

Chapter 2

“Ask Nebora if you need anything else,” said Cassandra as Tessa took the bags from the servants’ hands.

“I will. ...Are you s-sure this is f-fine, Mom?” muttered Cessilia.

Her mother smiled gently and caressed her hair a bit more.

“I have a good feeling. Plus, you’re going with Tessa. What should I be worried about?”

Behind Cessilia, Tessa gave her aunt a confident nod and walked up to the Black Dragon, leaving the poor old Yassim in awe. It couldn’t be... Those girls were preparing to ride this beast? With him?!

Cessilia lovingly hugged her mother, then walked up to Krai, gently patting its snout, while her cousin was already climbing onto the dragon’s back. Once on top, the young woman put down the two satchels and held out her hand to help Cessilia climb up.

“Hurry up, old man!” she suddenly shouted at Yassim.

“M-my ladies, you’re not expecting me to... mount this deity creature!”

“The deity creature will be twenty times faster than a horse,” sighed Tessa, “and I promise he won’t eat you unless we ask him to!”

Yassim let his jaw down without thinking and turned to Lady Cassandra.

“...The d-dragons really eat humans?”

“Don’t worry,” chuckled the Princess. “This one’s been on a low-human diet for a few years now.”

Yassim needed a few seconds to process those words, wondering if she was simply toying with him. They wouldn't really have let a creature that could eat human beings near the Imperial Children, right?

Seeing the two young ladies ready to go and waiting for him, Yassim had no choice but to move, and he did so very, very carefully. The old man took a long detour around the mighty Black Dragon, even though Krai visibly had no interest in him. Instead, it raised its head high for Cessilia to scratch behind its horns, making high-pitched sounds of satisfaction. Yassim had to gather all the courage he had left in his body to accept Lady Tessa's help and set foot on the onyx scales. The height once on the dragon's back was impressive, but he didn't have time to look down. He was seated right behind Tessa, who quickly explained to him where to hang on.

"K-Krai, let's go," gently said Cessilia, patting its neck.

The dragon turned its head to Cassandra, who gave it a gentle pat on the hip before standing back.

Yassim was terrified, but he thought he was a blessed mortal to ever be given a chance to climb on a dragon's back and ride it! The large black wings spread far on the sides, showing off the dragon's unexpected width, and Krai flapped them twice before suddenly taking off. The climb was so sudden, it felt like the dragon had jumped up and forgot to fall back down. Yassim gasped loudly and held on, frozen by fear. He was riding a dragon!

"Close your mouth, old man," chuckled Tessa. "You won't like it if something flies in!"

"Sir Yassim," said Cessilia. "We can make s-stops if you need. D-dragon flying can be d-difficult for elders..."

"Our grandmother hates flying now," nodded her cousin. "She always says she'd rather walk all the way from the Diamond Palace to the Imperial Palace than mount a dragon again!"

“I am alright, my ladies,” lied Yassim with a grimace. “I am honored to be allowed to... fly this wonderful creature. D-do you mind if I ask a few questions, though? The old man I am still holds much curiosity for the wonders of the Dragon Empire, and now that I have seen this, I can’t help but wonder...”

“Ask away,” nodded Tessa. “Most people in this Empire don’t get to see the dragons often either, to be honest.”

“Only my little s-sister goes out with hers.”

Yassim nodded. He had understood the young Lady Kiera was one to run away, but it looked like the younger siblings were usually watched by this adult dragon.

“M-may I ask about this... magnificent dragon? I wonder about the size difference with... the younger ones from earlier...”

“K-Krai is Father’s d-dragon,” said Cessilia.

“The dragons you saw earlier were babies,” explained Tessa. “Dragons don’t grow like humans; they undergo major growth spurts when their master matures, around teenage years. We don’t know much about the reasons behind the size differences from one dragon to another, but the stronger their master, the bigger the dragon. You saw Auntie Shareen’s Golden Dragon earlier, right? That’s Glahad, our grandfather’s dragon. He’s getting smaller with the years because his owner passed...”

“When I was a b-baby, Glahad was much b-bigger than Krai... K-Krai is still growing t-too.”

Perhaps from hearing its name, the Black Dragon let out a long growl, and Cessilia gently patted its neck.

Yassim was stunned. So this red-eyed dragon was the War God’s Dragon itself? Moreover, if the Golden Dragon from earlier used to be bigger, he couldn’t even imagine that mountain of scales moving! It was worth ten armies! The old man took a few minutes to rethink everything he had ever learned about the Dragon Empire’s dragons, but he had just learned more

in a few minutes than in years of study. Somewhere in his heart, the old Yassim felt incredibly grateful to have lived to this day.

However, he couldn't just be stunned by the moment and forget his mission... As beautiful and impressive as the wonders of the Dragon Empire were, his heart was solidly chained to the Eastern Kingdom's fate. Those dragons were a magnificent gift, but a much more important creature was riding one at the moment. He ought to be sure of who he was tying his fate to and perhaps his King's too.

"Lady Tessa... M-may I ask how come you're also... speaking as one of the former Emperor's granddaughters...?"

