

Chapter 19

“They won’t be late, right?” muttered Nana, while pacing back and forth in the corridor.

“They will definitely make it,” sighed Tessa. “They are probably just acting all lovey-dovey who-knows-where...”

She crossed her arms again, leaning against the wall. They had only been waiting for a few minutes, but the atmosphere was tense, as expected. It wasn’t just because her cousin and the King were a bit late. That guy was the King, he could probably be late all he wanted. No, Tessandra had an odd feeling since seeing the Lords from the different clans walk by earlier. The two girls had bathed, changed into new clothes, and even grabbed dinner with Sabael. Thankfully, the young soldier had apparently decided to stop teasing her each chance he got, so she had been able to eat comfortably. Probably because things were getting more serious in the castle. Tessandra glanced at a duo of Royal Soldiers walking by again.

“...Familiar faces?” she asked Sabael without looking at him.

“Not really.”

He had an odd feeling too. All of the Royal Guards they had seen so far seemed to be strangers to him. Although he was usually posted to the Inner Wall, Sabael should have had at least some sense of familiarity, but there was none. Tessa caressed the handle of her sword, frowning a bit. Perhaps it wasn’t a bad thing that she had chosen a more practical outfit rather than a ceremonial one...

“Do you think the clans are plotting something?” she muttered.

“Definitely. The Yekara and Pangoja Leaders are not happy with the King choosing Lady Cessilia over their candidates... I heard the last Royal

Council caused quite an uproar after she made an appearance too. If they know they might lose, they might act before they really lose everything...”

“That can’t be good,” muttered Nana, nervous. “They own so many military forces! Their private militia was estimated to be over three hundred soldiers in the Capital alone just two years ago, and it’s been growing since then...”

Tessa turned to her.

“What else do you know, Nana? About the Yekara and Pangoja?”

“They are two of the oldest and most established clans, and among the largest ones,” she immediately began reciting. “The Yekara grew from an ancient military family after they recruited a lot of the forces that had turned their back on the ancient King, and they heavily invested in combat training and weapons. The Pangoja have money. Lots and lots of money, but their military power is only about a fourth of the Yekara; they mostly use their money to hire mercenaries. They both have at least three residences within the Capital and many more properties.”

“So if those two began to cooperate...”

“A catastrophe,” sighed Naptunie. “That would be a catastrophe!”

“It’s highly unlikely, though,” said Sabael. “The two clans don’t see eye-to-eye...”

“You can never know for sure,” Tessa grumbled. “People with common enemies become friends surprisingly quickly...”

Just as she finished her sentence, Cessilia and Ashen appeared at the end of the corridor, holding hands. Tessandra smiled. Although she wasn’t fond of the King himself, she had rarely seen her usually shy cousin looking so happy.

“...No need to mention all that to those two,” she muttered to Naptunie and Sabael.

“Why?”

“They probably already know,” she said, moving from the wall.

The five of them met up in the corridor, Cessilia smiling at them, although there was a dash of pink on her cheeks. Both she and the King had changed clothes too.

“Lady Cessilia, your hair is so pretty like that! But you don’t have any hair ornaments, will that be fine?”

“I th-think it will,” chuckled Cessilia. “I d-don’t think this c-competition is really about looks...”

Tessandra glanced at the King but didn’t say anything. She shrugged.

“Let’s go,” she sighed. “I have a feeling this new banquet won’t be relaxing at all, anyway.”

She walked ahead, while the two siblings, a bit more self-conscious about the King’s presence, politely let him and Cessilia through first. Their little group made their way downstairs in silence. The closer they got to the cave where the banquet was being held, the heavier the tension got.

While going down the stairs, though, Cessilia couldn’t help but admire how their surroundings became less handcrafted but more natural. The walls were now irregular, designed by the waves that once reached this place. The windows were rarer too and were the last things men had put in there. Even the stairs got less and less equal, more uneven and forcing them to watch their steps. The path was narrow, forcing them to come down two at a time. Had everyone come down this narrow path? It didn’t leave much room for a proper evacuation in case something happened... It would be easy to block the way out too. Her cousin probably had the same thoughts, as Tessandra kept nervously glancing all around.

Finally, they reached a much more open area. It wasn’t a room per se, more like a very large cave that had been designed to look like a hall. The ceiling was entirely made of stone, some stalactites even coming down from the ceiling. There were only a handful of windows, all too small to brighten the whole cave without the help of a few well-placed mirrors, some torches lit up against the walls, and at the other end of the cave, a small lake. Just like the one she had been to with Ashen before, this water was crystal clear, almost turquoise, and reflected the light like a large

mirror. There had been a conscious effort made by the human craftsmen too. Unlike the roof of the cave, all of the walls up to a certain height had been decorated with gorgeous mosaics, most made of stained glass, shaped gems, or polished stones, to represent scenes or beautiful designs. A portion of the cave's floor had been dug to an even level and had a clean floor of stained glass and polished stones. It was as if the lower half of the cave had been made into a large hall, while the top was still very natural, where no man's tool could reach. It was a truly unique place, beautiful both by the efforts men had made and the natural talents of nature.

The cave was large, but most of it was used as an arena, just like Naptunie had described. A large circle had been dug below the natural cave's floor, while stairs had been carved all around, three levels for the guests to sit around it. Outside of this arena, the cave was mostly left to its natural state, with only three entries like the one Cessilia's group had just walked out of, small holes on the other side, probably dead ends to smaller caves, and the little lake. As they finally reached the last step into the cave, Cessilia was surprised by the sand color of the stones around, much clearer than the ones from outside. Perhaps the lack of seawater and sunlight reaching them had preserved the stone's natural color...

"It's so beautiful!" exclaimed Naptunie, saying out loud what Cessi was also thinking.

Her voice echoed in the cave, attracting all eyes to their little group. Although the cave was very large, the echo was equally as impressive, and thus, the smallest sound could be heard everywhere. Moreover, the people already seated on the steps of the arena had been rather quiet, or only whispering, thus their entrance was not discreet at all.

There were a lot more people than Cessilia remembered seeing at the first banquet, perhaps because the room had been smaller before. Now, the cave seemed filled with people from all clans, their eyes going right to her. It would have been a bit scary if she hadn't prepared herself for at least this much attention. However, with Tessandra in front of her and Ashen holding her hand, Cessilia wasn't scared at all. Moreover, she wasn't only getting defiant glares. A lot of the eyes looked happy to see

her, notably those from the clans she had already befriended. She looked around, trying to spot her closest allies, but none of those who had helped at the Outer Wall were there. She suspected the Yonchaa, Hashat, and Sehsan had sent representatives and remained at the Outer Wall to help. She recognized Lady Bastat's father and Nanaye, the candidate of the Yonchaa Tribe and Naptunie's friend. The Hashat Family was represented by Hephrael's father, although the man looked a bit unhappy to be there, his arms crossed and his lips pinched.

Seated on the first level was the Yekara Clan, more numerous than before. Cessilia frowned. They were all wearing blood-red outfits, their eyes on her. Their leader, Lord Yebekh, was between his two candidates and smirking. He definitely had something on his mind...

"Is it me or... are there a lot of people?" muttered Naptunie, a bit worried.

"The Yekara asked to bring more men, saying they were worried for their candidates after the murder," muttered Ashen. "I couldn't refuse, but I brought more of our guards, just in case..."

Sabael nodded. Indeed, he recognized some of his fellow Royal Soldiers, even nodding at those he personally knew or was friends with. Still, it couldn't be helped that the atmosphere would be tense with so many people. There would have been no reason for the Yekara Clan to bring this many people if they didn't have something in mind.

"...Krai really won't be able to come here," groaned Tessandra. "It's still raining outside, and there's no point in him coming, either; he'd risk killing us all if the cave collapses."

This was definitely part of the alienated clans' plan. Cessilia had thought the same while looking around the cave. She could hear the sea waves outside, probably not too far on the other side of the cave's walls, but the underwater passage probably led them further than that. They could also hear the rain, much calmer than before but seconded by a storm getting closer and closer. She silently hoped Naptunie was right about that waterway...

They finally reached what seemed like the arena, but far from parting with her, Ashen held her hand tight and guided her to his seat in the stalls. Unlike all the other seats carved around them, the King's throne was much larger, more embellished, and almost as tall as two rows by itself. No one had sat near it, so when Ashen sat down, Cessilia was noticeably the only one within his proximity. After a hesitation, she sat right next to him, in a normal seat, but with the King still holding her hand. Tessandra, Nana, and Sabael sat close by, although deliberately leaving some space for the couple. Their seating gathered a lot of attention once again, some staring while others glared. The women behind the Yekara Leader, in particular, seemed to be piercing holes through Cessilia, but she ignored them. Instead, she glanced at the Pangoja Leader. That middle-aged man seemed to have lost weight and aged a few years in just a couple of days' time. Perhaps he was very affected by his candidate's death. The remaining one was seated right next to him, with a defiant look in her eyes. Istis had a beautiful, long, orange dress that did not match her unhappy expression, as if she had been dragged here by force. In fact, she was the only candidate not looking toward the King or Cessilia, her eyes down on her hands.

"Welcome, Your Majesty!" exclaimed Lord Yebekh as if he was the main host of the banquet.

"You sound very happy," hissed Ashen.

