cessilia ignored him, fiercely focusing on drying

each of her long curls. She hid under the towel as an excuse to ignore him. She was jealous, and a bit embarrassed about her

own possessive nature. It was a side of herself she was unfamiliar with and quite uneasy about showing to Ashen.

Suddenly, she felt large hands over her own, and he gently squeezed them. His fingers moved to take control of the

towel, and he began drying her hair for her. Cessilia was mute, only following his lead, his movements far less aggressive than

her own. Despite being temporarily blind, she could feel his presence right behind her, a bit too close.

"...They should be the ones to be jealous."

His deep voice sent a wave of warmth down her chest. She tried to swallow her saliva, but her throat was dry, and her

heart was beating a tad too fast. She wasn't so shy when they kissed earlier, so why was she so much more troubled when he used his words...?

He slowly pulled the towel down and wrapped it around her shoulders instead. Because he was behind her and she

couldn't see his movements, Cessilia was on edge, trying to guess what to do next. She heard him chuckle, and she turned around, unable to take it anymore. She faced his smug expression, making her even more embarrassed.

"It's not f-funny," she mumbled, trying to push him away.

"I'm not making fun of you," he assured her, caressing a strand of her hair. "...I'm just being a bit selfish."

Cessilia sighed. He could be horribly arrogant at times. He chuckled once more, but stepped away, grabbing another

towel to hand her. Although her hair was half-dry now, her dress was still soaked, and her body cold. It was unlikely she'd get

a cold, but she was still very much uncomfortable. This time, he stepped away, giving her some space to finish drying herself,

or at least try to. He called out for a maid to bring her a new dress, and quickly changed himself, grabbing one of the very few

pieces of clothing in that wardrobe. They were strangely cautious around each other, both looking away from the other's naked

body. Cessilia, first, tried hard not to look his way as he got into a new pair of pants, still not bothering with a shirt. She was a

bit surprised to see him so absorbed in the fire while she put on the new dress brought by the servant, though. Ashen was very

clearly looking away on purpose when she had expected him to peek at her naked body. She wondered... was he really not

interested? Or just trying to be considerate? She wondered if she was more foolish for wanting him to look, or because she was dejected he didn't...

The dress was very pretty too. She recognized one of those they had brought to her bedroom. This one was ocean blue,

with the shades getting darker and darker toward the bottom, in thin layers that followed her body's curves. It was sleeveless

and off-the-shoulder, with thin silver-colored chains around her neck and arms, holding the fabric and acting as body jewelry.

She liked it. It wasn't one of those overly decorated dresses, it had no embroideries or anything sewn on it, but the fabric was

obviously of superior quality. It barely weighed anything and was very flowy... She could feel it float around her like a breeze

as she moved. When Cessi turned around, Ashen was seated on the bed, waiting for her. She smiled at him and closed the distance between them.

“How much t-time do we have?” she asked.

“A couple of hours, more or less. You have time to sleep a bit.”

“B-but what if I miss the b-banquet?”

“I’ll wake you up,” he promised. “Plus, it’s my banquet. They won’t start without me. Come.”

He gently pulled her onto the bed, and they laid next to each other. Ashen took her in his arms while still respecting her with a bit of distance between them. Cessilia chuckled. He was definitely holding himself back on purpose... For now, she was indeed much too tired to want anything more. In fact, as soon as she laid down, it was as if all the fatigue from the day suddenly washed over her. All strength left her body, and she gladly snuggled against Ashen’s warm torso.

His fingers started caressing her temple, combing her curls gently. Cessilia slowly drifted away, soothed by the gentle rain sounds, the smell of a warm fire, and Ashen’s fingertips against her skin. “...Cessilia.”

She woke up to lips softly pressed against her shoulder. Cessilia frowned, a bit confused and upset about being taken away from her very good nap. She felt like she had only slept for a very short while, but the lighting in the room said otherwise. It was darker outside, and the room was taken into a warm halo from the fire. Ashen moved his lips to her cheek with a faint chuckle.

“Are you awake?”

She nodded with a faint sigh. At least, she was feeling a bit more rested. She felt Ashen move to position himself over her, and she opened her eyes to see him, a playful smile on his lips, hovering over her. His intense, burning stare woke her up instantly. Her heartbeat quickened again, sending blood rushing through her body. She realized she was trapped between his arms.

“Ashen... D-don’t we have to g-go?”

“We still have a few minutes.”

She blushed even more. He probably hadn’t planned those minutes to let her get ready... Still, her body felt strangely content about this. She knotted her hands behind his neck, a bashful smile on her lips as well. When Ashen came down to kiss her, she didn’t refuse him.

She was now warm, and feeling that heat from her lover’s body. Ashen was large enough to fill her entire field of vision, but she liked his presence, so protective and reassuring. His height was matching hers, and his thick arms were so nice

to caress with her hands too. It felt like a mile to cross his shoulder and his back to get back to his nape, her fingertips meeting the few bumps of his scars on the way there. She had never thought such a muscular body could be so attractive. Perhaps because she had grown up around toned people, Cessilia was just now realizing the beauty of a perfectly defined muscle moving, the silent strength that emanated from it. Ashen seemed like he could carry the world on his shoulders, and she liked that. She didn't want a man who would need her more than she needed him. He may have taken a long detour to realize it, but her Prince was truly a fine King.

The sounds of their kisses and caresses filled the room, with the beautiful concerto of the crackling fire and gentle rain behind them. She could hear his faint breathing like a brisk wind, and feel the mattress moving under them. His hands gently caressed her leg, up and down her hip, without going much further. While she wondered why he hesitated so much, Ashen's lips moved to her cheek, down her jawline, to her chin, her neck, and pressed down further to her cleavage. Cessilia blushed helplessly, but she didn't care anymore. She looked down, meeting his eyes. Ashen was kissing her between her breasts, the burning dark eyes of her lover locked with hers, making the whole encounter even hotter. She opened her lips to say something, but the delicious shivers he was sending from each place he kissed rendered her mute. It was good, scarily good. She gasped as his fingers moved in between her legs, caressing her even more intimately.

"...Will you be alright?" he asked between two kisses.

Cessilia felt a bit more embarrassed. She had lost her virginity just the previous day... It was only natural he'd ask.

However, she felt completely fine. Her body had recuperated quite quickly already, and in fact, she was even eager to do it again... She wanted it. She nodded, her heart beating fast and her whole body sweating a bit from the heat. Ashen smiled,

throwing her heart for a loop. He then ventured lower, to her surprise, moving his face between her legs. Pinned to the bed,

Cessilia covered her mouth, embarrassed by her own excitement.

"A-Ashen..."

"Let me taste you."

Before she could protest, his mouth was against her lower lips, and she moaned helplessly, surprised by the sensations it caused in her lower stomach. As Ashen used his tongue and lips to please her, his hand caressing her curves, Cessilia heard herself gasping and moaning in pleasure. She wanted to explore this facet of her womanhood. She was young, but so eager to learn more about the pleasures of the flesh. The situation was embarrassing, and making her blush endlessly, but she didn't

want to push any of it away. She wanted more... more of what Ashen was giving her. She moved her legs as she felt like it, her toes grabbing the sheets, and wriggled her waist under his tongue, crying out in pleasure. Her voice was embarrassing to her own ears, but she liked those sounds of the woman inside her getting pleased by her lover. Ashen's mouth was restless, not letting her escape. The wet sounds and movements were filled with lust, and a heat was growing in her stomach.

"Ashen..." she cried out, grabbing his hair.

His hot breath was as much a torture as his tongue. It felt like this would never end, but something was growing, dangerous and attractive. The pleasure was rising. Her voice got louder, her breath shorter. She could feel the tide rising, the sparks around her stomach close to the big finale...

He stopped suddenly, making her almost cry in dissatisfaction. Yet, Ashen quickly readjusted his position to move above her, and she felt him against her entrance, making her even more eager. Cessilia cupped his face with both her hands and led him to kiss her. That kiss had a strange taste, but she didn't care. She just wanted to feel him, all of him. She heard him chuckle, and he slowly moved, pushing his way inside, making her cry out. Cessilia spread her legs naturally, letting him all the way in, groaning in pleasure as he filled the void he had left just before. Her trembling voice spoke volumes. She didn't remember it being like this, but she liked that heat in her lower body, the foreign feeling inside. Ashen groaned next to her ear and clenched his fist around the cushion by her head.

"Are you a-alright?"

He chuckled, and this sent weird sensations that made her shudder.

"I should be the one asking you that," he whispered, kissing her cheek. "...I'm alright. Just working on my selfrestraint..."

"B-but I'm fine..."

He sighed and got on his elbows to look at her.

"I think you underestimate my greed a bit," he muttered. "You have no idea how much I want you... how much I have been craving you since yesterday."

Cessilia blushed and smiled, caressing his cheek.

"I want it too, Ashen... p-please."

He sighed, shaking his head a bit.

"You're more dangerous than an army of dragons, Cessi. ...Alright. Don't get mad at me later, please."

He suddenly began moving, making her cry out. It was more than she remembered. His pelvis moved so fast, so deep, she soon found herself crying out, completely helpless. His movements were so restless, barely giving her room to breathe as

he pulled almost all the way back, and went all the way in. Her body might have been strong, but her mind wasn't prepared for the torturing sensations of pleasure. It was like her stomach was twisted, the heat between her legs burning. The wetness from earlier was turning into a rapid, flowing back and forth with him, and rushing everything inside.

"Ah... Ah... A-Ashen! Ha... Hm!"

Cessilia was trying to catch her breath, hold onto him, but her body reacted faster than she could. She felt the waves rushing inside with him, the bed creaking helplessly, and the sensations between her legs making her crazy. She loved it, she loved it so much but she couldn't even stop to savor it. It was like a storm of pleasure unleashing inside, and she could only let herself be carried along. Ashen's grunts of pleasure were music to her ears, bestial and sexy. To think he was craving her body like this made her feel so powerful and desirable. She liked that he was losing himself in her, turning back into a greedy, pleasure-driven man craving her. There was no pain, but her body was straining to endure his frenzied pounding, her whole body trembling at each thrust. He only slowed down to kiss her, and each time, she found relief in that kiss, his lips more gentle than his lower body. She grabbed his shoulders to hold on to, her fingers locked on some strands of his white hair, and she tried to keep her eyes open. It was even sexier that they both had their clothes on, her dress pulled up to her stomach, and Ashen's pants lowered on his legs. A bit playful as he slowed down to kiss her again, Cessilia ventured her hand to grab his butt, making him jump in surprise, so much so that he stopped moving for a short while. She chuckled, a bit amused to be the one to shock him for once.

"You..."

He took a look at her red cheeks, a proud and wry smile on her lips. Her touch on that part of his body had calmed down the beast a little. He was far from done, and still inside her, but that was a welcomed break for the two of them, catching their breath while staring at each other.

"Are you being mischievous, my princess?" he chuckled.

"I c-can touch you where I w-want," she retorted, her lips pouting a bit.

She was unbearably cute when she was trying to take the offensive. He chuckled and lowered his head to kiss her.

Cessilia's hand was not letting go, a bit possessive of his muscular bottom. He quite liked it when she tried to be more boastful, as opposed to her usual shyness... especially when she did it to claim her ownership of him. He kissed her cheek.

"You sure can," he chuckled.

Then, he gently grabbed her hand, moving it from his butt to where their bodies were joined. Cessilia's stony facade dropped, while he chuckled.

"You're the one... making me like this."

Cessilia was rendered mute. He was inside of her with this? She regretted being so cocky just a second ago when she had such little self-awareness... Ashen resumed moving, slowly, making her even more aware of what was going on down there. Cessilia tried to control her breathing and her shameful thoughts, but it was a bit too late. Ashen guided her fingers on her own body, triggering a new little touch of pleasure. She was unveiling the secrets of carnal pleasure at high speed, and she couldn't admit to herself how good that felt... Before she realized it, he resumed his pounding, and her fingers moved on their own to increase her pleasure. Her voice grew steadily louder, now following the rhythm of her lover's thrusts. His groans too.

He called her nickname in between, not slowing down anymore. Time around them was now solely regulated by their pleasure, growing faster as the wave grew bigger. Cessilia could feel the pleasure rising; her fingertips moved faster, and Ashen's pounding intensified, making her cry out. Her hand stiffened, and she stopped her fingers, suddenly completely absorbed in his rough pounding. He was going fast, all in and almost all out, wrecking her senses and making some parts of her body numb, as if to focus everything on the ones being pleased. Her moans echoed in the room, but she was deaf to them; she could only focus on the inner sensations and the sparks that suddenly bloomed in her stomach. It was so sudden, she felt her body stiffen, and heard Ashen groan loudly. He froze deep inside, and her entire body froze, pinned down by pleasure and the strange trembling that came from it.

When her limbs finally relaxed, Cessilia calmed down, her breath slowing down. She had no idea when she had closed her eyes, but she could feel Ashen's fingers gently combing her hair. She hugged him, hiding her face in his neck. She was happy. It was like a stolen, private moment between them, so short but so blessed. Even if she was tired, she liked the lingering sensations in her body, the soft memory of their intense love-making.

"...Are you alright?"

Cessilia nodded slowly against his shoulders. She truly was. A bit tired, but happy, her heart at ease. She heard Ashen sigh, and his lips kissed her shoulders. He pulled out, making her grimace. She felt strangely empty, but her body needed a bit of a break from his presence inside.

"Damn it," he groaned.

"Ashen?"

“...I came inside. Sorry...”

He sighed again, but Cessilia wasn't happy with that. She moved away to look at his annoyed expression.

“Why d-do you apologize?”

He made a sour expression.

“I don't want to get you pregnant, Cessilia.”

“Why n-not?” she protested, almost vexed.

Cessilia had always wanted children. Not as many as her mother, but as someone who had helped raise her younger

siblings, she knew a bit about the happiness of raising a baby. She was aware she was still young, but she thought of herself as

mature and aware enough to become a mother, and her own mom was pregnant with her firstborn when she was even younger

than Cessilia. Moreover, Ashen was a King, and he would need heirs as soon as possible, probably. He was older than her by

over four years too. Cessilia had dreamt the father of her children would be him, just like she wanted to be the mother of his

children. Hearing him say he didn't want her to be pregnant was hurtful.

Ashen realized one second too late he had misspoken and made her upset. His black eyes opened wide, and right after,

he avoided her gaze for a second and shook his head.

“It's not that I don't want a child with you,” he explained. “Just... not now.”

“It t-takes several months t-to conceive a baby,” she retorted. “B-By then, I'm sure we will b-be done with the c-competition

and the c-clans' opposition too...”

“It's not about the competition or the clans. I'm the one who's not ready, Cessilia.”

There was something painful in his tone that made her calm down instantly. Ashen wasn't against having a child with

her; the issue was more personal. Cessilia moved their position to sit up, facing him with her hands still on his shoulders. He

was still avoiding her eyes, though. She gently pulled a bit of his white hair off his face and back.

“...T-tell me,” she said gently. “Ashen, speak t-to me.”

He sighed and leaned forward, resting his head against her stomach. She still couldn't see his face, but at least, his shoulders were a bit more relaxed.

“I would... love your child, Cessilia. A baby that comes from you... I would love your baby like I love you. So, so

much. But I just... I don't think I could be a good father, Cessi. I grew up in a broken family, with no father figure. My father

was a horrible piece of shit to both his women, and even worse to his own children.

...What if I do the same thing to our child?

What if I... get mad at him or her, what if I scare them? What if I... if I ever hurt them? I'd rather die than risk doing anything to

your child.”

Cessilia smiled. It wasn't really something she should have been happy about, but in her heart, Ashen was just proving himself to be an even better man than she thought. Underestimating himself, and already showing so much love and concern over his future children. Their future children.

She gently caressed his hair.

"...Ashen. L-look at me."

When he didn't move, Cessilia sighed and pulled his hair a little.

"L-look at me, I s-said."

Despite her stutter, her imperious tone was clear. He sighed and leaned on his arms to face her, still sullen. His dark

eyes looked full of doubt, and even a hint of fear. Cessilia smiled at him and gave a quick peck on his lips.

"Ashen," she muttered, "you're n-not like your father. You t-took good c-care of your mom and b-brothers, all you c-could.

You c-cared about so many of your p-people today t-too. You always d-do your best for others' sake. You really are a k-kind

man. You d-don't even realize how k-kind and selfless you are. ...Plus, d-do you really think I would let you d-do anything

to our children? If you d-don't trust yourself, at least, t-trust me. I am n-not a weak woman."

He finally broke into a faint smile. Ashen gave her back that quick peck, and tilted his head.

"...Right. I underestimated a dragon mom. Your children will be so lucky to have you..."

"Our ch-children. I d-don't plan to have a b-baby with anyone else b-but you."

"Still," he groaned, "I should have... had more restraint, until we talked properly about it."

"It's alright. We just d-did."

Her confident smile was enough for him. He chuckled, giving in to her confidence. He leaned forward, and they

resumed their kissing, caressing each other for a while.

Suddenly, a knock was heard on the door.

"Your Majesty," said a female voice. "They are waiting for you for the second banquet..."

Ashen groaned.

"Damn it," he grumbled.

"Let's g-go."

He nodded and helped Cessilia get out of the bed. While Ashen went to the door to tell the servant to announce his

arrival, Cessilia walked to the little basin to clean herself up. She felt like the remnants of what they had just done could be

seen on her, even if it was irrational. She did her best to clean herself up in a short time, putting her dress back down and

combing her curls with her fingers. Because she didn't have any hair ornaments this time, she braided her hair and quickly

twisted it into a low bun, some curls naturally falling out nicely. The result was simple but very elegant, and when she checked

in the mirror, Cessilia found her cheeks didn't need any blush nor her lips any more pink...

"Cessilia."

Ashen called out to her, and she came to take his hand, her heart thumping. It was strange that after all they had already done together, even the simplest gestures of affection made her heart flutter... After letting the servant in to put out the fire,

Ashen and Cessilia walked out of the room, hand in hand.

He guided her throughout the castle but, as they got closer to the location of the second banquet, Cessilia noticed he was frowning, lost in his thoughts.

"Ashen?"

"I'm just thinking... Next time, I have to be more careful. I might really get killed before I get to meet our child, you know."

"W-why are you saying that now?!"

Ashen sighed and shook his head.

"I'm being rational. ...I'm pretty sure your dad and brothers will take my head the minute they find out."

After a second, Cessilia laughed, unable to hold it. This part, at least, sounded like a reasonable concern of his...

Chapter 19

"They won't be late, right?" muttered Nana, while pacing back and forth in the corridor.

"They will definitely make it," sighed Tessa. "They are probably just acting all lovey-dovey who-knows-where..."

She crossed her arms again, leaning against the wall. They had only been waiting for a few minutes, but the atmosphere

was tense, as expected. It wasn't just because her cousin and the King were a bit late.

That guy was the King, he could

probably be late all he wanted. No, Tessandra had an odd feeling since seeing the Lords from the different clans walk by

earlier. The two girls had bathed, changed into new clothes, and even grabbed dinner with Sabael. Thankfully, the young

soldier had apparently decided to stop teasing her each chance he got, so she had been able to eat comfortably. Probably

because things were getting more serious in the castle. Tessandra glanced at a duo of Royal Soldiers walking by again.

