

Chapter 20

Everything else suddenly disappeared around them. Her horrified eyes could only see the blood streaming out of the injury, and the two men who had stopped moving, one's sword plunged deep into the other. A vicious smile appeared in Rohin's eyes as he thrust his sword a bit deeper, making Ashen grunt in pain. The King was trying to hold on, still glaring at his rival, but the pain had to be unbearable. The blood was already dripping at their feet, soaking the soil like Ashra's had before.

"Your Majesty!"

People screamed in horror as they discovered the scene one by one.

Cessilia was the first to react. This time, her vision was blurred except for one thing: Ashen. She had to save Ashen. Ignoring Jisel, all her questions, and her pain, she ran like hell toward Ashen and his brother. Sabael appeared right at the same time as her, on the other side. He swung his sword at Rohin, forcing him to back off, while Cessilia grabbed her lover to pull him away. Despite Rohin releasing the sword's handle, the weapon remained lodged in Ashen's abdomen as he fell back into her arms.

He was still conscious, which was a miracle given the large injury he had just sustained. Most people would have passed out already, either from the shock or blood loss. It only took one look for Cessilia to know he was in critical condition, though. He was pale, and the injury was as bad as she had thought. It was obvious he wasn't able to continue fighting; he'd be lucky to survive this. She glared at Rohin, who, amused by his win, was now fighting Sabael and trying to get past the Royal Guard to finish the King.

"Save the King!" someone shouted.

The news resonated inside the cave. Those who weren't too absorbed by their duels couldn't help but glance over, and a lot of the fighters became dispirited by the view of their injured monarch. Their will to fight got drowned by the King's defeat, and in just a few seconds, the Yekara people were able to secure their win. Only a few of the very best fighters, including Tessandra and Sabael, were able to continue fighting, keeping their opponents back, but everyone else was losing. Cessilia glared back at Jisel, but that woman was still standing there, a smirk on her face as if the chaos around had nothing to do with her.

"You can't win against me, Princess," she chuckled.

"No," retorted Cessilia, her voice filled with anger, "th-this is the last time I'm letting you get away with this. Th-the next time we cross p-paths, I'll kill you."

Her furious green eyes put an end to her rival's smirk. Cessilia could be really scary, and right now, she was as frightening as a dragon. She was down on her knees, her injured lover on her lap, but it was as if she was dominating the whole room. No one dared to approach her, either. She was like a dragon protecting its offspring. Jisel stepped back, sensing something was wrong. They should have been enduring a complete defeat, but neither the Princess nor her allies were acting like they were in trouble.

Cessilia quickly tore a piece of fabric from her dress to bandage the wound, applying pressure to prevent more blood from flowing out.

"...Nana, look after him, p-please," muttered Cessilia, slowly standing up.

"I-I will!" Naptunie nervously stuttered, rushing to the King's side.

Very focused, she took over putting pressure on the wound, trying to ignore the fights going on very close. In fact, a lot of people had given up on getting out of there and gathered around the King instead to protect him. As Cessilia stood back up and looked around, she spotted Bastat's father, lying on the ground with his throat sliced wide open. Her heart sank. Not only that but everyone on their side was heavily injured, dead, or fighting to survive. The Pangoja were powerful because of their money, but in this situation, they were also helpless against the skilled Yekara.

With the uneven numbers and the Yekara's skilled fighters, those who supported Ashen were bound to lose. Still, Cessilia was impressed. Instead of trying to run away again, or trying to change sides, all the people from the other families were slowly gathering around them. They were protecting the King like a defensive wall, even if it wouldn't last long. Opposing them, the Yekara people had received orders to not let anyone escape, thus they were gathering in a semicircle, their backs turned toward the cave's exits. A few steps behind their ranks, the Yekara Leader was boasting.

"The King is dead!" he shouted. "Prince Rohin is the new King!"

"Not yet," grunted Sabael.

Given the difference in strength, Naptunie's older brother was doing amazing against the Prince. He didn't have as much strength and was losing when they had to challenge one another's arms, but Sabael was compensating with his speed and impressive movements. He had begun to use Tessa's signature twin swords style, which was a lot of help against Rohin's massive sword.

However, he wasn't meant to win this fight. The Prince was merely toying with him, and although Sabael managed to hold his own for a while, it was clear this wouldn't last. Rohin was progressively winning ground, and pushing the Royal Guard back, getting closer to his goal: Ashen. However, Cessilia was still standing between him and her lover. While Tessa was doing the work of three men in keeping enemies at bay, the Princess was standing very still, her eyes fixated on Rohin, not even watching the fight but just him.

When Sabael was forced to step back once more, losing his balance, she suddenly grabbed his shoulder, and with a swift movement, pushed him further back. It all happened in the blink of an eye. Sabael himself barely understood. One second, he was about to lose and get sliced in two, and the next, he was falling back, a woman's hands on his and taking his swords from him. He didn't even comprehend what had happened until he fell on his ass, and looked up at Cessilia's back. The Princess now stood in front of him, wielding his weapons. In other circumstances, his ego

might have been severely wounded, but right now, he was in complete awe. Even the bystanders like Naptunie who had been able to watch the scene from a different point of view were amazed, and trying to grasp what had happened.

Cessilia had taken Sabael's spot and weapons, and was now fighting Rohin as if she'd been the one fighting him all along. To her opponent, though, the change was a major blow. Cessilia was stronger, faster, and much more skilled. Rohin, who had been winning one second before, was now frowning and struggling to keep up, slowly stepping back. Cessilia's hands were animated by fury. She was glaring at him, and forcing him to back off like a goddess of wrath. The Prince's mighty stance from earlier had vanished, and he was now fully focused on the fight, realizing he had underestimated this woman greatly. Whilst he had been toying with Sabael earlier, he was now unable to hold anything back, lest he fall beneath Cessilia's attack. The fight was impressive, and the strength used sent chills down everyone's spines. Those two were beyond the realm of normal humans. The Princess was moving and using her swords at incredible speed, yet not losing in strength, each of her attacks more violent and fascinating than the one before. Rohin was a good fighter, but one could see from his dark expression that he was struggling. Cessilia was rivaling his strength, and bent on not letting him catch a break. Bit by bit, he was forced to back away, and his pride was taking several blows at each step conceded.

"You... damn whore..." he grunted between his teeth.

Cessilia didn't even seem to hear. She was winning this fight, and people around were even cheering for her. The King had fallen, but the Princess was pushing the enemy back, and the feeling of revenge was thrilling. Cessilia's ardent fight was bringing back the fighting spirit of many, and some who had managed to keep up were now fighting back twice as hard. It didn't seem like their defeat was so certain anymore, at the very least. Behind enemy lines, the Yekara Clan Leader had also stopped smiling. Cessilia standing strong against his champion was a major blow to his plan. He glanced at Jisel, and the woman prepared more needles, aiming

at Cessilia this time. She threw them at full speed toward Cessilia, but just when it seemed the scenario was about to repeat itself, Tessandra appeared between them, and with one blow of her sword, knocked all the needles out her cousin's way. She glared at Jisel, a smirk at the corner of her lips.

“You should learn to play fair, you snake bitch,” she hissed.

Jisel's expression fell. While Cessilia was fully focused on her opponent, it was clear Tessandra would not let anything bother her cousin, even if she was fighting several people at a time herself. Sabael too was back on his feet and, despite his injuries, he was fully focused on protecting the Princess' other side as well as Nana and the King. The fight was taking another direction, with the group opposing Rohin's supporters refusing to give up. They were fighting bravely, still determined to protect the King and follow the Princess' brave lead against the Yekara. Whatever their motive, those people were resolved to keep fighting. Sadly, though, it was already clear Cessilia's side wouldn't come out victorious. It was too late. Despite their attempts to stand their ground, they had been cornered on the wrong side of the lake, the exit behind their enemies, and too many had died already. There was no way out, and the opponents far outnumbered them.

