

Chapter 26

The space wasn't as confined as before, but it certainly wasn't ideal to fight twenty people at once, either. Everything was happening at an incredible speed, and from the very first second, both Ashen and Cessilia quickly realized Yebekh hadn't exaggerated his men's strength; they were nothing like the ones they had fought earlier. The amount of pure strength used in that battle was unbelievable, and each clash of swords was incredibly brutal. Soon, the two lovers were forced to stand back to back to protect each other, and had to move quickly to keep up with the attacks coming from all sides.

Their enemies were also experienced enough to not let the space become an issue; they scattered around their opponents, sometimes leaving others to attack first, before attacking themselves. Ashen and Cessilia didn't have a moment of rest, and were even struggling to keep up at times. Cessilia feared for Ashen's life more than once. He only received minor injuries, but the strain put on his body was bound to become an issue sooner or later. Even she had to use all of her strength to keep those people at bay, and several times, she grunted loudly. The first body didn't hit the ground until several minutes later, their opponents incredibly tenacious. Moreover, even if the previous fights had been easy, Ashen and Cessilia had already fought dozens of fights against several people before coming here, while those fighters had obviously been waiting here all along. The tiredness was starting to show in their movements, and they had to gather all their strength to keep up. She even stopped listening to the dragon growls that had been informing her of what was going on outside. She could only focus on what was going on here, if she wanted to survive this.

“Cessi!”

Suddenly, a second of distraction and a wrong angle put her in danger. She saw the blade, slicing past her skin, and felt Ashen's large hand pulling her in the opposite direction. Cessilia gasped, shocked herself, and violently landed against the opposite wall. Her reflexes taking over, she got back on her feet, but Ashen was already in front, protecting her while they had been pushed against the wall.

"Sorry," she muttered, mad at herself.

"Don't," he grunted. "...Are you alright?"

Cessilia nodded. She only briefly glanced at her injured arm, deep indeed, but the silver scales were already taking over. She resumed the fight, before it hit her. ...Silver?

She kept fighting, trying hard not to make the same mistake twice and risk putting Ashen in danger, but tried to glance at her arm again. The scales weren't silver, but a dark gray. Had she dreamt it again? It was the second time. Before, when she had injured her palm, she had thought for a second that the little scales in her hand had been of a shiny tone, before realizing it was as ash-dark as before. What was wrong with her? She tried to push those dark thoughts away and resumed the fight, even angrier because of her mistake. Ashen had had to withhold their opponents in her stead for a few seconds, but those could have been fatal to him. In fact, he was already covered in sweat and grunting. Luckily, their armor was doing an amazing job of protecting them every time the enemy managed to hit them; the shiny scales seemed to deflect each blade, the shock barely felt on the skin underneath. Cessilia was surprised at how light they were compared to their defensive power. The weapons weren't getting dull either, and followed each of their movements with incredible precision. Cessilia had never been too fond of swords, but the ones she was holding now might just be the ones to change that. There was clearly a difference in the craft of the Dragon Empire's blacksmiths.

The armor and their weapons might be what kept them going for so long. There was a huge difference between fighters who held perfect weapons and armor for their needs, of an incredibly good craft, and those who held standard ones. It was as if Ashen and Cessilia were fighting with legend-

level weaponry, while the Yekara soldiers only held high-value ones. Their enemies' weapons were starting to fail them, giving them a slight advantage. Two men lost their lives shortly after their armor was broken open by Ashen's heavy blade, and Cessilia swung around at record speed to get two more men's weak points, slicing their napes without an ounce of hesitation. She and Ashen were in a perfectly synchronized dance of death, and instead of getting more and more tired, they were getting gradually more dangerous. Cessilia's eyes had transformed into a dark-green reptilian stare, scaring her enemies before coldly killing them. She truly was the War God's daughter, moving around so swiftly while sowing death around her. Ashen's movements were just as beautiful, but much more of a brutal force, like a dragon relentlessly attacking with all fangs out, ripping flesh apart and violently breaking bones.

Slowly but surely, they were reducing the numbers of their opponents. Each time a Yekara warrior fell, the remaining ones felt as if the strength of their enemies doubled. Even for experienced fighters, there was a fine line between amazement and fear. They knew the duo they were fighting weren't ordinary fighters, but they couldn't help but be bewildered by the woman's incredibly precise moves and the King's colossal strength. Even Lord Yebekh was left to watch in awe, mouth open at the two warriors, until he realized it was his men on the ground.

“What are you doing? Kill them! You incapable bastards! You call yourselves our best fighters?! You better kill them, or you'll die!”

The weakness of that threat had no effect on his men, who had already been fighting for their lives for the past several minutes. Now that they had been reduced to less than half their original number, they had no time to rest at all. Far from looking overwhelmed and outnumbered, Cessilia and Ashen looked like they were making a point of keeping their opponents from catching any break at all.

Suddenly, another loud growl resonated, but much closer this time, sounding like it was coming from all around them. Even worse, the tower they were in brutally shook, as if an earthquake was coming from above. The fight stopped, all fighters looking up with a common reaction.

Cessilia's heart went cold. That was Jinn. He had climbed onto that area of the castle. She and Ashen were luckily in the middle of the room, away from the windows, but that wouldn't help them much if that dragon decided to destroy the entire tower...

"That foolish dragon!" shouted Lord Yebekh, glaring at the ceiling. "Get off the tower, you useless bastard of a reptile!"

Cessilia glared at the man. How could he shout at the dragon like that?! No dragon she knew would have let a human insult them like that without biting their head off in retaliation if they understood and nobody stopped them. Yet, Yebekh kept vociferating at Jinn as if it was just a bad runt.