"...Familiar faces?" she asked Sabael without looking at him.

"Not really."

He had an odd feeling too. All of the Royal Guards they had seen so far seemed to be strangers to him. Although he was

usually posted to the Inner Wall, Sabael should have had at least some sense of familiarity, but there was none. Tessa caressed

the handle of her sword, frowning a bit. Perhaps it wasn't a bad thing that she had chosen a more practical outfit rather than a

ceremonial one...

"Do you think the clans are plotting something?" she muttered.

"Definitely. The Yekara and Pangoja Leaders are not happy with the King choosing Lady Cessilia over their candidates... I heard the last Royal Council caused quite an uproar after she made an appearance too. If they know they might lose, they might act before they really lose everything..."

"That can't be good," muttered Nana, nervous. "They own so many military forces! Their private militia was estimated to be over three hundred soldiers in the Capital alone just two years ago, and it's been growing since then..."

Tessa turned to her.

"What else do you know, Nana? About the Yekara and Pangoja?"

"They are two of the oldest and most established clans, and among the largest ones," she immediately began reciting.

"The Yekara grew from an ancient military family after they recruited a lot of the forces that had turned their back on the ancient King, and they heavily invested in combat training and weapons. The Pangoja have money. Lots and lots of money, but their military power is only about a fourth of the Yekara; they mostly use their money to hire mercenaries. They both have at least three residences within the Capital and many more properties."

"So if those two began to cooperate..."

"A catastrophe," sighed Naptunie. "That would be a catastrophe!"

"It's highly unlikely, though," said Sabael. "The two clans don't see eye-to-eye..."

"You can never know for sure," Tessa grumbled. "People with common enemies become friends surprisingly quickly..."

Just as she finished her sentence, Cessilia and Ashen appeared at the end of the corridor, holding hands. Tessandra

smiled. Although she wasn't fond of the King himself, she had rarely seen her usually shy cousin looking so happy.

"...No need to mention all that to those two," she muttered to Naptunie and Sabael.

"Why?"

"They probably already know," she said, moving from the wall.

The five of them met up in the corridor, Cessilia smiling at them, although there was a dash of pink on her cheeks. Both she and the King had changed clothes too.

"Lady Cessilia, your hair is so pretty like that! But you don't have any hair ornaments, will that be fine?"

"I th-think it will," chuckled Cessilia. "I d-don't think this c-competition is really about looks..."

Tessandra glanced at the King but didn't say anything. She shrugged.

"Let's go," she sighed. "I have a feeling this new banquet won't be relaxing at all, anyway."

She walked ahead, while the two siblings, a bit more self-conscious about the King's presence, politely let him and

Cessilia through first. Their little group made their way downstairs in silence. The closer they got to the cave where the banquet was being held, the heavier the tension got.

While going down the stairs, though, Cessilia couldn't help but admire how their surroundings became less handcrafted but more natural. The walls were now irregular, designed by the waves that once reached this place. The windows were rarer too and were the last things men had put in there. Even the stairs got less and less equal, more uneven and forcing them to watch their steps. The path was narrow, forcing them to come down two at a time. Had everyone come down this narrow path?

It didn't leave much room for a proper evacuation in case something happened... It would be easy to block the way out too. Her cousin probably had the same thoughts, as Tessandra kept nervously glancing all around.

Finally, they reached a much more open area. It wasn't a room per se, more like a very large cave that had been designed to look like a hall. The ceiling was entirely made of stone, some stalactites even coming down from the ceiling. There were only a handful of windows, all too small to brighten the whole cave without the help of a few well-placed mirrors, some torches lit up against the walls, and at the other end of the cave, a small lake. Just like the one she had been to with Ashen before, this water was crystal clear, almost turquoise, and reflected the light like a large mirror. There had been a conscious effort made by the human craftsmen too. Unlike the roof of the cave, all of the walls up to a certain height had been decorated with gorgeous mosaics, most made of stained glass, shaped gems, or polished stones, to represent scenes or beautiful designs.

A portion of the cave's floor had been dug to an even level and had a clean floor of stained glass and polished stones. It was as if the lower half of the cave had been made into a large hall, while the top was still very natural, where no man's tool could reach. It was a truly unique place, beautiful both by the efforts men had made and the natural talents of nature.

The cave was large, but most of it was used as an arena, just like Naptunie had described. A large circle had been dug below the natural cave's floor, while stairs had been carved all around, three levels for the guests to sit around it. Outside of this arena, the cave was mostly left to its natural state, with only three entries like the one Cessilia's group had just walked out of, small holes on the other side, probably dead ends to smaller caves, and the little lake. As they finally reached the last step into the cave, Cessilia was surprised by the sand color of the stones around, much clearer than the ones from outside. Perhaps

the lack of seawater and sunlight reaching them had preserved the stone's natural color...

"It's so beautiful!" exclaimed Naptunie, saying out loud what Cessi was also thinking. Her voice echoed in the cave, attracting all eyes to their little group. Although the cave was very large, the echo was equally as impressive, and thus, the smallest sound could be heard everywhere. Moreover, the people already seated on the steps of the arena had been rather quiet, or only whispering, thus their entrance was not discreet at all.

There were a lot more people than Cessilia remembered seeing at the first banquet, perhaps because the room had been smaller before. Now, the cave seemed filled with people from all clans, their eyes going right to her. It would have been a bit scary if she hadn't prepared herself for at least this much attention. However, with Tessandra in front of her and Ashen holding her hand, Cessilia wasn't scared at all. Moreover, she wasn't only getting defiant glares. A lot of the eyes looked happy to see her, notably those from the clans she had already befriended. She looked around, trying to spot her closest allies, but none of those who had helped at the Outer Wall were there. She suspected the Yonchaa, Hashat, and Sehsan had sent representatives and remained at the Outer Wall to help. She recognized Lady Bastat's father and Nanaye, the candidate of the Yonchaa Tribe and Naptunie's friend. The Hashat Family was represented by Hephrael's father, although the man looked a bit unhappy to be there, his arms crossed and his lips pinched. Seated on the first level was the Yekara Clan, more numerous than before. Cessilia frowned. They were all wearing blood-red outfits, their eyes on her. Their leader, Lord Yebekh, was between his two candidates and smirking. He definitely had something on his mind...

"Is it me or... are there a lot of people?" muttered Naptunie, a bit worried.

"The Yekara asked to bring more men, saying they were worried for their candidates after the murder," muttered Ashen.

"I couldn't refuse, but I brought more of our guards, just in case..."

Sabael nodded. Indeed, he recognized some of his fellow Royal Soldiers, even nodding at those he personally knew or was friends with. Still, it couldn't be helped that the atmosphere would be tense with so many people. There would have been no reason for the Yekara Clan to bring this many people if they didn't have something in mind.

"...Krai really won't be able to come here," groaned Tessandra. "It's still raining outside, and there's no point in him coming, either; he'd risk killing us all if the cave collapses."

This was definitely part of the alienated clans' plan. Cessilia had thought the same while looking around the cave. She

could hear the sea waves outside, probably not too far on the other side of the cave's walls, but the underwater passage probably led them further than that. They could also hear the rain, much calmer than before but seconded by a storm getting closer and closer. She silently hoped Naptunie was right about that waterway... They finally reached what seemed like the arena, but far from parting with her, Ashen held her hand tight and guided her to his seat in the stalls. Unlike all the other seats carved around them, the King's throne was much larger, more embellished, and almost as tall as two rows by itself. No one had sat near it, so when Ashen sat down, Cessilia was noticeably the only one within his proximity. After a hesitation, she sat right next to him, in a normal seat, but with the King still holding her hand. Tessandra, Nana, and Sabael sat close by, although deliberately leaving some space for the couple. Their seating gathered a lot of attention once again, some staring while others glared. The women behind the Yekara Leader, in particular, seemed to be piercing holes through Cessilia, but she ignored them. Instead, she glanced at the Pangoja Leader. That middle-aged man seemed to have lost weight and aged a few years in just a couple of days' time. Perhaps he was very affected by his candidate's death. The remaining one was seated right next to him, with a defiant look in her eyes. Istis had a beautiful, long, orange dress that did not match her unhappy expression, as if she had been dragged here by force. In fact, she was the only candidate not looking toward the King or Cessilia, her eyes down on her hands. "Welcome, Your Majesty!" exclaimed Lord Yebekh as if he was the main host of the banquet. "You sound very happy," hissed Ashen. "Of course! This banquet will most likely be a memorable one... Hopefully, no bad news comes to mess with our candidates' performances this time. We shall expect the ladies of our Kingdom to demonstrate their best skills, so Your Majesty can choose a queen from the best of them." His obvious intent to exclude Cessilia from the "ladies of our Kingdom" was rather straightforward, and got him a few glares. Not only from Tessandra and Ashen but from several people from the other families as well. Even Axelane, the beautiful candidate of the Nahaf Family, looked a bit annoyed at his arrogance, rolling her eyes and grabbing the hems of her gorgeous, long, golden dress. "...Enough," said Ashen. "This banquet is only happening so we can confirm who my future Queen will be. Since some of you still think this is even necessary..." He was obviously referring to two clans amongst the seven, but both the Pangoja and Yekara Leaders decided to play

dumb, remaining silent. Ashen formed a fist with the hand that wasn't holding Cessilia's. If it wasn't for those two clans' power, he would have ended this foolish, useless competition long ago. There was no way he'd choose a woman other than Cessilia. The only reason he couldn't end it was that the Yekara and Pangoja Clan might use this as an excuse to start another civil war. With Cessilia's latest achievements, though, this might not be a concern anymore. She had rallied several tribes and families to her with impressive speed and diplomacy.

Ashen took a deep breath.

"...May this second banquet start," he groaned.

This time, there would be no dances. He'd had enough of useless ceremonies and had insisted this banquet would be

less frivolous than the previous one, with only servants putting large tables full of food on each level so they could watch the

performances without moving around. The musicians were playing on their own in one corner of the arena, filling the time until

the first candidate's performance. It was quite austere, but this way, all the candidates had to remain there too, so no one could

get assassinated in the middle of the banquet a second time... which led the banquet to debut with a rather awkward tension in

the air. Cessilia didn't even touch her food, only drinking wine with her free hand. She couldn't shake that bad feeling she had,

and right below her on the stairs, Tessandra was also watching the audience like a dragon waiting for its prey to come out.

Soon enough, though, Ashen turned his eyes to the Sehsan Tribe Leader, and they exchanged a nod. The Lord slowly

stood up, and walked down to the center of the arena, quickly gathering the audience's attention.

"Honorable Lords," he said, "my King, and everyone here. I have an announcement to make as the leader of the Sehsan

Tribe. As you can see, my dear, first-born daughter and our tribe's candidate, Bastat, isn't attending the banquet today. My dear

Bastat has always been a wise child, doing her very best for the sake of our tribe, and, in the future, I will happily entrust her

with the title of Tribe Leader. Today, however, she shared with me that she had made the decision to renounce the position of

this Kingdom's future Queen. She said there would be no point in her attending this banquet and the next when there was a

candidate much better suited to accompany our King."

Cessilia was rendered completely mute. Lady Bastat was forsaking the competition? In her eyes, she had been the

second most likely candidate after herself! Cessilia had no intention to lose to anyone, but she couldn't help but be shaken up

by such a strong candidate openly giving up, and so soon too... Yet, she found herself even more shocked when Lord Gebri

turned to her and bowed very deeply. She could have mistaken it for a bow to Ashen if the man hadn't been so obviously addressing her.

"Lady Cessilia of the Dragon Empire, my daughter places her full trust in you, and so will the entire Sehsan Tribe. My daughter Bastat and I will fully support you as a candidate, and thus, are retiring from this competition in the hope that Lady Cessilia becomes our Queen."

Cessilia was speechless. Lady Bastat was giving up so her tribe could support... her? Right as she was wondering how

she should respond to this, if she had to answer at all, the Yonchaa, Hashat, and Dorosef Leaders or representatives slowly stood up, and came down to the center of the arena.

"The Yonchaa Tribe joins the Sehsan Tribe's position. We are forfeiting our candidate Nanaye's participation, and giving our full support to the Princess."

"The Dorosef Tribe forfeits our candidate Naptunie's position as well, to support Princess Cessilia."

"The Hashat Family gives its full support to the Princess as well, thus candidate Ishira will no longer partake in the competition from now on."

Cessilia was stunned. She couldn't even speak or get up to thank them. Should she even thank them? Half the candidates

were leaving the competition for her sake! When had they even decided on such a thing? This was insane! Naptunie and Tessa

both turned to her with bright smiles, but Cessilia was unable to process what had just happened.

On the other side of the arena, the Yekara Clan Leader had lost his smirk, and his expression was now absolutely

furious. He stood up, glaring at the four families' representatives.

"You are all insane! Leaving this Kingdom to a foreigner!"

"We are leaving this Kingdom to a promising young woman who can do something for it," retorted Lord Gebri, Bastat's

father. "Lord Yebekh, this young woman spent the whole day outside, under the downpour, caring for our people more than

anyone in this place has in a long time. Where were your candidates then? In my eyes, and my daughter's, this brave Princess

more than deserves to be our future Queen already!"

Despite what she was hearing, Cessilia had a hard time believing all of this was even real. She had been so nervous

about this second banquet and the lack of time to prepare a performance to measure up to her rivals that she hadn't even thought

about how the others could have lost interest in the meantime. Not in a million years would she have imagined four of the

candidates forfeiting, and for her sake too. It was a lot all at once. Moreover, the leaders were now all arguing over her.

“You bunch of spineless cowards!” the Yekara Clan Leader was shouting. “You dare let this foreigner win over your own daughters? We cannot allow one of our enemies on the throne!”

“Wake up, Yekara,” retorted the Dorosef Tribe Leader, a very large man named Poseus, and one of Naptunie’s granduncles.

“The war ended long ago, despite what you like to think! We have more to win by working with the Dragon Empire than against them.”

“That’s so typical of you,” hissed Yebekh. “You’ll run away at the first sign of a fight. You should all be ashamed! No

matter what, you should have let your candidates try and defeat the other girls!”

“You forget this competition is more about who is most suitable to become Queen than who can survive their rival’s

jealousy,” retorted Lord Gebri. “I am not willing to risk my only child’s life any longer for the mere sake of my pride. My child

is the only pride I need, and I will happily serve a queen who can do great things for my tribe and all of our children.”

“Our own daughters or nieces have chosen their Queen already,” nodded the Yonchaa Tribe representative. “The next

generation knows the way, and the Princess has shown a lot of grace and kindness already. Yes, she is a foreigner. But she still

has the proper lineage as a princess and inherited power and knowledge from the current ruler. Nothing disqualifies her, and

her actions have only given us more proof that she is a great candidate, at the very least. Admitting defeat is no shame when the

winner’s victory makes it valuable.”

“You fools!”

Despite the Yekara Clan Leader’s furious shouting, most other people in the cave seemed to be agreeing with the four

family representatives’ words. As Cessilia looked around, Axelane of the Nahaf Family seemed to be chatting with her Family

Leader, a bit worried. The Pangoja, however, looked like they had taken a big bite out of a sour fruit. They seemed to disagree

with both sides. They most likely hated the Yekara Clan too much to agree with them but also didn’t believe in Cessilia. They

had never hidden their intentions but she believed their clan wouldn’t be as scheming as the Yekara, at least.

Still, Lord Yebekh wouldn’t calm down. He slammed his hand on the armchair, shouting back at each argument the other

leaders gave him. However, neither party wanted to change their minds, and this debate was going absolutely nowhere.

Cessilia sighed. If this was just the beginning of the banquet, it would surely last a while...

“Enough!” finally roared Ashen. “Lord Yebekh, whether you agree to it or not, this is the other Lords’ decision, and you

have no right to interfere with it. Their candidates are all willingly giving up. The remaining ones are free to stay or drop out of the competition as well, but I won't hear any more protests today. Sit back down and shut the hell up or I'll assume your candidates are forfeiting this one."

Lord Yebekh slowly sat down, still glaring at his King with a furious expression, his fists clenched. Every single inch of his body expressed his silent and barely contained anger in some way. His daughter and niece were calmer, but they had similar furious glares at the King. Cessilia couldn't help but wonder why those two were so bent on becoming Ashen's Queen. They didn't seem to have much affection for him, yet they were participating in this competition as if there was no way they could lose.

"...The candidate of the Nahaf Family should perform first," finally said Ashen after a heavy silence.

Axelane jumped up from her seat as if she had just remembered why she was there. She awkwardly went down to the center of the little arena, but as soon as her performance started, it felt much too weak for most people to care. In fact, her fan dance may have been beautiful, but she was obviously not focused, and even made a couple of mistakes, dropping one of her fans twice, and sending scared glances left and right. Cessilia couldn't help but wonder if she had been threatened in some way? This was the first time she had seen this prideful, young woman so shaken up... When Cessilia glanced up at the other side of the arena, a man was whispering in Lord Yebekh's ear, making him nod slightly with a frown. Whatever was up, he seemed fine with it. His candidates were looking down at their rival's performance with bored expressions, like most of the public, but Ashra kept glancing at her Clan Leader. She also seemed interested in whatever he was being told.

Cessilia kept looking around. This banquet was definitely much more tense than the previous one. In fact, many eyes kept coming to her. Some were simply observing, while others sent her regular glares as if they needed to remind her not everyone was on her side. She didn't care much for those, though. It was always the same people, and she had the same contempt for them. She realized that only half of the ten candidates remained. It was now down to the two Yekara girls, Axelane of the Nahaf Family, Istis of the Pangoja Clan, and herself. Even Nana seemed a lot brighter since her Tribe Leader had announced she wasn't participating anymore, although Cessilia wondered if she had known beforehand or not.

Axelane's poor performance came to an end with a dramatic last note of music, and those who did remember to clap

did it without much conviction, aside from the people of her family. Cessilia sighed, but Ashen gently caressed the back of her hand with his thumb.

"...Are you alright?" he whispered.

She nodded, and he brought her hand to his lips, kissing it in public without an ounce of shame. Cessilia blushed, but

she also looked around, a bit shocked that he dared to do such a thing. The remaining candidates saw this with expressions like they were witnessing a slaughter scene, shocked and disgusted. In fact, everyone seemed surprised to see the usually aloof

King act so gently toward a woman, making a hint of pride surge in Cessi's heart.

"The Princess is not our Queen yet," hissed Yebekh, not staring at her but glaring at Ashen instead. "Despite what she

might have gotten into her head, she still needs to demonstrate her skills and show us a performance like all the other candidates!"

Cessilia glared back, although his attempt to destabilize her fell flat. After his shameless claims about her virginity,

there was no low blow she wouldn't expect from this man. In fact, she caressed Ashen's hand a bit before letting go and

standing up, fierce and not afraid to fight back.

However, before she did, they all very distinctly heard a perfectly timed clearing of a throat. All of the people present

turned their heads to see the old Counselor Yassim, who had just made his way down the stairs. He smiled, as if half of the stares weren't actually glares.