"My father was one of his sons and Auntie Shareen's half-brother," Tessa explained, "but like our other uncles and aunties, my dad abandoned his title as an Imperial Prince after Auntie Shareen took the throne to simplify the succession for Cessi's big brother. I have no title; I'm merely a relative of the Imperial Family and a merchant's daughter, although Cessi and I are cousins from both our mothers' and fathers' sides."

The two girls smiled at each other, looking as close as sisters indeed. Yassim was impressed. All of his teaching about the Dragon Empire had shown centuries of bloody fighting between all the previous emperors' many concubines and children for the succession. For each new ruler, a long trail of blood had to be spilled for him to access the golden throne, his hands dirtied by many of his siblings' blood. It was no secret that most concubines weren't afraid to kill to protect their progeny if said progeny didn't kill their own siblings themselves once they were old enough. Even Empress Shareen's generation had been the theater of an impressive war between her father's six sons. Yassim thought he had come prepared, knowing that Empress Shareen had been crowned despite three out of her six brothers still being alive, but now, it turned out this was all a peaceful agreement between the remaining siblings? His scenario of the War God scaring his two younger siblings into obedience was completely wrong! As it turned out, both had willingly forfeited their lineage for their nephew to become the heir apparent? This was truly an amazing Empire!

“Isn’t... His Highness, your father, retaining any desire to return to the Imperial Palace?”

“My dad?” scoffed Tessa. “He’s better off away from it! He only goes once in a while to deliver our aunt her favorite alcohol from our family brewery my mother established, and that’s it!”

Yassim was speechless. A former Imperial Prince was now a family man and an alcohol merchant? How unbelievable!

“Our turn to ask questions!” exclaimed Tessa with a big smile, brushing her flying hair and little braids out of her face. “Tell us about your King that wants to marry Cessi. How is he? You said he’s young, isn’t he!”

Yassim’s expression fell before he could remember to control it, so he bowed as much as he could while riding a flying mount to hide his face.

“Yes, my lady. King Ashen the White is young, but an admirable, young king. Our Kingdom has suffered many difficult years...”

“Your Kingdom used to be a Republic, didn’t it?” scoffed Tessa. “We were taught about your civil wars too. You guys fell for one tyrant after another, and you called us barbaric because we are an empire.”

“T-Tessa...” muttered Cessilia, pulling her cousin’s sleeve.

“It’s true, my ladies,” sighed Yassim. “Our system was failing long before we sought war with the Dragon Empire; that is the truth. The gap between our poor citizens and the rich elites brought the Goddess of War upon our nation... Our once-wise leaders were no better than an assembly of greedy people back then, seeking to put the blame for failure on each other, with only a handful daring to take responsibility and find better solutions. And those who did were quickly blamed for any new failure to bring back the equilibrium and killed as an example until no one dared to speak anymore.”

“...Was there n-no leader to m-make a d-... decision?” asked Cessilia.

“There were leaders, my lady, but most were too worried about protecting themselves from our angry people to dare speak up and act! The issue with

our former Republic was that once a leader stood out, he didn't have enough power to carry his actions efficiently. Thus, all the good men who could have brought change found themselves powerless and were considered failures instead of given the support they needed!"

"But you still managed to decide to go to war with our Empire twenty years ago," said Tessa.

"Yes, my lady. A lot of those leaders were... blinded by the promise of treasures and better days. Many of our famished citizens enrolled in that war hoping to get money to send to their families."

Yassim sighed, and shook his head.

"Once we lost the war and the army returned, utterly defeated, anger rose once again, and our Republic fell into the hands of the Goddess of Chaos. Our infuriated citizens attacked the noble houses to steal what they could, good citizens became bandits overnight, and no power was strong enough to stop the chaos. The... Goddess of Chaos kept her power over our lands for ten years like this, whilst many tried to stop the madness."

"Ten years..." grumbled Tessa.

"That's right, my lady. For ten years, our nation slowly fell into chaos. The fights stopped at times, everyone trying to find what they could of a normal life, hoping a new leader would emerge soon to bring back the peace, but... for many, the anger was too strong. The nobles who tried to seize power were overthrown one after the other by citizens who couldn't stand to see their former masters wield the power again. Until, twelve years ago, a man who could finally lead us rose. He declared himself the new King, former General Ashtoran."

"Ashtoran...?"

"General Ashtoran was no noble like the previous men who had tried to conquer our land. He had once been one of the nobles' servants and had risen through hard work and devotion to his position. Hence, our citizens liked this man much better than the previous nobles, and when he took power, no one tried to stop him."

“To stop him?” repeated Tessa, frowning. “You make it sound like this General wasn’t such good news...”

Yassim shook his head slowly.

“...To this day, this old servant still believes the price for bringing back peace was too costly. The General gathered many of those who had once been his men and created a new army with his own colors.”

“You’re saying he stopped the chaos through more violence, then.”

“...Yes, my lady. The new King’s rule was cruel, ruthless, and terrified our citizens into obedience. However, this new regime worked to stop a lot of the bandits who were constantly harassing the defenseless, so slowly, our people abided by it, fearing our new King as much as those he protected them from.”

Yassim glanced toward the green-eyed Princess. She was obviously listening with a hint of sadness in her eyes, but in silence. Was it because of her speech impairment that this Princess was much quieter than her cousin? He could see in her eyes she was very captivated, though, as if she were listening to a fascinating story, breathing a bit more intensely... The old man resumed, his old heart still with the hope that this young woman could one day shift the fate of their Kingdom too.