"Of course! This banquet will most likely be a memorable one... Hopefully, no bad news comes to mess with our candidates' performances this time. We shall expect the ladies of our Kingdom to demonstrate their best skills, so Your Majesty can choose a queen from the best of them."

His obvious intent to exclude Cessilia from the "ladies of our Kingdom" was rather straightforward, and got him a few glares. Not only from Tessandra and Ashen but from several people from the other families as well. Even Axelane, the beautiful candidate of the Nahaf Family, looked a bit annoyed at his arrogance, rolling her eyes and grabbing the hems of her gorgeous, long, golden dress.

“...Enough,” said Ashen. “This banquet is only happening so we can confirm who my future Queen will be. Since some of you still think this is even necessary...”

He was obviously referring to two clans amongst the seven, but both the Pangoja and Yekara Leaders decided to play dumb, remaining silent. Ashen formed a fist with the hand that wasn't holding Cessilia's. If it wasn't for those two clans' power, he would have ended this foolish, useless competition long ago. There was no way he'd choose a woman other than Cessilia. The only reason he couldn't end it was that the Yekara and Pangoja Clan might use this as an excuse to start another civil war. With Cessilia's latest achievements, though, this might not be a concern anymore. She had rallied several tribes and families to her with impressive speed and diplomacy.

Ashen took a deep breath.

“...May this second banquet start,” he groaned.

This time, there would be no dances. He'd had enough of useless ceremonies and had insisted this banquet would be less frivolous than the previous one, with only servants putting large tables full of food on each level so they could watch the performances without moving around. The musicians were playing on their own in one corner of the arena, filling the time until the first candidate's performance. It was quite austere, but this way, all the candidates had to remain there too, so no one could get assassinated in the middle of the banquet a second time... which led the banquet to debut with a rather awkward tension in the air. Cessilia didn't even touch her food, only drinking wine with her free hand. She couldn't shake that bad feeling she had, and right below her on the stairs, Tessandra was also watching the audience like a dragon waiting for its prey to come out.

Soon enough, though, Ashen turned his eyes to the Sehsan Tribe Leader, and they exchanged a nod. The Lord slowly stood up, and walked down to the center of the arena, quickly gathering the audience's attention.

“Honorable Lords,” he said, “my King, and everyone here. I have an announcement to make as the leader of the Sehsan Tribe. As you can see, my dear, first-born daughter and our tribe’s candidate, Bastat, isn’t attending the banquet today. My dear Bastat has always been a wise child, doing her very best for the sake of our tribe, and, in the future, I will happily entrust her with the title of Tribe Leader. Today, however, she shared with me that she had made the decision to renounce the position of this Kingdom’s future Queen. She said there would be no point in her attending this banquet and the next when there was a candidate much better suited to accompany our King.”

Cessilia was rendered completely mute. Lady Bastat was forsaking the competition? In her eyes, she had been the second most likely candidate after herself! Cessilia had no intention to lose to anyone, but she couldn’t help but be shaken up by such a strong candidate openly giving up, and so soon too... Yet, she found herself even more shocked when Lord Gebri turned to her and bowed very deeply. She could have mistaken it for a bow to Ashen if the man hadn’t been so obviously addressing her.

“Lady Cessilia of the Dragon Empire, my daughter places her full trust in you, and so will the entire Sehsan Tribe. My daughter Bastat and I will fully support you as a candidate, and thus, are retiring from this competition in the hope that Lady Cessilia becomes our Queen.”

Cessilia was speechless. Lady Bastat was giving up so her tribe could support... her? Right as she was wondering how she should respond to this, if she had to answer at all, the Yonchaa, Hashat, and Dorosef Leaders or representatives slowly stood up, and came down to the center of the arena.

“The Yonchaa Tribe joins the Sehsan Tribe’s position. We are forfeiting our candidate Nanaye’s participation, and giving our full support to the Princess.”

“The Dorosef Tribe forfeits our candidate Naptunie’s position as well, to support Princess Cessilia.”

“The Hashat Family gives its full support to the Princess as well, thus candidate Ishira will no longer partake in the competition from now on.”

Cessilia was stunned. She couldn't even speak or get up to thank them. Should she even thank them? Half the candidates were leaving the competition for her sake! When had they even decided on such a thing? This was insane! Naptunie and Tessa both turned to her with bright smiles, but Cessilia was unable to process what had just happened.

On the other side of the arena, the Yekara Clan Leader had lost his smirk, and his expression was now absolutely furious. He stood up, glaring at the four families' representatives.

“You are all insane! Leaving this Kingdom to a foreigner!”

“We are leaving this Kingdom to a promising young woman who can do something for it,” retorted Lord Gebri, Bastat's father. “Lord Yebekh, this young woman spent the whole day outside, under the downpour, caring for our people more than anyone in this place has in a long time. Where were your candidates then? In my eyes, and my daughter's, this brave Princess more than deserves to be our future Queen already!”

Despite what she was hearing, Cessilia had a hard time believing all of this was even real. She had been so nervous about this second banquet and the lack of time to prepare a performance to measure up to her rivals that she hadn't even thought about how the others could have lost interest in the meantime. Not in a million years would she have imagined four of the candidates forfeiting, and for her sake too. It was a lot all at once. Moreover, the leaders were now all arguing over her.

“You bunch of spineless cowards!” the Yekara Clan Leader was shouting. “You dare let this foreigner win over your own daughters? We cannot allow one of our enemies on the throne!”

“Wake up, Yekara,” retorted the Dorosef Tribe Leader, a very large man named Poseus, and one of Naptunie's grand-uncles. “The war ended long ago, despite what you like to think! We have more to win by working with the Dragon Empire than against them.”

“That’s so typical of you,” hissed Yebekh. “You’ll run away at the first sign of a fight. You should all be ashamed! No matter what, you should have let your candidates try and defeat the other girls!”

“You forget this competition is more about who is most suitable to become Queen than who can survive their rival’s jealousy,” retorted Lord Gebri. “I am not willing to risk my only child’s life any longer for the mere sake of my pride. My child is the only pride I need, and I will happily serve a queen who can do great things for my tribe and all of our children.”

“Our own daughters or nieces have chosen their Queen already,” nodded the Yonchaa Tribe representative. “The next generation knows the way, and the Princess has shown a lot of grace and kindness already. Yes, she is a foreigner. But she still has the proper lineage as a princess and inherited power and knowledge from the current ruler. Nothing disqualifies her, and her actions have only given us more proof that she is a great candidate, at the very least. Admitting defeat is no shame when the winner’s victory makes it valuable.”

“You fools!”

Despite the Yekara Clan Leader’s furious shouting, most other people in the cave seemed to be agreeing with the four family representatives’ words. As Cessilia looked around, Axelane of the Nahaf Family seemed to be chatting with her Family Leader, a bit worried. The Pangoja, however, looked like they had taken a big bite out of a sour fruit. They seemed to disagree with both sides. They most likely hated the Yekara Clan too much to agree with them but also didn’t believe in Cessilia. They had never hidden their intentions but she believed their clan wouldn’t be as scheming as the Yekara, at least.

Still, Lord Yebekh wouldn’t calm down. He slammed his hand on the armchair, shouting back at each argument the other leaders gave him. However, neither party wanted to change their minds, and this debate was going absolutely nowhere. Cessilia sighed. If this was just the beginning of the banquet, it would surely last a while...

“Enough!” finally roared Ashen. “Lord Yebekh, whether you agree to it or not, this is the other Lords’ decision, and you have no right to interfere with it. Their candidates are all willingly giving up. The remaining ones are free to stay or drop out of the competition as well, but I won’t hear any more protests today. Sit back down and shut the hell up or I’ll assume your candidates are forfeiting this one.”

Lord Yebekh slowly sat down, still glaring at his King with a furious expression, his fists clenched. Every single inch of his body expressed his silent and barely contained anger in some way. His daughter and niece were calmer, but they had similar furious glares at the King. Cessilia couldn’t help but wonder why those two were so bent on becoming Ashen’s Queen. They didn’t seem to have much affection for him, yet they were participating in this competition as if there was no way they could lose.

“...The candidate of the Nahaf Family should perform first,” finally said Ashen after a heavy silence.

Axelane jumped up from her seat as if she had just remembered why she was there. She awkwardly went down to the center of the little arena, but as soon as her performance started, it felt much too weak for most people to care. In fact, her fan dance may have been beautiful, but she was obviously not focused, and even made a couple of mistakes, dropping one of her fans twice, and sending scared glances left and right. Cessilia couldn’t help but wonder if she had been threatened in some way? This was the first time she had seen this prideful, young woman so shaken up...

When Cessilia glanced up at the other side of the arena, a man was whispering in Lord Yebekh’s ear, making him nod slightly with a frown. Whatever was up, he seemed fine with it. His candidates were looking down at their rival’s performance with bored expressions, like most of the public, but Ashra kept glancing at her Clan Leader. She also seemed interested in whatever he was being told.

Cessilia kept looking around. This banquet was definitely much more tense than the previous one. In fact, many eyes kept coming to her. Some were simply observing, while others sent her regular glares as if they

needed to remind her not everyone was on her side. She didn't care much for those, though. It was always the same people, and she had the same contempt for them. She realized that only half of the ten candidates remained. It was now down to the two Yekara girls, Axelane of the Nahaf Family, Istis of the Pangoja Clan, and herself. Even Nana seemed a lot brighter since her Tribe Leader had announced she wasn't participating anymore, although Cessilia wondered if she had known beforehand or not.

