

## The White King's Favorite by Jenny Fox Chapter 2

### #2 The Princess

The man was completely baffled. He knew the Dragon Empire had Dragons, but he didn't think he'd see so many of them at once, from so close, too!

Just a few seconds later, the Princess was surrounded by those small creatures, all trying to climb over her, or making high-pitched sounds at her feet. They were moving around a lot, but thanks to their very different colors, Yassim counted four of them. The biggest was a black one, about as large as a big dog, or a snow leopard, but including the tail, it was the length of two of those. It was rubbing his body like a cat against the Princess's leg, and this Dragon was a lot like the large one she had called Krai, with a longer body, but smaller tail and wings. It was arching its body in Yassim's direction, with glowing sapphire eyes and some faint growling. Another one was next to him, also moving around the Princess, visibly trying to approach her without climbing over a light-green Dragon, just a bit smaller. The two smallest were the ones climbing all over the Princess, trying to get around her shoulders or in her arms. They were both still a bit too big to be there, and were flapping their wings and kept bickering to get more space, even growling at each other in annoyance. One was a bright orange-red, while the other dark blue, and it was only thanks to the difference in color that Yassim could follow their bodies' bickering and flying around, until Cassandra clicked her tongue.

"Enough, you two!"

As soon as she did, both of the small ones jumped down on the grass, a bit quieter, but still rushed beneath their older peers to rub themselves against her ankles too, like angsty kittens.

Then, a fifth Dragon came out of the water, more shyly than the others. This one was grey, and even bigger than the black and blue-eyed one. Yet, it looked like it was almost afraid of the Princess, and tried to slither away.

"Kiki."

The Dragon froze, and Krai suddenly growled at this little one too. As soon as the big Black Dragon had growled, all four of the little Dragons quickly scattered. The two small ones ran to the little boys, hiding behind them, while the other two went to the elder sister, Cessilia, curling up next to the folds of her purple dress, one on each side, and put their heads on her lap. She chuckled, and petted them, but they all had eyes on poor Kiki.

Cassandra sighed, and walked to the Grey Dragon.

"Kiki, go find your owner. And you'd better stay with her this time!" she said.

As soon as she was done talking, the Grey Dragon flapped its tiny wings, and, although it looked like they wouldn't be strong enough to carry its weight, the little one managed to get itself above the wall. Even after Kiki was gone, Yassim was still unable to process what had just happened, what he was seeing. Dragons! Baby Dragons everywhere!

"Children, go see your aunt Phemera for a little while," Cassandra suddenly said, "I need to talk with your older sister."

They all obeyed immediately without a complaint, apparently happy to go see "Auntie 'Mera", their little Dragons following after them. Once those four and their Dragons were gone, only the two older girls and the huge Black Dragon were left in the garden. Calm befell on the garden, and Cassandra smiled at her daughter.

"Cessillia, this man has something to ask you."

Cessillia exchanged a look with her cousin.

"...Is it alright if I stay, Auntie?" asked Tessa.

Cassandra nodded gently, and the two young women stood up, Cessillia kept her book tight against her chest. Once she stood up, that young lady was obviously tall for her age... perhaps another family trait, from her father's side this time. Yassim had heard rumors about The War God being as tall as a giant... Although he had expected the rumor to be a bit of an exaggeration, Cessillia was definitely not a petite woman. She had her mother's slender figure though, but more defined muscles, which he could see from her exposed arms. Perhaps because she was a young woman, she wore a bit more jewelry, bracelets and earrings, and also a wide-band golden choker around her neck, covering most of it.

Tessa briefly glanced towards her aunt, before her dark eyes went to Yassim. Now that he was seeing her from a bit closer, his cousin also had a hint of green in her eyes, although it was very faint.

"Cessillia is my eldest daughter, she's eighteen years old," said Cassandra. "She and Tessa were born in the same year, hence why they are so close."

"...Auntie, what is this about?" asked Tessa, frowning.

Yassim could see defiance in his cousin's dark eyes, she was probably well aware of their Nations' bloody history together. She didn't bother to hide her frown, and acted somewhat cautious, with a hand on her hip. Unlike most women he had seen in the Dragon Empire, Tessa was wearing pants and a cropped top that flattered her flat stomach and curvy figure better than a dress would have, and wore only green too. Although she was also wearing several items of gold jewelry, even in her long braids. Yassim also noted how she stood slightly off profile, as if she was ready to step in at

any moment between him and Cessilia. Unlike her though, Cessilia looked much more relaxed, just a bit curious and surprised.

Cassandra glanced his way, so Yassim understood she was expecting him to explain himself alone. He nodded, and bowed once more to the two young ladies.