“The... harsh policies of King Ashtoran brought him to more and more extreme ends. The image our new King had was extremely conflicted. Some saw him as a tyrant... others as a hero. Out of fear that civil wars and in-fighting would destroy our nation from within again, the new King let absolutely no mistake slip through. Some were grateful for how efficient his policies were at cleaning our streets, but others... tried to plead that the King was far too merciless. Any crime resulted in a death sentence, even the smallest thefts. As one of his servants myself, I witnessed the long, long lines of people being given their death sentence, every day. It didn’t matter the age, gender, or wealth of the ones who had been accused of being criminals. King Ashtoran’s men were judge, jury, and executioner, leaving no time for people to get back on their feet on

their own. Many people only had the choice to starve or be killed as a thief...”

“That’s depressing,” grumbled Tessa. “...Alright, we get the picture, but how did that change from the General to your present King? You said the new one rose to power only five years ago. Is he his son or something? We’re certainly not going if he’s another blood-thirsty tyrant.”

“King Ashen is the General’s son indeed,” Yassim slowly nodded, “but unlike what you think, our King didn’t succeed his father. A few years later in the General’s reign, more and more people, seeing he couldn’t be reasoned with and had no intention to bring back the democracy or republic system, tried to murder him. It was said... that one of his sons, Prince Ashen, was one of the victims of those murder attempts.”

The two young women exchanged a glance.

“Wait. You’re saying your King... died? Is this a joke?”

“No, my lady. Rumor has it that Prince Ashen died seven years ago. After his death, the King got even more ruthless... and with more people protesting against him, new civil wars began, even worse than the first time. Our nation was torn between the security provided by a tyrant leader and our desire for peace and freedom. However, everything stopped five years ago upon Prince Ashen’s return.”

“He returned? From... the dead?” said Tessa, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes, my lady. The Prince came back, out of nowhere, after two years. He was the General’s mistress’ son and, if I’m allowed to say such a thing, the only one of the General’s sons our people had sympathy for or didn’t care about at all. Yet, he returned from the dead, his hair white like the Goddess of Death, and killed the General, his own father.”

“He... did what?”

Yassim took a deep breath.

“That is the truth, my lady. After many fights had happened already, at dawn, a White King rose, on the castle’s walls, holding the tyrant’s head,

and threw it to the angry citizens' feet. That White King was the former Prince Ashen, as many recognized him easily. That morning, he spoke loudly and said he had been sent to the gods, but the gods had only taken him to their realm for the sake of the Eastern Kingdom's people. The gods themselves had trained him to become a worthy king for our Kingdom. As proof, the gods had sent him back with his hair completely white, a legendary armor made of a dragon's skin, and the strength of a god."

The cousins exchanged a glance, both visibly surprised and doubtful.

"...Well, congrats," scoffed Tessa. "It sounds like you guys traded a tyrant for a psycho."

Despite the young woman's harsh words, Yassim couldn't even answer anything to that. In a way, he knew his home nation had traded the worst possible outcome for another, not much brighter one. Better than anyone else perhaps, he knew how complicated and deep the situation was for the King of the East. The white-haired young man had returned, grown and much more mature than the child everyone had remembered, with a gigantic, dark hole in his heart, and that rage that wouldn't leave his eyes. The truth was, perhaps the new King would end up being worse than his father. In a desperate desire for another leader and a different outcome, perhaps they had sealed their fate...

Yet, when Yassim looked ahead at the young green-eyed woman, a light of hope appeared in his old heart. He had come here on a crazy bet, a silly idea. As old as he was, Yassim wasn't scared to die, if not in vain or painfully. However, this old man wouldn't be able to lie peacefully if he couldn't try, one last time, to do something for his country. It was too soon to tell the truth to the Princess, and he knew he'd pay the price later. But, if by an incredible chance, his assumption turned out to be right, this old servant would be truly grateful he hadn't made this journey in vain...

"What's your relationship to the King?" asked Tessa. "He only sent one man to the Dragon Empire to fetch him a wife, isn't that too few?"

Yassim bowed as much as he could, while trying not to fall off.

“His Highness charged this mission to this servant alone, my lady. While the previous King was still alive, I was tasked with the education of the young Prince, and I taught him all I could, to the best of my abilities. I watched over this young man for many years, and I believe I am one of his closest aides. Our King is young, and due to the chaotic past of our nation, he still has many, many enemies. I am sad to admit, the people our King can truly trust are too few.”

“A real nest of snakes, then... So, he sent you here almost on a secret mission, then?”

“No one else knows I was sent here,” admitted Yassim.

It was important to him not to lie to Their Highnesses, at least to avoid it as much as he could. He was already incredibly lucky that the Princess had agreed to this insane request, and he was mentally preparing for when the truth would be unveiled at any moment. He only hoped he'd get a chance to offer his apologies...

“Sounds like a lot of fun,” chuckled Tessa, playing around with one of her braids. “Oh well, it will be entertaining at least...”

It was impressive how those young ladies didn't seem to fear anything, not even going to a different land to face a king who had allegedly killed his own father.