“We have to get you and His Majesty out,” declared Nana's uncle suddenly, very seriously. “We can't let the Yekara win here. If His Majesty and the Princess make it, there will still be hope.”

“But how...” muttered Nana.

She had her hands full of blood and, despite being protected, she was near absolute panic. She kept glancing at Cessilia's back. The Princess' incredible fighting might have been fascinating and impressive to most, but Naptunie was one of the few who couldn't help but genuinely worry for her. Cessilia's arm was still injured by Jisel's attacks, and even if she bested the Prince, there were many more people waiting on the sidelines to get to her. This fight couldn't be won by one woman alone, even if she was the best fighter in the cave. Moreover, Naptunie had already guessed Cessilia wouldn't fight anybody else. She was fighting Rohin because he was one person she didn't care about killing, blinded by her rage, but what

after that? There was no guarantee the Princess would want to keep fighting, and after what she'd seen, Naptunie could understand her wish.

She turned her head toward Tessa, who was fighting just as well as her cousin, now keeping two men at bay, more bodies already down around her. She was like a furious tornado, and no more fighters dared to approach her, choosing other opponents instead or carefully staying away to observe her movements, maybe looking for an opening that would never show up.

“Tessandra!” Naptunie called. “We need to get out of here...”

“...I know,” grunted Tessa between two clashes of swords.

Tessandra glanced at Cessilia, who was still fighting hard. Her cousin had probably heard that too, and from the way she was moving in the space, she was thinking the same. Despite her easily opposing Rohin, Cessilia was staying within an invisible space around their allies, meaning she wasn't willing to go past a certain point. She was staying near the lake, most likely ready to evacuate that way. The issue was, only a couple of people would be able to go this way. Only the two of them would be able to swim their way out of there, and they couldn't drag more than one person along. Sadly, there were dozens still around.

“Cessilia!”

As she called out to her, Cessilia suddenly turned around, spinning her whole body in a circle. Her swords made a wide movement around her, forcing Rohin to jump back before he got cut in two. He fell, landing on his side with a very pissed off expression. The distance between her and her opponent was now more than a few steps and, against all expectations, Cessilia didn't choose to go and finish him. Instead, she retreated quickly toward the group.

“Everyone step back!” Tessandra shouted.

Her voice resonated like thunder in the cave, taking everyone by surprise and magically stopping all the fighting. All those on their side

immediately obeyed, not because they knew what was going on, but because they felt compelled to by her imperious voice.

Meanwhile, Rohin was getting back on his feet, furious. That woman had bested him right when he thought he had finally won. He had thought victory was his with Ashen down and left to die, but this Princess had just ridiculed him, and incredibly easily too. Things weren't meant to happen this way. The Yekara Clan had expected little to no resistance, and yet, those people were still standing by his rival's side, even looking like they still cared about the injured King. It made no sense to him.

"I am the rightful King!" he shouted. "This bastard will die, and I'm going to take his place! Everything will be mine!"

"N-no."

Cessilia turned around, facing him from a few steps away. She lowered her hands, her swords by her sides, standing tall ahead of him. She was like a large wall on her own, and everyone behind her was looking up to that one woman. Her green eyes had gone from a furious, fiery green to a color as cold as ice, like an emerald stone, staring at him like he was nothing. That look was the worst. She made him feel like an irrelevant insect.

Anger distorted Rohin's face, and he grabbed his sword again, running toward her.

"My liege, wait!"

Yebekh's words were lost on him. The Prince was blinded by anger, and didn't even see the danger of the situation. It was too late, much too late. Cessilia and Ashen's people were now gathered behind her, in a small but dense group behind an invisible line. There was a clear gap between the two camps, and that's what had alarmed Yebekh. Those women were preparing something, but he only understood, when Cessilia suddenly screamed.

It wasn't just a scream; her voice had suddenly turned into some unbearable sound, a loud echo, deeper than any voice he'd heard and yet

more high-pitched than any bird known. It was deafening, and many fighters on both sides tried to block their ears immediately. It was no use, though. The entire cave was shaken up by her voice, trembling beneath their feet, as if an earthquake was happening at the same time. Even outside, the weather seemed to have gotten much worse, throwing all the fighters into disarray.

A scary, creaking sound finally made him look up. The stalactites. They were all shaking violently, large fractures appearing on all of them. The first little pieces of rock began to fall before he could even shout to warn the others. Cessilia's voice, much more powerful than before, was shaking the stalactites to their core, and the foundations of the cave itself. However, the danger was only for those ahead of her, right in front of the echo of her voice. When the first stalactite fell, right on Rohin, his scream got lost in the loud echo. However, all of his allies could see their so-called King stuck to the ground, his face distorted in pain and his body half under a large rock, blood splattered all over the gruesome scene. Immediately, chaos shook their ranks. The Yekara people began to scream and try to run in all directions as more of the enormous, deadly rock spikes fell from above. Yebekh was rendered mute, watching his men get crushed one after another by those gigantic rocks. Some were stabbed right where they were, others were brutally crushed on the floor. Many panicked because no place looked safe in the cave, and some even ran up the stairs they had been trying to block before, fighting their own allies to escape first. The only safe place was behind Cessilia, where all those who had fought for her and the King stood.

Her scream didn't last long, but the echo persisted so long after that no one could tell when she had stopped.

Nana almost jumped when she saw the Princess by her side, her green eyes on the King's injury.

"How is the K-King?" Cessilia asked nervously.

Naptunie shook her head, helpless. She was no healer, but she knew Cessilia could already see in one glance. The King was in a bad state, and

only holding on by sheer willpower. Cessilia exchanged a glance with Tessandra, on the other side of his body.

“...You have to go,” nodded Tessandra. “Use the lake. I’ll lead the people here to the exits as soon as we kill more of those bastards.”

Cessilia glanced to the side. The stalactites kept falling and reducing the number of Yebekh’s men drastically, but it wouldn’t be enough. There was still a hell of a fight waiting for the survivors...

“Cessilia, go,” insisted Tessa before she could even refuse. “We already knew things might turn out like this.”

“You’re going too.”

Surprised, Tessandra turned to Sabael, who was standing there with a very serious expression. He was hurt and tired, but he had never looked so determined.

“No,” said Tessandra. “No, Sab. I’m staying with you.”

“You’re going,” he retorted. “Tessandra, I’m staying with my people, but Lady Cessilia will need you to get His Majesty out of here. And only you can accompany her. Take Nana with you.”

“Sabael, I can’t!”

He smiled, grabbing her hand as she was about to push him away, causing her words to become stuck in her throat.

“Go,” he insisted. “I promise we will be fine here. But we can’t guarantee there won’t be more enemies on the other side, and if the King and the Princess don’t make it out, everything will be lost. Please, trust me.”

Tessandra was still at a loss for words. She kept glancing around, looking for someone to help her out of this one, but strangely, everyone there seemed to agree with Sabael. They didn’t know what Tessa meant by using the lake, but they all had one conviction: the King and his Princess had to survive. Cessilia had already bought them a lot of time, but everyone remaining was ready to keep fighting. The Dorosef Tribe Leader nodded with conviction, and turned to Cessilia.

“Princess, please save His Majesty. I promise, no one else thinks like the Yekara Clan. If you can save our King, I swear everyone in this Kingdom will happily fight the usurper and the Yekara. Save him. That’s all we ask.”

Cessilia nodded, her fingers tightening up around Ashen’s.

“...I p-promise I will.”

Next to her, Naptunie had her eyes on her brother and uncle, looking about to cry.