"Ah... I'm glad I made it in time," he said as if he was simply attending any meeting. "I didn't want to miss this banquet after the Princess' amazing performance."

Cessilia frowned, a bit lost, and so did her cousin.

"Cessi hasn't done anything yet, old man," said Tessandra, "but she was just about to."

"Oh, really?" Yassim chuckled. "I believe her saving hundreds of our people at the Outer Wall was plenty enough."

He walked to the arena slowly, helped by a cane. The stairs must have been hard on him, as he was obviously walking with pain, his back bent forward.

"I saw the Princess establish a feeding chain for our people!" he exclaimed happily before anyone could stop him. "She

worked with two families to feed the needy. She solicited the Sehsan Tribe to make tents, and they even provided clothes. The

usually so secretive Hashat Family even healed many of our people for free! Four of the most prideful families worked

together by the impulse of that woman and a natural disaster was almost completely avoided. Isn't that quite a performance in itself?"

"That was not part of the competition!"

“Wasn’t it?” Yassim replied, not afraid at all. “I believe we placed all ten candidates inside the castle to see what they’d do, what they were capable of. I would be curious to hear what your candidates have done since they came to this castle, Lord Yebekh?”

Yassim was good with his words, and he had just delivered a massive blow to Lord Yebekh. She should have been grateful, but Cessilia was worried for the elder instead. The Yekara Leader now looked just about ready to commit a murder...

“That’s k-kind of you t-to say, Lord Yassim,” she said, “b-but I still will d-deliver a performance, since the C-Clan Leaders want t-to see it.”

Her calm and composed tone managed to spare the old Counselor some attention as most eyes turned back to her. She gave a faint smile to Ashen and slowly went down the stairs. Perhaps because she had a long day, and so much had happened, Cessilia felt strangely calm and confident. Even if the Yekara and Pangoja never accepted her, half of the families trusting her was already more than she had hoped for, and more than enough.

She reached the center of the arena and turned her back on Ashen and her friends to face the other leaders, especially

Lord Yebekh, whom she wanted to show she was not afraid of. Instead, she took a couple of seconds to stare at that man,

delivering so much pride and determination in her green eyes, as if she had already been crowned Queen. Then, Cessilia

slowly got down on her knees. It was strange to see that beautiful young woman sit at the lowest level of the arena, while still

dominating them all somehow. She had no jewelry and a simple dress compared to her rivals. However, she was shining brighter than all of them.

“You’d better not use your dragon again,” suddenly hissed Ashra. “A queen ought to be graceful and feminine to be the mother of this Kingdom!”

“Shut up, you useless doll!” shouted Tessandra.

Cessilia paid her no attention. Instead, she smiled, and to everyone’s surprise, opened her mouth to sing.

Her voice was surprisingly clear and soft, yet powerful. They had all heard her stutter constantly, so this perfect,

flawless tune left the audience speechless in a second. Not only that, but the melody sounded like the most beautiful, delicate

thing they’d ever heard. It was like the sound of morning itself, right before sunrise, when everything was gentle, peaceful, and

yet never completely quiet. Her voice sounded like it belonged to a gorgeous, ancient, and mythical creature. It was light, yet

deep, like a perfectly mastered instrument. The softness of the wind, and the strength of a powerful beast. This melody, a

myriad of sounds, bound everyone to their seats and forced them into a religious silence. Cessilia's voice was offering them all a unique, out-of-body experience. No matter how much they hated her, there was no way to resist the appeal of this unique call.

It was beautiful, almost too beautiful to bear for normal ears.

However, she wouldn't be done with just singing.

Suddenly, her green eyes turned to the Yekara Clan Leader, and a scary, bright flame lit up in them. This part was aimed

at him, only him. As if he had walked too deep into a cave and been lured to a monster's lair, the man suddenly found himself

vulnerable. While everyone else was still having a pleasurable listening experience, a chill ran down the man's spine,

grabbing him from behind, and fear began to creep in. He couldn't move. He could almost feel a dragon's silhouette coming

from behind him, its shadow growing as the inflections of the Princess' voice subtly changed. In fact, there was no dragon, but

Cessilia's voice was getting deeper, and everyone else noticed. The softness and gentleness were slowly consumed by

something dark, something frightening that was getting closer. Her song turned from a pleasant melody to a war anthem. It was

still pinning them to their seats, as if something ancestral had come back to haunt this cave, a monster brought back to life. Her

voice vibrated, resonated against the wall as if she had made the whole cave an instrument, a stage, and a trap. A pearl of

sweat dripped down Yebekh's neck, and an irrational feeling of his life being threatened slowly rose. Something felt wrong

about that woman's voice. Nothing about her had changed, but she was there, and her voice had turned into a weapon he was

powerless against.

"Princess."

Just one word interrupted the strange spell they had all fallen under.

All eyes turned to one end of the cave to spot Jisel. She was wearing a dark dress and standing with her usual cunning

smile against one of the pillars. Her confidence felt completely out of place as everyone slowly came back to reality, far from

the scary place Cessilia had tried to take them all just a second ago.

Tessandra and Cessilia alike glared at that woman, but she simply tilted her head, twirling one of her red curls around

her fingers as if she'd expected this much.

"Oh, did I interrupt too soon? Were you ready to kill already?"

Her finger pointed somewhere above their heads, and everyone but Cessilia looked up.

Right above their heads, some of the stalactites were still slowly moving, their structures shaken up by the powerful

echo of Cessilia's voice. She had somehow managed to weaken them all without one falling. The one right above the Yekara

Lord seemed the closest to collapsing, a bit of stone dust even falling down on his face, making him realize that the danger had been real until a second ago.

"You... you witch!" he shouted. "You almost killed me!"

"I wouldn't shout if I were you," warned Tessandra, a cunning smile on her lips. "They can still fall. It would only take one small blow..."

Her words might not have been as scary if she hadn't been playing with a little stone between her fingers while saying so.

Jisel chuckled and walked up to the arena, arms crossed on her chest. She sat in an empty spot, not close to anyone, but specifically opposite the King. Her eyes very briefly went to Ashen, before she looked away with a complex expression.

Cessilia had a bad feeling, even worse than all the other times she saw this woman...

"You vixen!" shouted Safia. "You almost killed us!"

"Like how you almost killed Lady Vena?" suddenly scoffed Axelane. "Accidents tend to surround your family a bit too often. What's one more?"

Safia turned her angry eyes to her rival, but despite flinching, Axelane didn't shy away from it. It seemed she had decided not to be intimidated by them.

"Then, maybe we shouldn't make it an accident."

Ashra suddenly stood up, impressive in her blood-red dress, glaring at Cessilia. Only then did they realize she had

been carrying an extraordinary sword, large and with a unique but obviously sharp blade. She stepped down into the arena, pulling it out and pointing it at Cessilia.

"Come and fight me if you will, Princess. This shall be my performance, and my clan's retaliation for you trying to murder us! The Yekara Clan will not be intimidated by you! You are a War God's daughter, they say? I shall see if you're not a sham!"

Cessilia slowly stood back up.

"No!" shouted Tessandra, jumping on her feet. "I will fight you, Yekara girl! My cousin already gave her performance, you have no need to fight her specifically!"

"No, I want to fight her. She's always hiding behind her loud and brawly cousin, isn't she? Yet, she is the War God's

daughter, not you. This Princess is only good for her money, and I shall prove it!"

"I said no," hissed Tessandra. "You dumb bitch, if you raise your sword against Cessilia—"

"Tessa, it's alright," said Cessilia.

Her composure contrasted with her cousin's visible nervousness. Tessandra was restless, her eyes going back and forth

between Cessilia and her opponent, but the Princess was calm and resolute. Everyone in the arena was now excited to see what this was about. Was the Princess overestimating herself this time? Or underestimating her opponent? Most didn't ignore that Ashra was a praised Yekara daughter and one of the very best warrior women in the Kingdom. Perhaps even the very best, but she seldom fought in public. A fight between her and Tessandra of the Dragon Empire would have been impressive for sure, but now, all the attention was on the Princess.

They saw Cessilia close her eyes for a second and take a deep breath. She did seem a bit nervous. With a slight hesitation, Tessandra threw her sword, and Cessilia caught it, effortlessly moving the weapon around.

"...Be careful, Cessi," she muttered.

Cessilia nodded and took a step back, her eyes riveted on her opponent. The tension in the room was palpable.

Tessandra slowly sat back, her hands joined and her upper body leaning toward the arena, nervous. Naptunie felt nervous as well, and scooted a bit closer to her.

"...Lady Cessilia will be alright, won't she? Maybe she still learned a thing or two... She should know how to put up a bit of a fight, right...?"

Tessandra turned to her with large eyes, and finally, let out a long sigh, shaking her head. She directed her dark eyes to the arena again.

"Cessi isn't the one I'm worried about, Naptunie. Really not. I'm more worried about what she's capable of doing to that dumb bitch..." Nana's jaw dropped a bit, and she slowly moved her gaze back to the arena. Looking at the slender, tall, and graceful figure of Lady Cessilia, she had a hard time imagining how she could be such a fighter that Tessandra would be worried for her opponent. She had only ever seen the gentle and caring Cessilia, who sometimes did get quite fierce and harsh with her words, but she couldn't remember seeing her actually wield a weapon. Every time, Tessandra had been the quickest to draw hers. Unlike her gentle-natured cousin, Tessa had always seemed to be the hot-blooded one, and not shy with her weapon, so much so that Naptunie hadn't even thought Cessilia could also be a fighter...

"So she's... actually really good?" muttered Nana.

"More than that," scoffed Tessandra. "She's only ever lost to her older brothers. Her dad's trained her himself since she was young. Cessilia never liked to fight, but she's really, really good regardless. After what happened to her, she picked up her training again and got even better. I know I wouldn't be able to win against her." Cessilia was an even better fighter than her cousin? Naptunie was speechless again. She knew Cessilia was the War

God's daughter, but that didn't mean she had chosen to follow his steps and learn how to fight! From what she had seen, the Princess was already very proficient in many domains, mostly medicine, but she also knew things like trade and politics, and even how to understand people's needs. Naptunie had thought Tessandra was mostly the other half of Cessilia, adept in what the Princess wasn't, but now, it seemed like she had underestimated her once more. Even now, Cessilia's figure seemed pretty harmless. She seemed to be barely holding the sword with the ends of her fingers, and not in a position to start fighting at all. However, she was standing very straight, and her green eyes were following her opponent. Naptunie looked around. Everyone around the arena was holding their breath, all eyes on the two young women. The Yekara Clan members were grinning, feeling confident. As expected, they all thought Cessilia's strength would mainly rely on her dragon blood. Now that she knew they were wrong, Naptunie felt a bit more excited, goosebumps appearing on her forearms. After she had witnessed Tessandra's fighting skills, she was all the more curious to see how her cousin could compare. If she had been trained by the War God himself, the Yekara candidate was about to learn quite a painful lesson about underestimating opponents...

"Grand speeches and gold coins won't save you this time, Princess," smiled Ashra. "The Yekara Clan doesn't use mighty titles calling ourselves gods to show off. We only rely on our strength to best our opponents. Our clan takes pride in centuries of hard training, ancient fighting techniques, and unique weapons crafted by the very best blacksmiths!"

Just as she said this, she took off the skirt of her dress, revealing pants with two strange blades attached to her hips. The blades had been cut in unique shapes that added a hook before the tip and were clearly sharpened. Naptunie felt a chill just from looking at them. Compared to Cessilia's weapon, Ashra's were made to injure the opponent multiple times. Tessandra suddenly clicked her tongue next to her.

"That sadistic bitch... Those are torture swords," she grunted. "Those swords aren't made to kill in one go, she wants to make a show out of this."

"Is it very bad?"

"It's strange, considering she knows about our skin. She most likely wants to show off. She wants to show she can injure us despite our dragon skin, and make the fight last. Cessi won't have it, though..."

Indeed, Cessilia didn't seem to care at all about Ashra's speech. She hadn't moved since before. Naptunie realized her sword seemed completely still as well, and almost like it was part of Cessilia's body. Ashra's sword had a handle with a long,

red ribbon, and symbols carved into the blade, while the Princess' sword had a simple leather handle, without any other kind of flourishes. Strangely, it seemed much more noble.

"...You should use a d-different sword," Cessilia said. "That one isn't s-suited for combat."

"Oh, I know. But to a specific monster, one shall adapt their weapon, Princess. Those scars on your neck mean your dragon skin cannot completely save you from cuts, hence I want to see how long it takes for you to bleed..."

"It's a fucking test," muttered Tessandra. "This isn't even about the fight. The Yekara Clan is experimenting with what it would take to kill us..."

Naptunie, who had been looking forward to this fight, was back to worrying again. The Yekara Clan was truly too much. They left nothing to fate; they were targeting the Princess on a long-term basis. They definitely had planned this fight, and to use Lady Ashra to test if she could kill the Princess... Now, it was all down to Cessilia. Despite Tessandra's words, she couldn't stop worrying about her. Cessilia seemed like such a kind-hearted person, it was hard to imagine she'd attack her opponent as fiercely and recklessly as they knew Ashra would.

"Your Majesty!" claimed Ashra with a wry smile. "I shall show you this Princess isn't right for our Kingdom. Our Kingdom needs a real queen!"

Right after that, she jumped forward, aiming right at Cessilia. The next movement was barely believable.

Ashra launched herself at full speed toward her, yet Cessilia seemed to simply step to the side. It was so quick, yet each movement was absolutely perfect. Ashra seemed to be blown aside, although they had clearly seen Cessilia be the one to move. The Princess was swift and quick, and her opponent's blade found absolutely nothing when she crossed the air in front of her. Ashra herself seemed to be completely speechless for a moment, blinking twice as if she had just been hit by reality.

Cessilia left her no room to catch up, though. The Princess made a simple movement with her wrist, and suddenly, a long, red ribbon flew into the air. Her sword wasn't even stained, but it was clearly blood that splattered the ground. The movement had been so perfect, swift, and silent, everyone in the audience looked for the injury with confusion. Even Ashra herself looked down to find her flank crossed with a long cut. She then screamed one second too late, holding the bleeding injury with a panicked expression.

"There you go," muttered Tessandra. "Cessi is gonna give her a taste of her own medicine..."

"She won't look for a quick victory?" asked Naptunie.

“No. Not now that she’s seen and heard what Ashra had planned for her. Cessilia might be kind, but she is no fool. She especially has no mercy for sadists with a thing for torture... We are not science subjects. Ashra should have faced a dragon instead. She would have gotten a quicker death...”

Down in the arena, the Yekara candidate seemed to be slowly catching up with what had just happened. She was still holding her bleeding flank, glaring at Cessilia with all her might. All of her earlier boastings were gone. Even if she had just been bested, the young woman was a good enough fighter to realize this was no mere luck from Cessilia. She had just realized how much she had underestimated her opponent. Quickly, she adjusted her position, holding her sword with both hands and getting ready, clenching her teeth.

“You... cursed freak,” she grunted.

“I’m j-just getting started,” said Cessilia.

Naptunie felt a chill. This Cessilia was so different from everything she had seen before. She was cold, calculative,

and focused on her opponent. No, those were the eyes of a predator focused on its prey. The Princess was now really looking like she was standing with all her might, towering over her opponent with the fierceness of a warrior. The fight was only just beginning, it seemed. Ashra too had adjusted her position to leave no openings. She had made a mistake once and didn’t want to risk it again. Her entire clan was watching like one body leaned forward with serious expressions on.

Ashra moved first again. This time, her movements were much faster, and her sword appeared above her head, ready to

cut down her opponent, but before she could, Cessilia’s sword blocked her halfway.

Ashra had both hands on her handle, while

Cessilia used only one to keep her from slicing her head in two, which spoke volumes about the strength difference. The two

women glared furiously at each other, and their blades loudly clashed again. Ashra was trying to break Cessi’s defense, but the

Princess blocked her each time. Each movement was so fast, it was like they could read each other’s minds. The audience

didn’t even dare to blink, as each movement was happening so quickly. Their blades would be pushing against one another for

several seconds, trembling from the pressure on both sides and would suddenly clash again loudly without warning. The

violence of the fight was impressive, yet it had some strange beauty to it. The two women were wearing incredibly elegant

outfits that contrasted with the almost bestial way they went at each other. It would have seemed like choreography if they

weren’t so clearly bent on hurting their opponent. Pearls of sweat had appeared on Ashra’s forehead, and Cessilia’s hairdo had

come undone. Each time she moved and spun, her curls went flying around her like a furious flame. The contrast of the red and blue dresses was hypnotizing, but everything was happening way too fast. Ashra hadn't lied about her own fighting skills; anyone who had once wielded a weapon could tell this much. Her movements were precise, full of strength, and clearly determined to hurt her opponent. Facing her, Cessilia was leaving no room for mistakes; she seemed to be effortlessly deterring each attempt of Ashra's blade to come near. Her dance was perfect and beautiful, but something about this Cessilia was scary. Naptunie felt like she was watching a different person. A coldblooded daughter of the War God's Favorite. When Ashra's blood flew in the air again, a surprised gasp took the whole audience. Once again, Cessilia had gone for a light but painful injury, slicing her opponent's hip. Ashra's anger increased with her pain, and she began attacking again, but her injury was hindering her. Cessilia spun beautifully and found herself behind her right after. Her sword drew a perfect line in Ashra's back, and a scream echoed in the arena.

"Cessi..." grunted Tessandra, frustrated.

Naptunie, who had been so focused on the fight, just now noticed how angsty Tessandra looked. The young woman was leaning forward, frowning and studying her cousin's expression more than the fight itself.

"...Is everything alright?" muttered Naptunie.

"I hope so," said Tessandra. "If Cessilia can remain calm..."

"She seems very calm, though? More than Lady Ashra, anyway..."

"Don't be fooled. Just because she looks calm doesn't mean she is. Cessilia still has the blood of a dragon... One of the reasons she hates fighting is because the bloodlust can get the better of her."

"You mean she could make mistakes if she gets too excited?"

"No." Tessa slowly shook her head. "It's much worse than that... She could get into a hunting mode. She would toy with her opponent for a long while, like a dragon would with its prey, and make her agony as slow and painful as possible."

"That's... terrible."

"Yes, and not what Cessilia wants at all. But she can't help it. With what happened to her when she was younger, her own instincts are now mainly focusing on self-preservation. She is so focused on this fight, I bet she has forgotten pretty much everything else going on. Who she's fighting, why, and who is around. For now, she still looks pretty much in control, but if Ashra doesn't concede defeat soon, that idiot is heading toward a very slow and painful death."

"We can't allow that," muttered Naptunie. "Lady Cessilia would hate such a thing! Even if she doesn't like the Yekara

Clan, she wouldn't like someone to endure such terrible torture!"

"I know, Nana. That's why I'm watching carefully, but I doubt we can simply convince Ashra and her stubborn clan to simply give up. That idiot is about as fierce as one can be. She's good, but at this rate, she's just going to push Cessilia past what she can actually handle..."