Yassim felt their countries, despite many similarities, were still two different worlds. He couldn't help but feel saddened as the gigantic Black Dragon flew effortlessly above the lands and villages, the citizens of the Dragon Empire appearing like tiny dots far below. Those forests were green, their lands full of growing crops, the houses full of happy families living their everyday lives under a stable Empire. The Eastern Kingdom knew little about their neighbor because they had too much to figure out on their own. How much would both countries have thrived if there had been any room to learn from the other! As a wise man and scholar, Yassim could only feel disheartened by all that knowledge that wasn't shared, how so much hatred and doubt had been fueled instead of trust... She had no

idea yet, but this young Princess might be the one to bring an incredible change to both nations' futures.

As the girls had mentioned, riding a dragon was bound to bring them to their destination faster than any horse. After a while, the landscapes below and ahead slightly changed, mountains perking up right in front of them. The villages and human habitations were getting rarer as well, and the temperature was getting colder around them. They had been flying for a while, and Yassim was glad he had brought a cape, but he was not ready for the north of the Empire. Unlike their Kingdom, the Dragon Empire was more lengthy than wide, hence, its northern regions were much colder than the Capital, and most of their lands.

From afar, he spotted the dark building. It wasn't just a black castle; the fortress was shining incredibly as the sun was setting in the sky. Was it getting late already? Yassim hadn't realized. He had arrived in the Capital that morning, waited a long time to see the Empress, and now, had spent even longer on a dragon's back. Neither the dragon carrying them nor the young ladies seemed in need of a break. While Krai was only flapping its wings lazily from time to time, the girls ate meat-filled buns from their satchels, giving Yassim one, and enjoyed the ride quietly, obviously used to this. The wind was getting stronger, colder, and louder, hence they couldn't speak much for now.

When the Black Dragon started descending, the old man felt most grateful to finally catch a break. Although the ride was rather stable, it was very uncomfortable to sit on a scaled and not flat seat...

What he hadn't expected, though, was the actual size of that castle. He had been impressed by the incredible size of the Imperial Palace in the Capital, but he hadn't expected there would be any other big structures in the Empire. Yet, this castle was getting bigger and bigger, and they weren't close yet! He had been misled by the lack of other buildings or villages around to compare the size, but he really understood how he'd been fooled when he realized that what he had mistaken for a small statue was actually another full-sized dragon!

The beast was growling loudly as they approached, and Yassim was impressed by the mighty creature. This one wasn't as big as the War God's Dragon, but it was certainly the closest he had seen so far. Unlike the not-so-small ones from earlier, this yellowish-brown one was an adult size, as large and long as five horses, and just a bit smaller than Krai. Moreover, it wouldn't stop moving its scaly body around, growling loudly as they landed.

"Hi, Dran!" exclaimed Tessa, jumping down as soon as Krai landed.

"It's my second b-brother's d-dragon..." explained Cessilia as she gently helped Yassim come down.

"Oh... So this is what Lady Tessa meant about the dragon's size earlier..."

Yassim was once again genuinely impressed, but also terrified. This dragon was an adult size, and very unruly, growling and pulling on the chain around its neck to try and get closer to the girls. Its claws had ravaged all the soil around it. Yassim was surprised to see one of the dragons chained. So they didn't leave those creatures completely free, after all?

Behind them, Krai loudly growled after Dran the Yellow Dragon, and both began exchanging deafening growls.

"Oh, he's probably being punished..." grimaced Tessa. "Don't get close to Dran, old man, he's a bit more dangerous, and he's stupid enough that he'd bite you without thinking. Dragon teenagehood."

Yassim nodded helplessly, but even without Tessa's warning, he would have never been brave enough to approach the reckless dragon of his own volition. This one was visibly younger than Krai, and much more agitated, growling and showing its fangs, its tail whipping the air and knocking against the wall behind it. If it hadn't been chained, what havoc such a creature could have caused! Yassim didn't even dare imagine. And this was only one of the many dragons they had!

Because he had been too captivated by the appearance of another one of those creatures, Yassim almost missed the man coming out of the castle's

gates. Not that he could be missed, though; he had never seen such an imposing man.

This couldn't be anyone else but the War God himself. He was moving like a deity among mortals, his impressive body exuding an immeasurable strength and aura. His dark eyes were pinning the old man right where he stood, as if they mirrored storm and chaos, ready to unleash hell. The man was wearing a thick, black cape on his shoulders, confounding his long, black hair. He had strong features, a straight jawline, and a presence that imposed respect right away. Not even the most brazen soldier would have dared step out of line. Yet, the young Princess smiled and ran fearlessly into this man's arms.

“Dad!”

The War God opened his arms right before his daughter reached him, and hugged her back, a slight smile appearing on his lips as the girl disappeared in his embrace.

“Cessi.”

One word, but a voice as deep as a volcano. Yassim felt a strange emotion surge in him as he realized that he was given the chance to meet this living legend, and the old man bowed right away, very emotional. After the Empress, the War God himself was standing before him! The old man was shaking a bit, but being intimidated was expected. What he had not foreseen, however, was how incredibly gentle and fatherly the War God was toward his daughter. He hugged Cessilia for several seconds and reluctantly stepped away from her to stare at her as if he hadn't seen his daughter in a while. He even caressed her hair and kept a hand on her back.