Axelane's poor performance came to an end with a dramatic last note of music, and those who did remember to clap did it without much conviction, aside from the people of her family. Cessilia sighed, but Ashen gently caressed the back of her hand with his thumb.

"...Are you alright?" he whispered.

She nodded, and he brought her hand to his lips, kissing it in public without an ounce of shame. Cessilia blushed, but she also looked around, a bit shocked that he dared to do such a thing. The remaining candidates saw this with expressions like they were witnessing a slaughter scene, shocked and disgusted. In fact, everyone seemed surprised to see the usually aloof King act so gently toward a woman, making a hint of pride surge in Cessi's heart.

"The Princess is not our Queen yet," hissed Yebekh, not staring at her but glaring at Ashen instead. "Despite what she might have gotten into her head, she still needs to demonstrate her skills and show us a performance like all the other candidates!"

Cessilia glared back, although his attempt to destabilize her fell flat. After his shameless claims about her virginity, there was no low blow she wouldn't expect from this man. In fact, she caressed Ashen's hand a bit before letting go and standing up, fierce and not afraid to fight back.

However, before she did, they all very distinctly heard a perfectly timed clearing of a throat. All of the people present turned their heads to see the old Counselor Yassim, who had just made his way down the stairs. He smiled, as if half of the stares weren't actually glares.

“Ah... I’m glad I made it in time,” he said as if he was simply attending any meeting. “I didn’t want to miss this banquet after the Princess’ amazing performance.”

Cessilia frowned, a bit lost, and so did her cousin.

“Cessi hasn’t done anything yet, old man,” said Tessandra, “but she was just about to.”

“Oh, really?” Yassim chuckled. “I believe her saving hundreds of our people at the Outer Wall was plenty enough.”

He walked to the arena slowly, helped by a cane. The stairs must have been hard on him, as he was obviously walking with pain, his back bent forward.

“I saw the Princess establish a feeding chain for our people!” he exclaimed happily before anyone could stop him. “She worked with two families to feed the needy. She solicited the Sehsan Tribe to make tents, and they even provided clothes. The usually so secretive Hashat Family even healed many of our people for free! Four of the most prideful families worked together by the impulse of that woman and a natural disaster was almost completely avoided. Isn’t that quite a performance in itself?”

“That was not part of the competition!”

“Wasn’t it?” Yassim replied, not afraid at all. “I believe we placed all ten candidates inside the castle to see what they’d do, what they were capable of. I would be curious to hear what your candidates have done since they came to this castle, Lord Yebekh?”

Yassim was good with his words, and he had just delivered a massive blow to Lord Yebekh. She should have been grateful, but Cessilia was worried for the elder instead. The Yekara Leader now looked just about ready to commit a murder...

“That’s k-kind of you t-to say, Lord Yassim,” she said, “b-but I still will d-deliver a performance, since the C-Clan Leaders want t-to see it.”

Her calm and composed tone managed to spare the old Counselor some attention as most eyes turned back to her. She gave a faint smile to Ashen and slowly went down the stairs. Perhaps because she had a long day, and so much had happened, Cessilia felt strangely calm and confident. Even if the Yekara and Pangoja never accepted her, half of the families trusting her was already more than she had hoped for, and more than enough.

She reached the center of the arena and turned her back on Ashen and her friends to face the other leaders, especially Lord Yebekh, whom she wanted to show she was not afraid of. Instead, she took a couple of seconds to stare at that man, delivering so much pride and determination in her green eyes, as if she had already been crowned Queen. Then, Cessilia slowly got down on her knees. It was strange to see that beautiful young woman sit at the lowest level of the arena, while still dominating them all somehow. She had no jewelry and a simple dress compared to her rivals. However, she was shining brighter than all of them.

“You’d better not use your dragon again,” suddenly hissed Ashra. “A queen ought to be graceful and feminine to be the mother of this Kingdom!”

“Shut up, you useless doll!” shouted Tessandra.

Cessilia paid her no attention. Instead, she smiled, and to everyone’s surprise, opened her mouth to sing.

Her voice was surprisingly clear and soft, yet powerful. They had all heard her stutter constantly, so this perfect, flawless tune left the audience speechless in a second. Not only that, but the melody sounded like the most beautiful, delicate thing they’d ever heard. It was like the sound of morning itself, right before sunrise, when everything was gentle, peaceful, and yet never completely quiet. Her voice sounded like it belonged to a gorgeous, ancient, and mythical creature. It was light, yet deep, like a perfectly mastered instrument. The softness of the wind, and the strength of a powerful beast. This melody, a myriad of sounds, bound everyone to their seats and forced them into a religious silence. Cessilia’s voice was offering them all a unique, out-of-body experience. No matter how much

they hated her, there was no way to resist the appeal of this unique call. It was beautiful, almost too beautiful to bear for normal ears.

However, she wouldn't be done with just singing.

Suddenly, her green eyes turned to the Yekara Clan Leader, and a scary, bright flame lit up in them. This part was aimed at him, only him. As if he had walked too deep into a cave and been lured to a monster's lair, the man suddenly found himself vulnerable. While everyone else was still having a pleasurable listening experience, a chill ran down the man's spine, grabbing him from behind, and fear began to creep in. He couldn't move. He could almost feel a dragon's silhouette coming from behind him, its shadow growing as the inflections of the Princess' voice subtly changed. In fact, there was no dragon, but Cessilia's voice was getting deeper, and everyone else noticed. The softness and gentleness were slowly consumed by something dark, something frightening that was getting closer. Her song turned from a pleasant melody to a war anthem. It was still pinning them to their seats, as if something ancestral had come back to haunt this cave, a monster brought back to life. Her voice vibrated, resonated against the wall as if she had made the whole cave an instrument, a stage, and a trap. A pearl of sweat dripped down Yebekh's neck, and an irrational feeling of his life being threatened slowly rose. Something felt wrong about that woman's voice. Nothing about her had changed, but she was there, and her voice had turned into a weapon he was powerless against.

“Princess.”

Just one word interrupted the strange spell they had all fallen under.

All eyes turned to one end of the cave to spot Jisel. She was wearing a dark dress and standing with her usual cunning smile against one of the pillars. Her confidence felt completely out of place as everyone slowly came back to reality, far from the scary place Cessilia had tried to take them all just a second ago.

Tessandra and Cessilia alike glared at that woman, but she simply tilted her head, twirling one of her red curls around her fingers as if she'd expected this much.

“Oh, did I interrupt too soon? Were you ready to kill already?”

Her finger pointed somewhere above their heads, and everyone but Cessilia looked up.

Right above their heads, some of the stalactites were still slowly moving, their structures shaken up by the powerful echo of Cessilia's voice. She had somehow managed to weaken them all without one falling. The one right above the Yekara Lord seemed the closest to collapsing, a bit of stone dust even falling down on his face, making him realize that the danger had been real until a second ago.

“You... you witch!” he shouted. “You almost killed me!”

“I wouldn't shout if I were you,” warned Tessandra, a cunning smile on her lips. “They can still fall. It would only take one small blow...”

Her words might not have been as scary if she hadn't been playing with a little stone between her fingers while saying so.

Jisel chuckled and walked up to the arena, arms crossed on her chest. She sat in an empty spot, not close to anyone, but specifically opposite the King. Her eyes very briefly went to Ashen, before she looked away with a complex expression. Cessilia had a bad feeling, even worse than all the other times she saw this woman...

“You vixen!” shouted Safia. “You almost killed us!”

“Like how you almost killed Lady Vena?” suddenly scoffed Axelane. “Accidents tend to surround your family a bit too often. What's one more?”

Safia turned her angry eyes to her rival, but despite flinching, Axelane didn't shy away from it. It seemed she had decided not to be intimidated by them.

“Then, maybe we shouldn't make it an accident.”

Ashra suddenly stood up, impressive in her blood-red dress, glaring at Cessilia. Only then did they realize she had been carrying an extraordinary sword, large and with a unique but obviously sharp blade. She stepped down into the arena, pulling it out and pointing it at Cessilia.

“Come and fight me if you will, Princess. This shall be my performance, and my clan’s retaliation for you trying to murder us! The Yekara Clan will not be intimidated by you! You are a War God’s daughter, they say? I shall see if you’re not a sham!”

Cessilia slowly stood back up.

“No!” shouted Tessandra, jumping on her feet. “I will fight you, Yekara girl! My cousin already gave her performance, you have no need to fight her specifically!”

“No, I want to fight her. She’s always hiding behind her loud and brawly cousin, isn’t she? Yet, she is the War God’s daughter, not you. This Princess is only good for her money, and I shall prove it!”

“I said no,” hissed Tessandra. “You dumb bitch, if you raise your sword against Cessilia—”

“Tessa, it’s alright,” said Cessilia.

Her composure contrasted with her cousin’s visible nervousness. Tessandra was restless, her eyes going back and forth between Cessilia and her opponent, but the Princess was calm and resolute. Everyone in the arena was now excited to see what this was about. Was the Princess overestimating herself this time? Or underestimating her opponent? Most didn’t ignore that Ashra was a praised Yekara daughter and one of the very best warrior women in the Kingdom. Perhaps even the very best, but she seldom fought in public. A fight between her and Tessandra of the Dragon Empire would have been impressive for sure, but now, all the attention was on the Princess.