Naptunie looked down at the fight again, with a very different view this time. This no longer felt like a fight between equals, and perhaps it never had been. Now, it was like they were watching a tragedy unfold. Lady Cessilia's green eyes did seem colder than ever, unlike what Naptunie had seen before. Meanwhile, Ashra was focused on the fight, and as Tessandra had said, completely unwilling to give in. Plus, her whole clan was behind her. The Yekara people weren't losing one second of the fight, looking so focused yet so blind as to what their candidate was really going through. Some were shouting to support her or scold her for the smallest mistake. They wouldn't allow Ashra to lose, let alone give up. Their candidate knew there was no option other than winning, and she was fighting for this. She had abandoned her plan to slowly injure Cessilia, and she was now fighting to kill her for real.

"...What can we do?" asked Nana. "Should we intervene before it's too late?"

"I think it's already too late," muttered Tessandra. "It was too late the moment that stupid bitch decided to pick a fight with Cessi, Nana. Cessilia would have been able to hold back if Ashra hadn't really aimed to hurt her. But this crazy bitch will not back down, and she isn't even admitting she's going to lose. If we stop the fight now, the Yekara will accuse us of trying to save Cessilia, regardless of how much she's been winning over her opponent."

"...They are ready to sacrifice their candidate," said Sabael. "Look at them, Nana. She's bleeding a ton and not a single one of them looks sorry for her or worried. It's their so-called clan pride speaking. The Yekara will never concede defeat against a foreigner."

"Then... what do we do? I know that Ashra isn't really on our side, but I don't want Lady Cessilia to suffer because of her clan either. Isn't there anything we can do?"

Tessandra glanced back at the King. Ashen's expression was indecipherable, but all this time, he hadn't said a word, his expression focused on Cessilia and Cessilia alone. Although she didn't know this man well and didn't like him much either, Tessa knew he was at least reliable in terms of strength. The White King wasn't of dragon blood, but if he had been trained by the War God himself, he ought to be worth something decent, at the very least.

Tessandra thought this highly of him because he was the only man the legendary War God had trained himself that wasn't his own son.

“...She’s got us,” finally said Tessandra. “Cessilia wouldn’t have gone through with it if she didn’t know there wasn’t a chance she could be stopped.”

Naptunie confidently nodded. She was feeling even prouder knowing that Cessilia was relying on them, even if it wasn’t her in particular. Now, she could refocus on the fight with a bit of a lighter heart and felt even more determined to witness Lady Cessilia’s victory.

Despite what was at stake, this ought to be one of the most epic one-on-one fights they would ever witness. Even some of the Yekara people had forgotten to shout and support their candidate, focusing on the fight. The level of the two young women was among the very best, far above most men in this room that carried a sword. Cessilia’s movements were like a river, smooth, unpredictable, and wild. Her whole body was enhancing the beauty of each of her movements as if it was a dance centered around her weapon and its victim. She was unstoppable like the sea while Ashra moved like a furious flame trying to survive. The fight was both astonishingly beautiful, and yet so violent. More and more blood was starting to flow;

Ashra now had cuts on all sides, her dress gradually turning into a darker red. No matter how much they loathed that woman and her family, even Tessandra had grown some respect for her as a fighter. However, the difference in strength was only growing more and more obvious with each wound. Cessilia’s blue dress was still pristine, while the ground beneath their feet had turned red.

Suddenly, though, something different happened. While she had just inflicted another wound on her opponent, Cessilia grimaced without visible reason. Tessandra jumped on her feet, feeling something was wrong. Ashra was faster to react. While the Princess was destabilized for a second, her sword dashed forward. A new red line appeared. However, this one was on Cessilia’s throat.

The Yekara Clan shouted like one man, but they missed the change in Cessilia’s eyes. Her irises narrowed, suddenly looking almost reptilian.

“Shit!” muttered Tessandra.

It was too late. Cessilia’s sword sliced the air with unprecedented violence, and this time, a large stream of blood flew upwards. Ashra stumbled backward, her shoulder mutilated by an extensive gash, blood pouring out of the wound. This time, she retreated, her survival instincts taking over everything else. Cessilia didn’t give her that opportunity. The Princess rushed forward, her blade ready to strike again. This time, the silver blade was dripping with blood. Ashra’s desperate attempt to flee

was pointless; all of her previous injuries were slowing her down. Half of the audience was shocked by the sudden turn of the fight, yet mesmerized by the tragic scene. Some of the Yekara Clan were still shouting after their candidate for her not to flee, but Ashra had no way to win or escape this time. Cessilia was coming for her, covered in her blood, her eyes so calm and icy, it was scary. She looked like a goddess of war; come to earth to execute some ineluctable fate.

“Cessi!” Tessandra shouted, running down the stairs.

“If the other girl meddles, she will lose!” shouted the Yekara Clan leader, almost happy to see Tessandra rushing to his own niece’s help. “She is forfeiting!”

It was like half their clan was blind to Ashra’s inevitable end. All that mattered was seeing Cessilia lose, one way or

another. The tragedy just had to turn in their favor, the sacrifice didn’t matter.

Cessilia finally reached her opponent and raised her sword, ready to strike again. Her gaze was full of something deep

and painful. She looked fierce, but if one could see past that, there were actual tears in her eyes. She was trapped in the agony

of a memory she couldn’t escape. Her throat was in pain, her heart was bleeding, and it was hard to breathe. Blood

everywhere, and the agony of something, someone she had lost long ago. The sensation of that hot liquid running down her neck

was just too familiar. She needed to get out of there. Eliminate those who wanted to kill her. She wouldn’t succumb a second

time to weakness. She had to get out, at any cost. She had to kill them.

She lifted her sword, ready to strike. This time, she’d get out of there in time. She wouldn’t lose her voice or her

dragon. She was stronger than those who hurt her. She could kill them. She’d killed before, she could do it again. She was

strong, strong like a dragon. She could kill. This was nothing...

She swung her sword. A perfect move for a kill.

“Cessilia.”

The sound of two metals clashing woke her up. She raised her head to face Ashen standing before her. He was like a

wall, his broad torso blocking all of her sight.

“Cessilia,” he called her again.

She blinked twice as if she had just woken up. Cessilia was out of breath, and two strands of her curls were falling on

her face, but as she looked up at him, he could tell his Princess was back. She was just realizing where she was, what had

happened. There was a deafening silence in the cave. All they could hear was the faraway sounds of water, the erratic

breathing of the fighters, and Ashra’s grunts of pain.

“W-wha-... What did I d-do...”

Tears appeared in Cessi's eyes, and she let go of the blade, letting it fall loudly on the ground. She was in shock, remembering everything that had just happened as if she hadn't been in control until now. And in a way, she hadn't. She looked at her trembling hands. The sword's handle had left deep marks in her hands, her calluses showing along with dark scales. There was blood on all of her fingers, even under her nails. Her sobbing got more intense, her eyes looking at those hands and the sword at her feet in disgust.

"A-Ashen..." she cried, unable to utter anything else.

"It's alright."

He moved to hug Cessi, wrapping her in his arms as tightly as he could. She sobbed against his shoulder, her whole body shaking in distress. She wasn't shocked by how she had harmed and injured her opponent; Ashra had begun this fight and fought back just as hard. No, Cessilia was shocked by how much she had lost control of herself. She had lost all restraint, and gotten completely immersed in the fight, to the point where she wouldn't have thought twice about killing her opponent. It wasn't her, though; Cessilia's trauma caused her self-preservation instincts to take over when she could have won this fight easily without them. She thought she could control herself, but her memories had made her react in a much too extreme way.

Her shaking hand went to her throat. The cut wasn't even that deep, it had already stopped bleeding even without her scales being able to protect that part of her body. However, the injury was much more to her mind than physical. She'd lost control, completely. If it wasn't for Ashen, she would have killed that candidate, and she had no intention to in the beginning.

She could hear Ashra breathing like an injured animal behind Ashen, making things worse. Cessilia's tears wouldn't stop, she was crying silently, unable to calm down. She hated herself for what had just happened. She was scared of the monster she had felt herself disappearing into just seconds ago.

"I c-can't," she cried. "Ashen, I c-can't. P-please... P-please, d-don't let me d-do this again. I... I d-don't want to have t-to fight ever again. I c-can't. I'm s-so sorry... I c-can't..."

There was an intense fear in her voice, but what she feared was inside. Cessilia was terrified by what had just happened, so much so that she never wanted to touch a sword ever again. She kept shaking her head, her trembling hands grabbing the ends of Ashen's cloak to hold on to. He sighed and hugged her closer to his heart, comforting her gently. One of his hands was patting her back, the other holding her head against him, as if to give her a safe place inside his arms. No one

could see her face, and the audience could barely see a glimpse of her thin silhouette, hidden in the King's large embrace.

"It's alright," he whispered against her ear, such that only Cessi could hear. "Don't worry. I'm here."

"Your Majesty!" shouted the Yekara Clan Leader. "This fight isn't over!"

"It is," groaned Ashen.

"Your candidate lost," added Tessa. "She should be glad she didn't lose her life too."

"She was about to overpower your so-called Princess when His Majesty intervened! I request this fight to resume immediately!"

"No," Ashen retorted, glaring at the Yekara Leader.

In his arms, Cessilia hadn't moved an inch, but she was clearly still in shock. She wouldn't pick up that sword again,

that was for certain. Right now, the situation was tense. With the fight halted, perhaps temporarily, all eyes had gone to the

Yekara Leader or the King to see who would have the last word on this. Most people in the audience were confused by

Cessilia suddenly dropping her sword and hiding in the King's embrace. The fight had been so intense just before, they

couldn't understand why she'd given up on an almost certain victory.

Things also didn't make much sense for people who weren't part of the Yekara Clan.

Did they really believe their

candidate had a chance against the Princess? The difference in strength had been made astonishingly obvious in the past few

minutes. They couldn't understand how Ashra had managed to slice open the Princess' throat just before, but so far, it felt like

she should have been the gladdest of all that the fight was stopped. Even now, she was covered in blood, exhausted, and barely

able to stand. It felt like her demise had been postponed. Her Clan Leader looked like a madman to all, to force his own blood

to finish a fight they couldn't win. Even more shocking was that the Princess herself wasn't ready to finish the fight either. It

was clearly not mercy that had stopped her, but something more complicated that made the King act like she needed protection.

Either way, most people were completely confused, and looking forward to what was going to happen next. It looked like

neither the King nor Lord Yebekh would give up, which made the situation look like a dead end.

"It's Cessilia's victory," said the King. "There's no more reason to fight."

"Except that she threw her weapon! Our candidate is still standing and able to fight!

There's no victory yet, Your

Majesty! She has to finish what she started, or that means she gives up!"

"You're the one who started this!" Tessandra shouted back, furious. "You should be begging mercy for your candidate,

you crazy piece of shit!"

“Watch your mouth! I am Lord Yebekh of the Yekara Clan! And our candidate knows her duty! Unlike your Princess, we don’t give up on a fight, no matter what! This fight needs a clear winner!”

“...I won’t f-fight again,” muttered Cessilia.

Ashen sighed. Truthfully, he didn’t want her to have to. Although he was incredibly proud of her at the beginning of the fight, he also couldn’t recognize the Cessilia of the past few minutes. Seeing her in such distress once she had come back to her senses had been quite shocking for him as well. Whatever she was going through, he wouldn’t push her to risk it again. It was one of the rare times she did really need him.

Tessandra was just as frustrated. She knew Cessilia had almost killed her opponent already, and she couldn’t understand what was going on. What were the Yekara after? They couldn’t possibly think their candidate had a real chance? Or was it that they were looking for a flaw in the Princess?

“Oh, my gods!”

All eyes went to Ashra’s body which had just collapsed. The young woman that was still standing seconds before had now collapsed to the ground, her eyes wide open, blood leaking out of her half-open mouth. As Ashen had stepped back to see what had just happened, the body was right in Cessilia’s line of sight.

The Princess gasped, covering her mouth with her hand, shocked. She didn’t even need to check the body; Ashra was definitely dead. Her body had fallen back in a strange position, in her own blood. Her fall had been so strange and slow, everyone was still stunned.

“Murder!” shouted a voice.

Tessandra reacted first. She ran down the stairs to the body, furious. She knew Ashra wouldn’t have died like this.

There was no way. Her injuries weren’t such that she could have simply died so easily. She had lost blood, and received

multiple cuts, but none should have been life-threatening, or able to simply kill her in a second. Tessandra had watched the

whole fight without losing a second of it; she was knowledgeable enough both in combat and medicine that she could tell when

someone would die from their injuries or not. Ashra’s sudden death made absolutely no sense.

She reached the body and turned her around, quickly trying to find a clue. Something had definitely happened that was

not Cessilia’s fault. Her cousin was standing there, shocked, probably too stunned to realize. This was probably the worst outcome for Cessilia, who had already been filled with immense guilt.

“Your Majesty!” shouted the Yekara Clan Leader. “The Princess killed our candidate!

This is against the rules! Don’t allow her relative to touch our candidate!”

“Tessa, back off,” said Sabael.

He had run after her the second he had understood her objective. Tessandra might have had the heart to relieve her cousin’s guilt first, but the situation was still much more complex than that. He gently grabbed her arm to pull her away from the body, Nana arriving behind them, equally worried.

In the cave, the voices were getting louder. People who had already recovered from Ashra’s sudden death were now loudly arguing with the Yekara Clan’s people.

“The Princess broke the rule, she murdered her opponent! She has to be eliminated from the competition!”

“Are you insane? Your candidate just dropped dead, who said anything about the Princess killing her? She didn’t even touch her and she suddenly dropped dead like this! It makes no sense!”

“She’s clearly innocent!”

“You’re the one who wanted a death match to begin with! You forced this fight to get to a proper end! So your candidate’s dead, it’s the Princess’ victory!”

“There’s no need for disqualification! It was a fair fight!”

“Your stubbornness killed your candidate!”

The cave’s benches were turning into a complete chaos of shouting. There were three clear sides: those who believed Cessilia had won fairly, those who wanted to free her from Ashra’s death foremost, and the Yekara Clan who were sure this was worth her disqualification. Their plan was now clear: since Ashra hadn’t been able to beat the Princess in combat, they were entirely relying on her death to kick Cessilia out of the competition. Tessandra clenched her fists, furious. Now, if she touched the body again, they’d say she tampered with it to make her cousin appear innocent. Sabael was right; they were stuck in a trap laid by the Yekara Clan.

“...I d-didn’t kill her.”

Cessilia finally turned around to face the Yekara Clan, her eyes still red. All traces of her tears were gone, but she was clearly angry. She’d overcome the terrible experience she had just gone through to be mad at Ashra’s death. She didn’t want the candidate dead, and despite her anger, she was still clear-minded enough to know she was innocent. Although she hadn’t been quite herself, she could remember her fight perfectly, she knew she hadn’t wounded Ashra mortally. Moreover, Ashra had stood back there for several seconds while Ashen had hugged her; it made no sense for her to drop dead when she could probably have resumed the fight.

“She d-didn’t die from the injuries of our b-battle,” she said.

“That’s easy for you to claim,” retorted Lord Yebekh. “However, you have no proof! You’re the only one who harmed

our candidate for the last few minutes! Who else could have—”

“Earlier, something s-stabbed me,” declared Cessilia. “D-during our fight, I lost my f-focus for a second b-because something p-pricked my back.”

Without hesitation, she quickly undid the laces of the top of her dress and turned around, revealing her naked back.

There was a little red spot in the middle of her back. Something had indeed pricked her, it was obviously an external wound. It

wasn’t bigger than a spider bite or a small dart. Tessandra frowned. That explained her cousin’s sudden grimace in the middle

of the fight, but there was no way to know where it had come from, aside from a general area near the arena’s stairs. The hole

was much too small and whatever had caused this was nowhere to be seen. However, if some projectile had done this,

whoever had sent this was good enough to take aim at a moving target, from quite a distance too. They could have used a

device to send this without being seen while everyone was focused on the fight itself. It was much too late to find them...

“This could be anything!” retorted Lord Yebekh. “You have no proof!”

“You don’t have any either,” said Tessa. “Nothing proves my cousin killed your candidate when she just collapsed by

herself. It could be anything... even a very well-timed assassination.”

“The Princess killed our candidate! Didn’t we all see it? His Majesty tried to step in to stop her, but it was too late!

The Yekara Clan requires reparation for the loss of our lady, and for the foreign candidate to be sent back! We don’t want a murderer for a queen!”

“You’re really trying to bark too loudly,” scoffed Tessandra. “Your candidate requested this fight, how could this even

be called a murder? She was aiming for Cessilia’s life in the first place!”

“D-don’t you even feel s-sorry for her at all?” suddenly said Cessilia, stepping forward.

“Your own kin just d-died and

you’re only f-focusing on me b-being eliminated? C-can’t you even p-pretend her death p-pains you?”

Lord Yebekh turned red with anger. Now that she had said this, everyone else in the audience was staring at him like a

real monster. It was clear he wasn’t very surprised by Ashra’s death, nor very sorry. He seemed more afflicted about Cessilia’s

presence in the competition than his own niece’s passing. Even Safia had gone mute and a bit white behind him. If this had been

the plan all along, she wasn’t involved in it.

“A true Yekara will remain proud even in death,” her Clan Leader retorted. “My niece did her very best to serve this

clan, and she made us proud, but a fallen soldier has failed their duty. My niece is no different, neither is my daughter. Even in

death, she has to serve her clan's objectives. Now, our candidate is dead, and you have broken the rules of this competition.

We want justice for her life!"

"I said no."

Ashen stepped in front of Cessilia, glaring at the Yekara Clan Leader with all his might.

"I'm still your King, Lord

Yebekh, and the ultimate decision is mine. I declare the Princess is innocent, and your candidate's death is not her doing."

A grin appeared on his opponent's face.

"Then my King has betrayed his most loyal subject for a foreigner!" shouted Yebekh.

Those words sent a chill down everyone's back. The tension rose immediately,

everyone getting ready for whatever

was coming next. All the Yekara Clan members were acting a bit oddly. They were

sitting straight, eyes on their leader and

tense, as if waiting for some sort of signal or something. Tessandra and Sabael

exchanged a quick glance, having noticed the

same thing as well. He swiftly took the sword and handed it to Tessa without looking at her, and pulled his sister to come a bit

closer to him. Naptunie's eyes were still riveted on the body, wondering just how Ashra had possibly died.

"Watch your words, Yebekh," hissed Ashen, getting tense as well.

"Oh, I am watching them, Your Majesty. In fact, I have been watching you for quite some time already! Your Majesty

always relied on our clan, but ever since this foreign Princess came, you have been

acting odd and ignoring your own

subjects!"

"On the contrary. I've finally been listening to those I've ignored for too long."

Ashen seemed calm on the surface, but right behind him, Cessilia could feel his tense shoulders. She glanced to the side

to notice all those who weren't from the Yekara Clan had moved a bit away from them.

By now, everyone could tell something

was afoot.

"...Well, it seems to us, the Yekara Clan, that His Majesty has lost sight of what it takes to lead this Kingdom."

"Watch what you're saying, Yebekh!" retorted the Pangoja Clan Leader, slowly standing up. "His Majesty might not

always agree with us Lords, but he is still the rightful heir to the throne!"