“Hi, Uncle!” said Tessa, waving at him.

“...Tessa.” He nodded, greeting his niece before looking at his daughter again. “What are you both doing here?”

Cessilia briefly glanced back at Yassim, and suddenly, the old man felt the pressure of the War God's stare on him, and bowed again, worried sick.

This man obviously loves his daughter. Would he be willing to let her go...?

“This is Yassim the Wise, Father. He came from the Eastern Kingdom...”

The War God didn't answer to that, adding to Yassim's anxiety. He had come to take this man's daughter to another country, he wouldn't even dare cry if he was about to get his head cut off!

“...Come inside.”

While neither of the girls seemed scared at all by the living god, poor Yassim's legs were ready to give in at any minute, and if it wasn't for Dran's sudden growl behind him, perhaps he wouldn't have dared to straighten back up and follow them inside!

“Father, why is D-Dran chained... chained...?” asked Cessi, holding her father's arm as they walked inside.

“He's being punished.”

“That idiot destroyed a mountain!” suddenly answered a feminine voice from inside.

“Auntie Nebbie!”

A beautiful woman appeared, with long, dark hair and pouty lips. She was wearing a floor-length, green dress and a coat, and from the way she carried a pile of clean clothes, she was probably a servant here, but to Yassim's surprise, both girls greeted her like a family member.

“What did that idiot do?” laughed Tessa.

“The pair of idiots decided it would be fun to play between the mountains, until they broke several rocks and provoked a landslide,” sighed the dark-haired woman. “Darsan is not to come back until he puts it all back up, and Dran is not allowed to help him...”

She sent a glare toward the yellow beast, who answered with a growl. Yassim was lost. It couldn't be that the War God had sent his son to put the mountain back with... his bare hands only? What kind of young man could do such a thing?! It would take months, even if it was possible!

Those people had to be living in a different world or holding some secret power he hadn't grasped...

"What are you girls doing here?" frowned the servant woman. "...Did Kiera run away again? She's not here."

"We know," chuckled Tessa. "She probably ran to Grandmother's or somewhere in the Capital with her friend."

"...I need... t-to t-talk t-to Father," muttered Cessilia.

Yassim took note that the young woman did seem nervous, and it reflected in her way of speech... The big, hopeful eyes she had on her father didn't match his kind expression while looking at her, which made the old man more nervous. Princess Cessilia expected her father to be reluctant to do this.

Noticing the exchange between those two, and her eyes gliding over the old man, Aunt Nebbie frowned, but Tessa walked ahead, grabbing some towels.

"Aunt Nebora, should we make some tea first? And I have a few things to ask you to help us with..."

Taking her cue, Nebora nodded, and the two women quietly left, both sending worried or curious glances toward the strange trio left behind.

Poor Yassim was due for another dose of anxiety. He, along with the Princess, to explain to her father that he was about to take her to his King, a ruthless, young man who had beheaded his own father and taken over the Kingdom by force? Even the bravest man in the Empire would have begged the gods for mercy already! However, before the old man could lose the few white hairs he had left, Cessilia and her father walked to a room, a little salon on the side. There was the biggest fireplace he had ever seen, with a large fire easily warming up the whole room, and several huge cushions on a large carpet. There was only one massive wooden seat, but neither Cessilia nor her father sat. The War God removed his cape and threw it on the seat, and added wood to the fire with a dark expression.

Cessilia was standing behind him, but after a while, she gently grabbed one of his hands with hers.

“Father... I want t-to go t-to the East... Eastern K-Kingdom,” she muttered.

“Why?”

His question had come right away, with something strong in his voice. It didn't sound like anger, just... determination. Yassim was surprised he hadn't even been asked anything yet, but for the War God, only his daughter seemed to be here. He turned to her, and it was truly moving to see such an imposing and strong man have such tender gestures toward the young woman.

“...I r... really want t-to go,” simply said Cessilia.

Although she had a tiny and hesitant voice, her green eyes were full of determination and unafraid to hold her father's dark gaze too.

“K-King Ashen asked t-to see me,” she resumed. “I... I want t-to go.”

“To see you?”

This time, the War God's words were directed at Yassim, and so was his terrifying glare. The old man bowed quickly, his throat tight, but he ought to at least stay something.

“P-Princess Cessilia is invited by... His Majesty, in hopes of... standing as his Queen.”

“...His Queen,” repeated the War God.

His voice was deep, and his emotions even harder to decipher. Yassim was silently praying to every god and goddess he knew, and hoping he'd be spared to see his plan succeed or fail. If only he could bring Princess Cessilia to His Majesty, then perhaps, there was hope... For now, though, the mountain standing before him was no other than the War God and a father who cherished his daughter deeply. Yassim was truly having a hard time understanding what those people were thinking, but he was already shocked that the War God hadn't yet kicked him out or killed him. Instead,

his eyes were still on Cessilia, perhaps conflicted. Was his daughter's hopeful gaze making him really consider this insane request?

"...What did your mother say?"

"M-Mother said I c-could d-decide and live my own ad-dventure," quickly answered Cessilia. "She a-... agreed. D-Dad, please..."

