

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 th-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 b-been 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 d-discuss with the families to have jobs c-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 d-didn’t mean in the Outer C-Capital,” said Cessilia, “but in the K-Kingdom. Some villages c-can still be rebuilt and c-consolidated, and the security improved. If you p-pay men to protect those p-places and let the t-tribes own lands, they will expand and c-create more cities for p-people to gather.”

“You want me to give lands to the tribes?”

“You c-can have them p-pay you back slowly. The t-tribes have the businesses, and there are p-people willing to work hard, it c-can work. The families c-can also defend themselves, otherwise, they wouldn’t b-be able to live outside the C-Capital, right? B-but if you g-give them p-places

they c-can own to settle, they c-can create even more p-places for their b-businesses and let the other p-people feel safe t-too. P-people can work t-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.