“Sab... Uncle...”

“Nana, I’m entrusting you with the Princesses,” said Sabael, ignoring Tessandra’s furious eyes. “You stick to them and the King and help the best you can, alright? I know you’ll be the best to assist them. Make sure the Princesses and His Majesty are safe, it’s the most important thing right now.”

“Sabael!” shouted Tessandra, still furious. “You can’t do that! You guys barely have any chance of making it!”

Sabael chuckled, and turned to her with a smug expression.

“I already know that. And I may not be as good as you,” he said, “but you still shouldn’t underestimate me. I’m still a Royal Guard. Protecting the King is my duty, and I’ll die doing so if I must.”

He stepped closer to her, squeezing her hand. Tessandra tried to pull away, but from what Cessilia saw, she probably didn’t use her full strength as Sabael held on.

“...I love you,” he muttered, “but my duty to my King comes first, Tessandra. I’m sure you understand.”

Once again, Tessandra had nothing to retort, simply glaring at him with her furious, but conflicted, dark eyes. It was only a matter of a few precious seconds, and the fight around them would resume. There was no time to lose, but she still didn’t want to let go. No one knew when they would see each other again. There was no guarantee they would even see each other again, and they knew it all too well. The urgency of the

situation, coupled with their respective dutiful personalities, made it even more painful. For once, Tessandra had her personal feelings battling her rational mind, and she hated it. She clenched her teeth, and suddenly kissed him. It was a quick but forceful kiss, with a salty taste as tears ran down her cheeks.

“...You’d better make it,” she muttered. “If you die, I’ll kill you.”

“Got it,” he chuckled.

After that, as if to get this over with, Tessandra angrily turned around and grabbed Naptunie’s hand, pulling her toward the lake. As the echo of Cessilia’s voice started dying on the other side, they knew it was time to leave before the fight resumed.

“You should hurry, Princess,” nodded Nana’s uncle, looking at his niece’s silhouette.

“Will you b-be alright?” muttered Cessilia.

“We will do our best. But you guys have a higher chance of making it out if you go through the lake,” said Sabael. “Don’t worry about us, Princess. There are more of our allies on the other side. I’m sure you and His Highness will be fine.”

He didn’t say anything about himself, and realistically, they all knew their chances were slim. Not void, but still, scarily slim. Cessilia nodded. Although it broke her heart to separate from Sabael, and everyone that had sided with them this way, she was aware everyone there knew exactly what they were doing. They were making this decision willingly, not for her or Tessa, but for Ashen and the future of their kingdom. That was something she had to respect and, if anything, she had to keep her side of this promise by saving their King. On the other side, the echo was over, and the Yekara forces were already getting ready to fight back, gathering their fighters and trying to save those who hadn’t been crushed to death. Cessilia’s voice had done considerable damage, though. She had greatly reduced their numbers, and perhaps, given the chance Sabael’s side needed to survive this...

“You go ahead,” nodded the Dorosef Leader, noticing her hesitation.

The first fights were resuming on the other side. The Yekara Clan leader, infuriated by Cessilia’s devastating attack, was yelling orders like a mad man for his men to regroup and fight back. There was no time to lose. The remaining fighters made a wall between their pursuers and them, but it wouldn’t last long before some of their enemies broke through the ranks. With a heavy heart, Cessilia grabbed her lover, using her incredible strength to carry him while being careful of his injury, and ran behind Tessandra and Nana toward the lake. She wished they could have taken everyone along with them, but realistically, it was just impossible. They couldn’t swim with more than one person with them, it would have been too risky, especially since they would go almost blind.

“You hang on to me tight,” Tessandra was saying to Naptunie. “No matter what, you have to hold your breath and hang on to me.”

“...Are you sure we’re going to make it?” muttered Nana, on the verge of tears. “If we drown, it’s such a horrible way to die...”

She glanced toward her brother’s side of things, but realistically, it wasn’t looking much better. Too many people had died. There were almost as many bodies on the ground as the ones standing, which was terrifying, especially for someone with no fighting skills like Nana. Tessandra grabbed Naptunie’s cheeks and turned her head back toward herself.

“Nana, trust me. We’re going to make it. All I ask of you is to hold on and hold your breath. I promise I’ll take care of everything else and get us to the other side.”

“But... But what if I’m wrong and the tunnel is blocked, or we get lost...”

“Nana, it’s g-going to be alright,” said Cessilia, arriving at their side. “We t-trust your knowledge, and you t-trust us, right? We will be alright.”

Naptunie nodded, her eyes going to the King by Cessilia’s side. Perhaps the sight of Ashen’s half-unconscious state helped make up her mind, because she nodded again, looking a bit more resolute.

Meanwhile, Tessandra quickly took off her shoes and turned to Cessilia.

“You should probably go ahead, just in case. You’re the better swimmer, and if you lose the King, I can always grab him after you.”

“I think so t-too.”

Naptunie watched both young women prepare the bottom of their outfits, tearing apart some of the fabric and using Tessandra’s sword to cut large slits until most of their legs were visible. Then, they did something even more shocking. Grabbing a handful of small rocks and broken seashells, Cessilia suddenly rubbed them against her legs, grazing all of her skin until it turned red.

“Oh my God!” shouted Naptunie, shocked.

“It’s alright, Nana,” said Tessandra. “Look.”

She did just the same as her cousin, injuring her own legs, all the way down to her ankles. When she removed all the rocks and dust from her legs, Naptunie noticed the wound itself. It was superficial, with a few cuts here and there, but right away, Tessandra’s skin was replaced by vibrant green scales covering her legs. She looked to the side, and sure enough, the same phenomenon was now covering Cessilia’s legs but with ash-colored scales. Within a few moments, the two young women had transformed all their skin from mid-thigh to their ankles into scales.

“To go faster in water!” exclaimed Naptunie, who had only just understood the reasoning.

“Exactly. It will make us win a few precious seconds, and it’s easier to move too...”

Naptunie was astonished. So this was part of their secret as to why the Dragon Empire Princesses were so confident with their swimming! She glanced at the lake. Despite this new information, she was still nervous. The fact that this lake led to a cave outside was still pretty uncertain. Not only that, but they would be swimming in the dark for a pretty long part of the trip. The mere thought of dying underwater, drowning and in the dark, made poor Nana shiver. She considered herself a decent swimmer, as the daughter of a family of fishermen, but this was very different...

There weren't any other ways to escape. She could still catch sight of her older brother on the other side, fighting the Yekara's people, trying to keep up a wall between their little group and the enemy. There was a lot of bloodshed already... The Yekara were also focused on their people that had been crushed by the rocks, trying to save who they could. Nana didn't feel the slightest bit sorry for those people. They didn't think twice about betraying their own King and Kingdom to have a usurper pose as a potential king! That man wasn't dead either. They seemed to be trying to save his life, several people around him, including that woman, Jisel. While Naptunie kept staring, that woman suddenly lifted her head, and looked right back at her, as if she had felt her gaze. She glared at them and suddenly stood up, running in their direction.

"Uh... T-Tessa..." muttered Naptunie, taking a step back.

"Nana, come on, hurry."

While she was looking away, Tessandra was already in the lake, the water reaching up to her hips. Next to her, on the shore, Cessilia was using the shredded fabric of their dresses to roughly bandage the King's wound. The fabric was stained with red almost immediately, but the stain didn't grow as large as Naptunie would have expected. Somehow, this unusual bandaging of hers was doing a good enough job at cinching the wound.

"Will he be alright?" asked Naptunie, tearing her dress and handing it to Cessilia.

"He will h-hold on."

Cessilia's short answer wasn't very reassuring, but Naptunie knew how dire the situation was. She took the hand Tessandra was offering, and got into the water next to her, shivering a bit. It was very cold, but she didn't have time to complain now.