They saw Cessilia close her eyes for a second and take a deep breath. She did seem a bit nervous. With a slight hesitation, Tessandra threw her sword, and Cessilia caught it, effortlessly moving the weapon around.

“...Be careful, Cessi,” she muttered.

Cessilia nodded and took a step back, her eyes riveted on her opponent. The tension in the room was palpable.

Tessandra slowly sat back, her hands joined and her upper body leaning toward the arena, nervous. Naptunie felt nervous as well, and scooted a bit closer to her.

“...Lady Cessilia will be alright, won't she? Maybe she still learned a thing or two... She should know how to put up a bit of a fight, right...?”

Tessandra turned to her with large eyes, and finally, let out a long sigh, shaking her head. She directed her dark eyes to the arena again.

“Cessi isn't the one I'm worried about, Naptunie. Really not. I'm more worried about what she's capable of doing to that dumb bitch...”Nana's jaw dropped a bit, and she slowly moved her gaze back to the arena. Looking at the slender, tall, and graceful figure of Lady Cessilia, she had a hard time imagining how she could be such a fighter that Tessandra would be worried for her opponent. She had only ever seen the gentle and caring Cessilia, who sometimes did get quite fierce and harsh with her words, but she couldn't remember seeing her actually wield a weapon. Every time, Tessandra had been the quickest to draw hers. Unlike her gentle-natured cousin, Tessa had always seemed to be the hot-blooded one, and not shy with her weapon, so much so that Naptunie hadn't even thought Cessilia could also be a fighter...

“So she's... actually really good?” muttered Nana.

“More than that,” scoffed Tessandra. “She's only ever lost to her older brothers. Her dad's trained her himself since she was young. Cessilia never liked to fight, but she's really, really good regardless. After what happened to her, she picked up her training again and got even better. I know I wouldn't be able to win against her.”

Cessilia was an even better fighter than her cousin? Naptunie was speechless again. She knew Cessilia was the War God's daughter, but that didn't mean she had chosen to follow his steps and learn how to fight!

From what she had seen, the Princess was already very proficient in many domains, mostly medicine, but she also knew things like trade and politics, and even how to understand people's needs. Naptunie had thought Tessandra was mostly the other half of Cessilia, adept in what the Princess wasn't, but now, it seemed like she had underestimated her once more.

Even now, Cessilia's figure seemed pretty harmless. She seemed to be barely holding the sword with the ends of her fingers, and not in a position to start fighting at all. However, she was standing very straight, and her green eyes were following her opponent. Naptunie looked around. Everyone around the arena was holding their breath, all eyes on the two young women. The Yekara Clan members were grinning, feeling confident. As expected, they all thought Cessilia's strength would mainly rely on her dragon blood. Now that she knew they were wrong, Naptunie felt a bit more excited, goosebumps appearing on her forearms. After she had witnessed Tessandra's fighting skills, she was all the more curious to see how her cousin could compare. If she had been trained by the War God himself, the Yekara candidate was about to learn quite a painful lesson about underestimating opponents...

"Grand speeches and gold coins won't save you this time, Princess," smiled Ashra. "The Yekara Clan doesn't use mighty titles calling ourselves gods to show off. We only rely on our strength to best our opponents. Our clan takes pride in centuries of hard training, ancient fighting techniques, and unique weapons crafted by the very best blacksmiths!"

Just as she said this, she took off the skirt of her dress, revealing pants with two strange blades attached to her hips. The blades had been cut in unique shapes that added a hook before the tip and were clearly sharpened. Naptunie felt a chill just from looking at them. Compared to Cessilia's weapon, Ashra's were made to injure the opponent multiple times. Tessandra suddenly clicked her tongue next to her.

“That sadistic bitch... Those are torture swords,” she grunted. “Those swords aren’t made to kill in one go, she wants to make a show out of this.”

“Is it very bad?”

“It’s strange, considering she knows about our skin. She most likely wants to show off. She wants to show she can injure us despite our dragon skin, and make the fight last. Cessi won’t have it, though...”

Indeed, Cessilia didn’t seem to care at all about Ashra’s speech. She hadn’t moved since before. Naptunie realized her sword seemed completely still as well, and almost like it was part of Cessilia’s body. Ashra’s sword had a handle with a long, red ribbon, and symbols carved into the blade, while the Princess’ sword had a simple leather handle, without any other kind of flourishes. Strangely, it seemed much more noble.

“...You should use a d-different sword,” Cessilia said. “That one isn’t suited for c-combat.”

“Oh, I know. But to a specific monster, one shall adapt their weapon, Princess. Those scars on your neck mean your dragon skin cannot completely save you from cuts, hence I want to see how long it takes for you to bleed...”

“It’s a fucking test,” muttered Tessandra. “This isn’t even about the fight. The Yekara Clan is experimenting with what it would take to kill us...”

Naptunie, who had been looking forward to this fight, was back to worrying again. The Yekara Clan was truly too much. They left nothing to fate; they were targeting the Princess on a long-term basis. They definitely had planned this fight, and to use Lady Ashra to test if she could kill the Princess... Now, it was all down to Cessilia. Despite Tessandra’s words, she couldn’t stop worrying about her. Cessilia seemed like such a kind-hearted person, it was hard to imagine she’d attack her opponent as fiercely and recklessly as they knew Ashra would.

“Your Majesty!” claimed Ashra with a wry smile. “I shall show you this Princess isn’t right for our Kingdom. Our Kingdom needs a real queen!”

Right after that, she jumped forward, aiming right at Cessilia. The next movement was barely believable.

Ashra launched herself at full speed toward her, yet Cessilia seemed to simply step to the side. It was so quick, yet each movement was absolutely perfect. Ashra seemed to be blown aside, although they had clearly seen Cessilia be the one to move. The Princess was swift and quick, and her opponent's blade found absolutely nothing when she crossed the air in front of her. Ashra herself seemed to be completely speechless for a moment, blinking twice as if she had just been hit by reality.

Cessilia left her no room to catch up, though. The Princess made a simple movement with her wrist, and suddenly, a long, red ribbon flew into the air. Her sword wasn't even stained, but it was clearly blood that splattered the ground. The movement had been so perfect, swift, and silent, everyone in the audience looked for the injury with confusion. Even Ashra herself looked down to find her flank crossed with a long cut. She then screamed one second too late, holding the bleeding injury with a panicked expression.

"There you go," muttered Tessandra. "Cessi is gonna give her a taste of her own medicine..."

"She won't look for a quick victory?" asked Naptunie.

"No. Not now that she's seen and heard what Ashra had planned for her. Cessilia might be kind, but she is no fool. She especially has no mercy for sadists with a thing for torture... We are not science subjects. Ashra should have faced a dragon instead. She would have gotten a quicker death..."

Down in the arena, the Yekara candidate seemed to be slowly catching up with what had just happened. She was still holding her bleeding flank, glaring at Cessilia with all her might. All of her earlier boastings were gone. Even if she had just been bested, the young woman was a good enough fighter to realize this was no mere luck from Cessilia. She had just realized how much she had underestimated her opponent. Quickly, she adjusted her position, holding her sword with both hands and getting ready, clenching her teeth.

“You... cursed freak,” she grunted.

“I’m j-just getting started,” said Cessilia.

Naptunie felt a chill. This Cessilia was so different from everything she had seen before. She was cold, calculative, and focused on her opponent. No, those were the eyes of a predator focused on its prey. The Princess was now really looking like she was standing with all her might, towering over her opponent with the fierceness of a warrior. The fight was only just beginning, it seemed. Ashra too had adjusted her position to leave no openings. She had made a mistake once and didn’t want to risk it again. Her entire clan was watching like one body leaned forward with serious expressions on.

Ashra moved first again. This time, her movements were much faster, and her sword appeared above her head, ready to cut down her opponent, but before she could, Cessilia’s sword blocked her halfway. Ashra had both hands on her handle, while Cessilia used only one to keep her from slicing her head in two, which spoke volumes about the strength difference. The two women glared furiously at each other, and their blades loudly clashed again. Ashra was trying to break Cessi’s defense, but the Princess blocked her each time. Each movement was so fast, it was like they could read each other’s minds. The audience didn’t even dare to blink, as each movement was happening so quickly. Their blades would be pushing against one another for several seconds, trembling from the pressure on both sides and would suddenly clash again loudly without warning. The violence of the fight was impressive, yet it had some strange beauty to it. The two women were wearing incredibly elegant outfits that contrasted with the almost bestial way they went at each other. It would have seemed like choreography if they weren’t so clearly bent on hurting their opponent. Pearls of sweat had appeared on Ashra’s forehead, and Cessilia’s hairdo had come undone. Each time she moved and spun, her curls went flying around her like a furious flame. The contrast of the red and blue dresses was hypnotizing, but everything was happening way too fast.