“Good morning, my Ladies. I am Yassim the Wise, a close advisor to his Highness, King Ashen the White.”

“...K-king Ashen?” repeated Cessilia.

Yassim was a bit taken aback by the Princess’s visible surprise, but he nodded, thinking she ought to be shocked by the reason for his visit after all.

“Yes, my Lady. I have come to the Dragon Empire to extend my King’s request that they provide him with a... possible future Queen of the Eastern Kingdom.”

“You want to send Cessilia as a prospect wife, Auntie?” asked Tessa, visibly shocked too.

“Only if she wants to go,” said Cassandra, very calm, her green eyes on her daughter.

For a few seconds, mother and daughter exchanged a long look in silence. Some silent discussion seemed to be happening between them, between Lady Cassandra’s calm and gentle expression, and that little spark in her daughter’s eyes. Then, Cessilia turned to Yassim.

“D-did the K-king r-really ask for... for me as his wife, S-sir Yas...Yassim?”

Yassim was too shocked to answer her right away. This time, it couldn’t be a surprise. Her way of speech... The princess had read that book perfectly fine before, but just now... She was a stutterer?

As a man called wise, Yassim quickly hid his surprise, and nodded politely.

“My Lord still has no Queen by his side, Princess, and he is actively looking for one befitting the position. He sent me away to find for him a Princess of the Dragon Empire.”

Yassim knew he was in a dangerous position if he lied to the Princess or the Imperial Family, but the man was at his wits’ end, and was now betting everything on this moment. He already considered himself quite lucky he had made it this far, and that the Princess looked interested in his query...

“I s-see...” muttered Cessilia, looking down.

"You're the only one of age, Cessillia," her mother gently said, "But this is your decision."

"We don't have any obligation to comply with the King's demand, right my Aunt?" asked Tessa, still frowning.

"Of course not."

Yassim kept his head down. No, they didn't have any. He was an old man and had come alone, to almost beg them to agree to send one of their precious daughters to a Kingdom they had been at war with for longer than they had been at peace. Moreover, there was no discussion to even be held in terms of difference of power. The Dragon Empire was extremely rich, prosperous and had Dragons to defend it. Their Kingdom was barely recovering from the wounds of the past civil wars, a broken system and the loss of many of their own people. Even if they sent him back in little chunks with an insult tattooed on his forehead, there would be nothing that could be done in retaliation, nothing.

Hence, Yassim the Wise was presently very happy to see that Princess Cessillia was seriously considering his demand. He had come with nothing else to give other than a little chest full of cheap treasures, and his good word.

"D-did you ask Aunt Sh-Shareen?" asked Cessilia, turning to her mother again.

"It's your decision, Cessi. Your decision only. Your unt allowed this man to meet you, didn't she?"

Cessilia's eyes went back to Yassim, and she gave him a faint smile. The old man was grateful, but still surprised. Was the princess seriously considering this? Going to a Kingdom she knew nothing of, to meet a complete stranger? As she remained silent a bit longer, he decided to take a little step forward, bowing again, and push his luck.

"Our King is young, my Lady, but a very handsome and smart man. He is named Ashen the White King, and just three years older than you."

"Ashen...?"

"Yes, my lady," said the man, bowing deeper.

A silence followed, and Yassim wondered if he wasn't overstepping. Yet, none of the women said anything, until he raised his head, and saw the Princess's conflicted green eyes.

"...Why is th-that his n-name? The white K-king?" asked Cessilia.

"That is because our King's hair is white, my Lady, like the Great God in our Lore."

“W-white?” she repeated, visibly surprised.

“Yes.”

Cessilia sighed faintly. Her fingers were fidgeting against her book, and her eyes were looking vacantly at the grass.

“Cessi?” called out her cousin, visibly worried.

“...You want to go, don't you?”

Cassandra's words surprised Yassim, but Cessilia's expression when she turned her green eyes back to her mother even more so. There was a strange feeling of... excitement in her eyes. She bit her lower lip slightly.

“Yes, b-but... Father...”

“Are you scared of your father's reaction?”

“I'm n-not scared of f-father, b-but... if he s-says no...”

Cassandra let out a long sigh, and stood forward, suddenly hugging her daughter gently. Cessilia's eyes opened a bit wider in surprise, but she hugged her mother back with one arm. When she finally stepped back, Cassandra smiled gently at her, and caressed her long curls.

“Cessilia, do you remember what I told Kiera last week?”

“T-that we all have an adventure t-to live, but K-Kiera was t-too impatient for hers?”