"Take deep breaths," said Tessandra. "Stay very calm, and breathe slowly, but filling and emptying your lungs each time. Try to relax as much as you can."

"I understand..."

While Naptunie was trying to do as she had been told, and walking deeper into the water, Tessandra glanced over her shoulder.

“...Cessi.”

Her cousin glanced back, also spotting the furious woman in red, running in their direction. She was still far, but Jisel clearly intended to pursue them. Cessilia squinted her eyes a bit, but then, she turned back to Ashen, gently pulling him into the water with her. She was relieved. By abandoning his coat and taking him in the water, his weight would be much easier to manage. She had used a piece of fabric to tie him to her, at the waist, so she could use her arms and legs freely to swim around. Tessandra was also doing the same, and tying Naptunie’s waist to her.

“...Is this alright?” asked Nana, worried.

“You can swim,” said Tessa, getting closer to Cessilia in the water, “but if you do feel I’m pulling too hard, just act like you’re a plank and let yourself be dragged, Nana. Don’t worry, I won’t lose you.”

“I’m not worried about that...”

There was no more time to argue. Cessilia took a very deep breath, and suddenly dove underwater. Naptunie thought of watching her, but in the blink of an eye, the Princess was gone. She quickly looked back, and that woman, Jisel, was getting much closer.

“Nana, let’s go!”

Tessandra dove right after her cousin, and Naptunie was brutally dragged underwater. She just had time to take a deep breath in, before her whole body was submerged.

Everything went fast. Naptunie tried to keep her eyes open for a bit, but everything got much, much darker in seconds. When she tried to look, and keep swimming as fast as she could, she only saw a bit of light, and the vague shape of Tessandra’s body. Ahead of them, Cessilia, despite having the King floating above her, was even faster, her dark legs going as fast as a small tornado in the water. The two cousins were swimming in different lines to avoid hindering each other, and Naptunie understood

how much more powerful their legs were. They were eating up the distance ahead, and not slowing down despite the darkness growing. How could they go so fast while seeing so little? Naptunie looked to the side, and almost let go of the bit of air still held in her mouth. Tessandra's eyes seemed bigger and shinier, like onyx shining under a dark light. She was looking straight ahead, and moving quickly as if she knew her environment perfectly. Naptunie tried to see ahead, and as they took a slight turn, she saw Cessilia's face. Her emerald eyes were just as incredible. It was as if she had no issue at all looking around. They were almost completely in the dark now, and going lower and lower, which should have worried Naptunie. Yet, seeing the two young women move so fast and fearlessly, she did feel like they had a chance.

How long had they been underwater? It felt like ten or twenty minutes, but Nana knew it was half that, at best. She was able to hold her breath for around five minutes when she played with her siblings, and now, she had been using her energy a lot to try and swim too. She could feel Tessandra was going faster, though. Her swimming was almost pitiful compared to her, but fear kept her going. Nana was still terrified by the idea of drowning there, and despite what Tessa had said, she refused to give up and simply be dragged along. She kept trying to calculate how much distance was left to distract herself from the struggle, the tiredness, and the cold, but slowly, she knew she was losing the air she had left. She could feel her body struggling, begging for air, but they were still deep in the tunnel, with no idea when they would get out. She was grateful for Tessandra's incredible speed, but she was starting to get genuinely scared. If she passed out, would she wake up? Would the four of them die here? She felt tears come out of her eyes, and grabbed Tessandra's belt tighter. As promised, she let herself be dragged, trying to keep her body as straight as possible, completely out of strength to keep swimming.

Unlike what Naptunie thought, Cessilia and Tessandra were already deep down in the cave, well past halfway. The two young women were swimming quickly and almost effortlessly, only exchanging a glance from time to time to check on the other. In fact, despite their speed, it was getting quite hard for them too. Their lungs were beginning to beg for air

despite having the strength to continue swimming. Their progress hindered by the narrow path, forcing them to slow down, making sure they weren't going to injure themselves or those they were dragging along. Ashen and Nana had fallen unconscious, but if they didn't get proper air soon, and water out of their lungs, it would really get dangerous for them. Luckily, the light in front of them was slowly getting brighter, and the path was going upwards instead of downwards. They accelerated, knowing the opening had to be close.

Suddenly, the path got much larger, and they both broke through the surface at the same time, gasping for air. They quickly found the nearest shore, and half-carried, half-dragged Naptunie and Ashen there.

"Nana," Tessandra kept calling. "Breathe. Nana, Nana, wake up! Come on!"

Soon enough, the young girl began coughing water and breathing heavily. Tessandra let out a long sigh of relief, and patted her back, helping her get through it.

On the other side, Cessilia was patting Ashen's back alike, and the King coughed some water as well. He didn't seem like he had drunk as much water as Nana, but he was desperate for air, and the wound had gotten worse. Even Tessandra grimaced upon seeing this.

"This guy needs to be healed as soon as possible, Cessi."

"I kn-know. Let's j-just see if we c-can make it through the--"

She stopped talking, alerted by a sound. She and Tessandra exchanged a glance, confirming they had heard the same thing. They got into a defensive position, looking around the cave they had arrived in. It was a much bigger cave than the one Ashen had taken her to and from the mix of dry sand and stones on the ground, probably around the same level. Most of it was in the dark, as night had fallen and the moon had just hidden behind some clouds. From time to time, though, the moonlight would shine, and it got a bit brighter in there.

"They are here!" a foreign voice suddenly shouted.

Their eyes turned to the opening of the cave. At least two dozen fighters ran in, and from the way their swords were drawn, these people were not allies.

“Damn it...” grunted Tessandra.

“How did they know?” muttered Nana, panicked.

“Sounds like we’re not the only ones who heard about this exit, Nana. Get behind us.”

Tessandra was already back on her feet, sword out and ready to fight, but there were way too many people. She would be in trouble if she had to fight this many people while protecting Ashen and Naptunie. Next to her, Cessilia got up too. She was going to fight, even if she had no weapon.

“...The Yekara p-people,” she muttered.

“I figured,” scoffed Tessandra.

“What are we going to do?” cried Naptunie, who was still recovering.

“Put up a fight.”

Right after that, Tessandra took a deep breath in, and suddenly, she spat a fireball, right in the direction of those men. A lot of them screamed in panic, some burnt on the spot, and others started running around with a part of their body on fire.

“Damn it,” grunted Tessandra. “It would have been better if I wasn’t so fucking drenched...”

“I hope you can dry fast.”

The voice coming from behind made them jump.

With a smirk on her face, Jisel was slowly coming out of the water, looking exhausted but still smug. Just like them, she had transformed her legs into red-scaled limbs that appeared in between the folds of her dress. She tilted her head.

“You damn bitch...”

“Oh, I’m the least of your problems right now.”

Just as she had said that, they heard it again. A loud, furious growl coming from ahead. Both Tessandra and Naptunie looked ahead, while Cessilia was still glaring at Jisel.

“Sir Dragon!”

“...That wasn’t Krai, Nana,” said Tessa, cutting her hopes short.

The young woman’s expression sank. She had noticed the growl was different from usual, but she hadn’t even thought it could have been another dragon. With horror, Naptunie watched as a large, dark-scaled creature appeared on the other side of the cave. This time, even Cessilia had to turn her head, her heart beating fast. There truly was another dragon, glaring at them with terrifying black eyes.

“What is it, Princesses?” chuckled Jisel. “...Never seen a dragon before?”

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me...” muttered Tessandra.

Fighting men, no matter their number, was still conceivable, and offered chances to actually survive. However, with a dragon in the mix, their chances of survival were cut drastically short. Tessandra was trying hard to think of something, an opening, but right now, she was exhausted from swimming, still not properly able to use her Dragon Fire, and they still had to care for the two that couldn’t fight behind them.