The War God let out a long sigh, and it felt as if a gush of hot wind was running through the room to echo his frustration. Yassim wasn't cold anymore; he was sweating profusely. However, the War God raised his hand to gently caress his daughter's cheek. Then, his fingers went down to her neck covered by her golden choker, and he frowned even more.

"...Don't do anything you don't want to," he suddenly said.

"I know, D-Dad."

"Don't let anyone touch you, insult you, or annoy you. If they do, punish them. Do not be scared, Cessi. Even if you kill him, it's fine. If you want to burn their whole country down, it's fine."

Yassim was on the verge of passing out from hearing this, but Cessilia simply chuckled.

"I und-derstand."

"...Take Krai with you."

"D-Dad, is it alright? It's your d-dragon..."

Her father didn't answer, but a loud growl resonated outside. Yassim couldn't believe what he was hearing. The Black Dragon was not just going to take them there, it was going to stay with the Princess all along? The War God's legendary dragon itself!

Yassim suddenly met the War God's eyes, and the dark gaze immediately changed into a life-threatening glare. The old man froze in utter fear instead of bowing again.

"...If anything happens to Cessi, you're all dead."

He had said that with incredible calm, yet his ice-cold voice left no doubt.

The Eastern Kingdom's fate now entirely relied on the well-being and future of that one young woman. Yassim bowed and heard himself thank the War God, but in his heart, he knew he had sealed his own country's future. Either his plan succeeded, or they would now be doomed for real...

"...Are you planning to destroy them already, Uncle?" chuckled a feminine voice.

Tessa was back, carrying a large tray with tea and dried fruits. She put it down on the table, but her confident attitude suddenly disappeared as she met her uncle's eyes. Yassim was still trying to grasp the dynamics of that family, but it was clear the young woman was also cautious in her uncle's presence. She nodded slightly.

"I'm going with Cessi," she said before he asked anything. "I won't let anything happen to her."

Cessilia stared at her cousin with a surprised expression, but Tessa was holding her uncle's stare without fail. The cousin's dark eyes were suddenly shining with determination, as if she was making a very serious promise... What was this about? Once again, Yassim felt like there was more meaning to her words than what he could witness. Was this related to the Princess' speech impairment? There was definitely something about her, and the way her family members reacted to her, treating her very preciously...

The War God didn't answer and, instead, turned back to Cessilia.

"Just the two of you?" he frowned.

"And K-Krai," smiled his daughter. "It will b-be fine."

The War God let out a long sigh, caressing her hair once more. He was visibly unwilling to part with his daughter, which was understandable. What man would send his daughter and niece abroad by themselves, to a country they knew almost nothing of? The fact that he was sending her with his dragon spoke volumes.

The truth was, Yassim was a bit curious as to why Cessilia didn't seem to have a dragon herself... or by her side. From what he had seen, dragons

could be away from their masters for prolonged periods of time, but it still seemed odd that she wouldn't be bringing hers, if she had one, with them to the Eastern Kingdom. Or was this as a precaution, perhaps? The old man didn't dare ask, for he feared they would have misunderstood it as him trying to invite a dragon owner, rather than a princess. Plus, the War God's Dragon would be coming along. How dare he ask for one more!

"...Stay here tonight," suddenly said the War God. "You can leave tomorrow morning."

Cessilia glanced Yassim's way, and he realized she was asking for his opinion. He immediately nodded.

"Thank you for your hospitality, Your Highness!"

The War God slightly squinted his eyes, with no intention to answer.

"Take all you need," he added.

"Oh, can I take some weapons from the armory, Uncle?" exclaimed Tessa, suddenly very excited.

He nodded, and the young woman squealed, running out of the room to wherever the armory was. Cessilia chuckled.

"I will ask Auntie Nebora for s-some food," she said, "and warmer c-clothes."

She turned to Yassim.

"It is c-colder there, isn't it?"

"Yes, my lady. But not as cold as these lands. Because our Kingdom is crossed by many rivers, the weather is more humid, and the temperatures do not change as drastically."

"Take as much as you need," said the War God. "Gold too."

Yassim couldn't help but feel a bit hopeful as he heard this.

The Dragon Empire was much, much richer than their broken Kingdom, he had witnessed this fact many times over. Their money was the same, but because gold was withheld in the chests of the wealthy back in the

Kingdom, it wasn't circulating as much, and their primary currency was silver, which was getting rarer as well... Meanwhile, here, the noble and wealthy wore gold as if it was nothing. Not only that, but they sold and bought luxury items such as gems, jewelry, or fabrics as a perfectly fine way of trading too, while in the Eastern Kingdom, defiance had brought their people to only rely on the silver change to buy only the most needed goods... Yassim had gotten used to it after several days of crossing the Empire, but the Princess already wore much more gold on herself than he had witnessed in several years in the Eastern Kingdom. Even the middle and lower classes here were already much wealthier than most of the Eastern Kingdom's people, who lived day to day with little to no resources. There was no common measure between their two nations' wealth. In fact, he had even been surprised by how sparsely decorated this castle was, considering it was a prince's house, and one of the wealthiest men in the Empire, at that... If Princess Cessilia and her cousin brought a bit of gold, it would be a dim light of hope in the Eastern Kingdom if they were to spend it...