"...What d-did you do to that dragon?" she hissed, glaring past the fighters at their master.

The man scoffed.

"Me? Nothing... As it turns out, its master is nothing but a stupid wench who knows she needs us to survive. Her dragon obeys me now."

Cessilia didn't believe that for a single second. Dragons couldn't simply be given to someone like one would change a pet's owner. Krai was her father's dragon, and although it had come along with her, the Black Dragon couldn't understand her like it would have her father. It wasn't her dragon, it was merely reflecting her father's protective feelings for her. She knew a part of the reason her father had sent Krai with her wasn't just for her security, but so he would miss his child less; he had already done that countless times with his wife. A dragon didn't completely mirror its owner's feelings, but it could understand them better than anyone. Even if Jinn's owner had died, her brother's love for Jisel couldn't be simply overthrown by a man's orders.

"...You threatened her," hissed Cessilia, angry. "You used Jisel to manipulate her dragon!"

Yebekh laughed.

"Manipulate? This woman is so foolish and yet cunning herself, I would hardly call that manipulation! ...Did I do anything different than you,

Princess? That Black Dragon isn't yours either, is it? Ha! How ironic, isn't it? For a bastard prince to have found you, of all people. You're the dragonless Princess, so useless you have to come accompanied by the War God's Dragon instead of your own! Aren't we both borrowing someone else's dragon?"

"Don't you dare c-compare me to you," she hissed. "I am still a Dragon Master. I am—"

"You're nothing but the most useless of your parents' children!" he shouted. "Of all the prospective brides he could have sent the King, he sent a dragonless, powerless one! How pathetic, Princess. Nothing you own isn't inherited from your parents, yet you dare to lecture me? I am the Lord of the Yekara Clan, the most powerful Clan Leader of this Kingdom! I fought and I killed for this position! And soon, I will be the most powerful man in this entire Kingdom!"

"...Dream on," groaned Ashen. "I'm never letting that happen, Yebekh. I'll have your head sliced off your damn neck and hung on the castle walls before the sun sets!"

"Fierce as ever, King Ashen," laughed Yebekh. "But you are no more deserving than your partner here. You were nothing but your father's discarded runt, and as expected, you grew up to be a barking mutt!"

Ashen swung his sword left, in a smooth and perfectly controlled movement, pointing at his enemy's throat, although he was still too many steps away to cut it off.

"Keep talking, Yebekh. I won't be swayed by your words anymore. You're only good at slithering your way into places of power and then hiding behind someone, aren't you? Let me guess. You were about to do the very same thing with my brother. He's of no use to you, after all. Once you get rid of me, you could put yourself on the throne, but no. Instead, you'd rather choose your pawn and hide behind him, then change when it is comfortable for you."

"You have no idea what you're talking about," crowed Yebekh, stepping forward. "Men like you, like your father, are nothing but pathetic! Figures

for the people to watch, but you have no idea about true power, the power to lead men, the power to keep these citizens in control!”

A feminine chuckle stopped his rant. Furious, his eyes went to Cessilia, who had a smile on.

“What are you finding so funny, Princess?!” he shouted.

“You.”

He was about to say something, most likely some insult, but Cessilia stepped up first, pushing the tip of her blade against the nearest soldier’s chest, with a glare of warning, having the man cautiously step back.

“You know n-nothing about the citizens of this Kingdom,” Cessilia calmly said. “You’re right. You are no King. You’re no leader, either. You’re nothing b-but a vicious snake.”

“You—! You wench!”

“...Ashen won’t have any p-problem dealing with you,” she muttered.

Yebekh’s face was gradually becoming deformed by rage, but that only made Ashen happier, a smile appearing on his face.

“You... You’re no Princess! You’re nothing but a little wench!” he shouted.

“No, you snakeface,” grinned Ashen, raising his sword again. “She’s a queen. My Queen.”

He swung his sword, this time slicing one of Yebekh’s remaining men in two. The fight resumed, even fiercer than before. Even if it only looked like insults had been exchanged, the truth was that both Cessilia and Ashen had been able to catch a break thanks to that. This was the bit of energy they had needed to fight even harder than before. The remaining fighters were soon down to five, then only four, then three, all of them growing visibly wary of the unstoppable couple.

Cessilia and Ashen weren’t unscathed. Cuts had appeared on the parts of their bodies that weren’t covered by the armor, and they had blood, sweat, and dust covering the previously shiny scales. Their muscles were sore

from two days of relentless fighting, and they had one too many internal injuries already. If anything, they finally seemed human while fighting, but there was a silent grace to the passion they put into the fight. They didn't seem to swing their weapons so effortlessly, but their fights were more admirable, given how the pair was working together to get rid of their opponents. In the end, they still found ways to get the upper hand. Not because they were physically stronger, but because they kept acting like a perfect combo, trained by the very best, using the best techniques, flawless moves, and sharp senses to best their opponents. And they did.

When the last of Yebekh's men got down on their knees, Ashen made a point of staring right into the Lord's eyes while mercilessly slicing that last throat. Cessilia was a bit out of breath too, standing next to him with her eyes riveted on the ceiling, listening for more dragon growls. She was standing so close her back was touching his arm, each feeling the other's presence without needing to look.

Yebekh had witnessed the whole fight, yet his eyes still turned red with rage while staring at the bodies layered between the duo and him, as if realizing the truth only now. Ashen swung his sword and got rid of the excess blood.

"...You're next, Yebekh," he hissed.

"Oh, no," chuckled the Lord with a sadistic smile. "Did you forget, my lord? I am not the one competing for the crown."

Shocked, Ashen's eyes turned to the throne, just in time to see his adopted brother jumping toward him, sword first. Ashen only had the reflex to push Cessilia out of the way, while Rohin's sword violently stabbed his shoulder.