“...Meet Jinn,” said Jisel, as if it was a normal introduction. “Isn’t my dragon wonderful?”

“He c-can’t be your d-dragon,” hissed Cessilia.

“Oh, right. He’s actually my dead brother’s... but he is still very much attached to me. And after all, who cares about the details? If I tell him to kill you, he will.”

“Who are you r-really?”

“Is that really what you care about right now, Princess?” said Jisel, raising an eyebrow. “You’re going to die here.”

“I want to know b-before I get rid of you.”

“Not today.”

Jisel then launched a new salvo of needles, but this time, Cessilia saw them coming. In an impressive movement, she swung her arm and grabbed all four right as they were about to hit her. Her glaring at Jisel hadn't changed; this time, if she wanted a real fight, that woman would have to stop trying to cheat. Jisel grimaced and stepped back. Either she wasn't confident in fighting Cessilia, or she preferred to see her killed by the soldiers or her dragon, it was hard to tell. She simply left the small lake at which they had arrived from via the opposite shore, never turning her back on the group of four, but also cautiously stepping back.

While Jisel wasn't engaging in a fight, there was a lot more to be worried about upfront. The first soldiers had already arrived at Tessandra, and she had to use her very best fighting skills to keep them at a distance. It wouldn't be enough, though. If she had been alone, she could have gone deeper into the crowd and fought with circular movements, but in this case, she still had to protect Nana and the King. Right behind her, Cessilia glanced at the situation ahead, and quickly pulled Ashen further out of the water, but closer to the cave's wall behind them.

“Nana, s-stay here,” she said, tightening Ashen's bandages again. “J-just watch the K-King for me, alright?”

“I understand,” nodded Nana.

Her voice was shaking, and she was visibly scared, but she was putting on a brave front, and that made Cessilia smile at her, loving the brave Nana even more.

“Put p-pressure on the injury,” added Cessilia, quickly showing her. “Th-the other side is b-blocked but he c-can't lose more b-blood, alright?”

“Yes!”

Happy to have something to be useful with, Naptunie put all her focus into applying her hands on the King's injury. She tried to ignore the blood that almost immediately stained her palms, or how pale the King was looking,

and simply focused, staring at it as if her gaze could keep the blood from flowing out.

Right after that, Cessilia got back up, and ran into battle next to Tessandra. She only had the needles she had just stolen from Jisel, but as an experienced fighter, any weapon in her hand was deadly. She was moving incredibly fast, and in such a perfect combo with her cousin, it was as if their fighting power had been tripled instead of doubled. The men were even reluctant to approach the deadly duo, as they seemed to quickly get rid of any opponent. The two of them were perfectly complementing each other, covering any blind spots, watching each other's back, and standing like an impenetrable wall between their opponents and the King. Their main issue was the number of fighters that kept coming at them, no matter how many they killed, and the dragon that was behind them, lying in wait but growling furiously. Cessilia was moving like a relentless tornado, swinging left and right, the two needles in each hand acting like sharp claws that sliced and stabbed her enemies in a deadly silence. Tessandra's style was much heavier and brutal. Her sword was drenched in blood, and she wasn't picky about her own precision; she was inflicting large injuries, chopping off limbs and rendering her opponents useless if not dead.

Both of them were keeping a close eye on the foreign dragon. It was their first time encountering an enemy dragon, but they both knew enough about those creatures to analyze what they saw. It was a large creature, but smaller than most dragons they knew. It wasn't adult size, more like a teen dragon, about the size of three men. It had the body of a water dragon, long and sleek, which explained how it had gotten there without trouble. While fighting, they had spotted boats stranded on the seashore, somewhere behind those men, further past the cave's large opening. Most of the people they fought were even a bit wet, and so was that dragon. Was that where it had been hidden all along? Underwater?

"...A bit big," grumbled Tessandra.

"His real owner's d-dead," nodded Cessilia. "He c-can't grow more, b-but..."

"Yeah. Still fucking big..."

Cessilia grimaced. Despite her poor choice of language, Tessandra was expressing both their thoughts. Fighting an enemy dragon was completely unexpected, and neither of them knew how they'd do that. The creature suddenly stopped growling, and seemed to be breathing in, preparing to breathe out. Tessandra swung her sword wide to keep the enemies at bay, and did just the same.

Both her and the dragon breathed out a large plume of fire at the same moment. Their flames hit each other, creating a massive heat wave in the cave. Dust fell from the walls and ceiling, making everyone cough and blink, but at least, Tessandra had countered the dragon's fire for now. It was bigger than hers, but with the distance, all they noticed was a strong smell of something burning and the temperature jumping up. The men under the area where the fires had collided were far less lucky. Others were still on fire, running before throwing themselves to the ground, and rolling in the sand to try and extinguish the flames. Tessandra was out of breath, though, and glaring at the beast that was growling back.

"How cute," chuckled Jisel. "You think you'll be able to keep my dragon at bay, Princesses? For how long? All you have is a sword, a useless Dorosef girl, and little to no energy left."

"Just you watch," grunted Tessandra. "We're saving you for last!"

Just as she said this, she kept fighting, pearls of sweat appearing on her forehead. The heat in the cave was less responsible for that than the monstrous amount of energy she put into her fight. She seemed a bit tired, but comparatively, the men fighting her in the cave, even as they tried to relay each other, were clearly unable to best her. Next to her, Cessilia was moving just as vividly, her green eyes going all over the place to try and find a solution. They were stuck between the cave's wall, the lake Jisel was standing on the other side of, and a large sea of men in front of them, with a dragon standing right in the middle of the cave entrance. They were slowly clearing their way, but the fact that Ashen couldn't move was keeping them from truly escaping this place. With the underwater passage being a huge no, they were basically stuck, unless they found a way to get rid of all their opponents...

“Useless?”

Unknown to the two cousins, Naptunie had been glaring at Jisel. She could endure a lot for her friends’ sake, but being called useless was too much for her. Suddenly, her little, black eyes circled the cave too, but her way of thinking was miles away from Cessilia’s. After a short moment, Nana pulled over two large, flat rocks with her leg, and quickly swapped them with her hands to put pressure on the King’s chest. Just as she had calculated, the weight was almost the same as what she had been applying all along. She then quickly moved to rinse her hands in the water, and ran toward Tessandra and Cessilia.

“Nana, what are you doing?! Get back!”

However, for once, Naptunie was not going to listen. In fact, she barely heard Tessandra at all. She was frowning, and gathering some stones around her, grinding them together quickly to create a little mound on a larger, flat stone.

“Useless, she says. How dare she call me useless?! She can call me a bookworm, weak, library rat, pedant, bookish, even brainish, but how dare that wretched vixen of a woman call me useless?! You’ll see if I am useless!”

She then got back on her feet, carrying her little mountain of freshly ground dust, and walked toward Tessandra.

“Prepare to fire!” she shouted.

Before Tessandra could even answer, Naptunie suddenly threw her dust in a large and wide arc, in front of them. Immediately grasping what was going on, Tessandra spat fire.

The reaction was much bigger than she had expected. From the small fire she had put out, as soon as it reached Nana’s dust, it spread in a wave of sparks and explosions, blowing exponentially bigger on their enemies. The deflagration was so progressive and large even Cessilia and Tessandra had to jump back to avoid getting injured themselves. The cave was suddenly filled with small booms, cracks appearing everywhere and the

force shaking the surroundings. Some stalactites even fell down, injuring more people. The damage done was considerable, and a bit frightening too. Once the smoke and dust began to clear, they saw the terrible injuries inflicted on their opponents, some had full body parts burned, or the flesh exposed in long bloody patches.

