

Chapter 18

“Ashen...”

His large hands were going all over her body, warming her gently. She had no idea how his skin could be warmer than a dragon's, but she didn't want him to stop touching her ever. His hands were always rough, calloused, and a bit dry, but he still touched her so gently every single time. As if she was the most fragile, precious thing in this world.

With only one arm below her butt, holding her effortlessly against a wall, and Cessilia being a bit higher than him, the two of them hid to be intimate. She kept caressing his thick neck and combing his white hair with her fingers. She liked the length of it, which took her fingertips down to his large back. She had always been the tallest among most girls she knew, but Ashen made her feel like a small doll. Each time he raised his eyes to look at her, his dark irises glowed with a secret message only for her, right before they began kissing again.

When he had pulled her into a small, almost secret side passageway of the castle, taking her away from the rest of their little group, she hadn't resisted. They had snuck away like a pair of young lovers who couldn't hold it anymore. The feeling of guilt toward her cousin and friends was quickly erased by the taste of Ashen's kisses, and the pleasure of this stolen moment between them. She could always face Tessa's wrath later...

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

“Huh?”

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

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

smiled at her soft blushing and kissed her rosy cheeks one after the other, then her lips. They resumed their kissing, neither of them tired of it. Ashen seemed to be holding her as if she weighed absolutely nothing, and they were so serene, just the two of them in this small hideout, they probably would have stayed there for a while longer if Cessilia hadn't shivered.

"...You should change," muttered Ashen, frowning.

"I'm a-alright."

"No. Come on."

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

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

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

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

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

Behind him, Safia and Ashra smiled at the King, like two vipers at their prey. Cessilia glared right back at those two. Out of all the candidates, the Yekara women were the worst. She couldn't stand their haughty attitude and even worse, their lascivious looks in the King's direction. Ashen's hand held hers a bit tighter as if to reassure her.

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

What was that about? Cessilia frowned. What did the Yekara Clan do now? She almost regretted not staying for their council this morning. She had thrown facts in their faces angrily, but she had left Ashen alone against those vultures... Lord Yebekh wasn't losing his composure at all. This man was thin and tall, with a long beard caught in a single silver bead, and his long hair in a myriad of thin dreadlocks, large eyes, and oily skin, like an eel. He didn't seem like a warrior like his people, only thin and almost sickly under his large, thick clothes. He definitely had the eyes and attitude of a schemer, instead.

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

Cessilia wasn't phased by this man's insult. She had heard much worse, and she believed in Ashen too. She would never be just a concubine. This was the low attempt of the Yekara Leader to bring her down again when he had already failed miserably this morning.

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

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

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

“D-do you really think a d-dragon is all I have t-to offer? His M-Majesty and I just c-came back from the Outer C-Capital. We were helping the p-people against the flood. I d-don't believe we saw anyone from your c-clan.”

“Why should we bother with the low-borns and criminals of the Outer Capital?” retorted Yebekh, losing his smile. “Does the Princess believe those people will make you Queen, perhaps? They are irrelevant! Saving those people is useless, they will die of any disease they brought with them or in our streets like the rats they are!”

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

The Yekara Leader shook his head slowly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

His eyes were clearly staring at Cessilia, just like his niece and daughter that were already glaring at her. Cessilia was disgusted by this man. She had already thought he was a horrible creature that morning while trying to use her relationship with Ashen against her, but now, his political standpoint was perhaps even worse to hear.

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

They cut across the room, briefly crossing paths with the Yekara, although they purposely left quite some space between them. Ashen didn’t spare them a second glance, but Cessilia didn’t shy away from their glares. She was clearly an annoying obstacle between their candidates and the King, and they didn’t even bother to hide their hatred. The smirk on the Clan Leader’s lips as she was pulled away annoyed Cessilia all the more.

“N-no, wait.”

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

“You knew th-the flood would p-put people at risk outside the C-Capital,” she said. “You d-didn’t send help at all. Almost all the families did, but you d-decided to ignore those p-people.”

“Those families are so poor and weak precisely because they can’t help but lose their wealth stupidly. It is their choice to waste money and goods on those useless people. The Yekara Clan shall stand strong, alone. We do not need to concern ourselves with those peasants. They should have left those beggars to die in the natural order of things and saved their wealth. No wonder they are still below us.”

Cessilia chuckled.

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

overthrown. Cessilia's confident laugh made him lose his stance. Facing him, the Princess looked strangely relieved. Her smile was anything but what he had expected.

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

"How dare you?!"

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

"The Yekara Clan doesn't hide!" he roared. "We don't fear anything!"