"Ashen!"

Cessilia's scream echoed in the tower like a thunderbolt. They had both made the mistake to completely disregard the one-legged man in the room, as opposed to all the warriors they had fought before. She hadn't even thought that adopted brother of his still had the strength to stand up, let alone to launch an attack. Yet, Ashen's blood did splatter on her face,

while she clearly witnessed Rohin's evil grin. That man had put on the prosthesis they had seen before when they weren't watching, and was now very clearly able to stand and face them. He was out of breath, but visibly very proud of the injury he had just caused to Ashen.

"That's it," he said with a rugged voice. "...I told you I'd get back at you, brother."

Cessilia wanted to run to Ashen, but she felt something was wrong before she could put her finger on it. The injury on Ashen's shoulder was deep and long, but it shouldn't have impaired him. Yet, she clearly saw her lover stagger, and have trouble getting back on his feet. Above them, as if to echo the dramatic situation, Jinn growled again. Its claws appeared at one of the windows, crushing the stone frame. Ashen glanced that way, before his eyes went back to his brother, holding his shoulder.

"...Poison," he hissed.

"Yes, brother," chuckled Rohin. "I know, it's not very fair, but... I needed a little help to make this fight a bit more balanced."

Another scary sound of crumbling stones echoed above them; a portion of the tower made a very worrying sound, making all four of them look up. Jinn growled again, obviously trying to dig its way into a tower half as small as it. After a second, Yebekh chuckled nervously.

"...I think you're the one he wants, Princess. That dragon is desperate to kill you, and save his mistress!"

Cessilia barely heard him. Her heart was torn between Ashen's injury, and the growling dragon outside. Even if it was meant to be against her, she wasn't insensitive to Jinn's distress. Dragons were a part of her, after all, and she could tell the young dragon's despair.

"...Go."

She turned her head to Ashen, who was gathering his senses, clenching his fists around his sword's handle.

"Ashen..."

“Go, Cessilia. I got this, and you need to calm that dragon down. I can handle these two bastards, but if this place collapses, we will all be dead for nothing.”

She knew he was right, but she was still reluctant to leave; another growl and stone-breaking sound made the decision for her, though. She carefully stepped back, getting behind Ashen, her eyes watching the crumbled window already. If she could get Jinn to follow her, Ashen and this room would be safe, but she didn't want to abandon him to face his adopted brother and Lord Yebekh alone, after he had been poisoned...

“Just go,” he insisted calmly. “I trust you... I love you.”

Cessilia's heart dropped. His words were exactly what she needed. Yes, they trusted each other, and they could rely on the other. They were no longer once-strangers. She clenched her fists, and quickly, stepped up to him, putting a quick kiss on his shoulder before running to the door behind them.

“...I trust you too,” she muttered, before running out of the room.

She had one objective in mind: find Jisel to stop Jinn. Or at least draw the dragon as far away as possible from the throne room it was about to destroy. Cessilia tried to remember the castle's complex map. She had to be somewhere she could catch Jinn's attention, big enough for it not to crumble right away. She suddenly remembered. The room of the first banquet was on the same level. Cessilia ran, staying close to the windows. She was trying to catch sight or hear another dragon's growl, but the ruckus outside was just too much to hear anything else. Jinn was still perilously climbing and growling, as it didn't look like the dragon had noticed her leaving that room.

Finally, Cessilia reached the large, oval banquet hall and ran to the balcony where she could see the dragon on the nearby roof. She whistled, as loud as she could, finally getting Jinn's attention. The Red Dragon turned its head to her, looking confused, while Cessilia carefully retreated, ready. It didn't take more than a few seconds for Jinn to react and, in two jumps it landed on the roof above her, while Cessilia ran back inside.

“...Are you done playing with my dragon?” suddenly said a calm voice.

Cessilia turned around, just in time to see Jisel closing the large doors behind her, with a slight close-lipped smile.

“Jisel,” groaned Cessilia.

“Yeah,” she answered. “...See, Princess, perhaps you should have killed me after all.”

“I gave you a ch-chance to g-go,” said Cessilia.

“I know,” sighed Jisel. “...Sadly, that’s not much of a choice for me.”

Cessilia frowned. That woman was an enigma to her. A part of her acknowledged how similar they were, yet so different too. Both with dragons that weren’t theirs, trying to find a place for their broken identities. Both carrying the dragon blood, without having their own dragon...

The red-haired woman slowly walked up to the balcony, opposite to Cessilia, where Jinn jumped to meet her. The dragon growled softly, a kind of growl Cessilia knew all too well, that showed affection to its favorite human. Jisel turned her back to the young dragon, but Jinn growled again, and gently nudged her shoulder with its snout. She sighed, and finally raised a hand to pet the red scales. The dragon growled again in appreciation, rubbing against her hand and closing its eyes.

“Why d-didn’t you run?” Cessilia asked, confused. “My b-brother saved you once, but you chose t-to ally yourself with the Yekara. Again.”

“Where would I run to?” Jisel scoffed. “You’re mistaken, Princess. You think I’m free, but this whole continent is my prison. There is no place for a woman like me. Both the Dragon Empire and the Eastern Kingdom will not let a woman with a roaming dragon live in peace. What is the point of leaving now that they know about Jinn? It’s all a matter of time before I’m caught and used again. No... I’m sick of being manipulated.”