“Dang, Nana. ...You should get mad more often,” scoffed Tessandra.

“Just because I can’t wield a weapon doesn’t mean I can’t fight,” grumbled the young woman. “Sorry I didn’t notice before we had all the elements and conditions for a dust explosion. I knew the principles, but I never created one in real life.”

“Don’t apologize for being the smart one, Nana. I’m mind-blown!”

“C-can you do th-that again?”

“Not so soon.” Nana shook her head. “It’s dangerous, as it consumes the air and makes it harder to breathe. We might get intoxicated if we don’t wait a bit...”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Tessandra. “You already helped us a ton...”

She was telling the truth. In front of them, out of the dozens of fighters they had been facing, only a few had been spared by the explosions. If some only had minor injuries, their burns still seemed to be incredibly painful, and none were in a hurry to get back to fighting those women. Perhaps they also feared another wave of explosions, and they were not looking forward to running to the front line. It didn’t solve their problem, though. Cessilia glanced back. Ashen seemed stable from there, but there was no telling when his heart would give up from the blood loss. Only a few minutes had passed since they had emerged from the lake, but it wasn’t enough.

“...I need t-to take c-care of him,” she muttered to Tessandra.

She couldn’t focus on taking care of the King while she was busy fighting. Tessandra nodded. Naptunie’s attack had done quite enough damage, but Jinn the dragon had gotten out unscathed, and quite mad too. That thing was getting closer and closer and soon, it’d be the bigger problem at hand.

Even if she could stand a few minutes against a dragon this size, Tessandra knew the fighters would stab her the second she turned her back on them to focus on the beast.

“...You think the big guy could show up now, by any chance?”

“I d-don’t know... Krai!” Cessilia called out, as loud as she could. “K-Krai!”

Her voice echoed in the cave, but there was no telling how far out it had gone. They had left the dragon outside the Outer Wall, and there was no indication of how long it would take for Krai to get down there, if it even realized something was wrong. It wasn’t bound to Cessilia, but to her father, which meant it could only know of what happened to her if it was close enough to smell or see it. Now, it would only be a matter of minutes before they knew whether the Black Dragon was coming to their rescue or not.

Meanwhile, they had no choice but to resume fighting. Nana stepped back, leaving the two Princesses to fight, but it did not look good for them. There were still too many fighters left, and for many, their injuries seemed to ignite even more desire to get rid of the women who had caused them. Some shouted something about their pride as Yekara, which explained a lot and, if needed, confirmed their identities. The dragon was getting closer too. Twice, it exchanged firepower with Tessandra, and the second time, her arm got burned, immediately covered in green scales. She grimaced, shaking her arm as if to get rid of the pain.

“Cessi. We have to do something, or we’re going to end up as burned meat.”

Cessilia turned to Jisel.

“C-call back your d-dragon.”

“Oh no,” chuckled Jisel. “I think I’m going to watch him get rid of you.”

Cessilia clicked her tongue in annoyance, but suddenly changed direction. She ran back toward the lake, as fast as she could, only having one target in mind: Jisel. When her opponent realized what she was going to do, she

began to step back, crawling back against the cave's wall, hoping to get out of there. Either she was out of weapons or knew she wouldn't be able to stand against Cessilia. So she didn't even try to put up a fight and only tried to run away, obviously scared. Both she and Cessilia had made the same journey to get there, and they were both tired, but Cessilia had a few more minutes to recuperate, and she had longer legs too. Watching the pursuit from afar, it was clear she'd be able to catch her opponent. Moreover, she had to act quickly as Tessandra had been left alone to protect the others.

She suddenly grabbed Jisel, making the woman cry out, and quickly put her needle under her throat, threatening to stab it.

"T-tell your dragon to b-back off."

"No," chuckled Jisel. "I told you. I want to see Jinn get rid of you!"

Cessilia frowned and pressed her weapon a bit deeper against her throat, but that smirk on Jisel's face wouldn't go away. She wasn't lying. She wouldn't give in, no matter how much Cessilia injured or threatened her. Frustrated, she looked up, and began to walk forward, to at least get closer to Tessandra.

"B-back off!" she shouted to the fighters. "Or I'll k-kill her!"

"We don't care about that woman!"

"Who gives a damn about the King's former whore?!"

It was clear those men didn't give a damn about Jisel's life. She scoffed next to Cessilia.

"Typical of men, isn't it? Getting rid of you without blinking once they are done using you..."

Cessilia ignored her. While the soldiers didn't seem to give a damn about Jisel's life, that wasn't the case for everyone in this cave. To their surprise, Jinn, the young dragon, was growling in Cessilia's direction but, as she stepped forward, it was cautiously retreating.

"You idiot!" shouted Jisel. "Don't care about me, kill them!"

“D-dragons share the emotions of their o-owner,” said Cessilia. “Looks like your b-brother cared about you.”

Jisel grunted in frustration. Regardless of her relationship with her brother, she was now frustrated at Jinn’s reluctance to attack. The dragon kept retreating, its maw closed, completely ignoring Tessandra and looking worried. It was now even past the cave’s entrance, and with the dragon gone, Tessandra was finally able to gain some ground.

“Good job, Cessi,” she grunted between the clashing of swords. “Nana, prepare more powder!”

“But—”

“Just do it!”

Naptunie obeyed, and went back to grinding more powder, brows furrowed and focused on her task. Meanwhile, Cessilia kept advancing forward, making sure Jinn would keep backing off. Despite Jisel’s continuous shouting for the dragon to attack, Jinn seemed hesitant, almost worried, its head low and its butt perched up. It was still growling, but only at Cessilia, focusing on her hostage. The dragon was truly worried for Jisel, so much so that it had forgotten the rest of the fight. That was a huge opportunity for Cessilia and the others. The fighters, shaken to see the dragon retreating, were having trouble keeping up with the fight. With so many of them injured or dead already, and their biggest firepower currently backing off like a scared kitten, they were unsure what to do next. Some had even begun retreating, although they wouldn’t go past the cave’s entrance.

“What are you waiting for, you cowards?” suddenly shouted Jisel, to the men this time. “Attack! It’s only two women!”

Their pride wounded, the Yekara seemed to wake up. A few of them ran toward the two women, and Cessilia had to step back this time, as she wouldn’t be able to fight comfortably and keep Jisel as her hostage. They had bought enough time, though.

Naptunie stood up, with her powder again, and this time, she waited for Tessandra's instructions.

“Throw it as high and far as you can! Toward the entrance!”

It took only a few seconds for the smart Naptunie to understand what Tessandra was aiming to do, but it certainly didn't make it any easier. She put all the powder into a ripped piece of fabric from her own clothing, forming a little bundle in a ball shape, and with all of her strength, she threw it just as Tessandra had said, far and high.

Tessandra chose her moment very precisely. She threw flames right when the little ball was about to hit the ceiling of the cave. The explosions boomed right away, shaking the whole cave. This time, the men panicked, running away from the first explosions as fast as they could. This was the lesser issue, though. Just as Tessandra had planned, the explosions reached the entrance of the cave, shaking the rocks that formed its walls. Perhaps dust had accumulated there, because the explosions grew exponentially above them, and everything began to collapse.

“Jinn!” Jisel shouted, suddenly panicked. “Run!”

They had no time to see what happened to the dragon. Tessandra turned around, grabbed Nana by the collar, and just like Cessilia with Jisel, they ran toward the cave's wall, hiding from the collapsing rocks. The whole cave trembled and shook, as if they had provoked a real earthquake, with large stones falling, crushing everything under them. It didn't last long, but it was a real nightmare, a deafening ruckus.

When things suddenly calmed down, they finally dared to look up. The entrance of the cave was now completely blocked by a mountain of rocks, with some men crushed underneath.