"He might not be the only one."

A cold silence followed this. It didn't take more than a few seconds to understand, but a while longer to accept what

they had just heard. However, it was clear Lord Yebekh was very proud of himself. He turned to the people of his clan, and, to

everyone's surprise, a young man came forward. He had a portion of his face burnt, and one of his eyes was covered by a

white, foggy veil. For a few seconds, everyone was confused. It was clear most of them had no idea who this man was. He

seemed young, strong, and suddenly smiled at Ashen. A smile that meant nothing good. "It's been a while... my bastard brother."

All were shocked.

A brother of the King had survived? Cessilia noticed Ashen's fist closing tightly. He was clenching it so tightly his knuckles were going white, and he was faintly shaking. He was furious, and not happy in the slightest. She guessed he was completely unaware one of his adopted-siblings had survived. The anger on his face meant this wasn't his blood brother, but one of those boys his father had adopted, one of his former rivals he had told her about. Cessi knew him well enough. Despite the circumstances, no matter what he said, Ashen would have been relieved to see his younger brother be brought back to life.

This wasn't anything like that. Plus, that man didn't even remotely look like the White King... They only seemed to be of similar age. She couldn't remember if Ashen had mentioned what had happened to those three young men, but it was clear now one of them had survived the previous King's death.

"Surprised to see me?" asked the man. "You certainly don't seem happy... Your Majesty."

The irony in his voice was unpleasant, irksome. Moreover, because of his burn, half the muscles of his face weren't moving when he spoke, making him do strange grimaces whenever his lips moved, and his speech was strangely altered as well. Even a portion of his scalp was burnt, but his hair had been arranged to fall in dreadlocks to the side, and he had earrings on each lobe. They could all guess how handsome he had once been before that horrible burn. Now that he was standing, they could also see how tall and muscular he was. Almost as much as Ashen, and the scars of more burns were visible on his skin that wasn't covered by his dark clothes. His body frame was the most similar thing to Ashen, showing how they had grown up with similar training...

Cessilia was shocked. Not by the man himself, but by how he had even dared to be here. The Yekara Clan Leader had deliberately brought one of Ashen's adopted brothers here, since the beginning? This meant they were planning to rebel from the start. She had guessed something was wrong, but now it was clear the situation was way worse than she had thought.

"What the fuck are you doing here..." grunted Ashen.

"I'm not too sure," said the burnt man, tilting his head. "I heard you're not doing a decent job at being King. ...I came to see if you needed someone to help you with that. Or replace you."

The two former siblings glared at each other. Despite his words, and his soft and slow voice, that man wasn't fooling

anyone. He clearly hadn't come for Ashen's sake, but to fight him. The deep hatred in his dark eyes and the irony in his voice didn't leave any room for mistake.

Meanwhile, Lord Yebekh, very proud of himself, turned to the rest of the audience.

"See, good people of the Kingdom!" he shouted, opening his arms wide. "Our King lied! Another one of the rightful

heirs to the throne survived! His Highness Prince Rohin is just as legitimate of an heir as Prince Ashen was, and without murdering his own father..."

"You damn bastard, Yebekh..." groaned Ashen. "You were the first one to rejoice in my father's death when it suited you!"

"You should be ashamed!" shouted the Dorosef Tribe Leader. "You're one fickle, backboneless, greedy piece of shit! It took years for King Ashen to bring peace to us, end our civil war, and now you're turning against the savior of our nation!"

"Prince Ashen was the only remaining blood heir to the Kingdom!" added Bastat's father. "At the very least, he had the support of our people! That man is no more than a boy who was created, formatted by King Ashtoran to be no less of a tyrant than he was!"

"A tyrant is a man who won't listen to his people!" retorted Yebekh. "Can't you see? King Ashen is betraying his

people for a foreigner! A woman threatening us with her family's power as if we are powerless! If we let this happen, soon we will all be bowing to the Dragon Empire itself! Or is it that everyone forgot the vile humiliation they imposed on us? They couldn't get us by strength, so they sent this woman to win us over and then get rid of us in our sleep! Soon, we will see dragons burning our Kingdom to ashes! I won't have that! The Yekara Clan will only stand for a king that listens to his people and stands against the Empire's dominion!"

"You mean a king that will listen to you!" said the Pangoja Clan Leader. "This is ridiculous, Yebekh! You're going too far!"

"...Prince Rohin."

All eyes turned to the calm voice who had spoken. Yassim was staring at the Prince with a pained expression, as if he was not shocked, but feeling betrayed by his appearance. Cessilia frowned. He didn't look like someone who was surprised to see one of his former students alive... Could it be that he knew all along that this man had survived? She exchanged a look with Tessandra. Her sword back in her hand, her cousin was glaring at the assembly, looking for who would try and fight first. It was clear the competition was completely forgotten now, if it had even been relevant at all. The whole room was preparing for

a fight. With what the Yekara Leader had insinuated, and with one of the King's possible rivals brought back from the dead, there would be no going back.

"Ah, Yassim," chuckled Rohin. "Good old Yassim. Still alive, are you? I'm surprised Ashen didn't chop your head off already. After all, you were never able to pick a side, were you? Saving him, then me... always saving everyone, but alienating us at the same time. You're too good for your own sake, old man."

Ashen's furious glare immediately shifted to his old teacher. So Yassim was the reason his adopted-brother had survived... The elder didn't even seem to notice the King's furious eyes. Instead, he was staring at his former student as if his heart was broken. Cessilia felt a bit sorry for him. If he had saved Rohin, it was probably not for him to come back this way.

The young man chuckled and suddenly began to step down the stairs. Everyone who had one drew out their swords, Ashen being the first. He was clearly prepared to fight Rohin, but instead, his adopted-brother calmly walked up to Yassim. He completely ignored the fact that every person present in the cave was getting ready to fight for or against him. He simply went to his former teacher, with an apologetic expression.

"What is it? Not even happy to see me?"

"...I had suggested you leave, Rohin," muttered Yassim. "I asked you to leave and find a peaceful life for yourself..."

"Oh, I know, teacher," sighed Rohin, patting his shoulder, "...but, you see, after what Ashen did to me and my brothers, I'm afraid peace was never really an option. I sincerely thank you for saving my life, though. Please don't resent me too much. I really did like you."

His hands suddenly moved quickly, a snap was heard, and Yassim's body dropped at his feet.

Cessilia's scream died in her throat. It had happened too fast for anyone to react. The shock was too intense. After all his words from before, no one could have foreseen he'd kill his own teacher, not when his affection toward Yassim seemed so real and genuine. A faint silence followed the Counselor's death, and someone in the audience suddenly screamed, a bit late.

There was truly no going back this time.

"You... bastard!" shouted Ashen.

"Oh, stop yelling and shouting every time something doesn't go your way, big brother," sighed Rohin, rolling his eyes.

"It's not proper conduct for a king... Plus, you should have killed him yourself ages ago. Or is it that Your Majesty's gone too soft for that? You were always the soft one, Ashen. Too kind and too weak to get things done."

His mocking tone was infuriating. Anger helped Cessilia recover from the shock, and her green eyes began glaring at that man instead. She couldn't believe he'd killed the man who had saved his life, to then mock Ashen about it. She had always had a hunch that Ashen hadn't killed Yassim out of respect for his former teacher, despite his resentment. Rohin just had no second thoughts about getting rid of him. He was staring down at the body and Ashen, his hands moving as if he wasn't sure what to do with them. There were strange movements in his shoulders too, like spasms. The more she looked at his expression, listened to his speech, and witnessed his strange mannerism, the more she was sure of it. That man was insane... and completely unfit to become King.

Cessilia suddenly turned her head to Lord Yebekh, directing her rage to the one she held most responsible.

"Is th-this what you want?" she asked aloud. "A k-king that k-kills without a second th-thought?"

Her voice was fueled with anger over Yassim's death, and resonating like thunder in the cave. She was shocked, sad, and mad, but she wouldn't let the ones responsible for this go unscathed. Despite everything, Cessilia held some hope that she could stop this madness. After all, there were still many people present who were just as shocked as they were. In any case, it was now clearly the Yekara Clan against everyone else.

"A king that listens to his people!" shouted Yebekh, drawing out his sword. "Instead of listening to a pathetic, stuttering foreigner!"

"If you wanted an obedient puppet, you could have at least chosen a sane man," scoffed Tessandra, who had come to the same conclusion as her cousin, "or is it you just wanted to stir trouble? No one will want that pathetic, insane piece of shit for a king! That guy's obviously mad!"

"Oh, I'm not mad," chuckled Rohin, "unless you mean furious, unrestrained, and dying to take back what should have been mine! My father had chosen me."

He stepped forward, in Ashen's direction this time, and the King directed his sword at him. However, Rohin kept

walking in their direction very slowly, his expression torn between anger and calm.

"Did you know that, brother? It should have been me. I was the strongest, the smartest, and Father's favorite son."

"You weren't his son."

"Sure, maybe not by blood. But unlike you, Father actually chose me... Doesn't that make me more his son than you?"

He smirked, obviously very proud of himself. However, he didn't find the expected reaction. Instead, Ashen's eyes

hadn't gone as cold as ice, but rather indifferent. Cessilia took her hand off his arm, leaving him to get ready for the fight. She knew this time, he was controlling his emotions. He had never fought for his legitimacy. On the contrary, Ashen almost hated being his father's son all along. He hated his biological father, and he didn't like his adopted siblings much more either. If Rohin had somehow hoped to make him mad with that statement, he was far off the mark.

"...What are you really doing here, Rohin?" asked Ashen.

"Isn't it obvious? I've come to reclaim the throne! I wish I could have stayed away, but... see, since you're doing such a poor job, I have no choice but to step in. It's for our Kingdom's sake, Ashen. The Yekara Clan believes I'd be a better king than you. So, are you going to yield?"

After those words, he suddenly took out a long sword, holding it with both hands. He was now just a few steps away from Ashen, and ready to fight. Grunting, Ashen prepared himself all the same, while Cessilia took a step back, and turned her gaze to the Yekara Clan.

"You're committing a grave mistake."

"You're the mistake, you swine of the Empire!" shouted Yebekh. "Everything would have been fine if the Dragon Empire had stayed out of this!"

"You traitor, Yebekh!" shouted the Sehsan Tribe Leader. "How could you ever bring one of King Ashtoran's people in here?! After everything we went through to bring back peace, you're just asking for another civil war!"

"Then another civil war, it will be!" he retorted. "We will fight for the integrity of our Kingdom! Blame your King for choosing a foreigner over one of his own people's women! My daughter is the only one fit to become Queen!"

The cave was turning into chaos. Everyone present was slowly realizing the battle could start at any moment, and they were trapped in here already. A few from the tribes stood up, glancing toward the entrances and wondering whether they should make a run for it or not. However, it was already too late. Many of the people from the Yekara Clan had already run ahead, standing in the way and blocking those exits. Everywhere, people were drawing swords and weapons out, ready to fight. It was all going down much too fast. Some of the Royal Guards were even turning against their peers, positioning themselves like the Yekara people to block the exits.

"I knew it. Damn traitors..." hissed Sabael, his hand clenching on his sword.

Yebekh also got down to the arena, a smile on. Cessilia glared at this man. She really had underestimated him. This was

never about the competition or his candidates. She wasn't sure if he had planned his niece's death or not, but she was now sure things would have turned this way, regardless of whether she won the battle or not; as long as Ashen didn't repudiate her, this would have been the outcome anyway. This was all part of a plan, a trap, and they had walked right into it.

"King Ashen," he claimed out loud, "this is your one chance to step down. We will let you flee to the Dragon Empire with the Princess, with your promise to never come back to the Kingdom again! You shall be considered a traitor, and banished from this land!"

"No."

Ashen hadn't hesitated a single second, and Cessilia felt a bit proud of him. Some time ago, this might have been an appealing offer, to leave this position he didn't like much to someone else, and be able to be with Cessilia. However, this

Ashen was determined. His eyes hadn't left his so-called brother, electing him as his opponent, and no one else.

Tessandra stood ahead of Cessilia, between her and Lord Yebekh.

"...Sure you don't want to fight, Cessi?" muttered Tessandra. "You don't have to be scared."

"...I'm n-not scared to fight, T-Tessa," muttered Cessi. "...I'm s-scared of what I'm capable of."

"Fair enough."

The first clash of blades came from Ashen and Rohin. In a moment she had missed, the two former siblings had jumped on each other, starting their duel and the battle in the cave. This threw everyone on the stairs into even more panic. The other families' people began to shout and try to run to the exits, only to be blocked by the Yekara people. Swords swung, and fights began all around the cave. Those who had weapons had decided very quickly to fight their way through, and even those without were trying to force their way to the exits, or attack the Royal Guards and Yekara people somehow. However, the number was overwhelming. With so many Royal Guards switching sides, the Yekara were almost as many as everyone else.

"You damn dragon bitches," hissed Yebekh. "I'll get rid of you two and send your heads back to the Empire, along with that wretched dragon of yours!"

"Just you try," retorted Tessandra.

She let him attack first, easily blocking his first attack. Yebekh was as good of a fighter as his niece was, despite his skinny appearance, but Tessandra didn't have to be shy with her skills, either. In fact, now that she knew that man was the enemy, she was fighting unrestrained, using her full strength and moving quickly in the arena.

Meanwhile, Cessilia retreated to grab Naptunie's hand and make sure the only non-fighter of the group was staying behind her. Sabael had also begun a fight with one of the Royal Guard traitors, fighting with two new dual swords. Cessilia's green eyes landed on Yassim's body, feeling a pinch in her heart. The old Counselor didn't deserve to die like this.

Suddenly, a movement on her left made her raise her arm to protect her face. Three long and thick needles stabbed her forearm, piercing through, the ends appearing in front of her face. Cessilia grimaced in pain. She had never seen those kinds of weapons before, but just looking up, she immediately found who had sent those. Jisel. The King's former mistress was standing up on one of the lowest seats, more of those darts between her fingers and a smirk on her face. So she really was the one responsible for those, as Cessilia had suspected. Perhaps she had even used a smaller one to murder Ashra. She was staring at Cessilia with almost an amused expression, as if all the commotion around was none of her business.

"What are you going to do, now?" she said.

Cessilia had read her lips more than she had actually heard Jisel's voice because of the chaos around, but that was enough. She already hated that woman, but now, it was clear Jisel wasn't surprised by the situation at all, and perhaps she had even planned some of this.

Jisel smirked again, and sent a new wave of her darts. Cessilia raised her forearm, and felt one more pierce her arm, but the rest bounced back on the scales that had appeared from her previous injury. Cessilia took the four out and sent them toward Jisel. To her surprise, that woman didn't try to dodge them. Instead, she raised her arm, exactly like Cessilia had, and let them pierce through. Then, she lowered her arm, revealing her smirk behind it, and took those darts out.

"N-no..."

Red scales appeared on Jisel's arm. A shiver went down Cessilia's spine. She had always had a gut feeling about this.

That Jisel was something else, someone more dangerous than she appeared to be.

There really was no mistake. This was the very same phenomenon that had scales appear on Tessa as Lord Yebekh managed to inflict some minor injuries on her. Jisel had dragon blood too. But how?

However, her enemy wasn't ready to let Cessilia ponder much longer. She prepared a new wave of darts and threw them. Cessilia protected herself immediately with her arms again, but this time, no pain came. She realized her mistake one second too late. She wasn't the target. Ashen was.

The darts had stabbed the King's exposed arm and nape, making him lose his focus and grunt in pain. This was the opportunity his enemy had been looking for.

In front of Cessilia's eyes, Rohin's sword violently impaled Ashen.

Chapter 20

Everything else suddenly disappeared around them. Her horrified eyes could only see the blood streaming out of the

injury, and the two men who had stopped moving, one's sword plunged deep into the other. A vicious smile appeared in

Rohin's eyes as he thrust his sword a bit deeper, making Ashen grunt in pain. The King was trying to hold on, still glaring at his

rival, but the pain had to be unbearable. The blood was already dripping at their feet, soaking the soil like Ashra's had before.

"Your Majesty!"

People screamed in horror as they discovered the scene one by one.

Cessilia was the first to react. This time, her vision was blurred except for one thing: Ashen. She had to save Ashen.

Ignoring Jisel, all her questions, and her pain, she ran like hell toward Ashen and his brother. Sabael appeared right at the same

time as her, on the other side. He swung his sword at Rohin, forcing him to back off, while Cessilia grabbed her lover to pull

him away. Despite Rohin releasing the sword's handle, the weapon remained lodged in Ashen's abdomen as he fell back into

her arms. He was still conscious, which was a miracle given the large injury he had just sustained. Most people would have

passed out already, either from the shock or blood loss. It only took one look for Cessilia to know he was in critical condition,

though. He was pale, and the injury was as bad as she had thought. It was obvious he wasn't able to continue fighting; he'd be

lucky to survive this. She glared at Rohin, who, amused by his win, was now fighting Sabael and trying to get past the Royal

Guard to finish the King.

"Save the King!" someone shouted.

The news resonated inside the cave. Those who weren't too absorbed by their duels couldn't help but glance over, and

a lot of the fighters became dispirited by the view of their injured monarch. Their will to fight got drowned by the King's

defeat, and in just a few seconds, the Yekara people were able to secure their win. Only a few of the very best fighters,

including Tessandra and Sabael, were able to continue fighting, keeping their opponents back, but everyone else was losing.

Cessilia glared back at Jisel, but that woman was still standing there, a smirk on her face as if the chaos around had nothing to

do with her.

"You can't win against me, Princess," she chuckled.

“No,” retorted Cessilia, her voice filled with anger, “th-this is the last t-time I’m letting you get away with this. Th-the next time we cross p-paths, I’ll kill you.”

Her furious green eyes put an end to her rival’s smirk. Cessilia could be really scary, and right now, she was as frightening as a dragon. She was down on her knees, her injured lover on her lap, but it was as if she was dominating the whole room. No one dared to approach her, either. She was like a dragon protecting its offspring. Jisel stepped back, sensing something was wrong. They should have been enduring a complete defeat, but neither the Princess nor her allies were acting like they were in trouble.

Cessilia quickly tore a piece of fabric from her dress to bandage the wound, applying pressure to prevent more blood from flowing out.

“...Nana, look after him, p-please,” muttered Cessilia, slowly standing up.

“I-I will!” Naptunie nervously stuttered, rushing to the King’s side.

Very focused, she took over putting pressure on the wound, trying to ignore the fights going on very close. In fact, a lot of people had given up on getting out of there and gathered around the King instead to protect him. As Cessilia stood back up and looked around, she spotted Bastat’s father, lying on the ground with his throat sliced wide open. Her heart sank. Not only that but everyone on their side was heavily injured, dead, or fighting to survive. The Pangoja were powerful because of their money, but in this situation, they were also helpless against the skilled Yekara. With the uneven numbers and the Yekara’s skilled fighters, those who supported Ashen were bound to lose. Still, Cessilia was impressed. Instead of trying to run away again, or trying to change sides, all the people from the other families were slowly gathering around them. They were protecting the King like a defensive wall, even if it wouldn’t last long. Opposing them, the Yekara people had received orders to not let anyone escape, thus they were gathering in a semicircle, their backs turned toward the cave’s exits. A few steps behind their ranks, the Yekara Leader was boasting.