"I will," nodded Cessilia. "I can have c-clothes made if I need t-too... D-don't worry. I will t-take all I need, or b-buy it over there..."

The War God nodded, visibly satisfied with those answers. Just then, Tessa came back, carrying two long and sharp swords with an ecstatic smile. However, Cessilia frowned.

"T-Tessa... Those are D-Darsan's..."

"I know!" replied her cousin, excited. "And he won't know for a while that I took them! He's never let me take them, so this is his loss for being punished! Oh, these are amazing!"

"Is this r-really fine, D-Dad...?" muttered Cessilia.

The War God shrugged, visibly not caring much over his niece borrowing his son's weapons. Instead, he turned to Nebora as the servant walked back into the room with a large fur coat in her arms.

"They will need more," he said.

“I know, my lord,” replied the woman. “We’re already gathering all they need for the journey and putting it with Krai. Cessi, I prepared some of your clothes too, but feel free to take anything you want. And take some money! Oh, and jewelry too. You should look your best if you’re going there as our representative... A princess can’t look too shabby!”

Yassim almost choked himself. Shabby? The Princess’ cousin alone was already wearing more than enough to impress the whole Eastern Kingdom’s court! Some of the nobles’ ears would bleed if they heard this exchange... He didn’t dare say anything, though, and watched as Tessa took a seat by the fire, her fingers lovingly sliding along the swords’ blades. Cessilia went to pour the tea, just like her mother had done earlier, and her father sat down, closing his eyes and resting in the large seat.

“Y-Your Highness...” muttered Yassim, gathering his courage. “M-may I ask how come you’re... residing here? Instead of at the Imperial Palace...”

The War God didn’t even open his eyes or manifest in any way that he had heard the question. For a second, Yassim worried he had overstepped, but to his surprise, Princess Cessilia answered instead.

“Father hates c-crowds... He d-doesn’t want to live in the Imperial P-Palace with our aunt... Mom g-goes more often.”

“When will she come back?” suddenly asked the War God, opening his eyes at the mention of his wife.

Cessilia and Tessa exchanged a glance.

“I d-don’t know...”

The Prince grimaced and closed his eyes again, visibly unhappy with that answer. Yassim glanced toward the two young women, but neither of them looked surprised. Cessilia offered him some dried fruits, and the old man gladly took them, a bit hungry indeed.

“Is there anything else we c-could need?” she asked.

“I don’t believe so, my lady. The Kingdom will provide you with everything you need upon your arrival... His Majesty will have a room for you in the castle.”

“A room?” repeated Tessa. “Is she going as a future wife or a guest?”

Yassim almost bit his tongue, realizing his mistake, but before he could think of something to say, Cessilia shook her head.

“I haven’t d-decided yet, T-Tessa... Getting a r-room for ourselves is b-better.”

The young cousin, staring at Yassim with a suspicious expression, was about to ask something else, but her eyes met with her uncle’s, and she didn’t dare to.

“That’s right,” nodded Nebora. “You should see and take your time to examine the situation first. What wedding now... Tessa told me everything, old man. How dare he summon Cessi like that?! Is your King a good man? Because we are not going to marry away one of our precious girls to some pighead!”

“P-p-pighead?” Yassim repeated, shocked. “My lady, I can assure you, King Ashen is not a... pighead.”

There were a lot of other ways to describe his King, and although he certainly had some concerning strength of character, to go as far as to call a monarch a pighead was too much! Moreover, coming from the mouth of a servant...! Yassim was expecting the Empire to look down on their neighbor a little, but this was just too much!

“He’d better,” scoffed Nebora. “Otherwise, you can be assured he won’t last long. That girl’s brothers will happily come and take her back home if needed.”

“Auntie Nebbie...” muttered Cessilia.

“She’s right, you know,” chuckled Tessa. “As soon as Kassian and Darsan hear of this, you can expect them to come and make a major fuss there... That’s why we shouldn’t stay here too long. I mean, evading the little ones

is easy, but wait until those two hear Cessi is in the Eastern Kingdom, it will be a show!”

Yassim was getting worried all over again. He had mistakenly thought the War God would be the biggest issue, not the older Princes! He couldn't help but think about Dran, the Yellow Dragon outside. What if his master got mad at them for taking his sister? Plus another one, the older brother at that? Two dragons would come to wreak havoc in the Eastern Kingdom! Not only the War God's Dragon but two more! What had he done? His Kingdom would surely fall in no time!

“M-my lady,” he gasped. “Your brothers wouldn't really... attack the Kingdom, would they? We have nothing to defend ourselves against dragons!”

“D-don't worry,” said Cessilia. “They are not unreasonable...”

“...Unless it comes to Cessi,” muttered Tessa, sending a chill down poor Yassim's old back.

“We won't tell them yet,” said Nebora. “Kassian is still in the north, and that idiot Darsan will still be stuck for a few more weeks to take care of that mountain. You have at least a few weeks until they come here and realize you're gone. Moreover, they won't dare to make a ruckus in another Kingdom. The Empress would skin them alive.”

Yassim couldn't think straight anymore. Every member of the Imperial Family sounded way too dangerous! Yassim had thought things would be over quickly once he brought the Princess, and he'd find out soon enough if he was to lose his head or not, but now, it was clear even if that didn't happen right away, the Princes would come sooner or later to punish his bravery!