She turned to the dragon, faintly smiling at it. Once again, Cessilia noticed Jisel actually held some feelings for the young dragon. Perhaps it wasn’t

as strong as its real owner, but she did like the dragon, and sincerely felt connected to it. Jinn was even more obvious, mirroring what its deceased owner's feelings should have been, those of a brother toward a beloved older sister. Cessilia's younger siblings' dragons acted the very same with her, always asking for cuddles even if their young masters pretend otherwise. Dragons were often more in tune with their owners' deep feelings than the superficial ones that wouldn't last. Jinn was carrying its previous master's inner feelings all the same.

"I did consider fleeing," she said, "but I decided a long time ago that the Eastern Kingdom would be my final home... Do you have any idea what it's like, Princess, when you have no home at all? My father used my mother, and then he used me. My own mother used my little brother to get more of my despicable father's attention. I bet you grew up witnessing nothing but love and care from your own family, but all I got from mine were shackles, betrayal, and poisonous feelings."

She sighed, and turned her eyes back to Cessilia.

"...We're both princesses, after all, aren't we? We have the same grandfather... Sadly, my mother was just one of many, many disposable princesses. First, she was used, abused by her brother, and then... she fell in love with another monster. Not all princesses get their happy ending with a prince, Princess Cessilia. My life has been nothing but running away... I lived in the dark corners of a gigantic palace, like a rat. I hid from every adult that should have protected me. When we fled that Palace, and I thought I'd finally get some room to breathe, things got even worse... Neither my brother's birth or Jinn's appearance were the ray of hope I should have had. They made my parents crazier instead. Yet, my younger brother got attached to me, the only other person capable of actually caring for him without twisted feelings... but instead of being twisted, my feelings were nonexistent. Numb. I was in constant survival mode ever since I was born. How could it have been any different?"

She flicked her red hair over her shoulder and began moving around the room, walking next to the walls facing Cessilia. Meanwhile, Cessilia was getting ready to fight. She didn't think Jisel would have trapped her here

if it wasn't to end things... It didn't seem like she had any weapon but a small dagger in her right hand, though, which was clearly not enough.

"I fled... I lied, I stole. I sold myself too. I did literally anything a woman could do to survive. I mixed myself up with people I thought I belonged with, but then again, my lineage kept coming back like a curse. I wear it on my skin, after all. Plus, hiding a dragon isn't all that easy."

She chuckled, seemingly admiring some invisible detail in the wall.

"You c-could have lived freely b-by yourself," said Cessilia, "with Jinn t-to protect you. No one should have been able to hurt you..."

Jisel suddenly turned to her with angry eyes.

"Oh, but that's where we're different, Princess. Unlike you, I'm not one to hide behind a dragon. I don't rely on Jinn, like I have never relied on anybody but myself. Look at you. You might be the War God's daughter, but you're nothing but a coward!"

"D-don't--"

"What?" scoffed Jisel. "Aren't I telling the truth? You were born with everything. Parents who loved you. Caring siblings, and even your own dragon! And what did you do? ...You betrayed every single one of them. You were dumb enough to lose your dragon and to leave your family for a man!"

"You d-don't know anything about me!"

"Of course I know," she retorted, a vicious smile on her lips. "It's written all over you. I've been watching you, curious about what kind of woman Ashen was so madly in love with. But what a disappointment! ...You're afraid of your own shadow, Princess. I'm sick of you and your sick manner of always acting so fragile. Even that stupid stutter of yours. You're not just scared, you're someone eaten up by guilt. I can see the pieces fitting together. You lost your dragon for a man, and you lost your family's trust. Isn't it ironic? You lost pretty much the only part of you that made you oh so special, and now, you're so afraid of showing what a disappointment you are to everyone, that you act like this!"

“Shut up!”

Cessilia violently punched the column next to her, furious. Even Jisel stopped her pacing, surprised, and looked up at the marble that trembled. The spot where the Princess’ fist had hit the stone was literally dug in by a couple of inches, and the whole structure was echoing a worrisome creaking. After a second, Jisel seemed to regain control of herself again, with a faint chuckle.

“...Look at that. I’m right, aren’t I? You know you’re not worthy of what you have. Your own brothers had to come and rescue you from the mess you can’t clean up by yourself. Your mere presence in this Kingdom ruined it! Ashen would have been fine if you hadn’t come. I would have been perfectly fine, by his side! ...You know, I truly believed it, for a while. I was fine with being a mere mistress. I was fine with being called his whore, the King’s slut, as long as I could live safely, peacefully. But no. You had to come here, and once again, ruin everything I was entitled to.”

Suddenly, Jisel also punched the wall next to her. The impact wasn’t big enough to cause as much damage as Cessilia’s fist had, but it did leave a monstrous hole in the previously perfect marble, and make more of the wall creak. A few steps back behind her, Jinn growled angrily at Cessilia, all fangs out. The dragon was now trying to get more of its head into the room, although the window was obviously too small.

“...I would have been fine staying in the shadows,” bitterly muttered Jisel. “Once again. Hiding in the shadows of this castle... It’s not like I hadn’t done it before. Except, this one, there would be no father or uncle to chase me. I could have simply been here, quiet and patient. I thought I could be happy, just this one time. ...However, things aren’t that easy, in a man’s world.”

She scoffed.

“He had to prove his stupid, childish love to you, once again. You know, I didn’t love him, but I did hope he wouldn’t abandon me like most had. I thought I had found a broken, but righteous man... However, a mistress is

nothing but an eyesore when the real lady comes, isn't she? He had to get rid of me."

"He let you g-go," said Cessilia. "You could have g-gone anywhere! The continent is so vast!"

"I did not want to go anywhere!" shouted Jisel. "I wanted to make this place my home! Do you have any idea what it's like, to have to flee, over and over again? How many times will I have to depend on a man's good will to survive?!"