Ashra hadn't lied about her own fighting skills; anyone who had once wielded a weapon could tell this much. Her movements were precise, full of strength, and clearly determined to hurt her opponent. Facing her, Cessilia was leaving no room for mistakes; she seemed to be effortlessly deterring each attempt of Ashra's blade to come near. Her dance was perfect and beautiful, but something about this Cessilia was scary. Naptunie felt like she was watching a different person. A cold-blooded daughter of the War God's Favorite. When Ashra's blood flew in the air again, a surprised gasp took the whole audience. Once again, Cessilia had gone for a light but painful injury, slicing her opponent's hip. Ashra's anger increased with her pain, and she began attacking again, but her injury was hindering her. Cessilia spun beautifully and found herself behind her right after. Her sword drew a perfect line in Ashra's back, and a scream echoed in the arena.

"Cessi..." grunted Tessandra, frustrated.

Naptunie, who had been so focused on the fight, just now noticed how angsty Tessandra looked. The young woman was leaning forward, frowning and studying her cousin's expression more than the fight itself.

"...Is everything alright?" muttered Naptunie.

"I hope so," said Tessandra. "If Cessilia can remain calm..."

"She seems very calm, though? More than Lady Ashra, anyway..."

"Don't be fooled. Just because she looks calm doesn't mean she is. Cessilia still has the blood of a dragon... One of the reasons she hates fighting is because the bloodlust can get the better of her."

"You mean she could make mistakes if she gets too excited?"

"No." Tessa slowly shook her head. "It's much worse than that... She could get into a hunting mode. She would toy with her opponent for a long while, like a dragon would with its prey, and make her agony as slow and painful as possible."

"That's... terrible."

“Yes, and not what Cessilia wants at all. But she can’t help it. With what happened to her when she was younger, her own instincts are now mainly focusing on self-preservation. She is so focused on this fight, I bet she has forgotten pretty much everything else going on. Who she’s fighting, why, and who is around. For now, she still looks pretty much in control, but if Ashra doesn’t concede defeat soon, that idiot is heading toward a very slow and painful death.”

“We can’t allow that,” muttered Naptunie. “Lady Cessilia would hate such a thing! Even if she doesn’t like the Yekara Clan, she wouldn’t like someone to endure such terrible torture!”

“I know, Nana. That’s why I’m watching carefully, but I doubt we can simply convince Ashra and her stubborn clan to simply give up. That idiot is about as fierce as one can be. She’s good, but at this rate, she’s just going to push Cessilia past what she can actually handle...”

Naptunie looked down at the fight again, with a very different view this time. This no longer felt like a fight between equals, and perhaps it never had been. Now, it was like they were watching a tragedy unfold. Lady Cessilia’s green eyes did seem colder than ever, unlike what Naptunie had seen before. Meanwhile, Ashra was focused on the fight, and as Tessandra had said, completely unwilling to give in. Plus, her whole clan was behind her. The Yekara people weren’t losing one second of the fight, looking so focused yet so blind as to what their candidate was really going through. Some were shouting to support her or scold her for the smallest mistake. They wouldn’t allow Ashra to lose, let alone give up. Their candidate knew there was no option other than winning, and she was fighting for this. She had abandoned her plan to slowly injure Cessilia, and she was now fighting to kill her for real.

“...What can we do?” asked Nana. “Should we intervene before it’s too late?”

“I think it’s already too late,” muttered Tessandra. “It was too late the moment that stupid bitch decided to pick a fight with Cessi, Nana. Cessilia would have been able to hold back if Ashra hadn’t really aimed to hurt her. But this crazy bitch will not back down, and she isn’t even admitting

she's going to lose. If we stop the fight now, the Yekara will accuse us of trying to save Cessilia, regardless of how much she's been winning over her opponent."

"...They are ready to sacrifice their candidate," said Sabael. "Look at them, Nana. She's bleeding a ton and not a single one of them looks sorry for her or worried. It's their so-called clan pride speaking. The Yekara will never concede defeat against a foreigner."

"Then... what do we do? I know that Ashra isn't really on our side, but I don't want Lady Cessilia to suffer because of her clan either. Isn't there anything we can do?"

Tessandra glanced back at the King. Ashen's expression was indecipherable, but all this time, he hadn't said a word, his expression focused on Cessilia and Cessilia alone. Although she didn't know this man well and didn't like him much either, Tessa knew he was at least reliable in terms of strength. The White King wasn't of dragon blood, but if he had been trained by the War God himself, he ought to be worth something decent, at the very least. Tessandra thought this highly of him because he was the only man the legendary War God had trained himself that wasn't his own son.

"...She's got us," finally said Tessandra. "Cessilia wouldn't have gone through with it if she didn't know there wasn't a chance she could be stopped."

Naptunie confidently nodded. She was feeling even prouder knowing that Cessilia was relying on them, even if it wasn't her in particular. Now, she could refocus on the fight with a bit of a lighter heart and felt even more determined to witness Lady Cessilia's victory.

Despite what was at stake, this ought to be one of the most epic one-on-one fights they would ever witness. Even some of the Yekara people had forgotten to shout and support their candidate, focusing on the fight. The level of the two young women was among the very best, far above most men in this room that carried a sword. Cessilia's movements were like a river, smooth, unpredictable, and wild. Her whole body was enhancing

the beauty of each of her movements as if it was a dance centered around her weapon and its victim. She was unstoppable like the sea while Ashra moved like a furious flame trying to survive. The fight was both astonishingly beautiful, and yet so violent. More and more blood was starting to flow; Ashra now had cuts on all sides, her dress gradually turning into a darker red. No matter how much they loathed that woman and her family, even Tessandra had grown some respect for her as a fighter. However, the difference in strength was only growing more and more obvious with each wound. Cessilia's blue dress was still pristine, while the ground beneath their feet had turned red.

Suddenly, though, something different happened. While she had just inflicted another wound on her opponent, Cessilia grimaced without visible reason. Tessandra jumped on her feet, feeling something was wrong. Ashra was faster to react. While the Princess was destabilized for a second, her sword dashed forward. A new red line appeared. However, this one was on Cessilia's throat.

The Yekara Clan shouted like one man, but they missed the change in Cessilia's eyes. Her irises narrowed, suddenly looking almost reptilian.

"Shit!" muttered Tessandra.

It was too late. Cessilia's sword sliced the air with unprecedented violence, and this time, a large stream of blood flew upwards. Ashra stumbled backward, her shoulder mutilated by an extensive gash, blood pouring out of the wound. This time, she retreated, her survival instincts taking over everything else. Cessilia didn't give her that opportunity. The Princess rushed forward, her blade ready to strike again. This time, the silver blade was dripping with blood. Ashra's desperate attempt to flee was pointless; all of her previous injuries were slowing her down. Half of the audience was shocked by the sudden turn of the fight, yet mesmerized by the tragic scene. Some of the Yekara Clan were still shouting after their candidate for her not to flee, but Ashra had no way to win or escape this time. Cessilia was coming for her, covered in her blood, her eyes so calm and icy, it was scary. She looked like a goddess of war; come to earth to execute some ineluctable fate.

“Cessi!” Tessandra shouted, running down the stairs.

“If the other girl meddles, she will lose!” shouted the Yekara Clan leader, almost happy to see Tessandra rushing to his own niece’s help. “She is forfeiting!”

It was like half their clan was blind to Ashra’s inevitable end. All that mattered was seeing Cessilia lose, one way or another. The tragedy just had to turn in their favor, the sacrifice didn’t matter.

Cessilia finally reached her opponent and raised her sword, ready to strike again. Her gaze was full of something deep and painful. She looked fierce, but if one could see past that, there were actual tears in her eyes. She was trapped in the agony of a memory she couldn’t escape. Her throat was in pain, her heart was bleeding, and it was hard to breathe. Blood everywhere, and the agony of something, someone she had lost long ago. The sensation of that hot liquid running down her neck was just too familiar. She needed to get out of there. Eliminate those who wanted to kill her. She wouldn’t succumb a second time to weakness. She had to get out, at any cost. She had to kill them.

She lifted her sword, ready to strike. This time, she’d get out of there in time. She wouldn’t lose her voice or her dragon. She was stronger than those who hurt her. She could kill them. She’d killed before, she could do it again. She was strong, strong like a dragon. She could kill. This was nothing...

She swung her sword. A perfect move for a kill.

“Cessilia.”

The sound of two metals clashing woke her up. She raised her head to face Ashen standing before her. He was like a wall, his broad torso blocking all of her sight.

“Cessilia,” he called her again.

She blinked twice as if she had just woken up. Cessilia was out of breath, and two strands of her curls were falling on her face, but as she looked up at him, he could tell his Princess was back. She was just realizing where

she was, what had happened. There was a deafening silence in the cave. All they could hear was the faraway sounds of water, the erratic breathing of the fighters, and Ashra's grunts of pain.

"W-wha-... What did I d-do..."

Tears appeared in Cessi's eyes, and she let go of the blade, letting it fall loudly on the ground. She was in shock, remembering everything that had just happened as if she hadn't been in control until now. And in a way, she hadn't. She looked at her trembling hands. The sword's handle had left deep marks in her hands, her calluses showing along with dark scales. There was blood on all of her fingers, even under her nails. Her sobbing got more intense, her eyes looking at those hands and the sword at her feet in disgust.

"A-Ashen..." she cried, unable to utter anything else.

"It's alright."