“...Congrats,” scoffed Jisel, “you've just buried us alive.”

Cessilia and Tessandra sighed, getting back on their feet and wiping the dust off their faces and shoulders.

“Are you alright, Nana?”

“I think... Oh, that was scary...”

They all quickly surveyed their surroundings, but everything was now quiet. Half of the cave had collapsed on its opening, making its ceiling look much lower and blocking the entrance. There was still a large opening, at the very top, but it was too high and dangerous to climb. The new little mountain of rocks was most likely very unstable.

Naptunie’s face paled as she noticed the red stains under some of the rocks. Even if some of the Yekara people had managed to flee, it was clear a lot had died in the collapse.

“Jinn!” Jisel called, immediately stepping forward. “Jinn! Jinn, are you alright?”

A weak growl answered her. She let out a faint sigh, relieved. Then, she suddenly turned to the other three women, furious.

“You almost killed my dragon!”

“So you d-do care about him,” muttered Cessilia.

“Of course! He’s my dragon! And now he’s injured while you’ve trapped me with you insane women!”

“You’d rather be under the rocks?” retorted Tessandra. “I’m sure we can find you a spot!”

“You almost killed us all!”

“Well, we tried to get out in a more peaceful way, but it didn’t work out. You’re welcome, by the way. You should thank Cessi. If it was me, I would have left you where you stood to die.”

Tessandra then walked away, going toward the rocks to try and find an opening, or make sure none of their opponents were still able to fight. Meanwhile, Jisel furiously turned to Cessilia.

“Why did you save me? I didn’t ask nor want to be saved by you! What is wrong with you, always playing the good girl? You could have let me die!”

“...M-maybe I should have,” said Cessilia. “You d-did injure and b-betray Ashen.”

“He betrayed me first,” Jisel retorted, full of spite.

“...B-but when I heard that you actually c-cared for your d-dragon before you g-got to safety, it ch-changed my mind.”

That sentence seemed to shock Jisel. She went mute, truly at a loss for words this time, simply glaring at Cessilia. The Princess had just saved her life, and she was now trapped with them in this cave. Her frustration was all over her face.

Meanwhile, Tessandra came back, sighing.

“The good news is, we’re not completely trapped, so it’s not like we’re going to run out of air. The bad news is, I don’t think we can get out of here by ourselves. Those rocks are completely unstable, we might kill ourselves if we try climbing up.”

“Great,” scoffed Jisel.

Cessilia couldn’t be bothered with that woman anymore, though. Turning her back on Jisel and Tessandra, she went back to Ashen to check on his state.

“...Is he going to be alright?” asked Naptunie.

Nana herself didn’t look alright. She was tired from the whole day, one of her buns coming undone. She had dark dust all over her face from the explosions, and unlike Cessilia and Tessandra, she didn’t have any scales to cover up the many scratches she got. Still, she wasn’t complaining at all, and instead, was down on her knees on the other side of the King, worrying about him. Cessilia sighed.

“...I hope he c-can hold on.”

She then got up, and went back to the little lake, observing the various plants and little submarine elements there, looking for something she could potentially use. Naptunie went with her, immediately helping her identify some of the algae.

Meanwhile, Tessandra kept staring at Jisel, her fists on her hips.

“Well,” she said, “at least now that we’ve got some free time ahead of us, perhaps you could finally answer some of the damn questions burning my tongue!”

“Why would I?” shrugged Jisel, crossing her arms. “I don’t see why I would cooperate with you at all.”

“Of course. You can also stay in your corner, and bleed to death after I cut off a leg or two,” retorted Tessandra.

Jisel grimaced. Although she was fine with dying, she probably wasn’t fond of being tortured. She glanced toward Cessilia. The Princess was already doing everything she could to save her lover. She and Nana had gathered small herbs, and fabrics from their clothes that were still more or less clean, and were even using Jisel’s long needles to do what they could on the injury.

“T-Tessandra,” Cessilia called, “I’m g-going to need some f-fire.”

“...You can’t do it too?” asked Naptunie, a bit surprised.

“No. N-not anymore.”

Naptunie regretted asking. She watched silently as Tessandra created a little fire for them, which they could use to sterilize the needles and heat the water, but also to warm them up a bit. They were close to the water, and since night had fallen, so had the temperature. Not only that but all of their clothes were drenched and torn. The fire was quite welcome.

“...Do you think Sir Dragon will find us?” Nana asked.

“He’ll probably start searching for us sometime soon,” nodded Tessandra. “At the latest, he’ll get worried in the morning if he doesn’t see us in the bedroom. He wouldn’t miss his breakfast...”

“...I d-don’t know if we c-can wait until th-then.”

Their eyes all went to Ashen. He seemed to be barely breathing, and he had been unconscious for a while. The amount of blood spread on his torso was impressive, if not scary. Because Cessilia was currently taking care

of the wound, it was all exposed. Even though she was helping out, Naptunie couldn't help but grimace and kept trying to look away any chance she could. Cessilia sighed and resumed trying to take care of the wound.

"Luckily, it d-didn't damage any v-vital organs. His abdominal m-muscles did help s-stop the b-blade from going too d-deep."

"Thank the gods for abs..." muttered Tessandra. "...Can you save him?"

"I d-don't know." Cessilia shook her head. "I... I don't think he'll b-be able to survive if he s-spends the whole n-night without p-proper treatment, Tessa."

Her cousin nodded. She had suspected as much. Anyone could have seen how bad that wound was. It can take a long time for a man to die, but given everything Ashen had gone through that day and the lack of medical tools, his life span was getting shorter every minute.

"...Call your dragon to dig us out," Tessa ordered Jisel.

"Are you joking? First, he's wounded! Second, I don't see why I should help you out. And lastly, in case you haven't noticed, there's no way my dragon alone will be able to get us out. You've seen his size, Jinn's not even an adult. Did you see that blockage you created? There's no way my dragon can dig that out on his own!"

Tessandra grimaced. It was annoying, but realistically, Jisel probably wasn't lying about the last part. Her dragon was large, but that mountain of rocks blocking the exit was much bigger.

"...Let's j-just try to k-keep calling Krai," said Cessilia. "We c-can't stay here, Tessa. The sea will p-probably rise up b-before morning."

"It shouldn't get too high," added Nana, glancing at the lake, "but it will be a bit of a problem for His Majesty..."

Not only that, but the water would most likely cause the rocks to move toward them, which was dangerous.

“...Fine,” groaned Tessandra. “I’ll see if I can find an opening or move some of those stupid rocks without risking us dying under a landslide...”

She walked away and toward the rocks, hands on her hips, probably evaluating the ground. Meanwhile, Cessilia resumed taking care of Ashen for a while. Naptunie cautiously glanced to the side, but Jisel had simply taken a seat by the fire, and kept her eyes toward the entrance of the cave.

For a while, no one talked. They could hear the waves of the sea from afar, and a few men’s voices too. There were probably survivors on the other side of the collapsed rocks, and if there were any on this side, Tessandra would surely finish them. She had gone over the rocks, trying to climb some or judge how risky some were, and they’d hear her swear out loud sometimes, but she always fell safely back on her feet. Cessilia trusted her cousin entirely, and was able to fully focus on Ashen, not even glancing back once. Naptunie had gone to retrieve some seaweed they had deemed useful, and had even caught some wild shrimp they could eat later if needed. It was as if everyone needed to keep themselves busy, despite how tired they were.

The only one not doing anything was Jisel, staring at the fire with an empty expression, her arms around her knees.

“...Your d-dragon was red.”

Cessilia’s words finally got her out of her daydream. Jisel glanced at the Princess, who was trying to sew some part of her injured lover’s body.