"You d-don't need a man!" Cessilia shouted back. "You have a d-dragon, and you're such a smart woman b-by yourself! You made it this far alone! You c-could settle anywhere you want and start over!"

"...Is that what you think? That I made it this far alone? I relied my whole life on a man's good will, Princess Cessilia. My father, my uncle, all those I slept with, in exchange for food, shelter, or safety. Do you think a woman alone can ever make it on her own, without being bothered by a man? True, I have a dragon. But once men become aware of Jinn, what do you think will happen to him? He'll be hunted and killed, or used. Don't you know best? You were a girl with a dragon, and you left your father's home once... What happened to your dragon then?"

Cessilia's blood went cold. Cece. Her beloved Cece was killed.

Jisel's words brought back the haunting memory of that night. The men's horrible voices, smell, touch. Just remembering any of that nightmare made her stomach twist and want to puke her guts out. It was the most terrifying night of her life. She wasn't much like a dragon at all, back then. Just a vulnerable girl, with fear paralyzing her and pinning her down. She hated it. She hated that she had been so powerless, when she had wielded a sword for the first time at six, and learned to fight long before that. Yet, there were no words for the horrible, paralyzing fear that had overtaken her back then.

"That's right," said Jisel. "...That's the look. When we hate both the gender we were born in, and the stronger sex... See, Princess? I told you we were more similar than you think. We both know what it's like... to

have your life in somebody else's hands. We live in a man's world. Having a dragon, or being a princess, doesn't change a thing. Don't tell me again that I do not need a man! Or live by your words, and leave Ashen and this Kingdom!"

Cessilia clenched her fists.

"I c-can't," she muttered.

"Why not? Are you going to tell me about something as foolish as love, perhaps? Don't bother, then. Keep living in your fairytale, Princess. But this one won't have a good ending."

She suddenly reached one of the tables in the banquet hall, and pulled out a medium-length sword from underneath it. Cessilia frowned. Had that been hidden here all along? Or did Jisel put it there? The red-haired woman swung the sword easily, as if she was familiar with it.

"Surprised?" chuckled Jisel. "I needed a place to hide it quickly after killing that idiot Pangoja girl."

It suddenly hit Cessilia. The murder at the banquet! Jisel had vouched for her being on the balcony with the King during the murder, but she had no alibi herself, aside from her brief appearance during their interaction. So she really was the one behind Vena's brutal murder. Cessilia couldn't even say it came as much of a shock. She had her suspicions from the beginning...

"You were working f-for the Yekara all along?"

"Not that long. But when I heard about the competition and you arrived, Lord Yebekh was smart enough to offer me a deal... If one of his candidates got the throne, he would happily offer me a mansion to live in comfortably, as long as I got out of the picture. At first, I had no intention to betray Ashen, but when you appeared... I did try to extend a hand to you, but sadly, you refused, and the choice was quickly made. I knew Ashen marrying you would have a very different outcome than him marrying any other candidate. He didn't care for them, but I knew he'd

get rid of me if he was worried about what you'd say... and I was right, once again."

"The Yekara t-tried to use you all along, Jisel. They were never g-going to let you live!"

"I know that too," chuckled Jisel, "but I also had my own hidden card."

Jinn growled in response, trying to chew a bit more of the window's frame. For now, it was too small for the dragon's head to come in, but at this rate, Jinn would surely break enough of it to actually get in...

The two women finally stepped closer to each other. Cessilia held on to her weapons a bit tighter, trying to evaluate the situation. She had never seen Jisel actually fight, but from the amount of strength displayed earlier, she definitely had inherited the Dragon Blood too. Not only that, but the way she moved her sword showed she had received decent training. How? During her years fleeing the Empire? She couldn't tell. Either way, she was not expecting that woman to fight fairly. Jisel wasn't even glancing at her dragon trying to break into the room and wrecking the balcony, meaning she expected Jinn to step into the game at any time. The worst part of all was that Cessilia couldn't feel any real hatred coming from that woman. It was even scarier than if she had really intended to kill her. This was like Vena's murder: brutal and cold-blooded. A faint smile even appeared on Jisel's lips as they got closer.

"It feels like it was all bound to come to this, right?" she muttered. "You and I. Two women fighting for a man.... no, because of a man. I'm not that interested in the King anymore. He's about to die, and the Yekara will marry their daughter to his adopted brother before getting rid of him too. Such a simple plan, but then again, this Kingdom is already on its knees."

"You d-don't know a thing about this Kingdom," said Cessilia, lifting her weapons.

"And you do?" Jisel mocked.

Without waiting, Cessilia jumped forward, launching the first strike. Surprised, Jisel frowned and lifted her two blades just in time to block her.

The two women's blades loudly clashed, and for a few seconds, they measured each other's strength, trying to push the other's defense, their faces only inches away from each other. Their styles were somewhat similar, using the flow of their movements, rather than brute force, and trying to outmaneuver their opponent. For a while, it was as if a red fire and a purple-scaled creature were dancing around each other, trying to burn or bite the other, looking for a weakness. They never split up for more than a couple of seconds, before throwing themselves at each other again. Their style was superb, flawless, and fierce. It was nothing like the rugged fights from before, or between men using only their brute strength. Each woman was using her best skill, her wits, and showing off impressive fighting choreography. Jisel was dancing with her two mismatched blades as if they had been extensions of herself, while Cessilia balanced herself perfectly with her identical weapons. Despite the difference in their respective styles, the flow of their movements was sharp and swift, looking for the smallest window to attack, using speed and reflexes to try and best the other. Neither of them were showing any mistakes, always in motion, their light steps never touching the floor for more than a second. Their dance was like a death ritual, with the thunder and dragon's furious growls as background percussion. Pearls of sweat appeared on their skin, as each woman was getting frustrated with the other.