He moved to hug Cessi, wrapping her in his arms as tightly as he could. She sobbed against his shoulder, her whole body shaking in distress. She wasn't shocked by how she had harmed and injured her opponent; Ashra had begun this fight and fought back just as hard. No, Cessilia was shocked by how much she had lost control of herself. She had lost all restraint, and gotten completely immersed in the fight, to the point where she wouldn't have thought twice about killing her opponent. It wasn't her, though; Cessilia's trauma caused her self-preservation instincts to take over when she could have won this fight easily without them. She thought she could control herself, but her memories had made her react in a much too extreme way.

Her shaking hand went to her throat. The cut wasn't even that deep, it had already stopped bleeding even without her scales being able to protect that part of her body. However, the injury was much more to her mind than physical. She'd lost control, completely. If it wasn't for Ashen, she would have killed that candidate, and she had no intention to in the beginning. She could hear Ashra breathing like an injured animal behind Ashen, making things worse. Cessilia's tears wouldn't stop, she was crying

silently, unable to calm down. She hated herself for what had just happened. She was scared of the monster she had felt herself disappearing into just seconds ago.

“I c-can’t,” she cried. “Ashen, I c-can’t. P-please... P-please, d-don’t let me d-do this again. I... I d-don’t want to have t-to fight ever again. I c-can’t. I’m s-so sorry... I c-can’t...”

There was an intense fear in her voice, but what she feared was inside. Cessilia was terrified by what had just happened, so much so that she never wanted to touch a sword ever again. She kept shaking her head, her trembling hands grabbing the ends of Ashen’s cloak to hold on to. He sighed and hugged her closer to his heart, comforting her gently. One of his hands was patting her back, the other holding her head against him, as if to give her a safe place inside his arms. No one could see her face, and the audience could barely see a glimpse of her thin silhouette, hidden in the King’s large embrace.

“It’s alright,” he whispered against her ear, such that only Cessi could hear. “Don’t worry. I’m here.”

“Your Majesty!” shouted the Yekara Clan Leader. “This fight isn’t over!”

“It is,” groaned Ashen.

“Your candidate lost,” added Tessa. “She should be glad she didn’t lose her life too.”

“She was about to overpower your so-called Princess when His Majesty intervened! I request this fight to resume immediately!”

“No,” Ashen retorted, glaring at the Yekara Leader.

In his arms, Cessilia hadn’t moved an inch, but she was clearly still in shock. She wouldn’t pick up that sword again, that was for certain. Right now, the situation was tense. With the fight halted, perhaps temporarily, all eyes had gone to the Yekara Leader or the King to see who would have the last word on this. Most people in the audience were confused by Cessilia suddenly dropping her sword and hiding in the King’s embrace.

The fight had been so intense just before, they couldn't understand why she'd given up on an almost certain victory.

Things also didn't make much sense for people who weren't part of the Yekara Clan. Did they really believe their candidate had a chance against the Princess? The difference in strength had been made astonishingly obvious in the past few minutes. They couldn't understand how Ashra had managed to slice open the Princess' throat just before, but so far, it felt like she should have been the gladdest of all that the fight was stopped. Even now, she was covered in blood, exhausted, and barely able to stand. It felt like her demise had been postponed. Her Clan Leader looked like a madman to all, to force his own blood to finish a fight they couldn't win. Even more shocking was that the Princess herself wasn't ready to finish the fight either. It was clearly not mercy that had stopped her, but something more complicated that made the King act like she needed protection. Either way, most people were completely confused, and looking forward to what was going to happen next. It looked like neither the King nor Lord Yebekh would give up, which made the situation look like a dead end.

"It's Cessilia's victory," said the King. "There's no more reason to fight."

"Except that she threw her weapon! Our candidate is still standing and able to fight! There's no victory yet, Your Majesty! She has to finish what she started, or that means she gives up!"

"You're the one who started this!" Tessandra shouted back, furious. "You should be begging mercy for your candidate, you crazy piece of shit!"

"Watch your mouth! I am Lord Yebekh of the Yekara Clan! And our candidate knows her duty! Unlike your Princess, we don't give up on a fight, no matter what! This fight needs a clear winner!"

"...I won't f-fight again," muttered Cessilia.

Ashen sighed. Truthfully, he didn't want her to have to. Although he was incredibly proud of her at the beginning of the fight, he also couldn't recognize the Cessilia of the past few minutes. Seeing her in such distress once she had come back to her senses had been quite shocking for him as

well. Whatever she was going through, he wouldn't push her to risk it again. It was one of the rare times she did really need him.

Tessandra was just as frustrated. She knew Cessilia had almost killed her opponent already, and she couldn't understand what was going on. What were the Yekara after? They couldn't possibly think their candidate had a real chance? Or was it that they were looking for a flaw in the Princess?

“Oh, my gods!”

All eyes went to Ashra's body which had just collapsed. The young woman that was still standing seconds before had now collapsed to the ground, her eyes wide open, blood leaking out of her half-open mouth. As Ashen had stepped back to see what had just happened, the body was right in Cessilia's line of sight.

The Princess gasped, covering her mouth with her hand, shocked. She didn't even need to check the body; Ashra was definitely dead. Her body had fallen back in a strange position, in her own blood. Her fall had been so strange and slow, everyone was still stunned.

“Murder!” shouted a voice.

Tessandra reacted first. She ran down the stairs to the body, furious. She knew Ashra wouldn't have died like this. There was no way. Her injuries weren't such that she could have simply died so easily. She had lost blood, and received multiple cuts, but none should have been life-threatening, or able to simply kill her in a second. Tessandra had watched the whole fight without losing a second of it; she was knowledgeable enough both in combat and medicine that she could tell when someone would die from their injuries or not. Ashra's sudden death made absolutely no sense.

She reached the body and turned her around, quickly trying to find a clue. Something had definitely happened that was not Cessilia's fault. Her cousin was standing there, shocked, probably too stunned to realize. This was probably the worst outcome for Cessilia, who had already been filled with immense guilt.

“Your Majesty!” shouted the Yekara Clan Leader. “The Princess killed our candidate! This is against the rules! Don’t allow her relative to touch our candidate!”

“Tessa, back off,” said Sabael.

He had run after her the second he had understood her objective. Tessandra might have had the heart to relieve her cousin’s guilt first, but the situation was still much more complex than that. He gently grabbed her arm to pull her away from the body, Nana arriving behind them, equally worried.

In the cave, the voices were getting louder. People who had already recovered from Ashra’s sudden death were now loudly arguing with the Yekara Clan’s people.

“The Princess broke the rule, she murdered her opponent! She has to be eliminated from the competition!”

“Are you insane? Your candidate just dropped dead, who said anything about the Princess killing her? She didn’t even touch her and she suddenly dropped dead like this! It makes no sense!”

“She’s clearly innocent!”

“You’re the one who wanted a death match to begin with! You forced this fight to get to a proper end! So your candidate’s dead, it’s the Princess’ victory!”

“There’s no need for disqualification! It was a fair fight!”

“Your stubbornness killed your candidate!”

The cave’s benches were turning into a complete chaos of shouting. There were three clear sides: those who believed Cessilia had won fairly, those who wanted to free her from Ashra’s death foremost, and the Yekara Clan who were sure this was worth her disqualification. Their plan was now clear: since Ashra hadn’t been able to beat the Princess in combat, they were entirely relying on her death to kick Cessilia out of the competition. Tessandra clenched her fists, furious. Now, if she touched the body again,

they'd say she tampered with it to make her cousin appear innocent. Sabael was right; they were stuck in a trap laid by the Yekara Clan.

“...I d-didn't kill her.”

Cessilia finally turned around to face the Yekara Clan, her eyes still red. All traces of her tears were gone, but she was clearly angry. She'd overcome the terrible experience she had just gone through to be mad at Ashra's death. She didn't want the candidate dead, and despite her anger, she was still clear-minded enough to know she was innocent. Although she hadn't been quite herself, she could remember her fight perfectly, she knew she hadn't wounded Ashra mortally. Moreover, Ashra had stood back there for several seconds while Ashen had hugged her; it made no sense for her to drop dead when she could probably have resumed the fight.

“She d-didn't die from the injuries of our b-battle,” she said.

“That's easy for you to claim,” retorted Lord Yebekh. “However, you have no proof! You're the only one who harmed our candidate for the last few minutes! Who else could have—”

“Earlier, something s-stabbed me,” declared Cessilia. “D-during our fight, I lost my f-focus for a second b-because something p-pricked my back.”

Without hesitation, she quickly undid the laces of the top of her dress and turned around, revealing her naked back. There was a little red spot in the middle of her back. Something had indeed pricked her, it was obviously an external wound. It wasn't bigger than a spider bite or a small dart. Tessandra frowned. That explained her cousin's sudden grimace in the middle of the fight, but there was no way to know where it had come from, aside from a general area near the arena's stairs. The hole was much too small and whatever had caused this was nowhere to be seen. However, if some projectile had done this, whoever had sent this was good enough to take aim at a moving target, from quite a distance too. They could have used a device to send this without being seen while everyone was focused on the fight itself. It was much too late to find them...

“This could be anything!” retorted Lord Yebekh. “You have no proof!”

“You don’t have any either,” said Tessa. “Nothing proves my cousin killed your candidate when she just collapsed by herself. It could be anything... even a very well-timed assassination.”

“The Princess killed our candidate! Didn’t we all see it? His Majesty tried to step in to stop her, but it was too late! The Yekara Clan requires reparation for the loss of our lady, and for the foreign candidate to be sent back! We don’t want a murderer for a queen!”