“The King is dead!” he shouted. “Prince Rohin is the new King!”

“Not yet,” grunted Sabael.

Given the difference in strength, Naptunie’s older brother was doing amazing against the Prince. He didn’t have as much strength and was losing when they had to challenge one another’s arms, but Sabael was compensating with his speed and impressive movements. He had begun to use Tessa’s signature twin swords style, which was a lot of help against Rohin’s massive sword.

However, he wasn't meant to win this fight. The Prince was merely toying with him, and although Sabael managed to hold his own for a while, it was clear this wouldn't last. Rohin was progressively winning ground, and pushing the Royal Guard back, getting closer to his goal: Ashen. However, Cessilia was still standing between him and her lover. While Tessa was doing the work of three men in keeping enemies at bay, the Princess was standing very still, her eyes fixated on Rohin, not even watching the fight but just him.

When Sabael was forced to step back once more, losing his balance, she suddenly grabbed his shoulder, and with a swift movement, pushed him further back. It all happened in the blink of an eye. Sabael himself barely understood. One second, he was about to lose and get sliced in two, and the next, he was falling back, a woman's hands on his and taking his swords from him. He didn't even comprehend what had happened until he fell on his ass, and looked up at Cessilia's back. The Princess now stood in front of him, wielding his weapons. In other circumstances, his ego might have been severely wounded, but right now, he was in complete awe. Even the bystanders like Naptunie who had been able to watch the scene from a different point of view were amazed, and trying to grasp what had happened. Cessilia had taken Sabael's spot and weapons, and was now fighting Rohin as if she'd been the one fighting him all along. To her opponent, though, the change was a major blow. Cessilia was stronger, faster, and much more skilled. Rohin, who had been winning one second before, was now frowning and struggling to keep up, slowly stepping back. Cessilia's hands were animated by fury. She was glaring at him, and forcing him to back off like a goddess of wrath. The Prince's mighty stance from earlier had vanished, and he was now fully focused on the fight, realizing he had underestimated this woman greatly.

Whilst he had been toying with Sabael earlier, he was now unable to hold anything back, lest he fall beneath Cessilia's attack. The fight was impressive, and the strength used sent chills down everyone's spines. Those two were beyond the realm of normal humans. The Princess was moving and using her swords at incredible speed, yet not losing in strength, each of her attacks more violent and fascinating than the one before. Rohin was a good fighter, but one could see from his dark expression that he was struggling. Cessilia was rivaling his strength, and bent on not letting him catch a break. Bit by bit, he was forced to back away, and his pride was taking several blows at each step conceded. "You... damn whore..." he grunted between his teeth.

Cessilia didn't even seem to hear. She was winning this fight, and people around were even cheering for her. The King

had fallen, but the Princess was pushing the enemy back, and the feeling of revenge was thrilling. Cessilia's ardent fight was bringing back the fighting spirit of many, and some who had managed to keep up were now fighting back twice as hard. It didn't seem like their defeat was so certain anymore, at the very least. Behind enemy lines, the Yekara Clan Leader had also stopped smiling. Cessilia standing strong against his champion was a major blow to his plan. He glanced at Jisel, and the woman prepared more needles, aiming at Cessilia this time. She threw them at full speed toward Cessilia, but just when it seemed the scenario was about to repeat itself, Tessandra appeared between them, and with one blow of her sword, knocked all the needles out her cousin's way. She glared at Jisel, a smirk at the corner of her lips. "You should learn to play fair, you snake bitch," she hissed. Jisel's expression fell. While Cessilia was fully focused on her opponent, it was clear Tessandra would not let anything bother her cousin, even if she was fighting several people at a time herself. Sabael too was back on his feet and, despite his injuries, he was fully focused on protecting the Princess' other side as well as Nana and the King. The fight was taking another direction, with the group opposing Rohin's supporters refusing to give up. They were fighting bravely, still determined to protect the King and follow the Princess' brave lead against the Yekara. Whatever their motive, those people were resolved to keep fighting. Sadly, though, it was already clear Cessilia's side wouldn't come out victorious. It was too late. Despite their attempts to stand their ground, they had been cornered on the wrong side of the lake, the exit behind their enemies, and too many had died already. There was no way out, and the opponents far outnumbered them.

"We have to get you and His Majesty out," declared Nana's uncle suddenly, very seriously. "We can't let the Yekara win here. If His Majesty and the Princess make it, there will still be hope."

"But how..." muttered Nana.

She had her hands full of blood and, despite being protected, she was near absolute panic. She kept glancing at Cessilia's back. The Princess' incredible fighting might have been fascinating and impressive to most, but Naptunie was one of the few who couldn't help but genuinely worry for her. Cessilia's arm was still injured by Jisel's attacks, and even if she bested the Prince, there were many more people waiting on the sidelines to get to her. This fight couldn't be won by one woman alone, even if she was the best fighter in the cave. Moreover, Naptunie had already guessed Cessilia wouldn't fight anybody else. She was fighting Rohin because he was one person she didn't care about killing, blinded by her rage, but what

after that? There was no guarantee the Princess would want to keep fighting, and after what she'd seen, Naptunie could understand her wish.

She turned her head toward Tessa, who was fighting just as well as her cousin, now keeping two men at bay, more bodies already down around her. She was like a furious tornado, and no more fighters dared to approach her, choosing other opponents instead or carefully staying away to observe her movements, maybe looking for an opening that would never show up.

"Tessandra!" Naptunie called. "We need to get out of here..."

"...I know," grunted Tessa between two clashes of swords.

Tessandra glanced at Cessilia, who was still fighting hard. Her cousin had probably heard that too, and from the way she was moving in the space, she was thinking the same. Despite her easily opposing Rohin, Cessilia was staying within an invisible space around their allies, meaning she wasn't willing to go past a certain point. She was staying near the lake, most likely ready to evacuate that way. The issue was, only a couple of people would be able to go this way. Only the two of them would be able to swim their way out of there, and they couldn't drag more than one person along. Sadly, there were dozens still around.

"Cessilia!"

As she called out to her, Cessilia suddenly turned around, spinning her whole body in a circle. Her swords made a wide movement around her, forcing Rohin to jump back before he got cut in two. He fell, landing on his side with a very pissed off expression. The distance between her and her opponent was now more than a few steps and, against all expectations, Cessilia didn't choose to go and finish him. Instead, she retreated quickly toward the group.

"Everyone step back!" Tessandra shouted.

Her voice resonated like thunder in the cave, taking everyone by surprise and magically stopping all the fighting. All those on their side immediately obeyed, not because they knew what was going on, but because they felt compelled to by her imperious voice.

Meanwhile, Rohin was getting back on his feet, furious. That woman had bested him right when he thought he had finally won. He had thought victory was his with Ashen down and left to die, but this Princess had just ridiculed him, and incredibly easily too. Things weren't meant to happen this way. The Yekara Clan had expected little to no resistance, and yet, those people were still standing by his rival's side, even looking like they still cared about the injured King. It made no sense

to him.

"I am the rightful King!" he shouted. "This bastard will die, and I'm going to take his place! Everything will be mine!"

"N-no."

Cessilia turned around, facing him from a few steps away. She lowered her hands, her swords by her sides, standing

tall ahead of him. She was like a large wall on her own, and everyone behind her was looking up to that one woman. Her green

eyes had gone from a furious, fiery green to a color as cold as ice, like an emerald stone, staring at him like he was nothing.

That look was the worst. She made him feel like an irrelevant insect.

Anger distorted Rohin's face, and he grabbed his sword again, running toward her.

"My liege, wait!"

Yebekh's words were lost on him. The Prince was blinded by anger, and didn't even see the danger of the situation. It

was too late, much too late. Cessilia and Ashen's people were now gathered behind her, in a small but dense group behind an

invisible line. There was a clear gap between the two camps, and that's what had alarmed Yebekh. Those women were

preparing something, but he only understood, when Cessilia suddenly screamed.

It wasn't just a scream; her voice had suddenly turned into some unbearable sound, a loud echo, deeper than any voice

he'd heard and yet more high-pitched than any bird known. It was deafening, and many fighters on both sides tried to block

their ears immediately. It was no use, though. The entire cave was shaken up by her voice, trembling beneath their feet, as if an

earthquake was happening at the same time. Even outside, the weather seemed to have gotten much worse, throwing all the

fighters into disarray.

A scary, creaking sound finally made him look up. The stalactites. They were all shaking violently, large fractures

appearing on all of them. The first little pieces of rock began to fall before he could even shout to warn the others. Cessilia's

voice, much more powerful than before, was shaking the stalactites to their core, and the foundations of the cave itself.

However, the danger was only for those ahead of her, right in front of the echo of her voice. When the first stalactite fell, right

on Rohin, his scream got lost in the loud echo. However, all of his allies could see their so-called King stuck to the ground, his

face distorted in pain and his body half under a large rock, blood splattered all over the gruesome scene. Immediately, chaos

shook their ranks. The Yekara people began to scream and try to run in all directions as more of the enormous, deadly rock

spikes fell from above. Yebekh was rendered mute, watching his men get crushed one after another by those gigantic rocks.

Some were stabbed right where they were, others were brutally crushed on the floor. Many panicked because no place looked safe in the cave, and some even ran up the stairs they had been trying to block before, fighting their own allies to escape first.

The only safe place was behind Cessilia, where all those who had fought for her and the King stood.

Her scream didn't last long, but the echo persisted so long after that no one could tell when she had stopped.

Nana almost jumped when she saw the Princess by her side, her green eyes on the King's injury.

"How is the K-King?" Cessilia asked nervously.

Naptunie shook her head, helpless. She was no healer, but she knew Cessilia could already see in one glance. The King

was in a bad state, and only holding on by sheer willpower. Cessilia exchanged a glance with Tessandra, on the other side of his body.

"...You have to go," nodded Tessandra. "Use the lake. I'll lead the people here to the exits as soon as we kill more of those bastards."

Cessilia glanced to the side. The stalactites kept falling and reducing the number of Yebekh's men drastically, but it wouldn't be enough. There was still a hell of a fight waiting for the survivors...

"Cessilia, go," insisted Tessa before she could even refuse. "We already knew things might turn out like this."

"You're going too."

Surprised, Tessandra turned to Sabael, who was standing there with a very serious expression. He was hurt and tired, but he had never looked so determined.

"No," said Tessandra. "No, Sab. I'm staying with you."

"You're going," he retorted. "Tessandra, I'm staying with my people, but Lady Cessilia will need you to get His Majesty out of here. And only you can accompany her. Take Nana with you."

"Sabael, I can't!"

He smiled, grabbing her hand as she was about to push him away, causing her words to become stuck in her throat.

"Go," he insisted. "I promise we will be fine here. But we can't guarantee there won't be more enemies on the other side, and if the King and the Princess don't make it out, everything will be lost. Please, trust me."

Tessandra was still at a loss for words. She kept glancing around, looking for someone to help her out of this one, but

strangely, everyone there seemed to agree with Sabael. They didn't know what Tessa meant by using the lake, but they all had

one conviction: the King and his Princess had to survive. Cessilia had already bought them a lot of time, but everyone

remaining was ready to keep fighting. The Dorosef Tribe Leader nodded with conviction, and turned to Cessilia.

“Princess, please save His Majesty. I promise, no one else thinks like the Yekara Clan. If you can save our King, I swear everyone in this Kingdom will happily fight the usurper and the Yekara. Save him. That’s all we ask.”

Cessilia nodded, her fingers tightening up around Ashen’s.

“...I p-promise I will.”

Next to her, Naptunie had her eyes on her brother and uncle, looking about to cry.

“Sab... Uncle...”

“Nana, I’m entrusting you with the Princesses,” said Sabael, ignoring Tessandra’s furious eyes. “You stick to them and the King and help the best you can, alright? I know you’ll be the best to assist them. Make sure the Princesses and His Majesty are safe, it’s the most important thing right now.”

“Sabael!” shouted Tessandra, still furious. “You can’t do that! You guys barely have any chance of making it!”

Sabael chuckled, and turned to her with a smug expression.

“I already know that. And I may not be as good as you,” he said, “but you still shouldn’t underestimate me. I’m still a

Royal Guard. Protecting the King is my duty, and I’ll die doing so if I must.”

He stepped closer to her, squeezing her hand. Tessandra tried to pull away, but from what Cessilia saw, she probably didn’t use her full strength as Sabael held on.

“...I love you,” he muttered, “but my duty to my King comes first, Tessandra. I’m sure you understand.”

Once again, Tessandra had nothing to retort, simply glaring at him with her furious, but conflicted, dark eyes. It was

only a matter of a few precious seconds, and the fight around them would resume.

There was no time to lose, but she still didn’t

want to let go. No one knew when they would see each other again. There was no guarantee they would even see each other

again, and they knew it all too well. The urgency of the situation, coupled with their respective dutiful personalities, made it

even more painful. For once, Tessandra had her personal feelings battling her rational mind, and she hated it. She clenched her

teeth, and suddenly kissed him. It was a quick but forceful kiss, with a salty taste as tears ran down her cheeks.

“...You’d better make it,” she muttered. “If you die, I’ll kill you.”

“Got it,” he chuckled.

After that, as if to get this over with, Tessandra angrily turned around and grabbed Naptunie’s hand, pulling her toward

the lake. As the echo of Cessilia’s voice started dying on the other side, they knew it was time to leave before the fight

resumed.

“You should hurry, Princess,” nodded Nana’s uncle, looking at his niece’s silhouette.

“Will you b-be alright?” muttered Cessilia.

“We will do our best. But you guys have a higher chance of making it out if you go through the lake,” said Sabael.

“Don’t worry about us, Princess. There are more of our allies on the other side. I’m sure you and His Highness will be fine.”

He didn’t say anything about himself, and realistically, they all knew their chances were slim. Not void, but still,

scarily slim. Cessilia nodded. Although it broke her heart to separate from Sabael, and everyone that had sided with them this

way, she was aware everyone there knew exactly what they were doing. They were making this decision willingly, not for her

or Tessa, but for Ashen and the future of their kingdom. That was something she had to respect and, if anything, she had to keep

her side of this promise by saving their King. On the other side, the echo was over, and the Yekara forces were already getting

ready to fight back, gathering their fighters and trying to save those who hadn’t been crushed to death. Cessilia’s voice had

done considerable damage, though. She had greatly reduced their numbers, and perhaps, given the chance Sabael’s side needed

to survive this...

“You go ahead,” nodded the Dorosef Leader, noticing her hesitation.

The first fights were resuming on the other side. The Yekara Clan leader, infuriated by Cessilia’s devastating attack,

was yelling orders like a mad man for his men to regroup and fight back. There was no time to lose. The remaining fighters

made a wall between their pursuers and them, but it wouldn’t last long before some of their enemies broke through the ranks.

With a heavy heart, Cessilia grabbed her lover, using her incredible strength to carry him while being careful of his injury, and

ran behind Tessandra and Nana toward the lake. She wished they could have taken everyone along with them, but realistically,

it was just impossible. They couldn’t swim with more than one person with them, it would have been too risky, especially

since they would go almost blind.

“You hang on to me tight,” Tessandra was saying to Naptunie. “No matter what, you have to hold your breath and hang

on to me.”

“...Are you sure we’re going to make it?” muttered Nana, on the verge of tears. “If we drown, it’s such a horrible way

to die...”

She glanced toward her brother’s side of things, but realistically, it wasn’t looking much better. Too many people had

died. There were almost as many bodies on the ground as the ones standing, which was terrifying, especially for someone with

no fighting skills like Nana. Tessandra grabbed Naptunie’s cheeks and turned her head back toward herself.

“Nana, trust me. We’re going to make it. All I ask of you is to hold on and hold your breath. I promise I’ll take care of everything else and get us to the other side.”

“But... But what if I’m wrong and the tunnel is blocked, or we get lost...”

“Nana, it’s g-going to be alright,” said Cessilia, arriving at their side. “We t-trust your knowledge, and you t-trust us, right? We will be alright.”

Naptunie nodded, her eyes going to the King by Cessilia’s side. Perhaps the sight of Ashen’s half-unconscious state

helped make up her mind, because she nodded again, looking a bit more resolute.

Meanwhile, Tessandra quickly took off her shoes and turned to Cessilia.

“You should probably go ahead, just in case. You’re the better swimmer, and if you lose the King, I can always grab him after you.”

“I think so t-too.”

Naptunie watched both young women prepare the bottom of their outfits, tearing apart some of the fabric and using

Tessandra’s sword to cut large slits until most of their legs were visible. Then, they did something even more shocking.

Grabbing a handful of small rocks and broken seashells, Cessilia suddenly rubbed them against her legs, grazing all of her skin until it turned red.

“Oh my God!” shouted Naptunie, shocked.

“It’s alright, Nana,” said Tessandra. “Look.”

She did just the same as her cousin, injuring her own legs, all the way down to her ankles. When she removed all the

rocks and dust from her legs, Naptunie noticed the wound itself. It was superficial, with a few cuts here and there, but right

away, Tessandra’s skin was replaced by vibrant green scales covering her legs. She looked to the side, and sure enough, the

same phenomenon was now covering Cessilia’s legs but with ash-colored scales.

Within a few moments, the two young women

had transformed all their skin from mid-thigh to their ankles into scales.

“To go faster in water!” exclaimed Naptunie, who had only just understood the reasoning.

“Exactly. It will make us win a few precious seconds, and it’s easier to move too...”

Naptunie was astonished. So this was part of their secret as to why the Dragon Empire Princesses were so confident

with their swimming! She glanced at the lake. Despite this new information, she was still nervous. The fact that this lake led to

a cave outside was still pretty uncertain. Not only that, but they would be swimming in the dark for a pretty long part of the trip.

The mere thought of dying underwater, drowning and in the dark, made poor Nana shiver. She considered herself a decent

swimmer, as the daughter of a family of fishermen, but this was very different...

There weren't any other ways to escape. She could still catch sight of her older brother on the other side, fighting the Yekara's people, trying to keep up a wall between their little group and the enemy. There was a lot of bloodshed already... The Yekara were also focused on their people that had been crushed by the rocks, trying to save who they could. Nana didn't feel the slightest bit sorry for those people. They didn't think twice about betraying their own King and Kingdom to have a usurper pose as a potential king! That man wasn't dead either. They seemed to be trying to save his life, several people around him, including that woman, Jisel. While Naptunie kept staring, that woman suddenly lifted her head, and looked right back at her, as if she had felt her gaze. She glared at them and suddenly stood up, running in their direction.

"Uh... T-Tessa..." muttered Naptunie, taking a step back.

"Nana, come on, hurry."

While she was looking away, Tessandra was already in the lake, the water reaching up to her hips. Next to her, on the shore, Cessilia was using the shredded fabric of their dresses to roughly bandage the King's wound. The fabric was stained with red almost immediately, but the stain didn't grow as large as Naptunie would have expected. Somehow, this unusual bandaging of hers was doing a good enough job at cinching the wound.