“That's right. I believe this is your adventure, Cessi. The one you had been waiting for, patiently. ....not like your sister.”

Both women chuckled. Then, Cassandra grasped her daughter's chin with her hand, gently.

“You're too cautious, as always, and too scared. Don't be... You're much stronger than you think, Cessi, you're an amazing young woman, and very smart too. I think it's time you learn to bloom on your own, my Love, away from the nest.”

When she let go, her daughter was visibly blushing, but smiling, looking a bit happier. Next to her, her cousin chuckled, crossing her arms.

“Don't worry,” she said. “I'm not letting you go anywhere without me, and I'm actually curious about that neighbour of ours.”

“Are you going too, Tessa?” asked Cassandra, raising an eyebrow.

“Of course! I’m not letting Cessi go there on her own!”

“I don’t mind, but what will your mother say?”

Tessa suddenly grimaced.

“...Can’t you come up with an ex-”

“I am not lying to my own sister for your sake, Tessa.” interrupted Cassandra.

“But mom will never let me!” protested the young woman. “She’s worse than a harpy and she will complain about me not helping at the shop! She doesn’t care about me wandering around, but if she hears I’m going to the other side of the frontier she will bring my butt back and lock me up! You know she’s able to!”

“You forget about your Dad,” chuckled Cassandra. “What about him? Anour will be worried sick if you disappear out of the blue...”

Tessa stayed silent for a second, then her eyes lit up.

“Alright, I’ll send word to dad then. He’ll be so much more terrified to tell mom the truth, it will give me at least a week before she picks up on something.”

“You’re g-going to be in t-trouble...”

“Don’t worry Cess, my Dad will probably take half of my mom’s wrath first...”

“Poor Anour...” sighed Cassandra. “Alright then, I will talk to your mother later... But you girls should go to the Onyx Castle first.”

“What ab-... about my b-brothers?” asked Cessilia, looking a bit worried. “If they k-know...”

“Your father sent them both to train in the mountains, they aren’t there at the moment. That’s why you should go see him now, before they come back.”

Cassandra stepped forward to hug her daughter, and then her niece, and Yassim suddenly realized they were already saying goodbye.

“M-my Ladies, I know it is a long journey to the Eastern Kingdom”, he said. “But there really isn’t such a hurry...”

“Oh, we’d better get out of there before my mom knows,” retorted Tessa.

"It's alright," chuckled Cassandra. "If you fly there it will only take a few hours. Cessilia can come back any time she wants, even tonight if she doesn't like it. Moreover, she should leave before her younger siblings take notice too, otherwise you will have four more Dragons following you. I think even for his Majesty, that will be a bit too many guests at once..."

Yassim was astonished. The Dragon Empire's people really thought differently! Not only was the Water Goddess fine with sending her daughter away, but she was sending her... right away?

He glanced towards the majestic Black Dragon next to them. From what he had seen, all the children had their own Dragons, so it made sense that Princess Cessilia could indeed fly wherever she wanted, anytime she wanted... Still, Yassim was a bit worried. What if, once she knew the truth, the Princess prematurely decided to leave? He'd be losing his old head this time...

"There."

To Yassim's surprise, without him noticing, some servants had arrived, one holding the little chest he had brought with him. The others were bringing two satchels for the young women. Cassandra took the little chest and handed it to her daughter with a faint smile, glancing towards Yassim.

"Sir Yassim came with these, as an offering for you."

"R-really?" asked Cessilia.

"Ah, yes, Princess," said the man, bowing. "All those are for you."

The Princess opened the chest, visibly a bit excited. Yassim's heart was beating fast. Those were very small and humble treasures, but he had hoped the daughter would find something of worth in those, like her mother had... Next to her, Tessa was making a grimace while staring at the content of the little chest, but she didn't say anything, even when Cessilia handed the chest to her as she took the books out.

"I had b-been looking for those b-books!" she exclaimed, staring at the old books in awe.

"Those are rare editions, my Lady," said Yassim, a bit flattered.

"I know... They were m-mentioned once in another one I had b-been reading, and I was d-dying to find them... Even my b-brother tried to find them for me b-but c-couldn't... T-thank you, Sir Yassim."

"I'm glad they make you happy, my Lady."

Yassim noticed how she stuttered a bit less when she was happy. The Princess's emerald eyes were sparkling with happiness as she held the volumes and kept caressing their covers with her fingers, visibly thrilled. He smiled too, unable to hold it back as her own smile was so beautiful. Princess Cessilia seemed a beautiful and intelligent young woman indeed. Yassim bowed again, praying loud in his heart that the Princess – and her dazzling green eyes – could warm the White King's ice-cold heart...