“You’re really trying to bark too loudly,” scoffed Tessandra. “Your candidate requested this fight, how could this even be called a murder? She was aiming for Cessilia’s life in the first place!”

“D-don’t you even feel s-sorry for her at all?” suddenly said Cessilia, stepping forward. “Your own kin just d-died and you’re only f-focusing on me b-being eliminated? C-can’t you even p-pretend her death p-pains you?”

Lord Yebekh turned red with anger. Now that she had said this, everyone else in the audience was staring at him like a real monster. It was clear he wasn’t very surprised by Ashra’s death, nor very sorry. He seemed more afflicted about Cessilia’s presence in the competition than his own niece’s passing. Even Safia had gone mute and a bit white behind him. If this had been the plan all along, she wasn’t involved in it.

“A true Yekara will remain proud even in death,” her Clan Leader retorted. “My niece did her very best to serve this clan, and she made us proud, but a fallen soldier has failed their duty. My niece is no different, neither is my daughter. Even in death, she has to serve her clan’s objectives. Now, our candidate is dead, and you have broken the rules of this competition. We want justice for her life!”

“I said no.”

Ashen stepped in front of Cessilia, glaring at the Yekara Clan Leader with all his might. “I’m still your King, Lord Yebekh, and the ultimate decision is mine. I declare the Princess is innocent, and your candidate’s death is not her doing.”

A grin appeared on his opponent's face.

"Then my King has betrayed his most loyal subject for a foreigner!" shouted Yebekh.

Those words sent a chill down everyone's back. The tension rose immediately, everyone getting ready for whatever was coming next. All the Yekara Clan members were acting a bit oddly. They were sitting straight, eyes on their leader and tense, as if waiting for some sort of signal or something. Tessandra and Sabael exchanged a quick glance, having noticed the same thing as well. He swiftly took the sword and handed it to Tessa without looking at her, and pulled his sister to come a bit closer to him. Naptunie's eyes were still riveted on the body, wondering just how Ashra had possibly died.

"Watch your words, Yebekh," hissed Ashen, getting tense as well.

"Oh, I am watching them, Your Majesty. In fact, I have been watching you for quite some time already! Your Majesty always relied on our clan, but ever since this foreign Princess came, you have been acting odd and ignoring your own subjects!"

"On the contrary. I've finally been listening to those I've ignored for too long."

Ashen seemed calm on the surface, but right behind him, Cessilia could feel his tense shoulders. She glanced to the side to notice all those who weren't from the Yekara Clan had moved a bit away from them. By now, everyone could tell something was afoot.

"...Well, it seems to us, the Yekara Clan, that His Majesty has lost sight of what it takes to lead this Kingdom."

"Watch what you're saying, Yebekh!" retorted the Pangoja Clan Leader, slowly standing up. "His Majesty might not always agree with us Lords, but he is still the rightful heir to the throne!"

"He might not be the only one."

A cold silence followed this. It didn't take more than a few seconds to understand, but a while longer to accept what they had just heard. However, it was clear Lord Yebekh was very proud of himself. He turned to the people of his clan, and, to everyone's surprise, a young man came forward. He had a portion of his face burnt, and one of his eyes was covered by a white, foggy veil. For a few seconds, everyone was confused. It was clear most of them had no idea who this man was. He seemed young, strong, and suddenly smiled at Ashen. A smile that meant nothing good.

"It's been a while... my bastard brother."

All were shocked.

A brother of the King had survived? Cessilia noticed Ashen's fist closing tightly. He was clenching it so tightly his knuckles were going white, and he was faintly shaking. He was furious, and not happy in the slightest. She guessed he was completely unaware one of his adopted-siblings had survived. The anger on his face meant this wasn't his blood brother, but one of those boys his father had adopted, one of his former rivals he had told her about. Cessi knew him well enough. Despite the circumstances, no matter what he said, Ashen would have been relieved to see his younger brother be brought back to life. This wasn't anything like that. Plus, that man didn't even remotely look like the White King... They only seemed to be of similar age. She couldn't remember if Ashen had mentioned what had happened to those three young men, but it was clear now one of them had survived the previous King's death.

"Surprised to see me?" asked the man. "You certainly don't seem happy... Your Majesty."

The irony in his voice was unpleasant, irksome. Moreover, because of his burn, half the muscles of his face weren't moving when he spoke, making him do strange grimaces whenever his lips moved, and his speech was strangely altered as well. Even a portion of his scalp was burnt, but his hair had been arranged to fall in dreadlocks to the side, and he had earrings on each lobe. They could all guess how handsome he had once been before that horrible burn. Now that he was standing, they could also see how tall

and muscular he was. Almost as much as Ashen, and the scars of more burns were visible on his skin that wasn't covered by his dark clothes. His body frame was the most similar thing to Ashen, showing how they had grown up with similar training...

Cessilia was shocked. Not by the man himself, but by how he had even dared to be here. The Yekara Clan Leader had deliberately brought one of Ashen's adopted brothers here, since the beginning? This meant they were planning to rebel from the start. She had guessed something was wrong, but now it was clear the situation was way worse than she had thought.

"What the fuck are you doing here..." grunted Ashen.

"I'm not too sure," said the burnt man, tilting his head. "I heard you're not doing a decent job at being King. ...I came to see if you needed someone to help you with that. Or replace you."

The two former siblings glared at each other. Despite his words, and his soft and slow voice, that man wasn't fooling anyone. He clearly hadn't come for Ashen's sake, but to fight him. The deep hatred in his dark eyes and the irony in his voice didn't leave any room for mistake.

Meanwhile, Lord Yebekh, very proud of himself, turned to the rest of the audience.

"See, good people of the Kingdom!" he shouted, opening his arms wide. "Our King lied! Another one of the rightful heirs to the throne survived! His Highness Prince Rohin is just as legitimate of an heir as Prince Ashen was, and without murdering his own father..."

"You damn bastard, Yebekh..." groaned Ashen. "You were the first one to rejoice in my father's death when it suited you!"

"You should be ashamed!" shouted the Dorosef Tribe Leader. "You're one fickle, backboneless, greedy piece of shit! It took years for King Ashen to bring peace to us, end our civil war, and now you're turning against the savior of our nation!"

"Prince Ashen was the only remaining blood heir to the Kingdom!" added Bastat's father. "At the very least, he had the support of our people! That

man is no more than a boy who was created, formatted by King Ashtoran to be no less of a tyrant than he was!”

“A tyrant is a man who won’t listen to his people!” retorted Yebekh. “Can’t you see? King Ashen is betraying his people for a foreigner! A woman threatening us with her family’s power as if we are powerless! If we let this happen, soon we will all be bowing to the Dragon Empire itself! Or is it that everyone forgot the vile humiliation they imposed on us? They couldn’t get us by strength, so they sent this woman to win us over and then get rid of us in our sleep! Soon, we will see dragons burning our Kingdom to ashes! I won’t have that! The Yekara Clan will only stand for a king that listens to his people and stands against the Empire’s dominion!”

“You mean a king that will listen to you!” said the Pangoja Clan Leader. “This is ridiculous, Yebekh! You’re going too far!”

“...Prince Rohin.”

All eyes turned to the calm voice who had spoken. Yassim was staring at the Prince with a pained expression, as if he was not shocked, but feeling betrayed by his appearance. Cessilia frowned. He didn’t look like someone who was surprised to see one of his former students alive... Could it be that he knew all along that this man had survived? She exchanged a look with Tessandra. Her sword back in her hand, her cousin was glaring at the assembly, looking for who would try and fight first. It was clear the competition was completely forgotten now, if it had even been relevant at all. The whole room was preparing for a fight. With what the Yekara Leader had insinuated, and with one of the King’s possible rivals brought back from the dead, there would be no going back.

“Ah, Yassim,” chuckled Rohin. “Good old Yassim. Still alive, are you? I’m surprised Ashen didn’t chop your head off already. After all, you were never able to pick a side, were you? Saving him, then me... always saving everyone, but alienating us at the same time. You’re too good for your own sake, old man.”

Ashen's furious glare immediately shifted to his old teacher. So Yassim was the reason his adopted-brother had survived... The elder didn't even seem to notice the King's furious eyes. Instead, he was staring at his former student as if his heart was broken. Cessilia felt a bit sorry for him. If he had saved Rohin, it was probably not for him to come back this way.

The young man chuckled and suddenly began to step down the stairs. Everyone who had one drew out their swords, Ashen being the first. He was clearly prepared to fight Rohin, but instead, his adopted-brother calmly walked up to Yassim. He completely ignored the fact that every person present in the cave was getting ready to fight for or against him. He simply went to his former teacher, with an apologetic expression.

"What is it? Not even happy to see me?"

"...I had suggested you leave, Rohin," muttered Yassim. "I asked you to leave and find a peaceful life for yourself..."

"Oh, I know, teacher," sighed Rohin, patting his shoulder, "...but, you see, after what Ashen did to me and my brothers, I'm afraid peace was never really an option. I sincerely thank you for saving my life, though. Please don't resent me too much. I really did like you."

His hands suddenly moved quickly, a snap was heard, and Yassim's body dropped at his feet.

Cessilia's scream died in her throat. It had happened too fast for anyone to react. The shock was too intense. After all his words from before, no one could have foreseen he'd kill his own teacher, not when his affection toward Yassim seemed so real and genuine. A faint silence followed the Counselor's death, and someone in the audience suddenly screamed, a bit late. There was truly no going back this time.