"Will he be alright?" asked Naptunie, tearing her dress and handing it to Cessilia.

"He will hold on."

Cessilia's short answer wasn't very reassuring, but Naptunie knew how dire the situation was. She took the hand

Tessandra was offering, and got into the water next to her, shivering a bit. It was very cold, but she didn't have time to complain now.

"Take deep breaths," said Tessandra. "Stay very calm, and breathe slowly, but filling and emptying your lungs each time. Try to relax as much as you can."

"I understand..."

While Naptunie was trying to do as she had been told, and walking deeper into the water, Tessandra glanced over her shoulder.

"...Cessi."

Her cousin glanced back, also spotting the furious woman in red, running in their direction. She was still far, but Jisel clearly intended to pursue them. Cessilia squinted her eyes a bit, but then, she turned back to Ashen, gently pulling him into the water with her. She was relieved. By abandoning his coat and taking him in the water, his weight would be much easier to manage. She had used a piece of fabric to tie him to her, at the waist, so she could use her arms and legs freely to swim around.

Tessandra was also doing the same, and tying Naptunie's waist to her.

"...Is this alright?" asked Nana, worried.

"You can swim," said Tessa, getting closer to Cessilia in the water, "but if you do feel I'm pulling too hard, just act like

you're a plank and let yourself be dragged, Nana. Don't worry, I won't lose you."

"I'm not worried about that..."

There was no more time to argue. Cessilia took a very deep breath, and suddenly dove underwater. Naptunie thought of watching her, but in the blink of an eye, the Princess was gone. She quickly looked back, and that woman, Jisel, was getting much closer.

"Nana, let's go!"

Tessandra dove right after her cousin, and Naptunie was brutally dragged underwater. She just had time to take a deep breath in, before her whole body was submerged.

Everything went fast. Naptunie tried to keep her eyes open for a bit, but everything got much, much darker in seconds.

When she tried to look, and keep swimming as fast as she could, she only saw a bit of light, and the vague shape of

Tessandra's body. Ahead of them, Cessilia, despite having the King floating above her, was even faster, her dark legs going as

fast as a small tornado in the water. The two cousins were swimming in different lines to avoid hindering each other, and

Naptunie understood how much more powerful their legs were. They were eating up the distance ahead, and not slowing down

despite the darkness growing. How could they go so fast while seeing so little?

Naptunie looked to the side, and almost let go

of the bit of air still held in her mouth. Tessandra's eyes seemed bigger and shinier, like onyx shining under a dark light. She

was looking straight ahead, and moving quickly as if she knew her environment perfectly. Naptunie tried to see ahead, and as

they took a slight turn, she saw Cessilia's face. Her emerald eyes were just as incredible. It was as if she had no issue at all

looking around. They were almost completely in the dark now, and going lower and lower, which should have worried

Naptunie. Yet, seeing the two young women move so fast and fearlessly, she did feel like they had a chance.

How long had they been underwater? It felt like ten or twenty minutes, but Nana knew it was half that, at best. She was

able to hold her breath for around five minutes when she played with her siblings, and now, she had been using her energy a lot

to try and swim too. She could feel Tessandra was going faster, though. Her swimming was almost pitiful compared to her, but

fear kept her going. Nana was still terrified by the idea of drowning there, and despite what Tessa had said, she refused to give

up and simply be dragged along. She kept trying to calculate how much distance was left to distract herself from the struggle, the tiredness, and the cold, but slowly, she knew she was losing the air she had left. She could feel her body struggling, begging for air, but they were still deep in the tunnel, with no idea when they would get out. She was grateful for Tessandra's incredible speed, but she was starting to get genuinely scared. If she passed out, would she wake up? Would the four of them die here? She felt tears come out of her eyes, and grabbed Tessandra's belt tighter. As promised, she let herself be dragged, trying to keep her body as straight as possible, completely out of strength to keep swimming. Unlike what Naptunie thought, Cessilia and Tessandra were already deep down in the cave, well past halfway. The two young women were swimming quickly and almost effortlessly, only exchanging a glance from time to time to check on the other. In fact, despite their speed, it was getting quite hard for them too. Their lungs were beginning to beg for air despite having the strength to continue swimming. Their progress hindered by the narrow path, forcing them to slow down, making sure they weren't going to injure themselves or those they were dragging along. Ashen and Nana had fallen unconscious, but if they didn't get proper air soon, and water out of their lungs, it would really get dangerous for them. Luckily, the light in front of them was slowly getting brighter, and the path was going upwards instead of downwards. They accelerated, knowing the opening had to be close. Suddenly, the path got much larger, and they both broke through the surface at the same time, gasping for air. They quickly found the nearest shore, and half-carried, half-dragged Naptunie and Ashen there. "Nana," Tessandra kept calling. "Breathe. Nana, Nana, wake up! Come on!" Soon enough, the young girl began coughing water and breathing heavily. Tessandra let out a long sigh of relief, and patted her back, helping her get through it. On the other side, Cessilia was patting Ashen's back alike, and the King coughed some water as well. He didn't seem like he had drunk as much water as Nana, but he was desperate for air, and the wound had gotten worse. Even Tessandra grimaced upon seeing this. "This guy needs to be healed as soon as possible, Cessi." "I kn-know. Let's j-just see if we c-can make it through the—" She stopped talking, alerted by a sound. She and Tessandra exchanged a glance, confirming they had heard the same thing. They got into a defensive position, looking around the cave they had arrived in. It was a much bigger cave than the one

Ashen had taken her to and from the mix of dry sand and stones on the ground, probably around the same level. Most of it was in the dark, as night had fallen and the moon had just hidden behind some clouds. From time to time, though, the moonlight would shine, and it got a bit brighter in there.

"They are here!" a foreign voice suddenly shouted.

Their eyes turned to the opening of the cave. At least two dozen fighters ran in, and from the way their swords were drawn, these people were not allies.

"Damn it..." grunted Tessandra.

"How did they know?" muttered Nana, panicked.

"Sounds like we're not the only ones who heard about this exit, Nana. Get behind us."

Tessandra was already back on her feet, sword out and ready to fight, but there were way too many people. She would

be in trouble if she had to fight this many people while protecting Ashen and Naptunie.

Next to her, Cessilia got up too. She was going to fight, even if she had no weapon.

"...The Yekara p-people," she muttered.

"I figured," scoffed Tessandra.

"What are we going to do?" cried Naptunie, who was still recovering.

"Put up a fight."

Right after that, Tessandra took a deep breath in, and suddenly, she spat a fireball, right in the direction of those men. A

lot of them screamed in panic, some burnt on the spot, and others started running around with a part of their body on fire.

"Damn it," grunted Tessandra. "It would have been better if I wasn't so fucking drenched..."

"I hope you can dry fast."

The voice coming from behind made them jump.

With a smirk on her face, Jisel was slowly coming out of the water, looking exhausted but still smug. Just like them, she

had transformed her legs into red-scaled limbs that appeared in between the folds of her dress. She tilted her head.

"You damn bitch..."

"Oh, I'm the least of your problems right now."

Just as she had said that, they heard it again. A loud, furious growl coming from ahead.

Both Tessandra and Naptunie

looked ahead, while Cessilia was still glaring at Jisel.

"Sir Dragon!"

"...That wasn't Krai, Nana," said Tessa, cutting her hopes short.

The young woman's expression sank. She had noticed the growl was different from usual, but she hadn't even thought it

could have been another dragon. With horror, Naptunie watched as a large, dark-scaled creature appeared on the other side of

the cave. This time, even Cessilia had to turn her head, her heart beating fast. There truly was another dragon, glaring at them

with terrifying black eyes.

“What is it, Princesses?” chuckled Jisel. “...Never seen a dragon before?”

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me...” muttered Tessandra.

Fighting men, no matter their number, was still conceivable, and offered chances to actually survive. However, with a dragon in the mix, their chances of survival were cut drastically short. Tessandra was trying hard to think of something, an opening, but right now, she was exhausted from swimming, still not properly able to use her Dragon Fire, and they still had to care for the two that couldn’t fight behind them.

“...Meet Jinn,” said Jisel, as if it was a normal introduction. “Isn’t my dragon wonderful?”

“He c-can’t be your d-dragon,” hissed Cessilia.

“Oh, right. He’s actually my dead brother’s... but he is still very much attached to me.

And after all, who cares about the details? If I tell him to kill you, he will.”

“Who are you r-really?”

“Is that really what you care about right now, Princess?” said Jisel, raising an eyebrow.

“You’re going to die here.”

“I want to know b-before I get rid of you.”

“Not today.”

Jisel then launched a new salvo of needles, but this time, Cessilia saw them coming. In an impressive movement, she swung her arm and grabbed all four right as they were about to hit her. Her glaring at Jisel hadn’t changed; this time, if she wanted a real fight, that woman would have to stop trying to cheat. Jisel grimaced and stepped back. Either she wasn’t confident in fighting Cessilia, or she preferred to see her killed by the soldiers or her dragon, it was hard to tell. She simply left the small lake at which they had arrived from via the opposite shore, never turning her back on the group of four, but also cautiously stepping back.

While Jisel wasn’t engaging in a fight, there was a lot more to be worried about upfront. The first soldiers had already

arrived at Tessandra, and she had to use her very best fighting skills to keep them at a distance. It wouldn’t be enough, though.

If she had been alone, she could have gone deeper into the crowd and fought with circular movements, but in this case, she still

had to protect Nana and the King. Right behind her, Cessilia glanced at the situation ahead, and quickly pulled Ashen further out of the water, but closer to the cave’s wall behind them.

“Nana, s-stay here,” she said, tightening Ashen’s bandages again. “J-just watch the K-King for me, alright?”

“I understand,” nodded Nana.

Her voice was shaking, and she was visibly scared, but she was putting on a brave front, and that made Cessilia smile at her, loving the brave Nana even more.

“Put p-pressure on the injury,” added Cessilia, quickly showing her. “Th-the other side is b-blocked but he c-can’t lose more b-blood, alright?”

“Yes!”

Happy to have something to be useful with, Naptunie put all her focus into applying her hands on the King’s injury. She tried to ignore the blood that almost immediately stained her palms, or how pale the King was looking, and simply focused, staring at it as if her gaze could keep the blood from flowing out.

Right after that, Cessilia got back up, and ran into battle next to Tessandra. She only had the needles she had just stolen from Jisel, but as an experienced fighter, any weapon in her hand was deadly. She was moving incredibly fast, and in such a perfect combo with her cousin, it was as if their fighting power had been tripled instead of doubled. The men were even reluctant to approach the deadly duo, as they seemed to quickly get rid of any opponent. The two of them were perfectly complementing each other, covering any blind spots, watching each other’s back, and standing like an impenetrable wall between their opponents and the King. Their main issue was the number of fighters that kept coming at them, no matter how many they killed, and the dragon that was behind them, lying in wait but growling furiously. Cessilia was moving like a relentless tornado, swinging left and right, the two needles in each hand acting like sharp claws that sliced and stabbed her enemies in a deadly silence. Tessandra’s style was much heavier and brutal. Her sword was drenched in blood, and she wasn’t picky about her own precision; she was inflicting large injuries, chopping off limbs and rendering her opponents useless if not dead.

Both of them were keeping a close eye on the foreign dragon. It was their first time encountering an enemy dragon, but they both knew enough about those creatures to analyze what they saw. It was a large creature, but smaller than most dragons they knew. It wasn’t adult size, more like a teen dragon, about the size of three men. It had the body of a water dragon, long and sleek, which explained how it had gotten there without trouble. While fighting, they had spotted boats stranded on the seashore, somewhere behind those men, further past the cave’s large opening. Most of the people they fought were even a bit wet, and so was that dragon. Was that where it had been hidden all along? Underwater?

“...A bit big,” grumbled Tessandra.

“His real owner’s d-dead,” nodded Cessilia. “He c-can’t grow more, b-but...”

“Yeah. Still fucking big...”

Cessilia grimaced. Despite her poor choice of language, Tessandra was expressing both their thoughts. Fighting an

enemy dragon was completely unexpected, and neither of them knew how they'd do that. The creature suddenly stopped growling, and seemed to be breathing in, preparing to breathe out. Tessandra swung her sword wide to keep the enemies at bay, and did just the same.

Both her and the dragon breathed out a large plume of fire at the same moment. Their flames hit each other, creating a massive heat wave in the cave. Dust fell from the walls and ceiling, making everyone cough and blink, but at least, Tessandra had countered the dragon's fire for now. It was bigger than hers, but with the distance, all they noticed was a strong smell of something burning and the temperature jumping up. The men under the area where the fires had collided were far less lucky.

Others were still on fire, running before throwing themselves to the ground, and rolling in the sand to try and extinguish the flames. Tessandra was out of breath, though, and glaring at the beast that was growling back.

"How cute," chuckled Jisel. "You think you'll be able to keep my dragon at bay, Princesses? For how long? All you have is a sword, a useless Dorosef girl, and little to no energy left."

"Just you watch," grunted Tessandra. "We're saving you for last!"

Just as she said this, she kept fighting, pearls of sweat appearing on her forehead. The heat in the cave was less

responsible for that than the monstrous amount of energy she put into her fight. She seemed a bit tired, but comparatively, the

men fighting her in the cave, even as they tried to relay each other, were clearly unable to best her. Next to her, Cessilia was

moving just as vividly, her green eyes going all over the place to try and find a solution.

They were stuck between the cave's

wall, the lake Jisel was standing on the other side of, and a large sea of men in front of them, with a dragon standing right in the

middle of the cave entrance. They were slowly clearing their way, but the fact that Ashen couldn't move was keeping them

from truly escaping this place. With the underwater passage being a huge no, they were basically stuck, unless they found a way

to get rid of all their opponents...

"Useless?"

Unknown to the two cousins, Naptunie had been glaring at Jisel. She could endure a lot for her friends' sake, but being

called useless was too much for her. Suddenly, her little, black eyes circled the cave too, but her way of thinking was miles

away from Cessilia's. After a short moment, Nana pulled over two large, flat rocks with her leg, and quickly swapped them

with her hands to put pressure on the King's chest. Just as she had calculated, the weight was almost the same as what she had

been applying all along. She then quickly moved to rinse her hands in the water, and ran toward Tessandra and Cessilia.

“Nana, what are you doing?! Get back!”

However, for once, Naptunie was not going to listen. In fact, she barely heard Tessandra at all. She was frowning, and gathering some stones around her, grinding them together quickly to create a little mound on a larger, flat stone.

“Useless, she says. How dare she call me useless?! She can call me a bookworm, weak, library rat, pedant, bookish, even brainish, but how dare that wretched vixen of a woman call me useless?! You’ll see if I am useless!”

She then got back on her feet, carrying her little mountain of freshly ground dust, and walked toward Tessandra.

“Prepare to fire!” she shouted.

Before Tessandra could even answer, Naptunie suddenly threw her dust in a large and wide arc, in front of them.

Immediately grasping what was going on, Tessandra spat fire.

The reaction was much bigger than she had expected. From the small fire she had put out, as soon as it reached Nana’s dust, it spread in a wave of sparks and explosions, blowing exponentially bigger on their enemies. The deflagration was so progressive and large even Cessilia and Tessandra had to jump back to avoid getting injured themselves. The cave was suddenly filled with small booms, cracks appearing everywhere and the force shaking the surroundings. Some stalactites even fell down, injuring more people. The damage done was considerable, and a bit frightening too. Once the smoke and dust began to clear, they saw the terrible injuries inflicted on their opponents, some had full body parts burned, or the flesh exposed in long bloody patches.

“Dang, Nana. ...You should get mad more often,” scoffed Tessandra.

“Just because I can’t wield a weapon doesn’t mean I can’t fight,” grumbled the young woman. “Sorry I didn’t notice

before we had all the elements and conditions for a dust explosion. I knew the principles, but I never created one in real life.”

“Don’t apologize for being the smart one, Nana. I’m mind-blown!”

“C-can you do th-that again?”

“Not so soon.” Nana shook her head. “It’s dangerous, as it consumes the air and makes it harder to breathe. We might get intoxicated if we don’t wait a bit...”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Tessandra. “You already helped us a ton...”

She was telling the truth. In front of them, out of the dozens of fighters they had been facing, only a few had been spared

by the explosions. If some only had minor injuries, their burns still seemed to be incredibly painful, and none were in a hurry to

get back to fighting those women. Perhaps they also feared another wave of explosions, and they were not looking forward to running to the front line. It didn't solve their problem, though. Cessilia glanced back. Ashen seemed stable from there, but there was no telling when his heart would give up from the blood loss. Only a few minutes had passed since they had emerged from the lake, but it wasn't enough.

"...I need t-to take c-care of him," she muttered to Tessandra.

She couldn't focus on taking care of the King while she was busy fighting. Tessandra nodded. Naptunie's attack had done quite enough damage, but Jinn the dragon had gotten out unscathed, and quite mad too. That thing was getting closer and closer and soon, it'd be the bigger problem at hand. Even if she could stand a few minutes against a dragon this size, Tessandra knew the fighters would stab her the second she turned her back on them to focus on the beast.

"...You think the big guy could show up now, by any chance?"

"I d-don't know... Krai!" Cessilia called out, as loud as she could. "K-Krai!"

Her voice echoed in the cave, but there was no telling how far out it had gone. They had left the dragon outside the

Outer Wall, and there was no indication of how long it would take for Krai to get down there, if it even realized something was wrong. It wasn't bound to Cessilia, but to her father, which meant it could only know of what happened to her if it was close enough to smell or see it. Now, it would only be a matter of minutes before they knew whether the Black Dragon was coming to their rescue or not.

Meanwhile, they had no choice but to resume fighting. Nana stepped back, leaving the two Princesses to fight, but it did not look good for them. There were still too many fighters left, and for many, their injuries seemed to ignite even more desire to get rid of the women who had caused them. Some shouted something about their pride as Yekara, which explained a lot and, if needed, confirmed their identities. The dragon was getting closer too. Twice, it exchanged firepower with Tessandra, and the second time, her arm got burned, immediately covered in green scales. She grimaced, shaking her arm as if to get rid of the pain.

"Cessi. We have to do something, or we're going to end up as burned meat."

Cessilia turned to Jisel.

"C-call back your d-dragon."

"Oh no," chuckled Jisel. "I think I'm going to watch him get rid of you."

Cessilia clicked her tongue in annoyance, but suddenly changed direction. She ran back toward the lake, as fast as she could, only having one target in mind: Jisel. When her opponent realized what she was going to do, she began to step back,

crawling back against the cave's wall, hoping to get out of there. Either she was out of weapons or knew she wouldn't be able to stand against Cessilia. So she didn't even try to put up a fight and only tried to run away, obviously scared. Both she and Cessilia had made the same journey to get there, and they were both tired, but Cessilia had a few more minutes to recuperate, and she had longer legs too. Watching the pursuit from afar, it was clear she'd be able to catch her opponent. Moreover, she had to act quickly as Tessandra had been left alone to protect the others. She suddenly grabbed Jisel, making the woman cry out, and quickly put her needle under her throat, threatening to stab it.