After a while, they broke apart, by just a few steps, catching a quick break. The two women were now circling around each other like two furious wolves ready to bite one another.

"You sh-should have left, Jisel," muttered Cessilia.

"You already said that, Princess. But you know what? I think the same of you. You don't belong here. You're a coward. And without your dragon, well, you're nothing."

The furious Princess thrust her swords at her again, and Jisel blocked it with a smile on her lips. They began fighting for real, their four blades hitting each other for a few minutes, the metallic clashes echoing throughout the banquet hall. Their fight was violent, cold, and merciless.

Both of them were glaring at one another, looking for the next place to viciously hit and try to hurt the other. The more hits their weapons exchanged, the more Cessilia felt her blood boiling. Jisel's repeated smirks were annoying her, as if that woman always mocked her.

She tried to keep fighting and remain focused, but it was too late, the venom from Jisel's words were slowly poisoning her mind. She kept thinking about what she had said, and about Cece.

Was she right?

Probably. At least, when it came to her being a coward. Cessilia felt the same. She had felt that for a long time now, but the more she tried to push that thought away, the more vivid it came to her mind. Saying she was afraid of her own shadow wasn't a lie either. It was just as Kassian had said... she was scared of looking back at the Cessilia from before. She couldn't even remember what kind of girl she was before she had lost Cece. All she could think of, whenever she tried, was the painful result of her mistake. The guilt that was choking her up and tightening its claws around her voice all the time. Was it really love that had brought her back to Ashen, or the need to prove she was right to do what she had done for that love of theirs? It was suffocating just to think about it. Jisel was right. Her own anger, sadness, and remorse had been slowly building up inside, in all those words she had never dared to say. She resented herself for the weakness she had shown back then when her dragon needed her. Even more today.

"You don't deserve a... dragon," grunted Jisel, as their weapons clashed again. "That's right. You're too weak! Too much of a coward!"

She suddenly managed to graze Cessilia's arm. Not a deep wound, but the sharp edge of her blade suddenly sliced the skin that was showing between the parts of Cessilia's armor, leaving a vivid red line. Far from being bothered by the pain, Cessilia suddenly swung beautifully, and sent a violent flying kick toward her opponent, throwing Jisel far across the room. It wasn't enough to injure her, though, as the redhead fell back on her feet, a victorious smile on her lips.

“Ha! See! The precious daughter of the God of War is nothing but...”

She stopped herself upon seeing Cessilia’s eyes.

The Princess was now standing completely still, suddenly looking different, almost taller. Her eyes were shining with a dangerous, vivid green fire in them, as if lit up by some inner flame.

Cessilia stepped forward, and despite the distance between them, Jisel stepped back, scared. Something felt off, as if she was suddenly faced with a completely different person. Someone that was not human.

“...You were right,” she said with a strangely calm, almost mesmerizing voice. “I am done being a coward. ...I am done being sorry and afraid.”

She looked down, frowning.

“There is some truth in what you said. I was always... dependent on Ashen’s love. Not because I didn’t truly love him, but because I could hide behind that to excuse what had happened to Cece.”

Cessilia’s heart ached painfully at the mention of her deceased dragon. Yet, she took a deep breath in. She’d had enough of resisting this pain. She didn’t even try to hold back her tears.

“...It was all my fault,” she muttered. “Although my family was there to tell me it wasn’t... Not because I went out. Not because I was captured while trying to reunite with Ashen. What those men did... none of that was my fault, that much is true. Whatever they were seeking, their misdeeds are their fault only. And they paid with their lives for it. The one thing I can never forgive myself for is... that fear.”

Cessilia closed her eyes. She was done pushing that memory to the back of her mind, silencing it like her own voice had been silenced for so long. She didn’t care anymore. No, she wasn’t going to allow herself to flee from it any longer.

“You said it,” she continued. “I was... paralyzed by fear. I was so terrified of what they’d do to me, of the pain I had already endured, that I couldn’t react, even when they did that horrible thing to my dragon.”

She lifted her fingers, touching the scars on her neck.

“For a long time, I couldn’t even bear to see these. I couldn’t bear the memory of that pain. I felt like they were still hurting like the first second their blades had opened my throat. I’d wake up in horror at night, terrorized. My mother had to drug me, just so I could endure it... but it wasn’t the pain that really hurt me. It was to relive the fear, and the pain in Cece’s eyes, over and over again. My dragon didn’t die for me. She died because of me. Because I was too paralyzed by fear to fight back.”

Cessilia suddenly reopened her eyes, once again burning with a green, scary flame inside. Jisel could feel something was completely different about her. It was as if she was facing an entirely different woman. Even her posture was straighter, taller, looking like her real height. When the Princess resumed walking toward her, she backed off again, realizing she only had a few steps left between the wall behind and herself. Right now, her whole body was screaming to get out of there, to put as many walls as possible between her and that woman’s green eyes...

“And you know what? The worst part is that I am still afraid to fight back. I’ve been afraid for so long, because I’ve seen the monster in those men’s eyes. And I knew that if I let go, even just one bit, of my fear, the anger I was building up inside would eat me up, and make me a monster too.”

She did have the eyes of a monster right then. The eyes of a furious dragon, stuck on her prey with a murderous, terrifying intent. Jisel kept backing away, raising her blades in a protective stance, but Cessilia’s cold and composed approach was just paralyzing her with fear. She felt like she had unleashed something in that woman, and would only regret it once she got over there much too soon.

“You... You’re just thinking this is because of Ashen?” said Jisel, in an attempt to say something, anything to save herself. “You think his love has made you stronger?!”

“This has nothing to do with my love for Ashen.”