"You... bastard!" shouted Ashen.

"Oh, stop yelling and shouting every time something doesn't go your way, big brother," sighed Rohin, rolling his eyes. "It's not proper conduct for a king... Plus, you should have killed him yourself ages ago. Or is it that

Your Majesty's gone too soft for that? You were always the soft one, Ashen. Too kind and too weak to get things done."

His mocking tone was infuriating. Anger helped Cessilia recover from the shock, and her green eyes began glaring at that man instead. She couldn't believe he'd killed the man who had saved his life, to then mock Ashen about it. She had always had a hunch that Ashen hadn't killed Yassim out of respect for his former teacher, despite his resentment. Rohin just had no second thoughts about getting rid of him. He was staring down at the body and Ashen, his hands moving as if he wasn't sure what to do with them. There were strange movements in his shoulders too, like spasms. The more she looked at his expression, listened to his speech, and witnessed his strange mannerism, the more she was sure of it. That man was insane... and completely unfit to become King.

Cessilia suddenly turned her head to Lord Yebekh, directing her rage to the one she held most responsible.

"Is th-this what you want?" she asked aloud. "A k-king that k-kills without a second th-thought?"

Her voice was fueled with anger over Yassim's death, and resonating like thunder in the cave. She was shocked, sad, and mad, but she wouldn't let the ones responsible for this go unscathed. Despite everything, Cessilia held some hope that she could stop this madness. After all, there were still many people present who were just as shocked as they were. In any case, it was now clearly the Yekara Clan against everyone else.

"A king that listens to his people!" shouted Yebekh, drawing out his sword. "Instead of listening to a pathetic, stuttering foreigner!"

"If you wanted an obedient puppet, you could have at least chosen a sane man," scoffed Tessandra, who had come to the same conclusion as her cousin, "or is it you just wanted to stir trouble? No one will want that pathetic, insane piece of shit for a king! That guy's obviously mad!"

"Oh, I'm not mad," chuckled Rohin, "unless you mean furious, unrestrained, and dying to take back what should have been mine! My father had chosen me."

He stepped forward, in Ashen's direction this time, and the King directed his sword at him. However, Rohin kept walking in their direction very slowly, his expression torn between anger and calm.

"Did you know that, brother? It should have been me. I was the strongest, the smartest, and Father's favorite son."

"You weren't his son."

"Sure, maybe not by blood. But unlike you, Father actually chose me... Doesn't that make me more his son than you?"

He smirked, obviously very proud of himself. However, he didn't find the expected reaction. Instead, Ashen's eyes hadn't gone as cold as ice, but rather indifferent. Cessilia took her hand off his arm, leaving him to get ready for the fight. She knew this time, he was controlling his emotions. He had never fought for his legitimacy. On the contrary, Ashen almost hated being his father's son all along. He hated his biological father, and he didn't like his adopted siblings much more either. If Rohin had somehow hoped to make him mad with that statement, he was far off the mark.

"...What are you really doing here, Rohin?" asked Ashen.

"Isn't it obvious? I've come to reclaim the throne! I wish I could have stayed away, but... see, since you're doing such a poor job, I have no choice but to step in. It's for our Kingdom's sake, Ashen. The Yekara Clan believes I'd be a better king than you. So, are you going to yield?"

After those words, he suddenly took out a long sword, holding it with both hands. He was now just a few steps away from Ashen, and ready to fight. Grunting, Ashen prepared himself all the same, while Cessilia took a step back, and turned her gaze to the Yekara Clan.

"You're c-committing a g-grave mistake."

"You're the mistake, you swine of the Empire!" shouted Yebekh. "Everything would have been fine if the Dragon Empire had stayed out of this!"

“You traitor, Yebekh!” shouted the Sehsan Tribe Leader. “How could you ever bring one of King Ashtoran’s people in here?! After everything we went through to bring back peace, you’re just asking for another civil war!”

“Then another civil war, it will be!” he retorted. “We will fight for the integrity of our Kingdom! Blame your King for choosing a foreigner over one of his own people’s women! My daughter is the only one fit to become Queen!”

The cave was turning into chaos. Everyone present was slowly realizing the battle could start at any moment, and they were trapped in here already. A few from the tribes stood up, glancing toward the entrances and wondering whether they should make a run for it or not. However, it was already too late. Many of the people from the Yekara Clan had already run ahead, standing in the way and blocking those exits. Everywhere, people were drawing swords and weapons out, ready to fight. It was all going down much too fast. Some of the Royal Guards were even turning against their peers, positioning themselves like the Yekara people to block the exits.

“I knew it. Damn traitors...” hissed Sabael, his hand clenching on his sword.

Yebekh also got down to the arena, a smile on. Cessilia glared at this man. She really had underestimated him. This was never about the competition or his candidates. She wasn’t sure if he had planned his niece’s death or not, but she was now sure things would have turned this way, regardless of whether she won the battle or not; as long as Ashen didn’t repudiate her, this would have been the outcome anyway. This was all part of a plan, a trap, and they had walked right into it.

“King Ashen,” he claimed out loud, “this is your one chance to step down. We will let you flee to the Dragon Empire with the Princess, with your promise to never come back to the Kingdom again! You shall be considered a traitor, and banished from this land!”

“No.”

Ashen hadn't hesitated a single second, and Cessilia felt a bit proud of him. Some time ago, this might have been an appealing offer, to leave this position he didn't like much to someone else, and be able to be with Cessilia. However, this Ashen was determined. His eyes hadn't left his so-called brother, electing him as his opponent, and no one else.

Tessandra stood ahead of Cessilia, between her and Lord Yebekh.

"...Sure you don't want to fight, Cessi?" muttered Tessandra. "You don't have to be scared."

"...I'm n-not scared to fight, T-Tessa," muttered Cessi. "...I'm s-scared of what I'm c-capable of."

"Fair enough."

The first clash of blades came from Ashen and Rohin. In a moment she had missed, the two former siblings had jumped on each other, starting their duel and the battle in the cave. This threw everyone on the stairs into even more panic. The other families' people began to shout and try to run to the exits, only to be blocked by the Yekara people. Swords swung, and fights began all around the cave. Those who had weapons had decided very quickly to fight their way through, and even those without were trying to force their way to the exits, or attack the Royal Guards and Yekara people somehow. However, the number was overwhelming. With so many Royal Guards switching sides, the Yekara were almost as many as everyone else.

"You damn dragon bitches," hissed Yebekh. "I'll get rid of you two and send your heads back to the Empire, along with that wretched dragon of yours!"

"Just you try," retorted Tessandra.

She let him attack first, easily blocking his first attack. Yebekh was as good of a fighter as his niece was, despite his skinny appearance, but Tessandra didn't have to be shy with her skills, either. In fact, now that she knew that man was the enemy, she was fighting unrestrained, using her full strength and moving quickly in the arena.

Meanwhile, Cessilia retreated to grab Naptunie's hand and make sure the only non-fighter of the group was staying behind her. Sabael had also begun a fight with one of the Royal Guard traitors, fighting with two new dual swords. Cessilia's green eyes landed on Yassim's body, feeling a pinch in her heart. The old Counselor didn't deserve to die like this.

Suddenly, a movement on her left made her raise her arm to protect her face. Three long and thick needles stabbed her forearm, piercing through, the ends appearing in front of her face. Cessilia grimaced in pain. She had never seen those kinds of weapons before, but just looking up, she immediately found who had sent those. Jisel.

The King's former mistress was standing up on one of the lowest seats, more of those darts between her fingers and a smirk on her face. So she really was the one responsible for those, as Cessilia had suspected. Perhaps she had even used a smaller one to murder Ashra. She was staring at Cessilia with almost an amused expression, as if all the commotion around was none of her business.

"What are you going to do, now?" she said.

Cessilia had read her lips more than she had actually heard Jisel's voice because of the chaos around, but that was enough. She already hated that woman, but now, it was clear Jisel wasn't surprised by the situation at all, and perhaps she had even planned some of this.

Jisel smirked again, and sent a new wave of her darts. Cessilia raised her forearm, and felt one more pierce her arm, but the rest bounced back on the scales that had appeared from her previous injury. Cessilia took the four out and sent them toward Jisel. To her surprise, that woman didn't try to dodge them. Instead, she raised her arm, exactly like Cessilia had, and let them pierce through. Then, she lowered her arm, revealing her smirk behind it, and took those darts out.

"N-no..."

Red scales appeared on Jisel's arm. A shiver went down Cessilia's spine. She had always had a gut feeling about this. That Jisel was something else, someone more dangerous than she appeared to be. There really was no

mistake. This was the very same phenomenon that had scales appear on Tessa as Lord Yebekh managed to inflict some minor injuries on her. Jisel had dragon blood too. But how?

However, her enemy wasn't ready to let Cessilia ponder much longer. She prepared a new wave of darts and threw them. Cessilia protected herself immediately with her arms again, but this time, no pain came. She realized her mistake one second too late. She wasn't the target. Ashen was.

The darts had stabbed the King's exposed arm and nape, making him lose his focus and grunt in pain. This was the opportunity his enemy had been looking for.

In front of Cessilia's eyes, Rohin's sword violently impaled Ashen.