The old man sighed without thinking, while Cessilia handed him a cup of hot tea.

“Are you alright, S-Sir Yassim?” she asked him.

“I am, my lady. I am just worried I have sold my poor head for taking Your Highness away from her family!”

“D-don’t worry.” She smiled. “My b-brothers are not b-bad.”

It was heartwarming to see such a gentle young woman speak lovingly of her brothers, while he worried the young Princes would destroy an entire Kingdom for her sake. Still, Yassim knew there wasn’t much that could be done now. He could only hope this reckless plan of his would turn out for the better...

After this, it was clear they were to dine in this same room, with Nebora bringing little plates of food for them to eat. The meal served here may have been simple in their eyes, but to Yassim, it was truly a feast! There was a gigantic piece of meat, dried meat, many types of fruits and vegetables, several dishes he couldn’t even identify, cheese, and desserts. He was glad to eat, but it was hard to swallow anything in the War God’s presence. Although he didn’t say much, the man would sometimes take some meat to eat, and go back to resting.

Cessilia had moved to sit on a cushion against her father’s legs, her arms and head resting on his lap. He was caressing her long, brown curls from time to time, using his other hand to eat.

Both young women had many questions for Yassim and kept asking him about the Eastern Kingdom relentlessly. It was obvious Cessilia knew more than he had thought already. The young woman had read dozens of books, some about lands even farther away than theirs, and she was mostly asking to differentiate tales from reality, while Tessa had heard from folks more than books, as the little they knew about the Kingdom was brought by the few goods and people who did travel across the border.

It was strange to think that the border had been open for many, many years, yet only a handful of people dared to cross it each year. There were good reasons for it, though. On one side, the people of the Eastern Kingdom were scared of the Dragon Empire, with its strange customs, dragons, and, most importantly, higher costs. On the other side, the Dragon Empire citizens had no reason to cross over; the Kingdom was much too poor, didn’t have goods worth trading that couldn’t be found in the Empire, and the years of tyranny or civil war had convinced them it wasn’t worth the journey. Yassim himself had been baffled at how easy of

a journey it was, but how hard it had been for him once inside. The prices were too high for him to buy much more food than he had brought, and his savings were quickly depleted when he had no choice but to use them. Hence, he was more than grateful for each free meal he was given, like tonight.

“...So, most of the system already changed anyway, didn’t it?” sighed Tessa. “The rich people got overthrown and robbed, and what was true a few years ago changed when your new King came to power, then.”

“Yes, Lady Tessa. King Ashen got rid of his father’s policies right away, and chased or killed all of the former supporters of King Ashtoran. He only kept people who swore allegiance by his side, including this humble servant.”

“Good spring cleaning,” scoffed the young woman, biting into a piece of juicy meat.

“As of today, there are only nine lords allowed in the court, and His Majesty’s people. Those nine lords are the richest, most educated people of our Kingdom, and those our people trust. Each one of them either took a stand against the former King or pledged allegiance to King Ashen once he took over the throne. They have lands, people, and money behind them, but they are all also highly educated and respected. I believe they are the equivalent of your Empire’s scholars.”

“Our Empire has seventy scholars,” retorted Tessa, “and they aren’t that rich, either. ...And our aunt barely listens to any of them.”

“...Do they t-trust the K-King also?” asked Cessilia.

Yassim smiled. This young lady was smart indeed...

“On the surface, they are his loyal servants, my lady. However, each one of those lords hopes to secure their position, and King Ashen is known to be quite... particular in choosing his allies. To be honest, he doesn’t trust any of them, my lady. Yet, he needs them to content the people, and prevent further fighting. Not only that, but my King also needs all nine lords to get along, which is... quite difficult, at times.”

“Nine rich people in a room to learn to share? Yeah, good luck with that,” scoffed Tessa.

“Not just nine, my lady,” sighed Yassim. “Each lord represents his family, and at times, their wives, siblings, or children can hold as much power as they do. We talk of nine lords, but for some of them, they hold a small clan behind them. Yet, those nine are... essential in maintaining balance. They all hold a dominant power in one or more domains our Kingdom needs to be strong in: military, trade, finance, education, farming, science... Those people will help our young King shape the future of the Kingdom, or we are bound to repeat the same mistakes over and over again.”

“How about you? Aren’t you a lord?”

“I’m nowhere near any of those people, Lady Tessa. I am merely an old, wise man that this King was nice enough to keep by his side...”

Yassim felt very sad, pronouncing his words. Indeed, he had been lucky to stay alive until now, given his history, but... his King wouldn’t be so benevolent upon his return. It didn’t matter whether he got to keep his head or not, though. As long as he could bring the Princess to him, even his death would be worth it.

“Alright, Yassim the Wise,” yawned Tessa. “Well, I hope you’re as good of a guide as you are a storyteller, then, because now I am quite excited to visit that Kingdom of yours!”

“Let’s go t-to sleep,” agreed Cessilia, glancing toward her father. “We should leave early t-tomorrow...”

The War God nodded, looking a bit tired, and he got up from his seat, gently offering his large hand to help her up.

“...I’ll send you off at dawn.”