Suddenly, she was there, and her attack came from the sky, only leaving Jisel half a second to put her blades up. It was the same amount of strength

as before, so why was she so scared? She could keep up with that woman, she had the strength to measure up to her... So why did she feel like Cessilia had grown into an absolute beast in just a matter of seconds?!

Their blades clashed, and Jisel rolled to the side, cautiously using the opportunity to put some more distance between them. Still, Cessilia's eyes wouldn't leave her alone as the Princess followed her every single step.

"You know nothing about what love is supposed to be, Jisel. You only ever saw him as your way to survive. You used him."

"So what? You're no better than I am! You only hid behind him like a coward!"

"No," Cessilia retorted. "...Do you know why I love Ashen so much? ...He's not as special as you, or everyone else, is trying to push him to be. He was never meant to be a king's son. He's just a man, like any other out there. He's not a great king, and he's full of flaws too. His bad temper, his stubbornness. He's made tons of mistakes, and I know it all too well. He can't even trust people close to him... and that's all why I love him even more. He's imperfect, and he's broken... just like me. But, at least Ashen's true to his feelings; he gets mad when he's mad, and he never fears his own voice. He doesn't flee from his responsibilities, and he knows how to bear the blame for his own mistakes and flaws. While... While all I did, for all these years, was push my own responsibilities to the back of my mind and act like a victim."

At the opposite window, Jinn kept growling furiously, almost covering Cessilia's voice with the ruckus. The dragon's red-scaled paws were slowly digging their way inside the room, weakening the whole structure of the tower the banquet hall belonged to. The walls around and above the windows Jinn was destroying were starting to creak dangerously, thin dust coming off as a warning of a potential collapse. Still, neither of the two women bothered to try and stop the dragon from smashing its way into the room.

Jisel was actually hoping her dragon would get there soon to help her, while Cessilia couldn't be bothered. No one could tell if she was even

hearing the dragon coming in behind her, the thunder above their heads, and the ruckus coming from the streets.

“...But I’m done,” she said. “You were right, Jisel. I’m done being a coward.”

They swung their swords at each other again. The two women resumed their battle, fiercer, faster, more violent than before. It was down to who would be able to kill the other first. They weren’t leaving any time for rest, every second was passed trying to pierce the other’s defenses. It was a continuous ballet of blades, blocking or attacking relentlessly. They were flying and dancing around the banquet hall as if it had been just the right size to contain their attacks, as pieces of furniture were regularly stabbed and sliced in their stead, or violently thrown across the room to make way. The strength of their attacks was no less than that of a battle between male warriors. Those two had the Dragon Blood flowing fiercely through their veins, fueling the adrenaline and making them as aggressive as dragons ferociously defending their territory. There was no territory to defend, only the burning desire to best the other woman and get rid of their opponent.

“It doesn’t change a thing,” muttered Jisel as soon as Cessilia gave her a second to catch her breath. “Once a coward, always a coward, Princess. Don’t think you can change just because you’re a bit mad now.”

“Oh, I’m beyond mad,” hissed Cessilia, “and I won’t allow myself to be a coward anymore!”

She furiously struck again, Jisel’s sword barely appearing in time to block her attack. Yet, she wasn’t done, and not leaving her opponent any chance. Cessilia immediately spun around, and struck again, aiming at her flank this time; Jisel stopped it again, but too late. She was thrown violently to the side, forced to drop her dagger as her flank brutally hitting the ground.

“You know, for a while, I even feared that my dragon would actually come back,” said Cessilia, “because I wouldn’t know how to face her. I was that afraid of facing my own mistake that deep down, I really thought she was better off dead than with an owner like me!”

She struck as Jisel was still on the ground, leaving her to raise her sword above her body to protect herself. It didn't matter how Jisel held her sword up; Cessilia relentlessly attacked, again and again. However, behind all her reckless stabbing, teardrops began to appear. She wasn't trying to kill her opponent; her reckless attacks endlessly hit the blade of Jisel's sword, putting enormous pressure on the redhead, but without actually targeting her for real underneath her sword. No, instead, Cessilia was putting all of her rage into every single strike. Her arms were swinging with furious strength, like she could have kept punching a wall in anger. Those tears were coming from her inner rage, bottled up all these years, more than the hatred she felt for Jisel.

She was mad, furious at herself. She had tried to be good, to only allow herself to hide in the fear of that memory, while keeping the anger away. She had been so scared of letting that anger come out, scared of what she would have been capable of, if she had let her fury come out that day. Cessilia could almost remember the bitter disappointment in her heart when she had heard her brothers and father had already killed those men. And one second later, she had been shocked with the thoughts that had come to her mind, of what she would have been capable of doing to them herself if she had grasped her chance for revenge... It had been a constant trap. Fear, anger, fear of herself again. Fear of becoming the same kind of monster she had seen in those monsters' eyes. Cessilia had always admired her mother, and she wanted to be kind, gentle, like her. But she had her father's strength, and the blood of a dragon running through her veins. Her mother wasn't capable of killing people twice her size, but she was. And right now, she felt like she had finally reached that point, where the dragon inside could finally be free, after being trapped for so long and for all the wrong reasons.

She suddenly stopped striking and took a step back, catching her breath, and wiping her tears.

“See, Jisel. I'm done being a coward like you. Hiding behind a man or my cousin. Behind a dragon... behind any excuse. I am done passing for the one that needs protection. I am no weak, hurt child anymore!”

Just as she shouted that, the wall behind them violently burst open.

