

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 Hephael. “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 b-be 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 b-bringing tea and food," she said in a loud voice, "b-but no one will get anything if we c-can't distribute them. P-please be patient a little b-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 t-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 c-can 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 c-can’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, b-but 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 t-to 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 Hephael 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!”