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

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

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

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

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

Just before they left the room, Ashen noticed Yebekh's furious expression and smirked. Cessilia had defeated this man once again, just with words, no swords or dragons needed.

As the two of them walked away, he smiled to himself, proud of his Princess. She was surprisingly eloquent, fierce, and sharp as a blade at times. They climbed the stairs together in silence, both enjoying this little victory over the Yekara Clan after a long day. They finally reached his room, and Cessilia let out a long sigh, taking Ashen's fur cape and the raincoat off her shoulders. Meanwhile, he went to prepare the fire in the

little fireplace, half-naked already. Cessilia easily found towels in the only wardrobe and began drying her long curls with one.

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

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

“I d-don’t like it,” she frowned.

Every time they ran into some women, candidates, or servants, they couldn’t help but glance at the King’s impressive body, regardless of if they were scared or not. Cessilia didn’t like that at all. She rubbed her hair a bit more vigorously with the towel, reminiscing about the Yekara women that still had their hungry eyes on her man.

“...Cessi.”

His gentle voice wasn’t enough to make her stop pouting. Instead, Cessilia ignored him, fiercely focusing on drying each of her long curls. She hid under the towel as an excuse to ignore him. She was jealous, and a bit embarrassed about her own possessive nature. It was a side of herself she was unfamiliar with and quite uneasy about showing to Ashen.

Suddenly, she felt large hands over her own, and he gently squeezed them. His fingers moved to take control of the towel, and he began drying her hair for her. Cessilia was mute, only following his lead, his movements far less aggressive than her own. Despite being temporarily blind, she could feel his presence right behind her, a bit too close.

“...They should be the ones to be jealous.”

His deep voice sent a wave of warmth down her chest. She tried to swallow her saliva, but her throat was dry, and her heart was beating a tad too fast. She wasn’t so shy when they kissed earlier, so why was she so much more troubled when he used his words...?

He slowly pulled the towel down and wrapped it around her shoulders instead. Because he was behind her and she couldn’t see his movements,

Cessilia was on edge, trying to guess what to do next. She heard him chuckle, and she turned around, unable to take it anymore. She faced his smug expression, making her even more embarrassed.

“It’s not f-funny,” she mumbled, trying to push him away.

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

Cessilia sighed. He could be horribly arrogant at times. He chuckled once more, but stepped away, grabbing another towel to hand her. Although her hair was half-dry now, her dress was still soaked, and her body cold. It was unlikely she’d get a cold, but she was still very much uncomfortable. This time, he stepped away, giving her some space to finish drying herself, or at least try to. He called out for a maid to bring her a new dress, and quickly changed himself, grabbing one of the very few pieces of clothing in that wardrobe. They were strangely cautious around each other, both looking away from the other’s naked body. Cessilia, first, tried hard not to look his way as he got into a new pair of pants, still not bothering with a shirt. She was a bit surprised to see him so absorbed in the fire while she put on the new dress brought by the servant, though. Ashen was very clearly looking away on purpose when she had expected him to peek at her naked body. She wondered... was he really not interested? Or just trying to be considerate? She wondered if she was more foolish for wanting him to look, or because she was dejected he didn’t...

The dress was very pretty too. She recognized one of those they had brought to her bedroom. This one was ocean blue, with the shades getting darker and darker toward the bottom, in thin layers that followed her body’s curves. It was sleeveless and off-the-shoulder, with thin silver-colored chains around her neck and arms, holding the fabric and acting as body jewelry. She liked it. It wasn’t one of those overly decorated dresses, it had no embroideries or anything sewn on it, but the fabric was obviously of superior quality. It barely weighed anything and was very flowy... She could feel it float around her like a breeze as she moved. When Cessi turned around, Ashen was seated on the bed, waiting for her. She smiled at him and closed the distance between them.

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

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

“B-but what if I miss the b-banquet?”

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

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

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

“...Cessilia.”

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

“Are you awake?”

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

“Ashen... D-don’t we have to g-go?”

“We still have a few minutes.”

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

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

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

“...Will you be alright?” he asked between two kisses.

Cessilia felt a bit more embarrassed. She had lost her virginity just the previous day... It was only natural he'd ask. However, she felt completely fine. Her body had recuperated quite quickly already, and in fact, she was even eager to do it again... She wanted it. She nodded, her heart beating fast and her whole body sweating a bit from the heat. Ashen smiled, throwing her heart for a loop. He then ventured lower, to her surprise, moving his face between her legs. Pinned to the bed, Cessilia covered her mouth, embarrassed by her own excitement.

“A-Ashen...”

“Let me taste you.”