With a terrifying roar, Jinn crawled into the room, the large red head immediately going for Cessilia. The Princess only had time to turn around and raise her swords before she was brutally thrown across the room. A hilt escaped her fingers, and her back violently hit the opposite wall, her whole body shaking inside the armor. Even as she fell down, Cessilia had to immediately curl and try to protect herself from the stones crumbling above her. It was like a landslide, trying to bury her alive. She heard Jisel scream and shout something to her dragon, but it was barely heard through the ruckus. Cessilia quickly dug herself out with painful grunts, before Jinn's claws cut through the mountain covering her. The young dragon wasn't just trying to kill her; it was wrecking the whole place!

Luckily, the mass destruction going on allowed Cessilia to get away on all fours, while Jinn couldn't see or smell her through the mess of crumbling stones and clouds of dust filling the air. Cessilia quickly found a spot under a table to hide briefly, and catch her breath while witnessing the havoc in the room. Half of the tower's wall had been busted open, along with the roof above, leaving it exposed to the raging storm outside. In fact, Cessilia had been thrown against the edge of the half still standing, away from the only door and stairs out of there. Jisel was back on her feet, in the middle of the room, vociferating like a mad woman.

"Kill her! Kill her! She's there!"

Cessilia grimaced, and rolled out of her hideout before the dragon wrecked it too. She jumped back on her feet, glad the armor had held. She was bruised and injured from the shock for sure, but thankfully, the armor fitted her perfectly and had done its job protecting her, for the most part. Cessilia raised her sword, glad she had only lost one of the two despite the sudden hit. Fighting a dragon was a lot different from fighting a woman, and she was going to need that dragon claw sword!

Jinn was as ruthless and reckless as any young dragon; furiously growling, it kept trying to bite or scratch her, not bothering with the fact that it was completely destroying the room and even throwing its own mistress off. Only when Jinn heard Jisel scream did the dragon look back at her,

worried, before she shouted at it to attack again. Blocking its attacks was a whole new story from blocking Jisel's. Cessilia had to wield her sword in a defense position so its fangs wouldn't get to any of her limbs, and even a dragon's claw couldn't pierce a dragon's skin so easily, but it was close every time. Jinn would try to pounce on her, throw her against the ground or a wall, and wreak havoc until something crumbled or collapsed and forced it to back off. Twice, Cessilia managed to slice the dragon's snout, making it twice as enraged.

While she was able to keep the dragon from injuring her in some way, the same couldn't be said for their battleground. The banquet hall was already in ruins, unrecognizable except for the entrance door, still miraculously standing. Almost all the walls had been blown out, the ceiling collapsed, the stones falling on them or to the sides, hitting the other parts of the castle or diving into the sea. Cessilia's face was covered in sweat and rainwater, the dragon's growl echoing with the thunderous storm around them. The ground was getting both unstable and slippery, threatening to collapse at any given moment. Suddenly, a stone slipping under her threw Cessilia completely off balance.

She fell to her side, allowing the dragon's paw to completely sweep her out of the way. The sharp claws dug deep into her flesh, making Cessilia let out a scream of pain. She felt her whole body echo the horrible pain of her injury. Her flank was throbbing, the horrible feeling of foreign, painful darts stabbing her shoulder, flank, and stomach, piercing the pieces of her armor. Cessilia swung her sword blindly, and by chance, she hit something that made the dragon growl in fury. She was swept once again, her body sliding down the floor until she hit something, perhaps another piece of the fallen wall; the pain was still veiling everything in an intense red. She hadn't realized her head was hurt too until a thin trail of blood ran down her temple and eyelashes. Her hand went immediately for the injury by instinct to try and stop the bleeding. The warm liquid quickly filled her hand.

“Ha! See? ...You're still nothing without your dragon, Princess!”

Cessilia raised her head, and between her chestnut curls, she spotted Jisel, facing her next to her dragon, a triumphant smile on her lips.

“You’re still as weak as ever! You’ve lost the privileges of your blood! Your dragon wouldn’t even want to come back to such a weak mistress! You’re nothing but a...”

She stopped talking as Cessilia moved. The Princess was slowly getting back on her feet, despite the pain and blood running down her left side. Not only that, but the blood flow had calmed down a lot. Cessilia began taking off the damaged pieces of armor with her valid hand. The heavy pieces fell loudly on the floor, one by one, while Jisel watched in confusion. With no more armor to protect them, Cessilia’s injuries should have been exposed and yet, there was none of that. Instead, her body was shining. A thunderbolt struck from the sky above them, revealing the large, beautiful waves of scales that were appearing on her skin. The blood of her injuries was already drying out, and slowly replaced by the outgrowth of magnificent, silvery, diamond-shaped dragon scales on her skin. They had a beautiful magenta shine every time the light hit them, making them look even more vivid than her previous armor. Every single injury Cessilia had received was now getting covered by the growing scales, as if a second skin was growing on her in patches, like a predator’s markings. Her own skin could still be seen underneath in a strange contrast, but the new silvery scales were covering even a portion of her face. She didn’t look human anymore, but like a half-dragon creature, with glowing green eyes and a shimmery skin.

“No...” muttered Jisel, panicked, stepping back, her eyes wide open in horror. “What is this...? No. No, no, no, no, no! J-Jinn! Jinn, kill her! Kill her!”

“...You should have tried that sooner.”

Jinn growled furiously, and while its mistress ran to the back, the dragon arched its body, making itself bigger and showing its fangs, ready to face her again. This time, Cessilia was ready. Her injuries were still painful, but she could feel it. The Dragon Blood, hot and burning through her veins, rushing through her whole body and supplying her with the

adrenaline she needed to resume the fight. She had never felt so strong before, so... like a dragon. She was ready. With a fierce look in her green eyes, she began running, lifted her sword, and jumped at the Red Dragon, blade first.