“...I’ve only heard of one d-dragon that was red.”

Jisel didn’t answer, her eyes going back on the fire. From time to time, they would hear Jinn’s faint growls from the other side of the rocks. The young dragon seemed frustrated as well, but it was very much alive.

“My p-parents told me about it,” Cessilia continued as if she was talking to herself. “About what happened b-before I was born, when my older b-brother was just a b-baby. My father had a b-brother that k-killed a lot of p-people. He t-tried to kill my g-grandfather and become the Emperor. He was a t-truly twisted man, and he d-died back then.”

Naptunie, a bit confused, glanced at Jisel. That woman was now staring at Cessilia with an expression full of hatred. She definitely knew something about what Cessilia was talking about. Naptunie looked again at Cessilia in front of her. She was still not looking at Jisel, and incredibly calm.

“...Are you the d-daughter of my uncle Vrehan?” she finally asked.

“No,” retorted Jisel. “Hadn’t you already heard that from the Hashat? My father was from the Rain Tribe.”

“B-but you have a d-dragon.”

“I never lied,” retorted Jisel. “Not to Hephrael, and not even to Ashen... My mother was a princess of the Dragon Empire, my father a man of the Rain Tribe.”

“P-princesses never—”

“Passed on dragons to their sons?” scoffed Jisel. “Well, that’s because they never tried coupling them with someone from the Rain Tribe, did they? Do you really think all those legends about our mermaid ancestors and a mythical water dragon were only folktales?”

This time, Cessilia raised her eyes to look at Jisel, confused. Jisel smirked, and glanced around, until her eyes found Tessandra.

“...Your cousin. She’s an only child?”

“She has a l-little sister.”

“But no male siblings... If she did, he probably would have a water dragon too.”

Cessilia was shocked. Her hands stopped moving over Ashen, and she also glanced back at her cousin. If she hadn’t met Jisel, she would have never thought there was more to their genes than the fact that her mother was a bit special.

“...That bastard was my uncle too,” Jisel suddenly blurted out, her eyes going back to the fire. “As you guessed, we were indeed related. My mother was only unlucky to have been born as one of that piece of shit’s

sisters. I don't have memories of living in that place, but she told me a bit. She was living like she was invisible, only obeying her brother's orders to survive. Not making any waves, getting the little bits of happiness where she could. When he suddenly showed her an ounce of kindness by gifting her a male slave, she was all happy about it, like an idiot."

"...Your father was a slave?"

"Weren't all Rain people?" scoffed Jisel. "He was caught as a boy, and sold to entertain the whims of a princess a few years older than him. In all ways, of course. He couldn't say anything back to her, so he tried to use her to survive. He obeyed her every whim and made her attached. While she fell in love with her toy, he loathed her more and more each day. Their relationship was violent even when she was still his master, yet he showed her just the right amount of attention and kindness for her to never complain, and always forgive him. The typical romance tragedy for a love-deprived woman. I was born of their love-hate relationship first."

"...You used to live in the Imperial P-Palace?"

"Like a rat, yes. I hid all the time. I knew pissing the wrong person off could get me killed, so I did all I could to hide my very existence, and so did my mother. Everything was completely ruined by the war, though. You probably know better than I do what happened... When... your father killed him, my mother and that slave of hers she was in love with, fled from the palace to here. She got pregnant with my younger brother somewhere along the way. Life as refugees turned out to be... even worse than the one we had at the palace. My father took over as the monster."

She had a bitter smirk on as she stared at the fire, her eyes lost in her memories.

"Once free of his status as a slave, he became more violent than ever toward my mother. The difficulties were easier to blame on that woman than on himself. Although he never hurt us, my brother and I hated him alike. One day, he killed our mother, almost by accident. The wrong hit and that was it. What happened then traumatized my younger brother... and that's when we met Jinn."

“His d-dragon?”

“Jinn arrived out of nowhere, but my brother knew it was his dragon. I knew where my parents came from, I put the pieces together. My father, as well, of course. He did not like that his son was suddenly stronger than him, nor the reminder of whose blood we carried. Junian was too young for us to leave our father, so just like our mother did, we had to endure. Until we were both old enough to leave, to find a place of our own.”

“...What happened to your b-brother?”

Jisel sighed. She was incredibly calm and seemingly detached from the story she was telling. Almost as if it wasn't her own, or she had absolutely no feelings about it.

“A dragon isn't like a human. It can't be told to shut up and behave. So, each time my brother got upset, Jinn would retaliate against my father. He had the same fear-anger relationship as we had toward our father, even when he grew much bigger. My stupid father thought getting more violent toward my brother would make Jinn behave. Of course, he was wrong. One day, Jinn injured him. Badly. I remember leaving him there and going to bed hoping that man would be dead the next day. As it turns out, neither of them woke up.”

A chill went down Naptunie's spine. She didn't like that woman one bit, but listening to her story was still terribly painful. She could sort of understand what had happened, and it was frightening to put the pieces together. It was such a horrible story. Yet, Jisel was completely placid, and distant.

“I found myself alone with a dragon. Jinn was attached to me, of course, but I knew he'd draw attention. So I sent him away for a while, and tried to find my way into the Eastern Kingdom... I knew my skin color would draw attention, and I was young, alone, and worse, a woman. I survived, however I could. Whatever I had to do to survive, I did. I learned not to trust anyone. Especially men... They all betray you in the end.”

She suddenly turned her head to glare at Ashen. Cessilia sighed but did not say anything. Although she had played a large part in this, she still

knew this issue was between Jisel and Ashen; what had happened between them was not something she could intrude on.

“...Not all men,” Naptunie interjected, very invested in the story. “Your little brother didn’t betray you.”

“Yeah, but he never grew to be a man.”

Another long silence followed. Beyond Jisel’s story, Cessilia was thinking about Jinn the dragon. Its mere existence meant there was a lot more to her mother’s tribe than they had initially thought. She had never thought she would see water dragons other than in her family, but as it turned out, the Rain Tribe and the Dragon Empire’s Imperial Family had a lot in common, enough for their blood to be able to create more water dragons. She thought about Jisel’s words from earlier. Would a male sibling of Tessandra really have a water dragon too? If a man of the Rain Tribe and an Imperial Princess could produce a son with a water dragon, didn’t that mean the Rain Tribe’s genes only reacted when paired with someone from the Imperial Family? Cessilia’s thoughts painfully drifted to Cece, her own dragon.

She still wouldn’t have had Cece if it wasn’t for her mother and her encounter with a Water God. Cessilia had always known that story was more than a simple tale, but now, she felt like she was touching something even deeper about her own family. She felt a bit proud, even. At the same time, she missed Cece more than ever. If she had been here, none of this would have happened... Cece would have been big enough to get them out of there in a blink, while growling happily like she always did.

She froze, suddenly hearing it. Dragon growls. Cessilia jumped on her feet and ran toward the rocks.

“...D-do you hear that?”

“Is this Sir Dragon?” asked Nana.

“...No,” said Tessandra, a smile on her face.

Indeed, the dragon growls didn't sound like Krai's. They could hear Jinn growling against another dragon, with a more high-pitched growl than Krai, and male voices panicking out there.

"What the heck is going on?!" a male voice shouted. "Where the heck did that brat dragon come from?!"

"...Darsan?" frowned Tessandra.

"Cessi!" shouted a second male voice. "Cessi! Tessa! Are you in there?"

"K-Kassian!" Cessilia exclaimed, beaming.

A large ruckus followed, and they both had to quickly retreat as the mountain of rocks moved brutally. For a while, everything began to collapse on the other side, and after a few seconds, a very large silhouette of another, larger water dragon appeared at the top, with magnificent silver scales, and two men's silhouettes on its back.