Before she could protest, his mouth was against her lower lips, and she moaned helplessly, surprised by the sensations it caused in her lower stomach. As Ashen used his tongue and lips to please her, his hand caressing her curves, Cessilia heard herself gasping and moaning in pleasure. She wanted to explore this facet of her womanhood. She was young, but so eager to learn more about the pleasures of the flesh. The situation was embarrassing, and making her blush endlessly, but she didn't want to push any of it away. She wanted more... more of what Ashen was giving her. She moved her legs as she felt like it, her toes grabbing the sheets, and wriggled her waist under his tongue, crying out in pleasure. Her voice was embarrassing to her own ears, but she liked those sounds of the woman inside her getting pleased by her lover. Ashen's mouth was restless, not letting her escape. The wet sounds and movements were filled with lust, and a heat was growing in her stomach.

“Ashen...” she cried out, grabbing his hair.

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

He stopped suddenly, making her almost cry in dissatisfaction. Yet, Ashen quickly readjusted his position to move above her, and she felt him against her entrance, making her even more eager. Cessilia cupped his face with

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

“Are you a-alright?”

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

“I should be the one asking you that,” he whispered, kissing her cheek.

“...I'm alright. Just working on my self-restraint...”

“B-but I'm fine...”

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

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

Cessilia blushed and smiled, caressing his cheek.

“I want it too, Ashen... p-please.”

He sighed, shaking his head a bit.

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

He suddenly began moving, making her cry out. It was more than she remembered. His pelvis moved so fast, so deep, she soon found herself crying out, completely helpless. His movements were so restless, barely giving her room to breathe as he pulled almost all the way back, and went all the way in. Her body might have been strong, but her mind wasn't prepared for the torturing sensations of pleasure. It was like her stomach was twisted, the heat between her legs burning. The wetness from earlier

was turning into a rapid, flowing back and forth with him, and rushing everything inside.

“Ah... Ah... A-Ashen! Ha... Hm!”

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

“You...”

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

“Are you being mischievous, my princess?” he chuckled.

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

She was unbearably cute when she was trying to take the offensive. He chuckled and lowered his head to kiss her. Cessilia's hand was not letting

go, a bit possessive of his muscular bottom. He quite liked it when she tried to be more boastful, as opposed to her usual shyness... especially when she did it to claim her ownership of him. He kissed her cheek.

“You sure can,” he chuckled.

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

“You’re the one... making me like this.”

Cessilia was rendered mute. He was inside of her with this? She regretted being so cocky just a second ago when she had such little self-awareness... Ashen resumed moving, slowly, making her even more aware of what was going on down there. Cessilia tried to control her breathing and her shameful thoughts, but it was a bit too late. Ashen guided her fingers on her own body, triggering a new little touch of pleasure. She was unveiling the secrets of carnal pleasure at high speed, and she couldn’t admit to herself how good that felt... Before she realized it, he resumed his pounding, and her fingers moved on their own to increase her pleasure. Her voice grew steadily louder, now following the rhythm of her lover’s thrusts. His groans too. He called her nickname in between, not slowing down anymore. Time around them was now solely regulated by their pleasure, growing faster as the wave grew bigger. Cessilia could feel the pleasure rising; her fingertips moved faster, and Ashen’s pounding intensified, making her cry out. Her hand stiffened, and she stopped her fingers, suddenly completely absorbed in his rough pounding. He was going fast, all in and almost all out, wrecking her senses and making some parts of her body numb, as if to focus everything on the ones being pleased. Her moans echoed in the room, but she was deaf to them; she could only focus on the inner sensations and the sparks that suddenly bloomed in her stomach. It was so sudden, she felt her body stiffen, and heard Ashen groan loudly. He froze deep inside, and her entire body froze, pinned down by pleasure and the strange trembling that came from it.

When her limbs finally relaxed, Cessilia calmed down, her breath slowing down. She had no idea when she had closed her eyes, but she could feel Ashen’s fingers gently combing her hair. She hugged him, hiding her face

in his neck. She was happy. It was like a stolen, private moment between them, so short but so blessed. Even if she was tired, she liked the lingering sensations in her body, the soft memory of their intense love-making.

“...Are you alright?”

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

“Damn it,” he groaned.

“Ashen?”

“...I came inside. Sorry...”

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

“Why d-do you apologize?”

He made a sour expression.

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

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

Cessilia had always wanted children. Not as many as her mother, but as someone who had helped raise her younger siblings, she knew a bit about the happiness of raising a baby. She was aware she was still young, but she thought of herself as mature and aware enough to become a mother, and her own mom was pregnant with her firstborn when she was even younger than Cessilia. Moreover, Ashen was a King, and he would need heirs as soon as possible, probably. He was older than her by over four years too. Cessilia had dreamt the father of her children would be him, just like she wanted to be the mother of his children. Hearing him say he didn't want her to be pregnant was hurtful.