"T-tell your dragon to b-back off."

"No," chuckled Jisel. "I told you. I want to see Jinn get rid of you!"

Cessilia frowned and pressed her weapon a bit deeper against her throat, but that smirk on Jisel's face wouldn't go away. She wasn't lying. She wouldn't give in, no matter how much Cessilia injured or threatened her. Frustrated, she looked up, and began to walk forward, to at least get closer to Tessandra.

"B-back off!" she shouted to the fighters. "Or I'll k-kill her!"

"We don't care about that woman!"

"Who gives a damn about the King's former whore?!"

It was clear those men didn't give a damn about Jisel's life. She scoffed next to Cessilia. "Typical of men, isn't it? Getting rid of you without blinking once they are done using you..."

Cessilia ignored her. While the soldiers didn't seem to give a damn about Jisel's life, that wasn't the case for everyone in this cave. To their surprise, Jinn, the young dragon, was growling in Cessilia's direction but, as she stepped forward, it was cautiously retreating.

"You idiot!" shouted Jisel. "Don't care about me, kill them!"

"D-dragons share the emotions of their o-owner," said Cessilia. "Looks like your b-brother cared about you."

Jisel grunted in frustration. Regardless of her relationship with her brother, she was now frustrated at Jinn's reluctance to attack. The dragon kept retreating, its maw closed, completely ignoring Tessandra and looking worried. It was now even past the cave's entrance, and with the dragon gone, Tessandra was finally able to gain some ground.

"Good job, Cessi," she grunted between the clashing of swords. "Nana, prepare more powder!"

"But—"

"Just do it!"

Naptunie obeyed, and went back to grinding more powder, brows furrowed and focused on her task. Meanwhile,

Cessilia kept advancing forward, making sure Jinn would keep backing off. Despite Jisel's continuous shouting for the dragon to attack, Jinn seemed hesitant, almost worried, its head low and its butt perched up. It was still growling, but only at Cessilia, focusing on her hostage. The dragon was truly worried for Jisel, so much so that it had forgotten the rest of the fight. That was a huge opportunity for Cessilia and the others. The fighters, shaken to see the dragon retreating, were having trouble keeping up with the fight. With so many of them injured or dead already, and their biggest firepower currently backing off like a scared kitten, they were unsure what to do next. Some had even begun retreating, although they wouldn't go past the cave's entrance. "What are you waiting for, you cowards?" suddenly shouted Jisel, to the men this time. "Attack! It's only two women!"

Their pride wounded, the Yekara seemed to wake up. A few of them ran toward the two women, and Cessilia had to step back this time, as she wouldn't be able to fight comfortably and keep Jisel as her hostage. They had bought enough time, though.

Naptunie stood up, with her powder again, and this time, she waited for Tessandra's instructions.

"Throw it as high and far as you can! Toward the entrance!"

It took only a few seconds for the smart Naptunie to understand what Tessandra was aiming to do, but it certainly didn't make it any easier. She put all the powder into a ripped piece of fabric from her own clothing, forming a little bundle in a ball shape, and with all of her strength, she threw it just as Tessandra had said, far and high.

Tessandra chose her moment very precisely. She threw flames right when the little ball was about to hit the ceiling of the cave. The explosions boomed right away, shaking the whole cave. This time, the men panicked, running away from the first explosions as fast as they could. This was the lesser issue, though. Just as Tessandra had planned, the explosions reached the entrance of the cave, shaking the rocks that formed its walls. Perhaps dust had accumulated there, because the explosions grew exponentially above them, and everything began to collapse.

"Jinn!" Jisel shouted, suddenly panicked. "Run!"

They had no time to see what happened to the dragon. Tessandra turned around, grabbed Nana by the collar, and just like Cessilia with Jisel, they ran toward the cave's wall, hiding from the collapsing rocks. The whole cave trembled and shook, as if they had provoked a real earthquake, with large stones falling, crushing everything under them. It didn't last long, but it was a real nightmare, a deafening ruckus.

When things suddenly calmed down, they finally dared to look up. The entrance of the cave was now completely blocked by a mountain of rocks, with some men crushed underneath.

"...Congrats," scoffed Jisel, "you've just buried us alive."

Cessilia and Tessandra sighed, getting back on their feet and wiping the dust off their faces and shoulders.

"Are you alright, Nana?"

"I think... Oh, that was scary..."

They all quickly surveyed their surroundings, but everything was now quiet. Half of the cave had collapsed on its opening, making its ceiling look much lower and blocking the entrance. There was still a large opening, at the very top, but it was too high and dangerous to climb. The new little mountain of rocks was most likely very unstable.

Naptunie's face paled as she noticed the red stains under some of the rocks. Even if some of the Yekara people had managed to flee, it was clear a lot had died in the collapse.

"Jinn!" Jisel called, immediately stepping forward. "Jinn! Jinn, are you alright?"

A weak growl answered her. She let out a faint sigh, relieved. Then, she suddenly turned to the other three women, furious.

"You almost killed my dragon!"

"So you d-do care about him," muttered Cessilia.

"Of course! He's my dragon! And now he's injured while you've trapped me with you insane women!"

"You'd rather be under the rocks?" retorted Tessandra. "I'm sure we can find you a spot!"

"You almost killed us all!"

"Well, we tried to get out in a more peaceful way, but it didn't work out. You're welcome, by the way. You should thank

Cessi. If it was me, I would have left you where you stood to die."

Tessandra then walked away, going toward the rocks to try and find an opening, or make sure none of their opponents

were still able to fight. Meanwhile, Jisel furiously turned to Cessilia.

"Why did you save me? I didn't ask nor want to be saved by you! What is wrong with you, always playing the good girl? You could have let me die!"

"...M-maybe I should have," said Cessilia. "You d-did injure and b-betray Ashen."

"He betrayed me first," Jisel retorted, full of spite.

"...B-but when I heard that you actually c-cared for your d-dragon before you g-got to safety, it ch-changed my mind."

That sentence seemed to shock Jisel. She went mute, truly at a loss for words this time, simply glaring at Cessilia. The

Princess had just saved her life, and she was now trapped with them in this cave. Her frustration was all over her face.

Meanwhile, Tessandra came back, sighing.

"The good news is, we're not completely trapped, so it's not like we're going to run out of air. The bad news is, I don't think we can get out of here by ourselves. Those rocks are completely unstable, we might kill ourselves if we try climbing up."

"Great," scoffed Jisel.

Cessilia couldn't be bothered with that woman anymore, though. Turning her back on Jisel and Tessandra, she went back to Ashen to check on his state.

"...Is he going to be alright?" asked Naptunie.

Nana herself didn't look alright. She was tired from the whole day, one of her buns coming undone. She had dark dust all over her face from the explosions, and unlike Cessilia and Tessandra, she didn't have any scales to cover up the many scratches she got. Still, she wasn't complaining at all, and instead, was down on her knees on the other side of the King, worrying about him. Cessilia sighed.

"...I hope he c-can hold on."

She then got up, and went back to the little lake, observing the various plants and little submarine elements there, looking for something she could potentially use. Naptunie went with her, immediately helping her identify some of the algae.

Meanwhile, Tessandra kept staring at Jisel, her fists on her hips.

"Well," she said, "at least now that we've got some free time ahead of us, perhaps you could finally answer some of the damn questions burning my tongue!"

"Why would I?" shrugged Jisel, crossing her arms. "I don't see why I would cooperate with you at all."

"Of course. You can also stay in your corner, and bleed to death after I cut off a leg or two," retorted Tessandra.

Jisel grimaced. Although she was fine with dying, she probably wasn't fond of being tortured. She glanced toward Cessilia. The Princess was already doing everything she could to save her lover. She and Nana had gathered small herbs, and fabrics from their clothes that were still more or less clean, and were even using Jisel's long needles to do what they could on the injury.

"T-Tessandra," Cessilia called, "I'm g-going to need some f-fire."

"...You can't do it too?" asked Naptunie, a bit surprised.

"No. N-not anymore."

Naptunie regretted asking. She watched silently as Tessandra created a little fire for them, which they could use to sterilize the needles and heat the water, but also to warm them up a bit. They were close to the water, and since night had fallen, so had the temperature. Not only that but all of their clothes were drenched and torn. The fire was quite welcome.

"...Do you think Sir Dragon will find us?" Nana asked.

“He’ll probably start searching for us sometime soon,” nodded Tessandra. “At the latest, he’ll get worried in the morning if he doesn’t see us in the bedroom. He wouldn’t miss his breakfast...”

“...I d-don’t know if we c-can wait until th-then.”

Their eyes all went to Ashen. He seemed to be barely breathing, and he had been unconscious for a while. The amount of blood spread on his torso was impressive, if not scary. Because Cessilia was currently taking care of the wound, it was all exposed. Even though she was helping out, Naptunie couldn’t help but grimace and kept trying to look away any chance she could. Cessilia sighed and resumed trying to take care of the wound.

“Luckily, it d-didn’t damage any v-vital organs. His abdominal m-muscles did help s-stop the b-blade from going too ddeep.”

“Thank the gods for abs...” muttered Tessandra. “...Can you save him?”

“I d-don’t know.” Cessilia shook her head. “I... I don’t think he’ll b-be able to survive if he s-spends the whole n-night without p-proper treatment, Tessa.”

Her cousin nodded. She had suspected as much. Anyone could have seen how bad that wound was. It can take a long time for a man to die, but given everything Ashen had gone through that day and the lack of medical tools, his life span was getting shorter every minute.

“...Call your dragon to dig us out,” Tessa ordered Jisel.

“Are you joking? First, he’s wounded! Second, I don’t see why I should help you out. And lastly, in case you haven’t

noticed, there’s no way my dragon alone will be able to get us out. You’ve seen his size, Jinn’s not even an adult. Did you see that blockage you created? There’s no way my dragon can dig that out on his own!”

Tessandra grimaced. It was annoying, but realistically, Jisel probably wasn’t lying about the last part. Her dragon was large, but that mountain of rocks blocking the exit was much bigger.

“...Let’s j-just try to k-keep calling Krai,” said Cessilia. “We c-can’t stay here, Tessa. The sea will p-probably rise up b-before morning.”

“It shouldn’t get too high,” added Nana, glancing at the lake, “but it will be a bit of a problem for His Majesty...”

Not only that, but the water would most likely cause the rocks to move toward them, which was dangerous.

“...Fine,” groaned Tessandra. “I’ll see if I can find an opening or move some of those stupid rocks without risking us dying under a landslide...”

She walked away and toward the rocks, hands on her hips, probably evaluating the ground. Meanwhile, Cessilia

resumed taking care of Ashen for a while. Naptunie cautiously glanced to the side, but Jisel had simply taken a seat by the fire,

and kept her eyes toward the entrance of the cave.

For a while, no one talked. They could hear the waves of the sea from afar, and a few men's voices too. There were probably survivors on the other side of the collapsed rocks, and if there were any on this side, Tessandra would surely finish them. She had gone over the rocks, trying to climb some or judge how risky some were, and they'd hear her swear out loud sometimes, but she always fell safely back on her feet. Cessilia trusted her cousin entirely, and was able to fully focus on Ashen, not even glancing back once. Naptunie had gone to retrieve some seaweed they had deemed useful, and had even caught some wild shrimp they could eat later if needed. It was as if everyone needed to keep themselves busy, despite how tired they were.

The only one not doing anything was Jisel, staring at the fire with an empty expression, her arms around her knees.

"...Your d-dragon was red."

Cessilia's words finally got her out of her daydream. Jisel glanced at the Princess, who was trying to sew some part of her injured lover's body.

"...I've only heard of one d-dragon that was red."

Jisel didn't answer, her eyes going back on the fire. From time to time, they would hear Jinn's faint growls from the other side of the rocks. The young dragon seemed frustrated as well, but it was very much alive.

"My p-parents told me about it," Cessilia continued as if she was talking to herself.

"About what happened b-before I was born, when my older b-brother was just a b-baby. My father had a b-brother that k-killed a lot of p-people. He t-ried to kill my g-grandfather and become the Emperor. He was a t-truly twisted man, and he d-died back then."

Naptunie, a bit confused, glanced at Jisel. That woman was now staring at Cessilia with an expression full of hatred.

She definitely knew something about what Cessilia was talking about. Naptunie looked again at Cessilia in front of her. She was still not looking at Jisel, and incredibly calm.

"...Are you the d-daughter of my uncle Vrehan?" she finally asked.

"No," retorted Jisel. "Hadn't you already heard that from the Hashat? My father was from the Rain Tribe."

"B-but you have a d-dragon."

"I never lied," retorted Jisel. "Not to Hephrael, and not even to Ashen... My mother was a princess of the Dragon Empire, my father a man of the Rain Tribe."

"P-princesses never—"

"Passed on dragons to their sons?" scoffed Jisel. "Well, that's because they never tried coupling them with someone

from the Rain Tribe, did they? Do you really think all those legends about our mermaid ancestors and a mythical water dragon were only folktales?"

This time, Cessilia raised her eyes to look at Jisel, confused. Jisel smirked, and glanced around, until her eyes found Tessandra.

"...Your cousin. She's an only child?"

"She has a little sister."

"But no male siblings... If she did, he probably would have a water dragon too."

Cessilia was shocked. Her hands stopped moving over Ashen, and she also glanced back at her cousin. If she hadn't

met Jisel, she would have never thought there was more to their genes than the fact that her mother was a bit special.

"...That bastard was my uncle too," Jisel suddenly blurted out, her eyes going back to the fire. "As you guessed, we

were indeed related. My mother was only unlucky to have been born as one of that piece of shit's sisters. I don't have

memories of living in that place, but she told me a bit. She was living like she was invisible, only obeying her brother's orders

to survive. Not making any waves, getting the little bits of happiness where she could.

When he suddenly showed her an ounce

of kindness by gifting her a male slave, she was all happy about it, like an idiot."

"...Your father was a slave?"

"Weren't all Rain people?" scoffed Jisel. "He was caught as a boy, and sold to entertain the whims of a princess a few

years older than him. In all ways, of course. He couldn't say anything back to her, so he tried to use her to survive. He obeyed

her every whim and made her attached. While she fell in love with her toy, he loathed her more and more each day. Their

relationship was violent even when she was still his master, yet he showed her just the right amount of attention and kindness

for her to never complain, and always forgive him. The typical romance tragedy for a love-deprived woman. I was born of

their love-hate relationship first."

"...You used to live in the Imperial Palace?"

"Like a rat, yes. I hid all the time. I knew pissing the wrong person off could get me killed, so I did all I could to hide

my very existence, and so did my mother. Everything was completely ruined by the war, though. You probably know better than

I do what happened... When... your father killed him, my mother and that slave of hers she was in love with, fled from the

palace to here. She got pregnant with my younger brother somewhere along the way.

Life as refugees turned out to be... even

worse than the one we had at the palace. My father took over as the monster."

She had a bitter smirk on as she stared at the fire, her eyes lost in her memories.

“Once free of his status as a slave, he became more violent than ever toward my mother. The difficulties were easier to blame on that woman than on himself. Although he never hurt us, my brother and I hated him alike. One day, he killed our mother, almost by accident. The wrong hit and that was it. What happened then traumatized my younger brother... and that’s when we met Jinn.”

“His d-dragon?”

“Jinn arrived out of nowhere, but my brother knew it was his dragon. I knew where my parents came from, I put the pieces together. My father, as well, of course. He did not like that his son was suddenly stronger than him, nor the reminder of whose blood we carried. Junian was too young for us to leave our father, so just like our mother did, we had to endure. Until we were both old enough to leave, to find a place of our own.”

“...What happened to your b-brother?”

Jisel sighed. She was incredibly calm and seemingly detached from the story she was telling. Almost as if it wasn’t her own, or she had absolutely no feelings about it.

“A dragon isn’t like a human. It can’t be told to shut up and behave. So, each time my brother got upset, Jinn would retaliate against my father. He had the same fear-anger relationship as we had toward our father, even when he grew much bigger. My stupid father thought getting more violent toward my brother would make Jinn behave. Of course, he was wrong.

One day, Jinn injured him. Badly. I remember leaving him there and going to bed hoping that man would be dead the next day.

As it turns out, neither of them woke up.”

A chill went down Naptunie’s spine. She didn’t like that woman one bit, but listening to her story was still terribly painful. She could sort of understand what had happened, and it was frightening to put the pieces together. It was such a horrible story. Yet, Jisel was completely placid, and distant.

“I found myself alone with a dragon. Jinn was attached to me, of course, but I knew he’d draw attention. So I sent him away for a while, and tried to find my way into the Eastern Kingdom... I knew my skin color would draw attention, and I was young, alone, and worse, a woman. I survived, however I could. Whatever I had to do to survive, I did. I learned not to trust anyone. Especially men... They all betray you in the end.”

She suddenly turned her head to glare at Ashen. Cessilia sighed but did not say anything. Although she had played a large part in this, she still knew this issue was between Jisel and Ashen; what had happened between them was not something she could intrude on.

“...Not all men,” Naptunie interjected, very invested in the story. “Your little brother didn’t betray you.”

“Yeah, but he never grew to be a man.”

Another long silence followed. Beyond Jisel’s story, Cessilia was thinking about Jinn the dragon. Its mere existence meant there was a lot more to her mother’s tribe than they had initially thought. She had never thought she would see water dragons other than in her family, but as it turned out, the Rain Tribe and the Dragon Empire’s Imperial Family had a lot in common, enough for their blood to be able to create more water dragons. She thought about Jisel’s words from earlier. Would a male sibling of Tessandra really have a water dragon too? If a man of the Rain Tribe and an Imperial Princess could produce a son with a water dragon, didn’t that mean the Rain Tribe’s genes only reacted when paired with someone from the Imperial Family? Cessilia’s thoughts painfully drifted to Cece, her own dragon. She still wouldn’t have had Cece if it wasn’t for her mother and her encounter with a Water God. Cessilia had always known that story was more than a simple tale, but now, she felt like she was touching something even deeper about her own family. She felt a bit proud, even. At the same time, she missed Cece more than ever. If she had been here, none of this would have happened... Cece would have been big enough to get them out of there in a blink, while growling happily like she always did.

She froze, suddenly hearing it. Dragon growls. Cessilia jumped on her feet and ran toward the rocks.

“...D-do you hear that?”

“Is this Sir Dragon?” asked Nana.

“...No,” said Tessandra, a smile on her face.

Indeed, the dragon growls didn’t sound like Krai’s. They could hear Jinn growling against another dragon, with a more high-pitched growl than Krai, and male voices panicking out there.

“What the heck is going on?!” a male voice shouted. “Where the heck did that brat dragon come from?!”

“...Darsan?” frowned Tessandra.

“Cessi!” shouted a second male voice. “Cessi! Tessa! Are you in there?”

“K-Kassian!” Cessilia exclaimed, beaming.

A large ruckus followed, and they both had to quickly retreat as the mountain of rocks moved brutally. For a while, everything began to collapse on the other side, and after a few seconds, a very large silhouette of another, larger water dragon appeared at the top, with magnificent silver scales, and two men’s silhouettes on its back.