Ashen realized one second too late he had misspoken and made her upset. His black eyes opened wide, and right after, he avoided her gaze for a second and shook his head.

“It’s not that I don’t want a child with you,” he explained. “Just... not now.”

“It t-takes several months t-to conceive a baby,” she retorted. “B-By then, I’m sure we will b-be done with the c-competition and the c-clans’ opposition too...”

“It’s not about the competition or the clans. I’m the one who’s not ready, Cessilia.”

There was something painful in his tone that made her calm down instantly. Ashen wasn’t against having a child with her; the issue was more personal. Cessilia moved their position to sit up, facing him with her hands still on his shoulders. He was still avoiding her eyes, though. She gently pulled a bit of his white hair off his face and back.

“...T-tell me,” she said gently. “Ashen, speak t-to me.”

He sighed and leaned forward, resting his head against her stomach. She still couldn’t see his face, but at least, his shoulders were a bit more relaxed.

“I would... love your child, Cessilia. A baby that comes from you... I would love your baby like I love you. So, so much. But I just... I don’t think I could be a good father, Cessi. I grew up in a broken family, with no father figure. My father was a horrible piece of shit to both his women, and even worse to his own children. ...What if I do the same thing to our child? What if I... get mad at him or her, what if I scare them? What if I... if I ever hurt them? I’d rather die than risk doing anything to your child.”

Cessilia smiled. It wasn’t really something she should have been happy about, but in her heart, Ashen was just proving himself to be an even better man than she thought. Underestimating himself, and already showing so much love and concern over his future children. Their future children.

She gently caressed his hair.

“...Ashen. L-look at me.”

When he didn’t move, Cessilia sighed and pulled his hair a little.

“L-look at me, I s-said.”

Despite her stutter, her imperious tone was clear. He sighed and leaned on his arms to face her, still sullen. His dark eyes looked full of doubt, and even a hint of fear. Cessilia smiled at him and gave a quick peck on his lips.

“Ashen,” she muttered, “you’re n-not like your father. You t-took good c-care of your mom and b-brothers, all you c-could. You c-cared about so many of your p-people today t-too. You always d-do your best for others’ sake. You really are a k-kind man. You d-don’t even realize how k-kind and selfless you are. ...Plus, d-do you really think I would let you d-do anything to our children? If you d-don’t trust yourself, at least, t-trust me. I am n-not a weak woman.”

He finally broke into a faint smile. Ashen gave her back that quick peck, and tilted his head.

“...Right. I underestimated a dragon mom. Your children will be so lucky to have you...”

“Our ch-children. I d-don’t plan to have a b-baby with anyone else b-but you.”

“Still,” he groaned, “I should have... had more restraint, until we talked properly about it.”

“It’s alright. We just d-did.”

Her confident smile was enough for him. He chuckled, giving in to her confidence. He leaned forward, and they resumed their kissing, caressing each other for a while.

Suddenly, a knock was heard on the door.

“Your Majesty,” said a female voice. “They are waiting for you for the second banquet...”

Ashen groaned.

“Damn it,” he grumbled.

“Let’s g-go.”

He nodded and helped Cessilia get out of the bed. While Ashen went to the door to tell the servant to announce his arrival, Cessilia walked to the little basin to clean herself up. She felt like the remnants of what they had just done could be seen on her, even if it was irrational. She did her best to clean herself up in a short time, putting her dress back down and combing her curls with her fingers. Because she didn’t have any hair ornaments this time, she braided her hair and quickly twisted it into a low bun, some curls naturally falling out nicely. The result was simple but very elegant, and when she checked in the mirror, Cessilia found her cheeks didn’t need any blush nor her lips any more pink...

“Cessilia.”

Ashen called out to her, and she came to take his hand, her heart thumping. It was strange that after all they had already done together, even the simplest gestures of affection made her heart flutter... After letting the servant in to put out the fire, Ashen and Cessilia walked out of the room, hand in hand.

He guided her throughout the castle but, as they got closer to the location of the second banquet, Cessilia noticed he was frowning, lost in his thoughts.

“Ashen?”

“I’m just thinking... Next time, I have to be more careful. I might really get killed before I get to meet our child, you know.”

“W-why are you saying that now?!”

Ashen sighed and shook his head.

“I’m being rational. ...I’m pretty sure your dad and brothers will take my head the minute they find out.”

After a second, Cessilia laughed, unable to hold it. This part, at least, sounded like a reasonable concern of his...